

FLAME IN THE FOREST

by HAROLD TITUS

© By Harold Titus Illustrations by Irwin Myers WNU Service.

CHAPTER IX—Continued

—10—

"Y-yes, Tod. . . you see, I've a chance to sell two sections at a very fine figure. Under our agreement—"

"You can't sell a damn' foot of land!" he cut in. "No, Miss Nan Downer, you can't sell one damn' foot of ground!" He drove a fist into the other palm vindictively. "You had your chance once. I give you your chance a week ago. . . But what'd you do? Tried to wham me with an oar, that's what you did!"

"You know, well's I do, where we stand. You're right up ag'in' foreclosure this minute. You can't sell an acre until you've come across with the principal payment, 'most a year overdue."

She retreated around the corner of her desk as he advanced.

"And you don't like it, eh? Don't like doin' business that way! You can be high and mighty to me one day, and then expect favors the next! Well, I'll show you my heart's in the right place! I'll show you a contract's a contract! I'll show you that I'll see you busted and smashed and on the road without a roof, before we—"

"Tod! Don't Tod! Please—"

He had crowded her against the wall. Rigidity went from him and a strange sound, half-laugh, half-sob, came from deep in his throat.

"Hurt you? Hurt you, little Nan? . . . God, I'm sorry for the things that've happened!" He stepped back a pace or two unsteadily. Confusion lay in his eyes. He had come to gloat, but now . . .

"I meant that, up the river the other day," he said huskily. "I meant all I said: I want you, I need you, little Nan! I'll make you a good lover. . . I'll make you a good husband!"

Perhaps it was the loathing in her face, touched to life by his hoarse, unsteady voice, which stirred afresh the hell in his heart. Anyhow, he threw his arms wide, fists clenched.

"Will you have me?" he cried. "Will you have me, or 've I got to take you? Because I'll have you, just as sure as hell itself! I'm desperate and I—"

Nan had opened her lips to cry out, when a white fury flung through the doorway. Her cry was lost in that gasp of breath which burst from Tod's throat as a hand caught one of the outstretched arms, as he was spun about and Stuart's fist bashed into his lips.

The boy struck hard, struck with all his weight coming in, and when he had struck he squared for another blow.

But Tod West was not too drunk for action. He dropped his head, and fended off the flailing fist. He swung forward and charged and wrapped his great arms about Holt's slender body, sweeping him from his feet, crashing with him against the door-casing, falling with him to the floor.

The lad was no match for that ponderous strength. He was overwhelmed, smothered, made helpless. He kicked and writhed, but West had one arm pinned beneath a knee, the other secured in his iron grasp and his fist raised to do its cruel work on that defenseless face. . .

And then Nan screamed. The quality of it, the shrillness, the terror, struck through West's intent, made him hesitate. In that instant Holt freed a hand; he was over from his back to one side, upsetting West, grappling for the man's knee, throwing him off balance and floundering free.

Nan's cry had brought others. Feet sounded on the steps; and before West could charge again and maim and batter, he was surrounded by a dozen people.

Two men had Holt. Another stood before West, blocking the way to the boy, should he attempt advance. But he did not. Breathing heavily, he glowered for a moment at Stuart and then, seeking out Nan's face, nodded heavily.

"All right," he said. "I said my say. And that, I guess, will be all." He turned for the entry and none blocked his departure.

Ezra Adams, returning to Nan's after an hour in Jim Hinkle's home, came first into the excited group in the big room, was told what had happened, asked Nan's whereabouts and went, without knocking, into the office.

They stood close together, the girl holding both Holt's hands in hers, looking up into his face intently. The old physician, struck by the apparent significance of their postures, hesitated as if to withdraw.

"Come in, Ezra!" Nan said and then to Holt, with a little shake of his hands: "And so you will be careful, Holt dear?"

Stuart withdrew his hands from hers and turned, going abruptly, not looking at Adams.

When he was gone and Nan had closed the door, she swung toward the old man with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Ezra!" she moaned. "Oh, if anything should happen to Holt!"

"I heard about what went on. Don't fear. We'll watch to see nothin' does happen!"

"Tod's so savage, so brutal! And I feel such a responsibility for Holt. He's such . . . such an emotional boy! If Tod harms him, I'll feel I'm to blame and . . . Don't you see?"—beseechingly. "Oh, why must things like this come up to be faced just when . . . just when love comes, Ezra?"

Though her words had given him a sort of shock the old man downed his curiosity and the questions that they provoked, and devoted all his resources to comforting her. He stroked her hair and patted her shoulders until her emotions were under control. Then she asked him to go.

"It's my problem," she said. "I can think better alone. I'm so glad you were here to let me be female and weak for a moment!"—wiping her eyes and smiling bravely.

He left her then, with a deal to think about. He carried his news to Kerry later the same evening.

"Looks like Stuart's finally got what he seems to want most," he said, and did not notice that his companion appeared to stop even his breathing to listen. "She's awful upset because she's afraid something'll happen to him. And she's in love, too, which doesn't make for calm thinking. . .

"Tod'll have him on his list now, and Tod's got a long memory when he's been angered. Course, he was drunk."

Young did not hear this last. He was concerned at the moment only with one thing which Ezra had had to tell. Dismay filled him as he realized the emotion that had been fermenting in his heart for days, which had almost crystallized into recognizable thought this afternoon: that finally his heart had taken root! He was in love to his ears with Nan Downer and yet here was old Ezra, bringing word of her love for another. His heart had discovered a home, only to find it already occupied.

West was sober enough when an hour later he stood in the shadow of Bluejay's rattletrap flivver not far from Mel Knight's store at the Landing and talked rapidly, jabbing a finger now and again against the 'breed's chest.

". . . And he's made you a joke, here, knockin' you into the river that way, Frank! He'll drive you out of the country if he stays and

. . . and I want him gone because he tried to frame me!"

The 'breed's eyes were fixed on the white man's face.

"How much?" he asked.

"Well, not much. It's your fight. I can get along; I'd rather have him gone, but I can get along. You, though . . . And there'll be no chance, you see, out there on Townline if—"

"How much?"

Under his insistence West paused. "Ten dollars."

"Huh! You do your own job. Tod West!"

He turned to his car.

"Hold on!"—grasping a sleeve. "Money's scarce."

"Well, I ain't goin' to take no chances for no ten dollars. For a hunnerd, no—"

"A hundred! You're crazy!"

They bartered longer, but without heat, and finally Bluejay nodded.

"All right. But when?"

"When the job's done."

"I'll see, eh? And this other . . . you tell me when you want me to say I seen Stuart there, Tod. In the corner, eh? And burying a . . ."

His voice dropped to a cautious whisper.

Bluejay cranked his car and clattered away and Tod West strolled toward the store.

He had become a changed man in this span of a few short days.

Like the clanging of an ominous tocsin had come Bluejay's sketchy report of Young's talk with Ezra Adams. Why should these two be talking of the Downer case, when that had been considered closed months ago? And there was the disappearance of his pistol on the night he believed his house burning. Explainable, probably; the chances were that its disappearance was, in reality, a simple, casual affair. . . But he did not know that, and in his state of mind shadows were taking shapes. This evening Ezra and Young had their heads together for long over the doctor's motor . . . but West, watching, had not been fooled. Their talk was not of mechanics, he felt sure.

He walked on home, not daring to enter the store and be seen by others.

And across the way Kerry Young lay in his blankets, that strange numbness persisting. His eyes were open; sleep would not come. In boyhood he had thought he knew suffering, but now he realized he had not even skirted the edges of the fields of human misery.

CHAPTER X

BY NOON of that Thursday, Kerry had his camp made on an island a quarter mile offshore in Townline lake.

In the afternoon he and the dog set out for the first hours of cruising. Before sundown he paddled across to the cabin where he might have stayed, went inside and looked idly about and then returned to camp.

They were alone. They had not seen a soul, or heard a man-made sound . . . Of course, Frank Bluejay, squatting in the alders, made no sound except a surly, impatient grunt. That was when he raised himself to one knee and sought to cover the man in the canoe out there with the worn rifle he carried, and found that the glare of sunlight made the sight-bead show large as an orange. When the canoe was out of the glare, the range was too long for certainty.

And the next morning when Young set out a spanking breeze blew. He kept to shoal water for a mile where the seas were not dangerous so that he could square away and lay a course into the wind, thereby avoiding the chance of swamping. By the time he was out over the indigo depths again he was far from the 'breed and once more Bluejay dared not shoot. He could have killed his man without half trying once, but the body would have fallen into shallow water then. His father and his

father's father had told him that Townline lake never gave up its dead, did they drown in the channels. Bluejay wanted no risk of discovery in this doubly motivated undertaking.

Kerry Young was up early as well, the next day, stripping and running naked into the biting cold lake, plunging, blowing, splashing great fronds of water at Tip, who had followed him in. The dog liked it; he barked and yelped.

A spanking little breeze had come again with the sunrise, flattening out the smoke of the small fire, making coffee slow to boil and delaying the frying of bass he had caught last evening.

Wavelets hissed through the rushes. The deep blue of the channel was flecked with small whitecaps. Young looked at the weather and opined that the day would keep clear, though the wind might rise to half a gale.

That is what Frank Bluejay thought too, as breathing heavily, he made his way to the edge of a cedar thicket on the shore and saw the smoke of that breakfast fire.

He did not fidget nor fuss through the interval of waiting. But when the canoe put out he rose slowly, certain of his good concealment, and stiffened.

Young paddled straight toward the ambushed Indian. The light craft pitched and rolled rhythmically



The Boy Struck Hard, Struck With All His Weight Coming In.

cally under the impulse of his paddle. In the bow Tip balanced nicely, letting his tongue loll.

Closer and closer to the fringe of distant cedars they progressed, within two hundred yards, a hundred and seventy-five, a hundred and fifty; then the seas having subsided, Kerry swung sharply to the left, putting his canoe broadside to the weather.

It was now that Bluejay pulled back the hammer of the worn old rifle. Slowly he pressed his cheek tight against the cool stock. The sight-bead came down, wavering; found its object. The muzzle moved thrice, following the rise and fall of the canoe. The brown hand on the grip squeezed. . . The 'breed stood there for a long moment, lips, loose, watching.

On the shot Young had pitched forward and sideways, across the rail. For an instant the canoe hung so, on its beam's end; then with a quick roll and a little splash, it went bottom up and began to drift with the seas.

Tip, thrown into the waters, head held high, began circling swiftly. Around and around he went, crying out for the master who had disappeared.

With a sharp nod, Bluejay turned. He left the cedars, climbed the bank and pushed on through the hardwood.

Townline lake never gives up its dead. That was the thought which flashed through Kerry's mind as he went overboard. Once down in the channels . . .

But he was not going down in any channel! He was there, under his capsized canoe, still holding the shattered paddle in one hand.

The blow of the bullet had all but torn it from his grasp. Just as he was dipping the blade that terrific impact had struck. Perhaps the smooth ash had deflected the missile; perhaps the aim of his assailant had not been good. His first act was for self-preservation.

Someone had lain in wait to kill him. Someone had shot with reasonable accuracy . . . and to let them believe that a desired end had been achieved was at once smartness and caution.

So he went over the far side, his torso lolling in the water, the move throwing Tip out with a great scrambling. Kerry cautiously twisted his body so he would come up beneath the craft.

In there, he could hear nothing but the slish of water, the rustle of wind, the sharp, inquiring bark of the dog.

Young wanted to call out, to reassure the retriever that all was well, for Tip was in a great state of excitement and distress. But to do that, he feared, would set the animal diving for him and that, to a watcher, might betray the secret . . . that he was safe and in concealment.

With great caution, he shoved himself downward and came up on the leeward side.

The dog had just rounded the bow again. His look was tense, almost agonized, but when he came thus face to face with his master, the ears pricked stiffly and then relaxed, the orange flare left the eyes and a pink tongue showed.

"Okay!" Kerry choked. "All jake, chum! Hi! . . . All right, then!"

"Listen, Tip," he said, holding the dog beside him with one hand while the other rested on the canoe. "I got to get out of this!"

He looked about. The waves were high. Straight down wind was his island, reed-fringed, with warm sunshine beating upon it.

"You, Tip! . . . You get to camp! Savvy?" He reached for a hold on the dog's tail. "Hie on, now! Camp! Hie on!"

Obediently the dog turned down wind. Kerry kept his hold on the tail, let go the canoe.

"Camp!" gasped Kerry. "Hie on!"

Tip settled down to swim, low in the water, making slow going of it, but nevertheless towing his master steadily. . . And a watcher, from a distance, had he seen the dog, would never have guessed what dragged behind. . .

Kerry wormed his way through the reeds, once they were reached, and stretched flat on his belly on the clean sand, letting the sun drive the chill from his bones.

He lay there a long time before he moved. Then he wriggled into the brush, got behind his tent, extricated his binoculars from the pack and for a long interval studied the point from which the bullet must have been fired.

His canoe had followed him ashore but for a long time he made no move to secure it.

He went on, to the cabin.

He opened the door, peered in, then stooped, frowning. A fine dusting of dry sand was on the floor. Sand? No, his fingers told him it was powdered clay. It went from the doorway across toward a far corner; just a light dusting of it, a ragged stringer. He wondered what that might mean. Following, he found that it ended at two short sections of flooring. At some time—there was no way of determining when—these had been tampered with. Perhaps broken boards had been replaced. Still, why that dirt on the floor? It had not been here the other day.

"Tip," he said, as he stuffed tobacco into his pipe, "I'm getting good and hot under the collar! Shot at from ambush! Now, who the devil—?" He lighted his pipe and stood frowning, debating.

"Let's go to town," he said to the dog, "and see who's surprised to see us!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)