

CHAPTER V

A LITTLE CAYENNE!

Chet walked closer to where the boy stood, facing the fire, and, after attracting his attention by a significant motion of his hand, whispered. At first Tommy did not catch the words and the boy repeated:

"If you want to see the ghost, look behind you in a moment!"

Tommy walked carelessly toward the fire and then turned and swept his eyes over the thicket between the camp and the channel.

What he saw sent a shiver of excitement through his frame, but he soon regained control of himself and, bending over the fire, apparently not having observed anything out of the ordinary, said to his companion in a low tone:

"Shall I shoot?"

Chet shook his head and moved closer, still standing with his eyes fixed on the fire.

"He must have been here many times before," he said presently, "and left after stealing whatever he wanted in the way of food. Perhaps he will take his departure directly."

"Sandy saw that fellow this morning!" Tommy exclaimed. "He was paddling away in a canoe, and there was a boy about your size in the bottom of the boat."

The boys stood talking together until a

crackling sound in the thicket warned them that the intruder was moving. At first, they could not determine whether the sounds were approaching or receding, but before long they understood that their unwelcome visitor was taking his departure.

"He'll probably sneak away in my canoe!" Tommy exclaimed.

"If he does, he'll have to leave his own boat here and we can follow him," advised Chet.

Tommy regarded his companion critically.

"What do you want to let him go now for, if you're going to follow him?" he demanded.

"We've got him now if we want him!"

"I want to follow him," Chet replied, because I want to know whether the boy who was seen in his canoe is the one for whose return I have been waiting for two weeks."

"And that's good sense, too," whispered Tommy. "Is that the reason why you didn't want me to shoot?"

"I didn't know anything about the boy in the canoe when I advised you not to shoot," was the reply, "but all the same, I had an idea that we ought to find out where he lives, and what he means by stealing my provisions."

"And my boat!" added Tommy.

There was now a splash in the water, as if from the launching of a boat, and the boys crept towards the channel.

In a moment there came a great splash in the water, followed by a rifle shot. Then came another splash and a hoarse cry of terror.

"The fool!" shouted Chet. "He's wounded

the alligator, and had his canoe tipped over for his pains! Now we'll have to go and get him out!"

"Not me!" answered Tommy. "If the alligator doesn't kill him, we may have to. Let the old 'gator alone!"

"But about this boy?" asked Chet. "We've got to know more about him, and I don't see how we're going to secure the information of the man after an alligator has dragged him to the bottom of the channel."

"That's a fact!" answered Tommy. "We may never find the place where the boy is hidden unless we secure our information from that man."

Cries of fright and calls for assistance now came stridently from the channel, and, turning back to the fire, Chet seized a long pitch pine brand which was burning fiercely at one end.

With this in hand he dashed down to the margin of the channel. The boy's statement of the situation had not been far out of the way. The intruder had evidently wounded the alligator, and the infuriated saurian had overturned the light canoe.

The fellow was now making for the shore, uttering cries of horror and appealing for assistance. At the moment the boys appeared on the bank, the alligator was not more than a yard in the rear of the fleeing man.

Without stopping to consider the risk he was running, Chet dashed into the water and thrust the blazing end of the fat pine brand between the widely extended jaws of the alligator.

As the great jaws closed with a snap the man rushed past the boy and fell, weak from fright, into the thicket. Naturally the alligator now turned his attention to the boy who had inflicted such punishment upon him.

Chet lost no time in making for the shore, but found himself caught in nearly a foot of mud which lay upon the bottom next to the island.

The saurian was already reaching for one of the boy's legs when Tommy fired. It seemed at that time that the threatening jaws of the great brute were not more than an inch from the person of the boy.

Tommy did not content himself with one bullet, or two, but fired the whole clip into the face and eyes of the alligator. There was a great floundering in the water, one last reverberating bellow, and the great bulk sank to the bottom, his armored back showing above the surface as he lay on the bed of mud.

Chet appeared to be well-nigh exhausted with his efforts, and Tommy stepped into the water to assist him to solid ground. As he did so, the man whose life had been saved by the boys sprang to his feet and approached the edge of the channel.

It was Tommy who held the weapon, and so it was Tommy who was seized. Chet sank to the ground the moment he stepped from the water, and Tommy was hurled down with a brutality which seemed but a poor recompense for a service which had been rendered the intruder.

As the boy dropped, the fellow secured the revolver and, before Tommy could rise to his feet or offer resistance, the fellow had secured several clips of cartridges from his pocket.

"What do you mean by shooting at me?" the fellow demanded, as if trying to find some excuse for the brutality.

"I didn't!" replied Tommy.

"Well, you were going to, and that's the same thing!" shouted the other. "And this other youngster," he added, touching Chet with a heavy boot, "is just as bad as you are. I've got a score to settle with both of you!"

Both boys rose to their feet and stood watching the thankless brute as he calmly placed a clip of cartridges in the automatic.

"Didn't I tell you to let the bull alligator eat him?" demanded Tommy, turning to Chet without appearing to notice the remarks of their captor. "He's just fit for alligator food!"

"No lip, now!" threatened the other.

"If we hadn't come to your help," Chet said, eyeing the fellow angrily, "you'd have been killed. And this is the reward we get for saving your life. I wish we had it to do over again."

"Have you got any more revolvers at the camp?" asked the man.

Chet shook his head.

"Then chase up there," the other demanded, "and get me a square meal. I've been hanging about the swamps so long without proper food that I'm about dead!"

It seemed to the boys at that time that they would never be able to prepare any food for

their captor, but he was a desperate man, and had possession of the only weapon on the island, so they thought best to obey his instructions. The fellow sat watching the boys suspiciously as they prepared a meal of tinned provisions, soda biscuits, and steaming coffee. While they cooked and served the fellow lounged lazily in front of the fire, his great bulk seeming to dominate the whole island.

Now and then he pointed to the store of provisions and harshly ordered the opening of some package the label of which had caught his fancy.

"There's pineapple in there," he said, on one occasion, pointing a ham-like hand at a tin which lay exposed at the entrance to the shelter. "Bring it out and let's see what it's like."

He ate greedily, ravenously, of the fruit which was tendered him and cast the portions which he could not consume into the fire.

"There's mustard in that," he said, again, pointing at a small tin which lay in view. "Why don't you bring it out for my beans."

"Why," began Chet, "that isn't mustard, that's——"

As a matter of fact the can contained cayenne pepper, and the boy ceased speaking because an idea came to his brain.

Tommy stepped forward to secure the tin, but Chet took it from his hand, whispering as he did so.

"If anything happens to the gink in about a minute, you grab a big brand from the fire and soak him good and plenty on the coco."

"You bet I will," Tommy whispered back.

"Here!" roared the fellow. "What are you boys whispering about?"

"Nothing," replied Tommy.

The boy did not understand exactly what Chet had in mind until he read the label on the tin, then he was obliged to turn his face away in order to conceal the excitement in his eyes.

Chet tried at first to cut through the thick tin with his pocket knife, but did not succeed very well. Directly he winked at Tommy and the boy, remembering what had been said about a heavy brand from the fire, understood.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You can't cut that thick tin with a dull knife. Let me hit it."

He selected a long center of fat pine from the fire as he spoke and began to tap on the handle of the knife while Chet held the blade to the tin. The outlaw regarded the boys suspiciously, but said nothing. The freshly-loaded automatic was still pointed threateningly in their direction.

"Cut it all the way around," advised Tommy, in a soft whisper. "When we feed it to him we want to do a good job!"

"You bet we will!" answered Chet.

The knife cut slowly into the tin until the top was entirely removed, and then Tommy, leaning upon his brand of fat pine, suggested:

"That's pretty strong, Mister, so you want to be careful how much of it you put in your beans. And don't use it all!"

Chet approached the fellow with the open

can in his hand. As the other reached out to receive it, he threw the entire contents into the insulting face before him.

It entered his open mouth, his evil eyes, his wide-spreading nostrils, and dripped down in a red torrent over his scraggly beard!

The fellow dropped the revolver and threw his hands to his face, uttering such cries of agony as the boys had never heard before and hoped never to hear again. The harder he rubbed his face the more pepper worked into his eyes, and his bristling moustache kept supplying his nostrils with the red compound until his cries of pain were checked by long gasping sneezes.

Standing with the club in his hand, Tommy hesitated about striking the suffering man. It seemed to him that the fellow was enduring sufficient agony already.

"Hand him one!" cried Chet. "Hand him one!"

"One of the first rules of Boy Scout life," Tommy answered, "advises against inflicting unnecessary pain on any member of the brute creation. Don't you think that rule applies here?" he asked, pointing to the bulky, contorted figure of the outlaw.

"He's a member of the brute creation, all right!" replied Chet, "and he won't do a thing to us if we don't fix him so he can't!"

Tommy picked up the revolver and placed it in his pocket. Then he dodged about the writhing figure on the ground and extracted the clips from his pocket.

"Have you got a fish line?" he asked, then.

"Sure I have!" was the reply.

"Then tie His Nibs up with it," Tommy directed.

"That's a good idea, too!" declared Chet.

The fellow's ankles were bound firmly together, but the boys refrained from tying his wrists, as they understood that he might need the use of his hands for some moments to come.

"Now get a pail of water," advised Tommy, "and we'll give him a chance to work some of that cayenne pepper out of his system."

After half an hour or more of scrubbing and bathing, the fellow's suffering in a measure passed away. It was then discovered that his eyes were swollen shut.

"There is no danger of his getting away now," Tommy advised. "He can't run with his ankles tied up, and he couldn't see where he was going if he could, so we'll hike down to the channel and see about retrieving my canoe. I hope the alligator didn't smash it!"

Believing their prisoner to be absolutely safe, the boys remained a long time by the bank of the channel.