

CHAPTER IV.

A LESSON.

THE reptile's swaying head had drawn back and the huge snake launched itself forward from its coils straight for the dazed lad only a few feet in front of it.

Quick as was its spring, Charley was quicker. He dug his spur cruelly into his little pony's flank. With a neigh of pain the animal leaped forward. For a moment there was a tangle of striking hoofs and wriggling coils of the foiled reptile, while Charley leaning over in his saddle struck with the butt-end of his riding whip at the writhing coils. Though it seemed an eternity to the helpless watchers it was really only a few seconds ere the pony sprang away from its loathsome enemy and Charley with difficulty reined him in a few paces away. The snake with a broken neck lay lifeless on the ground, while Walter, sobbing dryly, had sunk into the arms of the captain, who had flung himself from his horse with surprising agility for a man of his age.

With a glance at the group, Charley dismounted,

and petting and soothing his trembling horse, ran his keen eyes over the animal's legs and flanks. From the little pony's left foreleg trickled a tiny stream of scarlet.

"Bring up the packhorse, quick, Chris," he commanded, with a break in his usually steady voice.

Quickly he removed pack, saddle and bridle from his mount. Rapidly as he worked, he had only just removed the bridle when the pony sank to its knees, struggled for a moment to rise, then sank slowly to the ground, where it lay looking up at its master with dumb appealing eyes.

Something welled up in Charley's throat. He flung himself on the ground beside his pony and put his arms around its neck.

"Good-bye, Billy, he whispered. "We haven't known each other long but I've got mighty fond of you, Billy, and when the time came you didn't fail me. You acted like a gentleman, old man."

Poor Billy's legs kicked restlessly to and fro as the tremors went through him.

With a mist in his eyes, Charley arose and looked down on the faithful animal. The wounded leg had already swollen to twice its natural size, the body was twitching with spasms, and the large brown eyes were eloquent with pain and suffering.

"I've got to do it, Billy. It's to save you torture, old fellow, just to save you useless suffering, Billy." He drew his pistol from his belt, took careful aim just behind the pony's ear, and, turning his head away, pulled the trigger.

With never a backward glance at the still form, he strode over to the pack pony and removing the pack transferred his own saddle to the animal.

The pack was quickly broken up into smaller packages and distributed equally amongst the party, and soon all were moving forward again on their westerly course.

It was a still, white, and shaken Walter who once more rode beside his silent chum.

"You saved my life, Charley, and it's a poor return to merely thank you," he said earnestly.

"Don't say anything about it," protested Charley, cheerfully. "The shoe may be on the other foot next time, and I know you will do the same for me then."

But Walter had not finished. "I want to say," he continued, "that you are the only one of us qualified to lead this party. Hereafter, what you say goes with me. I know it will with Captain Westfield too."

"There's Chris," said Charley with a smile. "I fear he will have to have his little lesson before he

gets in that frame of mind. "Walt," he continued earnestly, "I do not want the responsibility but I am not going to shirk it now that it is thrust upon me. Frankly, though, I can't help wishing that this trip was over and we were safe back in town once more."

"Thinking about our visitors of the other night?" Walter inquired.

Charley nodded, "If they meant any good to us, why did they not make their presence known to us," he reasoned. "Mark my words, we have not seen the last of them,—but hush, here comes the captain and Chris, there is no need to worry them with vague conjectures."

"See that prairie ahead, Charley?" asked the captain, "Chris says there's a big bird in the middle of it, but I can't see anything but grass."

The party was now only a few hundred yards from the small prairie-like patch. Charley rose in his stirrups and scanned it carefully.

"Chris is right," he said. "It's a big sand-hill crane."

"Good to eat, Massa Charley?" demanded the little ducky, eagerly.

"I have eaten some that were equal to the finest turkey."

"Dat settles it," Chris shouted "Golly, I reckon

dis nigger goin' to show you chillens how to shoot some. My shot, I seed him first."

"Don't shoot, Chris," said Charley, gently, "you can't get it and it won't be fit to eat if you do."

But Chris' obstinacy and pompous vanity were aroused. "Tink dis nigger can't shoot, eh? You-alls just watch an' Chris will show you chillens somfin'.

Charley said nothing more but his mouth set in a grim line. "Time for his lesson," he murmured to Walter.

Chris waited until they had come within a hundred yards of the crane when he unslung his rifle and dismounted while the others reined in to watch the outcome.

The little darky rested his gun on his saddle and took careful aim. The crack of his rifle was followed by a hoarse squawk and the tall bird tumbled over lifeless.

Chris danced with delight. "I got 'em, I'se got 'em," he cried. Like a flash he was on his pony and galloping towards the dead bird.

"Come back, Chris," shouted Charley, but the little darky galloped on unheeding.

And now the rest of the party beheld a curious thing. Chris' pony had reached the edge of the grass and had stopped so suddenly as to nearly throw its rider over its head. In vain did the little negro apply

whip and spur. Not a step further would the animal budge. They saw Chris at last throw the reins over the pony's head and leaping from his saddle plunge into the grass. Only the top of his head was visible but they could trace his progress by that and it was very, very slow. At last he reached the crane and slinging it over his shoulder began to retrace his footsteps. His return was infinitely slow, but at last he regained his pony and dragging himself and his burden into the saddle headed back towards the group of curious watchers. As he drew nearer they stared in silent amazement. He was wet from head to foot, his clothing was in tatters, and the blood flowed freely from a hundred cuts on face, hands and arms.

He rode up to Charley with a sickly smile. "I got 'em, Massa Charley," he boasted weakly.

Without a word Charley reached over and took the crane from him. Stripping away the feathers, he exposed the body of the great bird and held it up to view. The captain and Walter gave an exclamation of disgust. The body was merely a framework of bones with the skin hanging loosely from it.

"It's their moulting season," he explained simply.

"Why you doan tell me dat place full of water, dat grass cut like knife, an' dat ole mister crane wasn't no good nohow," Chris demanded, hotly.

Charley gazed at the pathetic, wretched, little figure and his conscience smote him.

"I told you not to go, Chris," he said gently, "but you would do it. This time there was plenty of time to explain to you that what you thought was merely a plot of grass was really a saw-grass pond, and that sand-hill cranes are not fit for use this season of the year; but suppose that a danger suddenly threatened us. Is it likely, Chris, that I would always have time to stop and explain just why I wanted you to do this or that?"

But Chris was suffering too much pain and humiliation to be soothed by Charley's explanation. With a snort of anger he dug the spurs into his pony's flanks and soon was far ahead of the rest of the party. In a few minutes he came tearing back to them, his face shining with excitement.

"River ahead, river ahead," he shouted.

"It's the St. Johns," declared Captain Westfield, scarcely less excited. "There's no other river in these parts."

Although they spurred forward their jaæd steeds the animals were so worn out that it was dusk before they reached the river bank, and they went into camp immediately.

After the supper was over, Chris approached

Charley, who was sitting apart from the rest, grave, silent, and evidently buried in deepest thought.

The little darky began awkwardly, "Massa Charley, Massa Cap say you de leader an' he going to do just what you say widout axin' no questions, Massa Walt say same ting, an' I guess Chris better say same, now. Golly, I jus' reckon dis nigger made a big fool of hisself over dat bird."

But although he answered Chris lightly and kindly, Charley was not elated over his unsought leadership. Vague suspicions were flitting through his mind, and his new responsibility was weighing heavily upon his young shoulders. As the evening wore on he still sat silent, buried in thought. The captain was reading aloud from an old newspaper he had brought along. Suddenly Charley straightened up, and a swift glance passed between him and Walter.