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, by Jr. Horatio Alger**

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Title: Bob Burton; or, The Young Ranchman of the Missouri

Author: Jr. Horatio Alger

Release date: May 30, 2016 [EBook #52194]

Language: English

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOB BURTON; OR, THE YOUNG RANCHMAN OF THE MISSOURI ***

BOB BURTON;

OR,

THE YOUNG RANCHMAN OF THE
MISSOURI

BY

HORATIO ALGER, Jr.,
AUTHOR OF "RAGGED DICK SERIES," "LUCK AND
PLUCK SERIES," "ATLANTIC SERIES," ETC.



PHILADELPHIA :
PORTER & COATES.



AARON WOLVERTON STEALS THE RECEIPT.

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[Pg i]

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PORTER & COATES.**

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TO

[Pg iii]

J. HENRY PLUMMER,
NOW OF TALLAPOOSA, GA.

FROM WHOM I HAVE RECEIVED VALUABLE ASSISTANCE IN
THE PREPARATION OF THIS VOLUME,

IT IS DEDICATED WITH FRIENDLY REGARD.

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BOB BURTON;

[Pg 5]

OR,

THE YOUNG RANCHMAN OF THE
MISSOURI.

CHAPTER I. MR. BURTON'S RANCH.

"Harness up the colt, Clip; I'm going to the village."

"All right, massa!"

"What makes you call me massa? One would think I were a slave-owner."

"Can't help it, massa. There I done forgot it agin," said Clip, showing his white teeth—preternaturally white they showed in contrast with his coal-black skin. "You see I used to say that

to my old massa, down in Arkansaw."

"What's my name, Clip?"

"Mister Burton."

"Then call me Mr. Burton. Now go, and don't waste any time."

"All right, massa."

"That boy's incorrigible," said Richard Burton to himself. "He hasn't got cut of his early ways yet; careless and shiftless as he is, I believe he is devoted to me and my family." [Pg 6]

Clip, as may be inferred, was a negro boy, now turned of fourteen, who for four years had been attached to the service of Richard Burton, a ranchman, whose farm lay on a small stream tributary to the Missouri, in the fertile State of Iowa. He had fled from his master in the northern part of Arkansas, and, traveling by night, and secreting himself by day, had finally reached Iowa; where he found a safe refuge in the family of Mr. Burton. Indeed he had been picked up by Bob Burton, a boy a year older than himself, who had brought him home and insisted on his father taking charge of the young fugitive. On a large ranch there was always something to do, and Clip was soon made useful in taking care of the horses, in doing errands and in many odd ways.

While waiting for the wagon, Mr. Burton went into the house, and sought his wife.

"Mamy," he said, "I am going to the village to pay Wolverton his interest." [Pg 7]

"I wish he didn't hold the mortgage, Richard," said Mrs. Burton, looking up from her work.

"So do I, but why is it any the worse for him to hold it than for any one else?"

"Richard, you may think me foolish and fanciful, but I distrust that man. It is impressed upon my mind that he will some day do us harm."

"That is foolish and fanciful in good truth, Mamy. Now Wolverton seems to me a—well, not exactly an attractive man, but good natured and friendly. When I needed three thousand dollars last spring, on account of a poor crop and some extra expenses, he seemed not only willing, but really glad to lend it to me."

"He took a mortgage on the ranch," said Mary Burton dryly.

"Why, of course. He is a man of business, you know. You wouldn't expect him to lend the money without security, would you?"

"And you pay him a large interest?"

"Ten per cent." [Pg 8]

"There isn't much friendship in lending money on good security at ten per cent., Richard."

"Oh, you put things in a wrong way, Mary. Money is worth ten per cent. out here, and of course I didn't want Wolverton to lose money by me. He could get that interest elsewhere."

"You are very unsuspecting, Richard. You credit everybody with your own true, unselfish nature."

"Why, that's a compliment, Mary," laughed the husband, "and deserves a kiss."

He bent over and touched his wife's cheek with his lips.

Mary Burton had reached the age of thirty-six, and was no longer in her first youth, but her face seemed even more lovelier than when he married her, so Richard Burton thought. He too was a man of fine presence, with a frank, open face, that invariably won the favor of those who met him for the first time. He was in the full vigor of manhood, and when he and his wife attended the Methodist church on Sundays, many eyes were attracted by the handsome couple. They had one son, Bob, who will soon receive attention. [Pg 9]

"I have a great mind, Richard, to tell you why I distrust and fear Aaron Wolverton," said his wife after a slight pause.

"I wish you would, Mary. Perhaps, when I know, I can talk you out of your apprehension."

"Did you ever know that Aaron Wolverton was once a suitor for my hand?"

Richard Burton burst into an explosive laugh.

"What! That dried-up old mummy had the presumption to offer you his hand!"

"He actually did, Richard," said Mrs. Burton, smiling.

"I wonder you did not laugh in his face. Why, the man is fifteen years older than I am, twenty years older than you."

"That difference is not unprecedented. I did not reject him because he was older than myself. If you had been as old as he when you offered yourself, I think I would have accepted you."

"Poor old fellow! Did he take it hard?" asked Burton, half jocosely.

"If you mean did he show any traces of a broken heart, I answer no. But when, after pressing his suit persistently, he found my resolution to be inflexible, his face became distorted with passion. He swore that he would be revenged upon me some day, and that if I dared to marry any one else he would never rest till he had brought harm to the husband of my choice." [Pg 10]

"I wish I had been there. I would have made him take back those words, or I would have horsewhipped him."

"Don't take any notice of them, Richard," said Mary Burton, hastily. "It will be much better."

"I agree with you," said her husband, his quick anger melting. "After all, the old fellow's disappointment was so great that I can excuse a little impetuosity, and even rudeness. You see, Mary, Wolverton isn't a gentleman."

"No; and never will be."

"He acted as his nature prompted. But it was all over years ago. Why, Mary, he is always friendly with me, even if I am your husband."

"That is on the outside, Richard; but I fear he is crafty. He is like an Indian; his thirst for vengeance keeps alive." [Pg 11]

"Admitting all that, though I don't, what harm can he do, Mary, while I am here to protect you?" and the husband expanded his breast in conscious strength, and looked down proudly on his fair wife. "Why, I could wring his neck with only one hand."

"Well, perhaps I am foolish, Richard," the wife admitted.

"Of course you are, Mary."

Just then Clip put his head inside the door.

"De hoss is ready, massa!" he said.

"All right, Clip! I'll come right out."

Richard Burton kissed his wife hastily, and went out.

As he closed the door, a bright, handsome boy, strongly made, and bearing a resemblance to both father and mother, entered.

"Hallo, mother! Are you all right?" he asked.

"I hope so, Robert."

"You look serious, as if you were worrying over something."

"I was thinking of Mr. Wolverton. Your father has gone to pay him interest on the mortgage." [Pg 12]

"Wolverton is a mean old hunk. He's got a nephew living with him, a boy about my age. He works him nearly to death, and I am sure the poor boy doesn't get half enough to eat."

"I was wishing your father didn't owe money to such a man."

"Oh, well, mother, there's no use in worrying. It's only three thousand dollars, and if we have a good crop next year, father will be able to pay off at least half of it. You can see we've got a splendid ranch, mother. There isn't another within twenty miles where the land is as rich."

"I shall be glad to see the day when the mortgage is wholly paid off, and we are out of debt."

"So shall I, mother."

"Does Mr. Wolverton ever take any notice of you, Robert?"

"He took some notice of me this morning," laughed Bob. "That reminds me. I just left three prairie chickens with Rachel in the kitchen." [Pg 13]

"Did you shoot them this morning, Robert?"

"Yes, mother; you see I have my hunting dress on. But I shot two more. I was bringing them home across a field of Wolverton's, when the old fellow suddenly made his appearance, and, charging me with shooting them on his land, laid claim to them. I denied the charge and told him I proposed to keep them. With that he seized me by the collar, and we had a rough-and-tumble fight for five minutes."

"Oh, Robert, how imprudent!"

"Well, mother, it was more than flesh and blood could stand. The upshot of it was that I left him lying on his back trembling with rage. I threw down two of the chickens to appease him. I hope he'll have them for dinner, and Sam'll get a share of them. The poor fellow is half starved. I don't believe he gets a square meal once a week."

"I am afraid you have made an enemy of Mr. Wolverton, Robert."

"I can't help it, mother. Would you have me bow down to him, and meekly yield up my rights?" [Pg 14]

"But, Robert, to get into a fight with a man so much older?"

"I don't want to get into any difficulty, mother. It was forced upon me. Besides, I left him two of the chickens."

"Was Clip with you?"

"I reckon I was, missis," said Clip, displaying his ivories. "I laughed like to split when Massa Bob laid de old man down on his back. Wasn't he jest ravin'? Wouldn't have lost dat sight, missis, for de biggest watermillion I ever seed."

Mrs. Burton smiled, but her smile was a faint one. She knew Aaron Wolverton, and she feared that some time or other he would try to be revenged on Bob.

CHAPTER II. AARON WOLVERTON.

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Richard Burton drove rapidly to the village. I may state here that the name of the township was Carver. Like most Western villages, it consisted principally of one long, central street, containing buildings of all sizes and descriptions, from a three-story hotel to a one-story office. But there seemed to be a good deal going on all the time—much more than in an Eastern town of the size. Western people are active, progressive, never content to stand still. In the drowsy atmosphere that pervades many an Eastern country town they would stagnate, but there perpetual motion is the rule.

Everybody in Carver knew Richard Burton. Everybody liked him also; he was easy and social with all. I have said everybody, but I must make one exception, and that was the man on whom he now proposed to call.

About midway on the main street was a small one-story building, about twelve feet square. Above the door was a sign:

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AARON WOLVERTON,
REAL ESTATE AGENT.

Mr. Wolverton had considerable capital, which he was in the habit of lending on mortgage, always for a large interest, and on substantial security. He was supposed to be rich, but did not live like a rich man. His dwelling lay a little way back from the street; it was small, cramped, and uncomfortable, and his style of living was of the most economical character. He was a bachelor, and the only other members of his family were his sister, Sally Wolverton, who resembled her brother in person and character, and a nephew, Sam, the son of a brother, who came in for a liberal share of ill-treatment from the uncle, on whom he was dependent.

Richard Burton reined up in front of Wolverton's office, and, leaping from his carriage, unceremoniously opened the outer door.

"Good morning, Wolverton," he said, cheerily.

Aaron Wolverton, a meagre and wrinkled man of fifty-five, looked up from his desk, and scanned his visitor's face attentively. He was not sure but Richard Burton, who was a high-spirited man, had come to take him to task for his attack upon Bob a short time before. Whenever he thought of it, he fairly trembled with rage and humiliation, for the boy had conquered him, and he knew it.

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Burton's words reassured him.

"I have come to pay interest on the mortgage, Wolverton. I suppose you haven't forgotten that?"

"No."

"Catch you forgetting a thing of that kind. That wouldn't be like you."

"I suppose you don't want to lift the mortgage?"

"No; it is all I can do to pay the interest. The first six months have passed remarkably quick."

"Not to me."

"No, for you are to receive money, I to pay it. It makes all the difference in the world. I suppose you are not in need of the money?"

"No, not at present," answered Wolverton, slowly; "but if I had it I could get higher interest."

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"Higher interest! Isn't ten per cent. enough for you?"

"Nothing is enough, as long as I can get more."

"Come, Wolverton, don't be such a money-grabber. You must be rolling in money."

The old man shrugged his shoulders in deprecation.

"Times are dull, and—I lose money sometimes," he said.

"Not much, if you know it," said Burton, jocosely. "Well, just write a receipt for six months' interest, one hundred and fifty dollars."

Aaron Wolverton took the proffered bills, eyeing them with eager cupidity, and put them in his desk. Then he made out a receipt, and handed it to his visitor.

"You will be paying the mortgage next year?" he said inquiringly.

"I don't know, Wolverton. If the crops are good, I may pay a part. But I am afraid I am not a very good manager. I can't save money like you, and that brings me round to the question: For whom are you piling up all this wealth? Is it for Sam?" [Pg 19]

"Sam is a young loafer," said Wolverton, with a frown. "I give him a home and his living, and he is almost too lazy to breathe."

"You were not that way at his age?"

"No. I worked early and late. I was a poor boy. All that I have, I made by hard work."

"Take my advice, Wolverton, and get the worth of it while you live. But perhaps you are saving with a view to matrimony. Ha, ha!"

And Richard burst into a ringing laugh.

Wolverton puckered up his face, and snarled:

"Why shouldn't I marry if I choose? What is there to laugh at?"

"No reason at all. I advise you to marry. You ought to, for I have found happiness in marrying one of the sweetest women in the world."

Then without any apparent reason, remembering that the man before him had aspired to the hand of his wife, he burst into another laugh, which he kept up till the tears ran from his eyes. He didn't notice the evil expression which it called up in the face of the moneylender. [Pg 20]

"I'd like to kill him where he stands," thought Aaron Wolverton. "She must have told him about me. Curse him! he stole her from me, and now he dares to laugh in my face!"

But Wolverton was not a man to indulge even his evil temper when it was impolitic to do so. He forced himself to look indifferent, and merely said:

"Let them laugh that win, Mr. Burton. Perhaps my time may come some day."

"Perhaps it may, Wolverton. I heartily hope that you may find some one to make your life happy. I am happy myself, and I like to see others happy."

There was a little more conversation, and then Richard Burton went out.

"Good-bye, Wolverton. Come to my ranch some time. I'll give you a seat at supper, and we will smoke a cigar afterwards." [Pg 21]

The colt—for it was scarcely more than that—was getting restless. It was pawing the ground and evidently anxious to get away.

"Your horse has a bad temper, Mr. Burton," said Wolverton.

"Yes, he needs taming. He's not well trained yet."

"There's something more than that," Wolverton said to himself, thoughtfully. "Horses are like men—they often have nasty tempers. I wouldn't ride behind that brute for—for the money Burton has just paid me. Some day he'll get upset, or thrown. And if he does," he continued, after a pause, "why should I lament? He has taken from me the only woman I ever loved. She might have made a different man of me—perhaps."

Just then a boy came up the street. He stopped and eyed Aaron Wolverton with a little misgiving.

"Sam," said Wolverton, sharply, "what kept you so long? Do you want the strap again?"

"Indeed, uncle, I hurried as fast as I could. Mr. Jenks kept me waiting." [Pg 22]

"That is probably a lie," growled Wolverton. "However, since you are here, go into your dinner. It is cold by this time, most likely."

It was cold and uninviting, but Sam could not afford to be dainty, and ate what was set before him by his aunt.

CHAPTER III. A LITTLE RETROSPECT.

Richard Burton, three years previous to the opening of this story, was a dry-goods merchant in

St. Louis. Becoming tired of the dull routine of his daily life, and with a wistful remembrance of the country, where he had passed his boyhood, he sold out his business for a few thousand dollars, and with the sum realized bought a large ranch located on a small river or creek running into the Missouri.

In taking this course he was influenced in no small degree by a city acquaintance, Aaron Wolverton, who six months before had located himself in the same township, and who, indeed, had made the purchase of the ranch on his behalf. Wolverton made a large commission on the transaction—larger than Richard Burton was aware; but it must be admitted he had bought him an excellent property. Burton was entirely unacquainted with the fact that Wolverton had at an earlier period been an unsuccessful suitor for his wife's hand, nor did he know it till the morning on which our story opens.

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It is always rather a hazardous experiment when a man, engaged till middle life in other business, becomes a tiller of the soil without special training for his new occupation. Few persons make farming profitable, however well qualified, and the St. Louis merchant was hardly likely to do more than make a living. In fact, he did not make both ends meet, but fell behind every year till he felt compelled to borrow three thousand dollars on mortgage of Aaron Wolverton. His wife expressed uneasiness, but he laughed away her remonstrances, and assured her he should be able to pay it back in a couple of years, if fortune favored him with good crops.

"You know, Mary," he said cheerfully, "there are a good many extra expenses just at first, but it will be different in future. Wolverton assures me that the ranch is a fine one, and that I can pay him back sooner than he desires, for he is glad to lend on such excellent security."

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Mrs. Burton was silent, but she was not convinced.

Robert Burton, popularly called Bob, was the only son of the ex-merchant. He thoroughly enjoyed the removal to the country, having a taste for manly sports. He usually spent a part of the day in study, reciting to a clergyman in the village, and the rest of his time he employed in hunting, fishing, and farm work. Clip, the young refugee, was his chosen companion, and was sincerely attached to Massa Bob, as he generally called him. The negro lad was full of fun and innocent mischief, but had no malice about him. Bob tried to teach him to read, but Clip was no scholar. He complained that study made his head ache.

"But you ought to know something, Clip," expostulated Bob. "You don't want to grow up an ignoramus."

"What's dat?" asked Clip, bewildered. "Never heard such a long word. Is it anything very bad?"

"It means a know-nothing, Clip."

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"I guess you're right, Massa Bob. Dat's what I am."

"But don't it trouble you, Clip?"

"No, Massa Bob; I guess I was never cut out for a scholar."

Still Bob persevered in his effort to teach Clip.

One day, after an unsuccessful attempt to get him to understand the difference between capital B and R, he said: "Clip, I don't believe you have got any sense."

"Spec's I haven't, Massa Bob," answered Clip, philosophically. "How many have you got?"

Bob laughed.

"I don't know exactly," he replied; "but I hope I have as many as the average."

"I reckon you've got a lot. You learn awful easy."

"I am afraid I shall have to learn for both of us, Clip."

"Dat's so!" said Clip, in a tone of satisfaction. "Dat'll do just as well."

So Bob was finally obliged to give up teaching Clip in despair. He was led to accept the conclusion of his young *protégé* that he was never meant for a scholar.

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In one respect Bob and Clip shared the prejudices of Mrs. Burton. Neither liked Aaron Wolverton. They felt friendly, however, to Sam Wolverton, the nephew; and more than once Sam, with his appetite unsatisfied at home, came over to Burton's ranch and enjoyed a hearty lunch, thanks to the good offices of Bob Burton.

One day he came over crying, and showed the marks of a severe whipping he had received from his uncle.

"What did you do, Sam?" asked Bob.

Sam mentioned the offense, which was a trifling one, and unintentional besides.

"Your uncle is a brute!" said Bob indignantly.

"Dat's so, Sam," echoed Clip.

"It would do me good to lay the whip over his shoulders."

Sam trembled, and shook his head. He was a timid boy, and such an act seemed to him to border on the foolhardy.

"How old are you, Sam?"

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"Fourteen."

"In seven years you will be a man, and he can't tyrannize over you any longer."

"I don't believe I shall live so long," said Sam, despondently.

"Yes, you will. Even in four years, when you are eighteen, your uncle won't dare to beat you."

"Why don't you run away, like I did?" asked Clip, with a bright idea.

But Sam was not of the heroic type. He shrank from throwing himself on the world.

"I should starve," he said. "Would you run away, Clip, if you were in my place?"

"Wouldn't I just!"

"And you, Bob?"

"He wouldn't strike me but once," said Bob, proudly.

"It's all well enough for you, but I think I'm a coward. When my uncle comes at me my heart sinks into my boots, and I want to run away."

"You'll never make a hero, Sam."

"No, I won't. I'm an awful coward, and I know it."

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"How is your aunt? Is she any better than your uncle?"

"She's about the same. She don't whip me, but she's got an awful rough tongue. She will scold till she's out of breath."

"How long have you lived with your uncle?"

"About four years. When my father died, he told me to go to Uncle Aaron."

"Didn't he leave any property?"

"Uncle Aaron says he didn't leave a cent, and I suppose it's so; but father told me in his last sickness there'd be some property for me."

"I've no doubt there was, and he cheated you out of it," said Bob indignantly. "That's just my opinion of your uncle."

"Even if it is so, I can't do anything. It'll do no good. But I'd like to know how it is, for Uncle Aaron is all the time twitting me with living on him."

"As if you don't do enough to earn your own living. Why, you work harder than Clip, here, though that isn't saying much," added Bob, with a smile.

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Clip showed his white teeth, and seemed to enjoy the joke.

"Spec's I was born lazy," he said, promptly. "Dat ain't my fault, ef I was born so."

"That wouldn't be any excuse with Uncle Aaron," remarked Sam. "He thinks I'm lazy, and says he means to lick the laziness out of me."

"I think we had better hire out Clip to him. He needs a little discipline like that sort."

"Oh golly, massa Bob! I couldn't stand it nohow," said Clip, with a comical expression of alarm. "Massa Wolverton's the meanest white man I ever seed. Wish an earthquake would come and swallow him up."

"Your father was round to see my uncle this morning," said Sam.

"Yes, I know; he went to pay him some interest money."

"Your father is a nice gentleman. I wish I was his nephew," said poor Sam, enviously.

"Yes, Sam; he's always kind. He's a father to be proud of."

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"By the way, Sam, I've got some good news for you."

"What is it, Bob?"

"Your uncle carried home a pair of prairie chickens this morning. You'll have one good dinner, at least."

"Where did he get them?"

"I shot them."

"And you gave them to him?" asked Sam, surprised.

"Well, yes, after a little squabble," and Bob related the adventure of the morning.

"How brave you are, Bob!" said Sam admiringly. "You actually had a quarrel with Uncle Aaron?"

"Yes," answered Bob, with a smile. "When I got through, your uncle was lying on his back resting. I threw down two of the chickens, as much for your sake as any other reason. I hope you'll get your share."

"I saw the chickens in the kitchen before I came away, and wondered where they came from. I knew Uncle Aaron wouldn't buy them."

"Has your uncle got a gun?"

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"No; I think he's afraid of a gun."

"And you are afraid of him?"

"I can't help it, Bob. He flogs me sometimes with a horsewhip."

"I'd like to see him try it on me," said Bob, with emphasis. "But as I said before, you'll be a man some time, Sam, and then he won't dare touch you."

CHAPTER IV. THE SUDDEN SUMMONS.

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When Richard Burton left the office of Aaron Wolverton, he did not return home immediately. He had a business call to make in the next township, and drove over there. Finding that he was likely to be detained, he went to the hotel to dine, and, the day being warm, sat on the piazza and smoked a cigar afterwards. It was not until four o'clock that he turned his horse's head in the direction of Carver.

The horse he drove was young and untrained. It would have been dangerous for an unskillful driver to undertake to manage him. Robert Burton, however, thoroughly understood horses, and was not afraid of any, however fractious. But he had been persuaded to drink a couple of glasses of whisky by acquaintances at the hotel, and he was easily affected by drink of any kind. So his hand was not as strong or steady as usual when he started on his homeward journey.

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The horse seemed instinctively to know that there was something the matter with his driver, and, as he turned back his head knowingly, he prepared to take advantage of it. So he made himself more troublesome than usual, and Burton became at first annoyed and then angry.

"What ails you, you vicious brute?" he exclaimed, frowning. "You need a lesson, it seems."

He gave a violent twitch to the reins, more violent than he intended, and the animal swerved aside suddenly, bringing one wheel of the wagon into forcible collision with a tree by the roadside. This, coming unexpectedly, threw Richard Burton violently from his seat, and he was pitched out of the carriage, his head being thrown with force against the tree which had been the occasion of the shock.

There was a dull, sickening thud, and the poor man lay insensible, his eyes closed and his breast heaving.

The horse detached himself from the wagon and ran home—they were within half a mile of the village now—leaving his driver without sense or motion beside the wrecked wagon.

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He had lain there not over twenty minutes, when a pedestrian appeared upon the scene.

It was Aaron Wolverton, who was on his way to the house of a tenant to collect rent. He had been walking with his eyes fixed upon the ground, thinking intently, when all at once, raising his eyes, he started in amazement at the sight of the wrecked carriage and the prostrate man.

"Who can it be?" he asked himself in excitement.

His eyes were failing, and he could not distinguish, till close at hand, the person of the stricken man.

"Robert Burton!" he exclaimed in excitement, when at last he had discovered who it was. "How on earth did this accident happen?"

He bent over the prostrate man and placed his hand upon his heart. Alas! it had already ceased to beat. The features wore a startled and troubled look, the reflection of the feelings excited by the collision.

[Pg 36]

"Well, well!" ejaculated Wolverton, awed in spite of himself by the sight, "who would have dreamed of this? and only this morning he called on me to pay his interest."

There was a sudden suggestion, begotten of his greed, that entered that instant into Wolverton's mind.

"He can't have gone home since," he bethought himself. "He must have the receipt with him."

Even if he had, what did it concern Wolverton? The money had been paid, but there was no evidence of it except the receipt which he had given him.

With trembling fingers, Wolverton, bending over, searched the clothes of the dead man, half turning his eyes away, as if he feared to meet Robert Burton's look.

At last he found it. Burton had thrust it carelessly into his vest pocket.

With a furtive look, to see if he were observed, Aaron Wolverton put the receipt into his own pocket. Then he rose to his feet, and turned to go away. He had no desire to remain any longer by the side of the dead. [Pg 37]

Meanwhile the horse had dashed into the village at wild speed. Now it happened that Clip, sent on an errand to the store by Mrs. Burton, was in the village. His eyes opened wide when he saw the horse dash by him.

"What's dat mean?" Clip asked himself, staring with all his eyes at the runaway horse. "What's come of Massa Burton? Must have been an accident. Wagon must have upset, and—golly! I hope Massa Burton isn't killed nor noting."

Clip was all alive with excitement. He had the sense not to attempt to follow the horse, but ran as fast as he could in the direction from which the horse had come. There, he argued, must be the wagon and its rider.

It was a straight road, and he was not long in reaching the scene of the casualty. He came in sight of it at the moment when Aaron Wolverton was bending over the prostrate man, and searching his pockets.

Here was another surprise for Clip. "What is Massa Wolverton doing," he asked himself. He was sure he was not up to any good, for, as we have already seen, he had no love for the real estate agent, and thought him a very bad man. Clip had no small share of curiosity, and, intent on finding out what Wolverton was doing, he slid behind a tree about a foot in diameter, which happened to be conveniently situated. Grief struggled with curiosity, for Clip had already seen the wrecked team and the prostrate figure of the kind master, to whom he felt warmly attached. [Pg 38]

"Poor Massa Burton! I hope he isn't dead," thought Clip. "Jes' as soon as old Wolverton goes away I'll go up and look. Won't Mrs. Burton feel bad?"

All the while Clip was watching the movements of the real estate agent.

"What's he searchin' Massa Burton's pockets for?" he asked himself. "Spec's he's going to rob him. Didn't think the old man was so mean before. I'd jes' like to jump out and scare him."

Meanwhile Wolverton finished his discreditable business, happily unconscious that any one was witness of his mean act. Then, as already stated, he got up and walked swiftly away, not venturing to look back. Had he done so he would have seen Clip stealing from behind the tree which had served to screen him from observation, and running towards the wreck. [Pg 39]

Clip had never before seen death, but there was something in the mute look of Richard Burton that awed the soul of the colored boy.

Clip had an affectionate heart. He felt that Richard Burton must be dead, and the thought overpowered him.

"Poor Massa Burton!" he cried, bursting into tears. "He's done dead, sure 'nough. Oh, what will we do?"

A minute later Clip bounded off like a deer, to carry the sad news to the village.

He met the village doctor driving along in his top buggy, and he quickly called out to him: "Go quick, Massa Doctor, for de love of God. Poor Massa Burton's upset himself, and I 'spec's he's dead."

"Whereabouts, Clip?" demanded the doctor, startled.

"Up the road a piece."

"Jump in with me and show me."

So Clip, seated beside the doctor, guided him to the fatal spot.

The doctor lost no time in jumping out of his buggy and approaching the fallen man. He didn't need to feel his pulse, or place his hand over his heart. To his practiced eye there were other indications that disclosed the terrible truth.

"Is he dead?" asked Clip, in an awed voice.

"Yes, Clip; your poor master is dead," answered the doctor, sadly.

He had known Richard Burton well, and, like all the rest of his neighbors, had a warm esteem for him.

"How did this happen, Clip?" he asked.

"I don't know, Massa Doctor; 'deed I don't," answered Clip. "I was walkin' along, when I saw the [Pg 40]

colt runnin' like mad, wid his harness on, and I 'spected something had happened. So I came up, and dat's what I saw."

"We can't do anything, Clip, except to see that he is carried home. I dread to break the news to his poor wife."

Meanwhile Aaron Wolverton had locked himself in his office. He drew the receipt from his pocket, read it through carefully, and chuckled: [Pg 41]

"I'll get the money out of the widder. She can't prove that the interest has been paid! But I don't care so much for that as I do to get even with that impudent rascal Bob. He'll rue this day, as sure as my name is Aaron Wolverton."

CHAPTER V. WOLVERTON'S FIRST MOVE.

[Pg 42]

Why did not Aaron Wolverton burn the receipt, and get rid once for all of the only proof that the interest had been paid? It would have been the most politic thing to do, inasmuch as he had made up his mind to be dishonest. But, though unprincipled, he was not a bold man. The thought did certainly occur to him, and he even went so far as to light a match. But more timid counsel prevailed, and he concealed it in his desk, carefully locking the desk afterwards.

It is unnecessary to describe the grief of the little family at Burton's Ranch when the body of the master was brought home. No one had dreamed of speedy death for Richard Burton. He seemed so strong and vigorous that it would have seemed safe to predict for him a long life—long beyond the average; yet here, in middle life, in the fullness of health and vigor, the summons had come. [Pg 43]

To Mrs. Burton, who was a most devoted wife, it was a crushing blow. It seemed at first as if it would be happiness to lie down beside her dead husband, and leave the world for him.

"What have I to live for now?" she asked, mournfully.

"You have me, mother," answered Bob, gently. "I have lost my father. What would become of me if I should lose my mother also?"

"You are right, Robert," said Mrs. Burton. "I was wrong to give way; but it is a very hard trial."

"Indeed it is, mother," said Robert, kissing her affectionately. "But we must try to bear up."

Mrs. Burton felt that this was her plain duty, and henceforth strove to control her emotions. She ceased to sob, but her face showed the grief she suffered.

The funeral took place, and the little family held a council to decide what was to be done. [Pg 44]

"Can we carry on the ranch now that your father is gone?" asked Mrs. Burton, anxiously. "Would it not be better to sell it?"

"No, mother; the sacrifice would be too great."

"But I do not feel capable of managing it, Robert."

"You may think me presumptuous, mother, but my proposal is to assist you, relieving you of the greater part of the care. Between us we can carry it on, I am confident."

"You are only a boy of sixteen, Robert," objected his mother.

"That is true; but I have watched carefully the manner in which the ranch has been carried on. Of course you must help, and you will try to get a man with whom I can advise. I am sure we can make a good deal more out of the farm than we could realize from investing the money it would bring."

"And are you willing to undertake this, Robert? It will be a hard task."

"I'll help him, missis," said Clip, eagerly.

"I shall have Clip to advise me, mother," said Robert. [Pg 45]

"No doubt Clip is willing," said Mrs. Burton, smiling faintly; "but after all, it will be only two boys."

"Try us a single year, mother," said Bob, confidently.

Mrs. Burton gave her consent, and Bob at once took his father's place, rising early and going to the field to superintend the farming operations. He seemed to have developed at once into a mature man, though in appearance he was still the same. Clip was his loyal assistant, though, being a harum-scarum boy, fond of fun and mischief, he was of very little service as adviser.

He had mentioned to Bob seeing Aaron Wolverton bending over the body of his father, and exploring his pockets. This puzzled Bob, but he was not prepared to suspect him of anything else than curiosity, until his mother received a call from the real estate agent a month after her

husband's decease.

Aaron Wolverton had been anxious to call before, but something withheld him. It might have been the consciousness of the dishonorable course he had taken. Be that as it may, he finally screwed up his courage to the sticking-point, and walked out to Burton's Ranch early one afternoon.

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Mrs. Burton was at home, as usual, for she seldom went out now. She had no intimate friends in the neighborhood. All that she cared for was under her own roof.

She looked up in some surprise when Mr. Wolverton was ushered into the sitting-room.

"I hope I see you well, Mrs. Burton," said the real estate agent, slipping to a seat, and placing his high hat on his knees.

"I am well in health, Mr. Wolverton," answered the widow, gravely.

"Yes, yes, of course; I understand," he hastily answered. "Terribly sudden, Mr. Barton's death was, to be sure, but dust we are, and to dust we must return, as the Scripture says."

Mrs. Burton did not think it necessary to make any reply.

"I came over to offer my—my condolences," continued Mr. Wolverton.

"Thank you."

[Pg 47]

"And I thought perhaps you might stand in need of some advice from a practical man."

"Any advice will be considered, Mr. Wolverton."

"I've been thinkin' the thing over, and I've about made up my mind that the best thing you can do is to sell the ranch," and the real estate agent squinted at Mrs. Burton from under his red eyebrows.

"That was my first thought; but I consulted with Robert, and he was anxious to have me carry on the ranch with his help."

Aaron Wolverton shook his head.

"A foolish plan!" he remarked. "Excuse me for saying so. Of course you, being a woman, are not competent to carry it on—"

"I have my son Robert to help me," said the widow.

Aaron Wolverton sniffed contemptuously.

"A mere boy!" he ejaculated.

"No; not a mere boy. His father's death and his affection for me have made a man of him at sixteen. He rises early every morning, goes to the fields, and superintends the farming operations. Peter, my head man, says that he is a remarkably smart boy, and understands the business about as well as a man."

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"Still I predict that he'll bring you deeper in debt every year."

"I don't think so; but, at any rate, I have promised to try the experiment for one year. I can then tell better whether it will be wise to keep on or sell."

"Now, Mrs. Burton, I have a better plan to suggest."

"What is it, Mr. Wolverton?"

"In fact, I have two plans. One is that you should sell me the ranch. You know I hold a mortgage on it for three thousand dollars?"

"I know it, Mr. Wolverton!" answered the widow, gravely.

"I'll give you three thousand dollars over and above, and then you will be rid of all care."

"Will you explain to me how Robert and I are going to live on the interest of three thousand dollars, Mr. Wolverton?"

[Pg 49]

"You'll get something, and if the boy runs the ranch you'll get nothing. He can earn his living, and I don't think you will suffer, even if you have only three thousand dollars."

"It is quite out of the question. Mr. Burton considered the ranch worth ten thousand dollars."

"A very ridiculous over-valuation—pardon me for saying so."

"At any rate, I don't propose to sell."

"There's another little circumstance I ought to mention," added Wolverton, nervously. "There is half a year's interest due on the mortgage. It was due on the very day of your husband's death."

Mrs. Burton looked up in amazement.

"What do you mean, Mr. Wolverton?" she said. "My husband started for your office on the fatal

morning of his death, carrying the money—one hundred and fifty dollars—to meet the interest. Do you mean to tell me that he did not pay it?"

"That is strange, very strange," stammered Aaron Wolverton, wiping his forehead with a bandana handkerchief. "What became of the money?" [Pg 50]

"Do you mean to say that it was not paid to you?" asked the widow, sharply.

"No, it was not," answered Wolverton, with audacious falsehood.

CHAPTER VI. THE LOST RECEIPT.

[Pg 51]

"I can't understand this," said Mrs. Burton, beginning to be troubled. "My poor husband had made all arrangements for paying his interest on the day of his death. When he left the house, he spoke of it. Do you mean to say he did not call at your office?"

If Aaron Wolverton had dared, he would have denied this, but Mr. Burton had been seen to enter the office, and so that he would not do him any good.

"He did call upon me, Mrs. Burton."

"And said nothing about the interest?"

"He said this, that he would pay me the coming week."

"He said that, when he had the money in his pocket?" said Mrs. Burton, incredulously.

"Of course I didn't know that he had the money with him. He probably thought of another way in which he wanted to use a part or all of it." [Pg 52]

"I don't believe it. He never mentioned any other use for it, and he was not owing any one except you. Mr. Wolverton, I don't like to say it, but I think he paid you the interest."

"Do you doubt my word?" demanded Wolverton, with assumed indignation.

"Suppose I say that you have forgotten it."

"I would not forget anything of that kind. You are very unjust, Mrs. Burton, but I will attribute that to your disappointment. Let me suggest one thing, however. If your husband had paid me, he would have been sure to take a receipt. If you have his wallet here—I happen to know that he was in the habit of carrying a wallet—and you doubt my word, examine the wallet and see if you can find the receipt."

Mrs. Burton thought this a good suggestion, and went up-stairs for the wallet. She opened it, but, as Wolverton had good reason to know would be the case, failed to find the important paper. [Pg 53]

"I can't find it," she said, as she re-entered the room.

"Did I not tell you so?" returned Wolverton, triumphantly. "Doesn't that settle it? Wasn't your husband a good enough business man to require a receipt for money paid?"

"Yes, yes," murmured the widow. "Mr. Wolverton, if you are right it arouses in my mind a terrible suspicion. Could my husband have been waylaid, murdered, and robbed?"

"No, I don't think so. His death was evidently the result of accident—the upset of his team."

"What then became of the money—the hundred and fifty dollars which he carried with him?"

"There, my dear lady, you ask me a question which I cannot answer. I am as much in the dark as you are."

"If this story is true, then we are one hundred and fifty dollars poorer than we supposed. It will be bad news for Robert."

"It need not be bad news for you, Mrs. Burton," said Wolverton, in an insinuating tone, shoving his chair a little nearer that occupied by the widow. [Pg 54]

Mrs. Burton looked up in surprise.

"How can it fail to be bad news for me?" she asked. "A loss like that I cannot help feeling."

"Do you think I would be hard on *you*, Mrs. Burton?" asked Wolverton, in the same soft voice.

"If you are disposed to wait for the money, or relinquish a part under the circumstances, Robert and I will feel very grateful to you, Mr. Wolverton."

"I might, upon conditions," said the agent, furtively shoving his chair a little nearer.

"What conditions?" asked Mrs. Burton, suspiciously.

"I will tell you, if you won't be offended. Mrs. Burton—Mary—you can't have forgotten the early

days in which I declared my love for you. I—I love you still. If you will only promise to marry me—after a while—all shall be easy with you. I am a rich man—richer than people think, and can surround you with luxuries. I will be a father to that boy of yours, and try to like him for your sake. Only tell me that you will be mine!"

[Pg 55]

Mrs. Burton had been so filled with indignation that she let him run on, quite unable to command her voice sufficiently to stem the torrent of his words. As he concluded, she rose to her feet, her eyes flashing, and her voice tremulous with anger, and said: "Mr. Wolverton, are you aware that my poor husband has been dead but a month?"

"I am perfectly aware of it, Mary."

"Don't address me so familiarly, sir."

"Mrs. Burton, then, I am perfectly acquainted with that fact, and would not have spoken now, but I saw you were anxious about the future, and I wished to reassure you. Of course I wouldn't hurry you; I only meant to get some kind of an answer that I might depend upon."

"And you thought that, after loving such a man as Richard Burton, I would be satisfied to take such a man as you?" said the widow, with stinging sarcasm.

"Richard Burton was not an angel," said Wolverton, harshly, for his pride was touched by the contempt which she made no effort to conceal.

[Pg 56]

"Don't dare to say anything against him!" said the widow, her eyes flashing ominously.

"Well, then, he was an angel," said Wolverton, sulkily; "but he's dead, and you will need to look to another protector."

"My son will protect me," said Mrs. Burton, proudly.

"That boy?" said Wolverton, contemptuously. "But I make allowance for a mother's feelings. Once more, Mary, I make you the offer. Remember that I am a rich man, and can surround you with luxuries."

"I would rather live in a log house on a crust, than to marry you, Mr. Wolverton," she said, impetuously. "If you were the only man in the world, I would go unmarried to my grave rather than wed you!"

Wolverton rose, white with wrath.

"You are tolerably explicit, madam," he said. "I can't charge you with beating round the bush. But let me tell you, ma'am, that you have done the unwise act of your life in making me your enemy."

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"I did not mean to make you an enemy," said Mrs. Burton, softening. "I suppose I ought to acknowledge the compliment you have paid me, but I must decline, once for all, and request you never again to mention the subject."

Aaron Wolverton was not so easily appeased.

"I do not care to stay any longer," he said. "You had better mention to your son about the interest."

Mrs. Burton had an opportunity to do this almost immediately, for Bob and Clip entered the house just as Wolverton was leaving it.

"What have you done to Mr. Wolverton, mother?" asked Bob. "He looked savage enough to bite my head off, and wouldn't even speak to me."

"Robert, I have some bad news to tell you. Mr. Wolverton tells me that your father didn't pay him the interest on the day of his death."

"I believe he tells a falsehood," said Bob, quickly.

"But he says, with some show of reason, if the interest was paid, why didn't your father take a receipt?"

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"Can no receipt be found?"

"No; I searched your father's wallet in vain."

"What is a receipt, missis?" asked Clip.

"It's a piece of paper with writing on it, Clip," said the widow, adjusting her explanations to Clip's intelligence.

"Golly! I saw de old man take a piece of paper from Massa Burton's pocket after he was dead—when he was a-lyin' on the ground."

"Say that again, Clip," said Bob, eagerly.

Clip repeated it, and answered several questions put to him by Mrs. Burton and Bob.

"It's all clear, mother," said Bob. "That old rascal has got up a scheme to rob you. He thinks there

isn't any proof of the payment. If he suspected that Clip had been a witness of his robbery he would have been more careful."

"What shall I do, Bob?"

"Wait a while. Let him show his hand, and then confront him with Clip's testimony. I wonder if he destroyed the receipt?"

"Probably he did so."

"If he didn't, I may get it through Sam. Don't be worried, mother. It'll all come out right."

[Pg 59]

One thing the widow did not venture to tell Bob—about Mr. Wolverton's matrimonial offer. It would have made him so angry that she feared he would act imprudently.

CHAPTER VII.

WOLVERTON'S ADVENTURE WITH CLIP.

[Pg 60]

Bob and his mother deliberated as to whether they should charge Mr. Wolverton openly with the theft of the receipt. On the whole, they decided to wait a while, and be guided by circumstances. If he took any measures to collect the money a second time, there would be sufficient reason to take the aggressive.

Bob had another reason for delay. He intended to acquaint Sam Wolverton with the matter, and request him to keep on the lookout for the receipt. Should he find it, he knew that Sam would gladly restore it to the rightful owner. He cautioned Clip not to say anything about what he saw on the day of his father's death, as it would put Wolverton on his guard, and lead him to destroy the receipt if still in his possession.

[Pg 61]

I must now relate a little incident in which Clip and Aaron Wolverton were the actors.

The creek on which Burton's Ranch was located was a quarter of a mile distant from the house. It was about a quarter of a mile wide. Over on the other side of the creek was the town of Martin, which was quite as large as Carver. In some respects it was a more enterprising place than Carver, and the stores were better stocked. For this reason there was considerable travel across the creek; but as there was no bridge, the passage must be made by boat.

Bob owned a good boat, which he and Clip used considerably. Both were good rowers, and during Mr. Burton's life they spent considerable time in rowing for pleasure. Now Bob's time was so occupied that the boat was employed only when there was an errand in the opposite village.

"Clip," said Bob, one morning, "I want you to go down to Martin."

"Yes, Massa Bob," said Clip, with alacrity, for he much preferred such a jaunt to working in the fields.

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The errand was to obtain a hammer and a supply of nails at the variety store in Martin. Clip was rather given to blunder, but still there was no reason why he should not execute the errand satisfactorily.

Clip went down to the creek, and unfastened the boat. He jumped in, and began to paddle away, when he heard a voice calling him.

"Here, you Clip!"

Looking round, Clip recognized in the man hailing him Aaron Wolverton.

Mr. Wolverton did not own any boat himself, and when he had occasion to go across the river he generally managed to secure a free passage with some one who was going over. If absolutely necessary, he would pay a nickel; but he begrudged even this small sum, so mean was he.

Clip stopped paddling, and answered the call.

"Hi, Massa Wolverton; what's the matter?"

"Come back here."

"What fo'?"

"I want you to take me over to Martin."

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Now Clip was naturally obliging, but he disliked Wolverton as much as one of his easy good nature could do. So he felt disposed to tantalize him.

"Can't do it, Massa Wolverton. I'm in a terrible hurry."

"It won't take you a minute to come back."

"Massa Bob will scold."

"You needn't mind that, boy. Come back, I say!"

"I dassn't."

"Don't be a fool, you little nigger. I'll pay you."

"What'll you give?" asked Clip, cautiously.

"I'll give you—a cent."

"Couldn't do it, nohow. What good's a cent to me?"

"A cent's a good deal of money. You can buy a stick of candy."

"'Tain't enough, Massa Wolverton. I ain't goin' to resk gettin' licked for a cent."

Cunning Clip knew that there was no danger of this, but he thought it would serve as an argument.

[Pg 64]

"I'll give you two cents," said Wolverton, impatiently.

"Couldn't do it," said Clip. "Ef it was five, now, I might 'sider it."

Finally Wolverton was obliged to accede to Clip's terms, and the colored boy pushed the boat to shore, and took in his passenger.

"Can you row good, Clip?" asked Wolverton, nervously, for he was very much afraid of the water, and he had never had Clip for a boatman before.

"You jes' bet I can, Massa Wolverton. I can row mos' as good as Massa Bob."

"Well, show it then; I am in a hurry to get over the creek."

Clip rowed to the middle of the creek, and then stopped paddling.

"I reckon you'd better pay me the money now, Massa Wolverton," he said.

"Why, you young rascal, are you afraid to trust me?"

"I dunno 'bout dat; but I wants my money."

"You haven't earned it yet. What are you afraid of?"

[Pg 65]

"You might forget to pay me, Massa Wolverton."

"No, I sha'n't. Push on."

"I'm goin' to sleep," said Clip, lying back in a lazy attitude.

"You young rascal! I've a good mind to fetch you a slap on the side of the head."

"Better not, Massa Wolverton," drawled Clip. "Might upset the boat."

"Give me the oars," said Wolverton, impatiently.

He took them; but he had never rowed in his life, and he almost immediately turned the boat around.

"Hi, yah!" laughed Clip, delighted. "Where was you raised, Massa Wolverton, not to understand rowin' no better dan dat?"

"Take the oars, you black scoundrel, and row me across, or I'll pitch you out of the boat!"

"Ef you do, what'll 'come of you, Massa Wolverton?" said Clip, not at all alarmed.

This was indeed an important consideration for a man so timid on the water as the real estate agent.

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"You put me out of all patience," said Wolverton, furiously. "Are you going to row or are you not?"

"I want my money," said Clip.

Wolverton was compelled to hand over a nickel, but registered a vow that if ever he caught Clip on land, he would make him pay for his impudence.

Clip took the oars, and made very good progress till he was about fifty feet from the other side of the creek. Then he began to make the boat rock, stopping his rowing.

"What are you about?" shouted Wolverton, turning pale.

"It's good fun, ain't it, Massa Wolverton?" said Clip; laughing insolently.

"Stop, you little rascal! You'll upset the boat."

"Golly! ain't dis fun?" said Clip, continuing his rocking.

"I'll choke you, if you don't stop," screamed Wolverton.

He rose to catch hold of Clip. The boy jumped up, and ducked his head. The result of the combined motion was that the boat, which was flat-bottomed, capsized, and the two were thrown into the water.

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There was no danger, for the water at this point was only four feet deep; and Clip could swim, while Aaron Wolverton was too tall to be drowned in that depth of water.

Wolverton was almost scared out of his wits. He cut such a ludicrous figure as he floundered in the water, that Clip screamed with delight. The black boy swam to the boat, and, managing to right her, got in again; but Wolverton waded to the shore, almost beside himself with rage.

"Is you wet, Massa Wolverton?" asked Clip, innocently, showing his white teeth.

"Come ashore, and I'll lick you!" shouted Wolverton, who had by this time landed, his clothes dripping wet.

"I reckon I'm too busy," answered Clip, with a grin. "I'm sorry you's wet, Massa Wolverton. Hi yah!"

"I'll wring your neck, you young tike!" said Wolverton, savagely.

"Dat old man's a hog," mused Clip. "Ain't much like my poor old gran'ther. *He* was always kin' an' good. I mind him sittin' in front of de ole cabin door down in Arkansas. I 'spec' de old chap's done dead afore this," concluded Clip, with a sigh. [Pg 68]

Clip kept at a safe distance from shore, and the agent was compelled to defer his vengeance, and go to the house of an acquaintance to borrow some dry clothes.

When he returned, it is needless to say that it was not in Clip's boat.

He opened his desk, to enter a business transaction in his account-book, when he made a startling discovery.

The receipt had disappeared!

CHAPTER VIII. WOLVERTON'S DISMAY.

[Pg 69]

Wolverton uttered a cry of dismay when he found that the receipt had disappeared. With trembling fingers he turned over a pile of papers in the hope of finding the important paper.

"Where on earth can it be?" he asked himself, with a troubled face.

He set himself to consider when he had seen it last and where he had placed it.

"It must be in the desk somewhere," he decided, and resumed his search. Those of my readers who have mislaid any article can picture to themselves his increasing perplexity as the missing paper failed to turn up.

He was finally obliged to conclude that it was not in the desk. But, if so, where could it be? If not found, or if found by any one else, his situation would be an embarrassing one. He had assured Mrs. Burton that the interest money had not been paid. Now suppose the receipt were found, what would be the inference? He could not help acknowledging that it would look bad for him. Until he learned something of its whereabouts he would not dare to press Mrs. Burton for a second payment of the interest money. [Pg 70]

"It is as bad as losing a hundred and fifty dollars," he groaned. "It is a pile of money to lose."

Aaron Wolverton did not appear to consider that it was losing what was not his property, and was only preventing him from pushing a fraudulent claim. He actually felt wronged by this inopportune loss. He felt somehow that he was the victim of misfortune.

But what could have become of the receipt? That was what troubled him. Was there anybody who was responsible for its disappearance? Naturally it would be important for Mrs. Burton to get hold of it; but then, they did not know of its existence. They had no evidence that the receipt had even been delivered to Richard Burton. Still it was possible that Bob Burton had visited the house, and searched the desk. He would inquire of his sister. [Pg 71]

He opened the door leading to the kitchen, where Miss Sally Wolverton was engaged in some domestic employment.

"Sally, has the Burton boy been here this morning?"

"No; why should he come? He isn't one of your visitors, is he?"

"Was he here yesterday?"

"No; what makes you ask?"

"There was a little business, connected with the farm, which he might have come about."

"I am glad he didn't come," said Sally. "He's too high-strung for me."

"I don't like him myself; but sometimes we have to do business with those we don't like."

"That's so. How's the widder left?"

"She's got the ranch, but I hold a mortgage of three thousand dollars on it," replied her brother, his features expanding into a wintry smile. A man who can laugh heartily possesses redeeming traits, even if in some respects he is bad; but Aaron Wolverton had never been known to indulge in a hearty laugh.

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"Can she pay?"

"Not at present."

"Is the mortgage for a term of years?"

"No; it can be called in at the end of any year."

"I never liked that woman," said Miss Sally Wolverton, grimly.

Sally Wolverton did not like any woman who was younger and prettier than herself, and there were few who were not prettier. She had never known of her brother's infatuation for the lady she was criticising, otherwise she would have been tempted to express herself even more strongly. She was strongly opposed to his marriage, as this would have removed her from her place in his household, or, even if she remained, would have deprived her of her power. Aaron did not care at present to take her into his confidence. Still he could not forbear coming, in a faint way, to the defense of the woman he admired.

"Mrs. Burton is a fine-looking woman," he said.

[Pg 73]

"Fine looking!" repeated Sally with a contemptuous sniff. "I don't admire your taste."

"She isn't in your style, Sally," said Aaron, with a sly twinkle in his eye.

Sally Wolverton was taller than her brother, with harsh features, a gaunt, angular figure, and an acid expression.

"I hope not," she answered. "I hope I don't look like an insipid doll."

"You certainly don't, Sally; you have expression enough, I am sure."

"Do you think Mrs. Burton pretty?" asked Sally, suspiciously.

"Oh, so so!" answered Aaron, guardedly; for he did not care to reveal the secret to his sister at present. She was useful to him as a housekeeper, and moreover (an important point) she was very economical; more so than any person whom he could hire. He did indeed pay his sister, but only a dollar a week, and out of this she saved nearly one half, having the gift of economy in quite as large a measure as himself.

This assurance, and her brother's indifferent tone, relieved Sally from her momentary suspicion. Yet, had she been able to read her brother's secret thoughts, she would have been a prey to anxiety. He had made up his mind, if ever he did marry Mrs. Burton, to give Sally her walking-ticket.

[Pg 74]

"I can't afford to support two women," he reflected, "and my wife ought to be able to do all the work in so small a household."

"Why are you so anxious to know whether any of the Burtons have been here?"

"I thought they might come," answered her brother, evasively. "You haven't seen anything of that black imp, Clip, have you?"

"No; has he any business with you?"

"I have some business with him," snarled Wolverton. "He played a trick on me this morning."

"What sort of a trick?"

"I got him to carry me across the creek in his boat, and he managed to upset me."

"Did he do it a-purpose?"

"Yes; he laughed like a hyena when he saw me floundering in the water."

"If he comes round here, I'll give him a lesson. I can't abide a nigger any way. They're as lazy as sin, and they ain't got no more sense than a monkey. It's my opinion they are a kind of monkey, any way."

[Pg 75]

Fortunately for the colored race all are not so prejudiced against them as Sally Wolverton—otherwise they would be in a bad case.

"By the way, Sally, have you seen a stray paper about the floor in my room?" asked Wolverton, with assumed carelessness.

"What sort of a paper was it?"

"It was a—a receipt," answered her brother, hesitating.

"What kind of a receipt—from whom?" asked Sally, who possessed her share of general curiosity.

"That isn't to the point. If you have seen such a paper, or picked it up, I shall feel relieved. I might have to pay the money over again if I don't find it."

This was misrepresenting the matter, but Wolverton did not think it expedient to give his sister a clew to so delicate a secret.

"No; I have seen no paper," she said shortly, not relishing his evasive reply. "Have you searched your desk?"

[Pg 76]

"Yes."

"And didn't find it?"

"No."

"Suppose I look. Four eyes are better than two."

"No, thank you, Sally," answered her brother, hastily. "I am particular about not having my papers disturbed."

Aaron Wolverton would have gained some valuable information touching the missing paper if he could have transferred himself at that moment to Burton's Ranch.

Bob and Clip were out in the yard when Sam Wolverton made his appearance, breathless and excited.

"What's the matter, Sam?" asked Bob, wondering.

"Let me catch my breath," gasped Sam. "I—I've got some good news."

"Then you are welcome. Has your uncle got married?"

"No; nor aunt Sally either," replied Sam. "What do you say to that?" and he drew from his vest pocket a long strip of paper.

"What's that?" asked Bob, eagerly.

"*It's the receipt*", answered Sam.

CHAPTER IX. SAM'S GIFT.

[Pg 77]

"What!" exclaimed Bob, in great excitement. "Not the receipt for the money?"

"That's just what it is," answered Sam, nodding emphatically.

"Let me see it."

Sam put the paper in Bob's hand.

There it was in regular form, a receipt for one hundred and fifty dollars, being the semi-annual interest on a mortgage on Burton's Ranch, dated on the day of Richard Burton's death, and signed by Aaron Wolverton.

"Hurrah!" shouted Bob, waving it aloft. "Then father did pay it, after all, and that mean scoundrel—excuse my speaking of your uncle in such terms, Sam—"

"I don't mind," said Sam, philosophically.

"That mean scoundrel wanted us to pay the money a second time. I'm ever so much obliged to you, Sam. But where on earth did you find it?"

[Pg 78]

"I'll tell you, Bob," answered Sam, perching himself on the fence. "This forenoon Uncle Aaron started out on business—I don't know where he went."

"I know," said Clip, giving way to a burst of merriment.

"How do you know?"

"I rowed him across de creek. I was out in de boat when old Massa Wolverton come along and axed me to take him across. I made him pay me a nickel, and he got into de boat," and Clip began to laugh once more.

"I don't see anything to laugh at, Clip."

"You would, massa Bob, ef you'd been dar. We was almost across when de old boat upset, yah! yah! and old Massa Wolverton—it makes me laugh like to split—tumbled into de water, and got wet as a drowned rat."

"Clip, you bad boy, you did it on purpose," said Bob, trying to look stern.

"Wish I may die!" asseverated Clip, stoutly, for he was not an imitator of George Washington.

[Pg 79]

"Didn't de old man look mad, dough? He jest shook his fist at me, and called me a black imp, 'deed he did."

"I am afraid he was right, Clip," said Bob, shaking his head. "But you haven't told me about the receipt, Sam."

"He sent me into his room to get his hat, when right down on the floor by his desk, I saw a piece of paper. I remembered what you told me, Bob, about the receipt, so I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket. I had to be quick about it, for Uncle Aaron is always in a hurry. Well, I took out the hat, and I didn't dare to take out the paper and look at it till he was out of sight."

"And then—"

"Well, then I saw it was the paper you wanted."

"Mr. Wolverton took it from the pocket of my poor father when he lay dead on the spot where he was thrown out," said Bob, gravely. "It would be hard to think of a meaner piece of rascality."

"Well, I'm glad you've got it, Bob. I don't know as I was right in taking it, but I'll take the risk." [Pg 80]

"If you never do anything worse than that, Sam, you won't have much to answer for. I wish you'd let me give you something."

"No, Bob, you are my friend, and it would be a pity if I couldn't do you a favor without getting paid for it."

"But this is a great favor. It is worth a hundred and fifty dollars. Without it we might, and probable would, have to pay the interest money over again. Now, when your uncle calls for it, we shall only have to show him the receipt."

"He'll wonder where it came from."

"I hope it won't get you into trouble, Sam."

"He won't suspect me. He'll know I couldn't break into his desk, and he won't know anything about having dropped it on the floor. I don't see how he came to be so careless."

"Depend upon it, Sam, it was the work of Providence. Mother says that God often overrules the designs of the wicked, and I think this is an instance. Henceforth, Sam, though you are old Wolverton's nephew, I shall consider you a friend of our family. Why can't you stay to supper to-night?" [Pg 81]

"It would never do, Bob, unless I asked permission."

"Then ask permission."

"I am afraid it wouldn't be granted."

"If your uncle is as mean as I think he is, he would be glad for you to get a meal at the expense of somebody else."

"He wouldn't like to have me enjoy myself," said Sam.

"Is he so mean as that?"

"Whenever he hears me singing, he looks mad, and wants to know why I am making a fool of myself."

"He's an uncle to be proud of," said Bob, ironically.

"I just wish I could live at your house, Bob."

"Perhaps I can make an exchange, and give Clip to your uncle instead of you."

"Oh, Massa Bob, don't you do it!" exclaimed Clip, looking scared. "Old Massa Wolverton would kill me, I know he would. He hates niggers, I heard him say so." [Pg 82]

Bob and Sam laughed, being amused by the evident terror of the young colored boy.

"I won't do it, Clip, unless you are very bad," said Bob, gravely, "though I think Sam would be willing to change."

"Indeed I would," said Sam with a sigh. "There's no such good luck for me."

When Bob carried in the receipt and showed it to his mother, her face lighted up with joy.

"This is indeed a stroke of good fortune," she said; "or rather it seems like a direct interposition of Providence—that Providence that cares for the widow and the fatherless. You must make Sam a present."

"So I will, mother; but if he understands it is for this he won't take anything."

"Sam is evidently very different from his uncle. He is a sound scion springing from a corrupt trunk. Leave it to me to manage. Won't he stay to supper?"

"Not to-night. I invited him, but he was afraid to accept the invitation, for fear of being punished." [Pg 83]

"Is his uncle so severe, then?"

"I suspect he beats Sam, though Sam doesn't like to own it."

"And this man, this cruel tyrant, wants to marry me," thought Mrs. Burton, shuddering.

Two days later Sam chanced to be in the house with the two boys, when Mrs. Burton passed through the room, and greeted him pleasantly.

"When is your birthday?" she asked.

"Last week—Thursday—ma'am."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Did you receive a birthday present?"

Sam shook his head.

"There's no one to give me presents," he said.

"You have an uncle and aunt, Sam."

"They never give presents. They tell me I ought to be thankful that they take care of me, and save me from going to the poor-house."

"There would be no danger of that, Sam," said Bob. "If your uncle ever turns you out to shift for yourself, come and live with us."

"I wish he would turn me out to-morrow, then," said Sam; and it was evident the boy meant it.

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"Sam, you will permit me to make up for your uncle's neglect," said Mrs. Burton, kindly. "Here is a neck-tie. I bought it for Robert, but I can get another for him. And here is something else which may prove acceptable."

She drew from her pocket a silver dollar, and put it into Sam's hand.

"Is this really for me?" asked Sam, joyfully.

"Yes; it is only a small gift, but—"

"I never had so much money before in my life," said Sam. "It makes me feel rich."

Mrs. Burton looked significantly at Bob. Her woman's wit had devised a way of rewarding Sam for the service he had done the family without his being aware of it.

The gift was well meant, but it was destined to get poor Sam into trouble.

CHAPTER X. SAM IN A TIGHT PLACE.

[Pg 85]

Many a man who had come unexpectedly into a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars would not have felt so rich as Sam with his silver dollar. It must be remembered that he had never before had so much money at one time in his life. The prospect of spending it opened up dazzling possibilities. There were so many things that he wanted, that it was hard to decide which to select.

Among other things, Sam wanted a fishing-pole. There was a supply at a variety store in the village. He had never inquired the price, because he had no money. Now that he was wealthy he determined to inquire.

So he went into the store and, pointing to the coveted article, asked the price.

"Seventy-five cents," answered the old man, Gordon Locke, who kept the store.

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"Seventy-five cents!" repeated Sam, thoughtfully.

This would only leave him twenty-five cents, and there were so many other things he wanted.

"Was you calc'latin' to buy, Sam?" asked Mr. Locke, pushing up his iron-bound spectacles.

"I don't know," said Sam, slowly; "I didn't think I'd have to pay so much."

"It's cheap, for the quality," said the store keeper. "This ain't no common fishing-pole. It comes all the way from York."

"Yes, it seems a nice one," Sam admitted.

"Hev you got the money about you?" asked the old man.

"Yes," answered Sam, unguardedly.

"Then you'd better take the pole. You won't find no better within fifty mile."

"I'll think about it," said Sam.

He could not make up his mind to part with his precious dollar so soon. As long as he had it, he felt like a man of property. When it was once changed, he would once more be a poor boy.

In spite of the storekeeper's persuasions, he walked out with his money intact, leaving the coveted fishing-pole behind. [Pg 87]

Now it so happened that his uncle, who never allowed anything to pass unnoticed, saw from the window Sam come out of the store, which was nearly opposite.

"What business has he there, I wonder?" he said to himself.

Five minutes later he made an errand to visit the store himself.

"Good-day, Mr. Wolverton," said Gordon Locke, deferentially.

"Good-day, Locke! Didn't I see my nephew, Sam, come out of here just now?"

"Like as not you did. He was here."

"What business had he here?"

"He was looking at them fishin'-rods."

"He was, hey?" said Wolverton, pricking up his ears.

"Yes; he reckoned he'd buy one soon."

"What's the price?"

"Seventy-five cents."

"He reckoned he'd pay seventy-five cents for a fishin'-rod," said Wolverton, slowly. "Did he show you the money?" [Pg 88]

"No; but he said he had it."

"Oho, he had the money," repeated Aaron Wolverton, shaking his head ominously. "Where'd he get it? That's what I'd like to know."

"I reckon you gave it to him; he's your nephew."

"I don't pamper him in any such way as that. So he's got money. I'll have to look into that."

Wolverton, who was of a suspicious disposition, was led to think that Sam had stolen the money from him. He could think of no other way in which the boy could get possession of it.

He went home, and sought his sister Sally.

"Sally, where is Sam?"

"I don't know." Then, noticing the frown upon her brother's brow, she inquired, "Is anything the matter?"

"I think there is. Sam has money."

"What do you mean? Where'd he get it, Aaron?"

"That's what I want to find out," and he told her of Sam's visit to the store. [Pg 89]

"Have you missed any money, Aaron?"

"Not that I know of. You haven't left any round?"

"No."

"It stands to reason the boy has taken money from one of us. Even if he hasn't, whatever he has belongs to me by right, as I am takin' care of him."

"Half of it ought to go to me," said Sally, who was quite as fond of money as her brother.

"I don't know about that. But where's the boy?"

"I don't know. He may have gone over to see the Burtons. He's there most of the time."

"I'll foller him."

Aaron Wolverton went into the shed, and came out with a horse-whip. He did not keep a horse, but still he kept a whip. For what purpose Sam could have told if he had been asked.

"If the boy's become a thief, I want to know it," said Wolverton to himself.

Sam had really started on the way to the Burtons. His uncle struck his trail, so to speak, and followed him. He caught up with his nephew about half a mile away. Sam had thrown himself down on the ground under a cotton-wood tree, and gave himself up to pleasant dreams of the independence which manhood would bring. In his reverie he unconsciously spoke aloud. "When [Pg 90]

I'm a man, Uncle Aaron won't dare to boss me around as he does now."

The old man, creeping stealthily near, overheard the words, and a malicious smile lighted up his wrinkled face.

"Oho, that's what he's thinkin' of already," he muttered. "What more?"

"I wish I could live with the Burtons," proceeded the unconscious Sam. "They would treat a boy decently."

"So I don't treat him decently," repeated Wolverton, his small eyes snapping.

He had by this time crawled behind the trunk of the tree under which Sam was reclining.

"I sometimes think I'd like to run away and never come back," continued Sam.

[Pg 91]

"You do, hey?" snarled Wolverton, as he stepped out from behind the tree.

Sam jumped to his feet in dire dismay, and gazed at his uncle panic-stricken.

"Did you just come?" he stammered. "I didn't hear you."

"No, I reckon not," laughed his uncle, with a queer smile. "So you want to get quit of your aunt and me, do you?"

"I don't reckon to live with you always," faltered Sam.

"No; but you ain't a-goin' to leave us just yet. There's a little matter I've got to inquire into."

Sam looked up inquiringly.

"What is it?"

"What did you go into Locke's store for?" demanded his uncle, searchingly.

"I just went in to look round," answered Sam, evasively.

"You went to look at a fishing-pole," said Aaron Wolverton, sternly.

"What if I did?" asked Sam, plucking up a little courage.

"Did you have the money to buy it?"

[Pg 92]

"Ye—es," answered Sam, panic stricken.

"How much money have you got?"

"A dollar."

"Which you stole from me!" asserted Wolverton, with the air of a judge about to sentence a criminal to execution.

"No, I didn't. It didn't come from your house."

"Where did it come from?"

"Mrs. Burton gave it to me—for my birthday."

"I don't believe it. It's one of your lies. Give it to me this instant."

Poor Sam became desperate. What! was he to lose the only money of any account which he ever possessed? He was not brave, but he made a stand here.

"You have no right to it," he said, passionately. "It's mine. Mrs. Burton gave it to me."

"I tell you it's a lie. Even if she had done so I should have the right, as your uncle, to take it from you. Give it to me!"

"I won't!" said Sam, desperately.

"Won't, hey?" repeated Wolverton, grimly. "Well, we'll see about that."

He raised the horse-whip, and in an instant Sam's legs—he was standing now—felt the cruel lash.

[Pg 93]

"Won't, hey?" repeated his uncle. "We'll see."

"Help!" screamed Sam. "Will no one help me?"

"I reckon not," answered his uncle, mockingly, and he raised his whip once more.

But before the lash could descend, it was snatched from him, and, turning angrily, he confronted Bob Burton, fierce and indignant, and saw Clip standing just behind him.

CHAPTER XI. AN ANGRY CONFERENCE.

[Pg 94]

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you brute!" exclaimed Bob.

"Do you want me to thrash you, too?" snarled Wolverton, angrily.

"You can try, if you want to," returned Bob, contemptuously.

"Sam, what was he going to whip you for?" asked Bob, turning to his unfortunate friend.

"I'll answer that question," said Wolverton, "though it's no concern of yours. The boy has been robbing me."

"What have you to say, Sam?"

"It's not true."

"What do you charge him with taking, Mr. Wolverton?"

"A dollar."

"It's the one your mother gave me, Bob."

[Pg 95]

"To be sure! I saw her give it to you myself."

"He lies, and you swear to it," said Wolverton, with a sneer.

"Mr. Wolverton, you have brought a false charge against your nephew, and you know it. If you don't care to take his word or mine, you can come over to our house and ask my mother whether Sam's story is true."

"It doesn't matter whether it's true or false," said Wolverton, doggedly. "Sam is under my charge, and I have a right to any money he comes by."

"I always knew you were mean," said Bob, contemptuously, "but this is ahead of anything I ever imagined. Do you still accuse Sam of robbing you?"

"I don't know whether he did or not."

"You can easily satisfy yourself by calling on my mother."

"I mean to call on your mother, but it won't be on this business," said Wolverton, opening his mouth and showing the yellow fangs which served for teeth.

[Pg 96]

"You are at liberty to call on any business errand," said Bob.

"Indeed, you are very kind, remarkably kind, considering that the ranch is as much mine as your mother's."

"How do you make that out?"

"I have a mortgage on it for half its value."

"I deny it. The ranch is worth much more than six thousand dollars. Besides, the time has not yet come when you have the right to foreclose."

"There you are wrong, young man! As the interest has not been promptly paid, I can foreclose at any time."

"You will have to see my mother about that," said Bob, carefully concealing the fact that the receipt had been recovered.

"I thought you would change your tune," said Wolverton, judging from Bob's calmer tone that he was getting alarmed.

Bob smiled, for he felt that he had the advantage, and foresaw Wolverton's discomfiture when the receipt was shown him.

"I am not quite so excited as I was," he admitted. "When I saw you with the whip uplifted I was ready for anything."

[Pg 97]

"Give me back the whip!" said Wolverton, menacingly.

"Will you promise not to use it on Sam?"

"I'll promise nothing, you young whipper-snapper! What business have you to interfere between me and my nephew?"

"The right of ordinary humanity."

"Give me the whip."

"Then make me the promise?"

"I won't."

"Then I propose to keep it."

"I will have you arrested for theft."

"Do so. I will explain matters to Judge Turner."

Judge Turner, the magistrate before whom such cases came, heartily despised and hated Aaron Wolverton, as the latter knew full well. He would certainly dismiss any charge brought against Bob by such a man. This consideration naturally influenced him.

"Very well," he said, though with an ill grace, "if your mother gave Sam the money, I retract the charge of theft. Nevertheless, as his guardian, I demand that the dollar be given to me." [Pg 98]

"Give it to me to keep for you, Sam," said Bob.

Sam gladly took it from his pocket, and threw it towards Bob, who dexterously caught it.

"Now, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob, quietly; "you will have to demand the money from me; Sam hasn't got it."

"You'll have to pay for your impudence, Robert Burton!" said Wolverton, wrathfully. "You forget that you are all in my power."

"You may find yourself mistaken, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob. "At any rate, I don't think I shall lose any sleep on that score."

"You can tell your mother I shall call this evening," continued Wolverton. "I expect her to be ready with the interest, which is long overdue."

"I will give her your message, Mr. Wolverton. Now, Clip, let us go on. Mr. Wolverton will excuse us, I know, when I tell him that we have an errand in the village."

"Yah, yah!" laughed Clip, gleefully; not that there was anything particular to laugh at, but because it took very little to excite Clip's risibilities. [Pg 99]

Mr. Wolverton turned upon Clip with a frown. He had not forgotten the trick Clip played upon him when he was upset in the river, and he would have liked nothing better than to flog him till he roared for mercy.

"What is that black ape grinning about?" he demanded.

Clip ought to have felt insulted, but he was only amused.

"Yah, yah!" he laughed again.

Aaron Wolverton made a dash at him with his recovered whip, but Clip nimbly jumped to one side and laughed again.

"Didn't do it dat time, Massa Wolverton," said Clip, showing his teeth.

"I'll get even with you yet, you black monkey!"

If Clip had been alone, Wolverton would have proceeded then and there to carry out his threat. But he had a wholesome respect for Bob, whose physical strength and prowess he well knew. It made him angry whenever he thought of this boy, who seemed born to be a thorn in his side. He was stronger than Wolverton, though the land agent was a man grown, and it was humiliating to Wolverton to be obliged to admit this fact. [Pg 100]

But he had one consolation in the mortgage he held upon the Burton ranch. Here the law was on his side, and he saw his way clear to annoy and injure Bob and his family, without running any risk himself. As for the chance of the mortgage ever being paid off, that he thought extremely small. If Richard Burton were still alive, he would have been right, but Bob, young as he was, bade fair to be a better manager than his father. He was not so sanguine, or, if the truth must be told, so reckless in his expenditures. Besides, he knew, though his father was ignorant of it, that Wolverton, for some reason which he could not penetrate, was a bitter enemy of the family, and that his forbearance could not be depended upon.

When Bob and Clip had left the scene Aaron Wolverton turned to Sam, and scowled at his unfortunate nephew, in a way which was by no means pleasant or reassuring. [Pg 101]

"I've a good mind to flog you for all the trouble you've brought upon me," he said.

"I don't see what I've done, uncle."

"You don't, hey? Haven't you sided with that upstart, the Burton boy?"

Sam was judiciously silent, for he saw his uncle was very much irritated.

"Why did you give that dollar to him?"

"He told me to."

"Suppose he did; is he your guardian or am I?"

"You are, Uncle Aaron."

"I'm glad you are willing to admit it. Then why did you give him the dollar?"

"Because his mother gave it to me. If you had given it to me, I wouldn't have done it."

"You'll have to wait a good while before I give you a dollar."

Sam was of the same opinion himself, but did not think it wise to say so.

"You deserve to be punished for what you have done," said his uncle, severely.

"I wish I were as strong and brave as Bob," thought Sam. "I don't see how he dares to stand up before Uncle Aaron and defy him. He makes me tremble." [Pg 102]

The truth was, Sam was not made of heroic mold. He was a timid boy and was easily overawed. He lacked entirely the qualities that made Bob so bold and resolute. He could admire his friend, but he could not imitate him.

"Now, come home," said Wolverton, shortly.

Sam followed his uncle meekly.

When they reached home Sam was set to work. At twelve o'clock the bell rang for dinner. Sam dropped his axe (he had been splitting wood) and entered the kitchen, where the frugal meal was spread. His uncle was already sitting in his place, and Sam prepared to sit down in his usual chair.

"Samuel," said his uncle, "you have disobeyed me. You do not deserve any dinner."

Sam's countenance fell, for he was very hungry.

"I am very hungry," he faltered.

"You should have thought of that when you disobeyed me and gave your money to the Burton boy. This is intended as a salutary lesson, Samuel, to cure you of your stubbornness and disobedience." [Pg 103]

"You are quite right, Aaron," said Miss Sally in her deep voice. "Samuel needs chastening."

Poor Sam slunk out of the door in a state of depression. Not being ordered to return to his work, he went out into the street, where he met Bob and Clip, and to them he told his tale of woe.

"Your uncle is as mean as they make 'em," said Bob. "Here, go into the baker's and buy some doughnuts and pie."

He handed Sam a quarter, and the hungry boy followed his advice, faring quite as well as he would have done at his uncle's table. Rather to Mr. Wolverton's surprise, he worked all the afternoon without showing signs of hunger, and that gentleman began to consider whether, after all, two meals a day were not sufficient for him.

CHAPTER XII. WOLVERTON'S WATERLOO.

[Pg 104]

Though the receipt was lost, Wolverton could not give up his plan of extorting the interest from Mrs. Burton a second time. It might have been supposed that he would have some qualms of conscience about robbing the widow and the fatherless, but Mr. Wolverton's conscience, if he had any, gave him very little trouble. He would have thought himself a fool to give up one hundred and fifty dollars if there was the slightest chance of securing them.

Towards evening of the day on which Bob had interfered with him, he took his hat and cane, and set out for Burton's Ranch.

It so happened that Bob answered the bell. He had been sitting with his mother, chatting about their future plans.

"Good-evening, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob, who felt it incumbent upon him to be polite to a guest, even though he disliked him. [Pg 105]

"Evening," returned Wolverton, curtly. "Is your mother at home?"

"Yes, sir. Will you come in?"

Wolverton had not the good manners to acknowledge the invitation with thanks, but strode into the sitting-room, following Bob.

The widow anticipated his visit, having been informed by Bob that he had announced his intention of coming.

"Good-evening, Mr. Wolverton. Take a seat," she said, pointing to a chair a few feet from her own. "Robert, take Mr. Wolverton's hat."

Wolverton looked at the widow with a hungry gaze, for she was the only woman, he had ever loved.

"If she would only marry me, all her troubles would be over," he said to himself. "She's a fool to

refuse."

We, who have some idea of Mr. Wolverton's character and disposition, are more likely to conclude that marriage with such a man would be only the beginning of trouble.

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"I've come on business, Mrs. Burton," said the visitor, in an aggressive tone.

"State it, if you please, Mr. Wolverton," the widow answered, calmly.

"Hadn't you better send your son out of the room? We'd better discuss this matter alone."

"I have no secrets from Robert," said the widow.

"Oh, well, just as you please; I don't care to have him interfere in what doesn't concern him."

"Any business with my mother does concern me," said Bob; "but I will try not to give you any trouble."

"The business is about that interest," Wolverton began, abruptly.

"What interest?"

"You must know what I mean—the interest on the mortgage."

"My husband paid it on the day of his death."

"It's easy enough to say that," sneered Wolverton, "but saying it isn't proving it, as you must have the good sense to know."

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"When my husband left me on that fatal morning, he told me that he was going to your office to pay the interest. I know he had the money and with him, for he had laid down the wallet, and I saw the roll of bills."

"Why didn't he pay it, then? That's what I'd like to know."

"Didn't he pay it to you, Mr. Wolverton?" asked Mrs. Burton, with a searching glance. "Carry back your memory to that day, and answer me that question."

Mr. Wolverton showed himself a little restive under this interrogatory, but he assumed an air of indignation.

"What do you mean, widder?" he demanded, bringing down his cane with emphasis upon the floor. "Do you doubt my word?"

"I think you may be mistaken, Mr. Wolverton," said Mrs. Burton, composedly.

"Who has been putting this into your head, widder? Is it that boy of yours?"

Bob answered for himself:

"I don't mind saying that I did tell mother that I thought the money had been paid."

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"Humph! you think yourself mighty smart, Bob Burton," snarled Wolverton. "Nat'rally you'd like to get rid of paying the interest, if you could; but you've got a business man to deal with, not a fool."

"You are no fool where money is concerned, there's no doubt about that. But I want to ask you one thing, if my father didn't pay you the money which mother can testify to his carrying with him on the morning of his death, what became of it?"

"How should I know? Did you search his wallet when he was brought home?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't find the money?"

"No."

"So you conclude that he paid it to me. Let me tell you, young man, that doesn't follow. He may have been robbed when he was lying on the ground insensible."

"I think very likely he was," returned Bob, quietly.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Wolverton, uneasily. "Who could have robbed him?"

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"Possibly some one that we wouldn't be likely to suspect."

"What does he mean? Can he possibly suspect me?" thought Wolverton, fixing his eyes on Bob's face. "But no! I certainly didn't take any money from him."

"You may be right," he said aloud; "but that hasn't anything to do with my claim for interest. Whether your father was robbed of the money, or spent it, is all one to me. It wasn't paid to me, I can certify."

"Would you be willing to swear that the money was not paid to you that day, Mr. Wolverton?"

"Do you mean to insult me? Haven't I told you it was not paid?"

"Do you expect me to pay it to you, then?" asked Mrs. Burton.

"Widder, I am surprised you should ask such a foolish question. It lies in a nutshell. I'm entitled to interest on the money I let your husband have on mortgage. You admit that?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you admit that. As your husband didn't pay, I look to you for it. I can say no more."

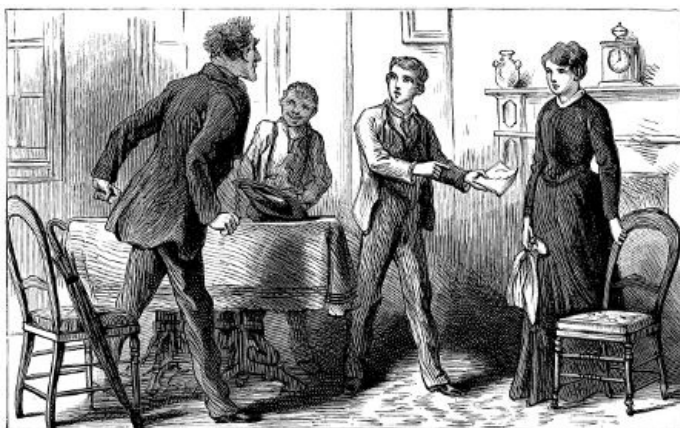
[Pg 110]

Mrs. Burton took a pocket-book from a pocket in her dress, and handed it to Robert. Bob opened it, and drew therefrom a folded paper.

"Mr. Wolverton," he said, quietly, "I hold in my hand a receipt signed by yourself for the interest—one hundred and fifty dollars—dated the very day that my poor father died. What have you to say to it?"

Mr. Wolverton sprang to his feet, pale and panic-stricken.

"Where did you get that paper?" he stammered, hoarsely.



BOB PRODUCES THE MISSING RECEIPT.

CHAPTER XIII. WHAT BOB FOUND IN THE CREEK.

[Pg 111]

"When my poor husband left your office this receipt was in his possession," answered Mrs. Burton.

"I deny it," exclaimed Aaron Wolverton, in a tone of excitement.

"Where else should it be?" inquired the widow, eying him fixedly.

"I don't know. How should I?"

"So you deny that the signature is yours, Mr. Wolverton?"

"Let me see it."

"I would rather not," said Bob, drawing back the receipt from Wolverton's extended hand.

"That's enough!" said Wolverton quickly. "You are afraid to show it. I denounce it as a base forgery."

"That will do no good," said the boy, un-terrified. "I have shown the receipt to Mr. Dornton, and he pronounces the signature genuine."

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"What made you show it to him?" asked Wolverton, discomfited.

"Because I thought it likely, after your demanding the interest the second time, that you would deny it."

"Probably I know my own signature better than Mr. Dornton can."

"I have no doubt you will recognize it," and Bob, unfolding the paper, held it in such a manner that Wolverton could read it.

"It may be my signature; it looks like it," said Wolverton, quickly deciding upon a new evasion, "but it was never delivered to your father."

"How then do you account for its being written?" asked Mrs. Burton, in natural surprise.

"I made it out on the day your husband died," Wolverton answered glibly, "anticipating that he would pay the money. He did not do it, and so the receipt remained in my desk."

[Pg 113]

Bob and his mother regarded each other in surprise. They were not prepared for such a barefaced falsehood.

"Perhaps you will account for its not being in your desk now," said Bob.

"I can do so, readily," returned Wolverton, maliciously. "Somebody must have stolen it from my desk."

"I think you will find it hard to prove this, Mr. Wolverton."

"It is true, and I don't propose to lose my money on account of a stolen receipt. You will find that you can't so easily circumvent Aaron Wolverton."

"You are quite welcome to adopt this line of defense, Mr. Wolverton, if you think best. You ought to know whether the public will believe such an improbable tale."

"If you had the receipt why didn't you show it to me before?" Wolverton asked in a triumphant tone. "I came here soon after your father's death, and asked for my interest. Your mother admitted, then, that she had no receipt."

"We had not found it then."

[Pg 114]

"Where, and when, did you find it?"

"I do not propose to tell."

Wolverton shook his head, satirically.

"And a very good reason you have, I make no doubt."

"Suppose I tell you my theory, Mr. Wolverton."

"I wish you would," and Wolverton leaned back in his chair and gazed defiantly at the boy he so much hated.

"My father paid you the interest, and took a receipt. He had it on his person when he met with his death. When he was lying outstretched in death"—here Bob's eyes moistened—"some one came up, and, bending over him, took the receipt from his pocket."

Mr. Wolverton's face grew pale as Bob proceeded.

"A very pretty romance!" he sneered, recovering himself after an instant.

"It is something more than romance," Bob proceeded slowly and gravely. "It is true; the man who was guilty of this mean theft from a man made helpless by death is known. He was seen at this contemptible work."

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"It is a lie," cried Wolverton, hoarsely, his face the color of chalk.

"It is a solemn truth."

"Who saw him?"

"I don't propose to tell—yet, if necessary, it will be told in a court of justice."

Wolverton saw that he was found out, but he could not afford to acknowledge. His best way of getting off was to fly into a rage, and this was easy for him.

"I denounce this as a base conspiracy," he said, rising as he spoke. "That receipt was stolen from my desk."

"Then we do not need to inquire who took it from the vest-pocket of my poor father."

"Robert Barton, I will get even with you for this insult," said Wolverton, shaking his fist at the manly boy. "You and your mother."

"Leave out my mother's name," said Bob, sternly.

"I will; I don't think she would be capable of such meanness. You, then, are engaged in a plot to rob me of a hundred and fifty dollars. To further this wicked scheme, you or your agent have stolen this receipt from my desk. I can have you arrested for burglary. It is no more nor less than that."

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"You can do so if you like, Mr. Wolverton. In that case the public shall know that you stole the receipt from my poor father after his death. I can produce an eye-witness."

Wolverton saw that he was in a trap. Such a disclosure would injure him infinitely in the opinion of his neighbors, for it would be believed. There was no help for it. He must lose the hundred and fifty dollars upon which, though he had no claim to it, he had so confidently reckoned.

"You will hear from me!" he said, savagely, as he jammed his hat down upon his head, and hastily left the apartment. "Aaron Wolverton is not the man to give in to fraud."

Neither Bob nor his mother answered him, but Mrs. Burton asked anxiously, after his departure:

"Do you think he will do anything, Bob?"

"No, mother; he sees that he is in a trap, and will think it wisest to let the matter drop."

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This, in fact, turned out to be the case. Mortifying as it was to give in, Wolverton did not dare to act otherwise. He would have given something handsome, mean though he was, if he could have found out, first, who saw him rob the dead man, and next, who extracted the stolen receipt from his desk. He was inclined to guess that it was Bob in both cases. It never occurred to him that Clip was the eye-witness whose testimony could brand him with this contemptible crime. Nor did he think of Sam in connection with his own loss of the receipt. He knew Sam's timidity, and did not believe the boy would have dared to do such a thing.

All the next day, in consequence of his disappointment, Mr. Wolverton was unusually cross and irritable. He even snapped at his sister, who replied, with spirit:

"Look here, Aaron, you needn't snap at me, for I won't stand it."

"How will you help it?" he sneered.

"By leaving your house, and letting you get another housekeeper. I can earn my own living, without working any harder than I do here, and a better living, too. While I stay here, you've got to treat me decently."

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Wolverton began to see that he had made a mistake. Any other housekeeper would cost him more, and he could find none that would be so economical.

"I don't mean anything, Sally," he said; "but I'm worried."

"What worries you?"

"A heavy loss."

"How much?"

"A hundred and fifty dollars."

"How is that?"

"I have lost a receipt, but I can't explain how. A hundred and fifty dollars is a great deal of money, Sally."

"I should say it was. Why can't you tell me about it?"

"Perhaps I will some time."

About two months later, while Bob was superintending the harvesting of the wheat—the staple crop of the Burton ranch—Clip came running up to him in visible excitement.

"Oh, Massa Bob," he exclaimed, "there is a ferry-boat coming down the creek with nobody on it, and it's done got stuck ag'inst a snag. Come quick, and we can take it for our own. Findings is keepings."

[Pg 119]

Bob lost no time in following Clip's suggestion. He hurried to the creek, and there, a few rods from shore, he discovered the boat stranded in the mud, for it was low tide.

CHAPTER XIV. THE BOAT AND ITS OWNER.

[Pg 120]

The boat was shaped somewhat like the popular representations of Noah's ark. It was probably ninety feet in length by thirty-eight feet in width, and was roofed. Bob recognized it at once as a ferry-boat of the style used at different points on the river, to convey passengers and teams across the river. It was a double-ender, like the much larger ferry-boats that are used on the East River, between New York and Brooklyn.

The creek on which the Burton ranch was located was really large enough for a river, and Bob concluded that this boat had been used at a point higher up.

"I wish I owned that boat, Clip," said Bob.

"What would you do with it, Massa Bob?"

"I'll tell you what I'd do, Clip; I'd go down to St. Louis on it."

[Pg 121]

"Will you take me with you, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, eagerly.

"I will, if I go, Clip."

"Golly, won't that be fine!" said the delighted Clip. "How long will you stay, Massa Bob?"

Clip supposed Bob intended a pleasure trip, for in his eyes pleasure was the chief end of living. But Bob was more practical and business-like. He had an idea which seemed to him a good one,

though as yet he had mentioned it to no one.

"Get out the boat, Clip," he said, "and we'll go aboard. I want to see if the boat will be large enough for my purpose."

Clip laughed in amusement.

"You must think you'self mighty big, Massa Bob," he said, "if you think there isn't room on that boat for you an' me."

"It would certainly be large enough for two passengers like ourselves, Clip," answered Bob, smiling; "for that matter our rowboat is large enough for two boys, but if I go I shall carry a load with me."

Clip was still in the dark, but he was busying himself in unloosing the rowboat, according to Bob's bidding. The two boys jumped in, and a few strokes of the oars carried them to the ferry-boat. Fastening the flat-bottomed boat, the two boys clambered on deck. [Pg 122]

Bob found the boat in good condition. It had occurred to him that it had been deserted as old and past service, and allowed to drift down the creek, but an examination showed that in this conjecture he was mistaken. It was sufficiently good to serve for years yet. This discovery was gratifying in one way, but in another it was a disappointment. As a boat of little value, Bob could have taken possession of it, fairly confident that no one would interfere with his claim, but in its present condition it was hardly likely to be without an owner, who would appear sooner or later and put in his claim to it.

"It seems to be a pretty good boat," said Bob.

"Dat's so, Massa Bob."

"It must have slipped its moorings and drifted down the creek during the night. I wish I knew who owned it." [Pg 123]

"You an' me own it, Massa Bob. Finding is keeping."

"I am afraid it won't be so in the present case. Probably the owner will appear before long."

"Can't we get off down de river afore he comes, Massa Bob?"

"That wouldn't be honest, Clip."

Clip scratched his head in perplexity. He was not troubled with conscientious scruples, and was not as clear about the rights of property as his young patron. He was accustomed, however, to accept whatever Bob said as correct and final. In fact, he was content to let Bob do his thinking for him.

"What was you goin' to take down de ribber, Massa Bob?" he asked.

"I'll tell you what I was thinking of, Clip. You know we are gathering our crop of grain, and of course it must be sold. Now, traders ask a large commission for taking the wheat to market, and this would be a heavy tax. If I could load it on board this boat, and take it down myself, I should save all that, and I could sell it myself in St. Louis." [Pg 124]

"Can I go, too?" asked Clip, anxiously.

"You shall go if I do," answered Bob.

"When will you know?" asked Clip, eagerly.

"When I find out whether I can use this boat. I had thought of building a raft, but that wouldn't do. No raft that I could build would carry our crop to St. Louis. This boat will be just the thing. I think it must have been used for that purpose before. See those large bins on each side. Each would contain from fifty to a hundred bushels of wheat. I only wish I knew the owner. Even if I couldn't buy the boat, I might make a bargain to hire it."

Bob had hardly finished his sentence when he heard a voice hailing him from the bank.

Going to the end of the boat, he looked towards the shore, and saw a tall angular figure, who seemed from his dress and appearance to be a Western Yankee. His figure was tall and angular, his face of the kind usually described as hatchet face, with a long thin nose, and his head was surmounted by a flapping sombrero, soft, broad-brimmed, and shapeless. [Pg 125]

"Boat ahoy!" called the stranger.

"Did you wish to speak to us?" asked Bob, politely.

"I reckon I do," answered the stranger. "I want you to take me aboard that boat."

"Is the boat yours?" asked Bob.

"It doesn't belong to anybody else," was the reply.

"Untie the boat, Clip. We'll go back!" ordered Bob.

The two boys dropped into the rowboat, and soon touched the bank.

"If you will get in we'll row you over," said Bob. "When did you lose the boat?"

"It drifted down last night," answered the new acquaintance. "I've been usin' it as a ferry-boat about twenty miles up the creek. Last night I thought it was tied securely, but this morning it was gone."

"I don't see how it could have broken away."

"Like as not some mischievous boy cut the cable," was the answer. "Any way, here it is, and here am I, Ichabod Slocum, the owner."

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"Then the boat and its owner are once more united."

"Yes, but that don't take the boat back to where it belongs. It's drifted down here, easy enough; mebbe one of you boys will tell me how it's goin' to drift back."

"There may be some difficulty about that," answered Bob with a smile. "How long have you owned the boat?"

"About two years. I've been usin' her as a ferry-boat between Transfer City and Romeo, and I've made a pretty fair livin' at it."

Bob was familiar with the names of these towns, though he had never been so far up the creek.

"I'm afraid you'll have trouble in getting the boat back," he said. "It will make quite an interruption in your business."

"I don't know as I keer so much about that," said Ichabod Slocum, thoughtfully. "I've been thinkin' for some time about packin' up and goin' farther west. I've got a cousin in Oregon, and I reckon I might like to go out there for a year or two."

"Then, perhaps you might like to dispose of the boat, Mr. Slocum," said Bob, eagerly.

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"Well, I might," said Ichabod Slocum, cautiously. "Do you know of anybody around here that wants a boat?"

"I might like it myself," was Bob's reply.

"What on airth does a boy like you want of a ferry-boat?" asked Slocum, in surprise.

"I have a plan in my head," said Bob; "and think it would be useful to me."

"There ain't no call for a ferry-boat here," said Ichabod.

"No; you are right there. I may as well tell you what I am thinking of. Our crop of grain is ready to harvest, and I should like to load it on this boat and carry it down to St. Louis and sell it there myself."

CHAPTER XV. BOB BUYS THE FERRY-BOAT.

[Pg 128]

"Good!" said Mr. Slocum. "I like your pluck. Well, there's the boat. You can have it if you want it—for a fair price, of course."

"What do you call a fair price?" asked Bob.

"I don't mind sayin' that I bought it second-hand myself, and I've got good value out of it. I might sell it for—a hundred and twenty-five dollars."

Bob shook his head.

"That may be cheap," he answered; "but I can't afford to pay so much money."

"You can sell it at St. Louis when you're through usin' it."

"I should have to take my risk of it."

"You seem to be pretty good on a trade, for a boy. I reckon you'll sell it."

[Pg 129]

"Do you want all the money down. Mr. Slocum?"

"Well, I might wait for half of it, ef I think it's safe. What's your security?"

"We—that is, mother and I—own the ranch bordering on the other side of the creek. The wheat crop we are harvesting will probably amount to fourteen hundred bushels. I understand it is selling for two dollars a bushel or thereabouts." (This was soon after the war, when high prices prevailed for nearly all articles, including farm products.)

"I reckon you're safe, then," said Mr. Slocum. "Now we'll see if we can agree upon a price."

I will not follow Bob and Mr. Slocum in the bargaining that succeeded. The latter was the sharper of the two, but Bob felt obliged to reduce the price as much as possible, in view of the heavy

mortgage upon the ranch.

"I shall never breathe easy till that mortgage is paid, mother," he said. "Mr. Wolverton is about the last man I like to owe. His attempt to collect the interest twice shows that he is unscrupulous. Besides, he has a grudge against me, and it would give him pleasure, I feel sure, to injure me." [Pg 130]

"I am afraid you are right, Robert," answered his mother. "We must do our best, and Heaven will help us."

Finally Mr. Slocum agreed to accept seventy-five dollars cash down, or eighty dollars, half in cash, and the remainder payable after Bob's river trip was over and the crop disposed of.

"I wouldn't make such terms to any one else," said the boat-owner, "but I've been a boy myself, and I had a hard row to hoe, you bet. You seem like a smart lad, and I'm favorin' you all I can."

"Thank you, Mr. Slocum. I consider your price very fair, and you may depend upon my carrying out my agreement. Now, if you will come up to the house, I will offer you some dinner, and pay you the money."



BOB BUYS THE FERRY-BOAT.

Ichabod Slocum readily accepted the invitation, and the three went up to the house together.

When Bob told his mother of the bargain he had made, she was somewhat startled. She felt that he did not realize how great an enterprise he had embarked in. [Pg 131]

"You forget, Robert, that you are only a boy," she said.

"No, mother, I don't forget it. But I have to take a man's part, now that father is dead."

"St. Louis is a long distance away, and you have no experience in business."

"On the other hand, mother, if we sell here, we must make a great sacrifice—twenty-five cents a bushel at least, and that on fourteen hundred bushels would amount to three hundred and fifty dollars. Now Clip and I can navigate the boat to St. Louis and return for less than quarter of that sum."

"The boy speaks sense, ma'am," said Ichabod Slocum. "He's only a kid, but he's a smart one. He's good at a bargain, too. He made me take fifty dollars less for the boat than I meant to. You can trust him better than a good many men."

"I am glad you have so favorable an opinion of Robert, Mr. Slocum," said Mrs. Burton. "I suppose I must yield to his desire." [Pg 132]

"Then I may go, mother?"

"Yes, Robert; you have my consent."

"Then the next thing is to pay Mr. Slocum for his boat."

This matter was speedily arranged.

"I wish, Mr. Slocum," said Bob, "that you were going to St. Louis. I would be very glad to give you free passage."

"Thank you, lad, but I must turn my steps in a different direction."

"Shall I have any difficulty in managing the boat on our course down the river?"

"No, you will drift with the current. It is easy enough to go down stream. The trouble is to get back. But for that, I wouldn't have sold you the boat. At night you tie up anywhere it is convenient, and start again the next morning."

"That seems easy enough. Do you know how far it is to St. Louis, Mr. Slocum?"

"There you have me, lad. I ain't much on reckonin' distances."

"I have heard your father say, Robert, that it is about three hundred miles from here to the city. I [Pg 133]

don't like to have you go so far from me."

"I've got Clip to take care of me, mother," said Bob, humorously.

"I'll take care of Massa Bob, missis," said Clip, earnestly.

"I suppose I ought to feel satisfied with that assurance," said Mrs. Burton, smiling, "but I have never been accustomed to think of Clip as a guardian."

"I'll guardian, him, missis," promised Clip, amid general laughter.

After dinner, in company with Mr. Slocum, Bob and Clip went on board the ferry-boat, and made a thorough examination of the craft, with special reference to the use for which it was intended.

"You expect to harvest fourteen hundred bushels?" inquired Mr. Slocum.

"Yes; somewhere about that amount."

"Then you may need to make two or three extra bins."

"That will be a simple matter," said Bob.

"The roof over the boat will keep the wheat dry and in good condition. When you get to the city you can sell it all to one party, and superintend the removal yourself. You can hire all the help you need there." [Pg 134]

Bob was more and more pleased with his purchase.

"It is just what I wanted," he said, enthusiastically. "The expenses will be almost nothing. We can take a supply of provisions with us, enough to keep us during the trip, and when the business is concluded we can return on some river steamer. We'll have a fine time, Clip."

"Golly! Massa Bob, dat's so."

"You will need to tie the boat," continued Ichabod Slocum, "or it may float off during the night, and that would upset all your plans. Have you a stout rope on the place?"

"I think not. I shall have to buy one at the store, or else cross the river."

"Then you had better attend to that at once. The boat may become dislodged at any moment."

After Mr. Slocum's departure, Bob lost no time in attending to this important matter. He procured a heavy rope, of sufficient strength, and proceeded to secure the boat to a tree on the bank. [Pg 135]

"How soon will we start, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, who was anxious for the excursion to commence. He looked upon it somewhat in the light of an extended picnic, and it may be added that Bob also, apart from any consideration of business, anticipated considerable enjoyment from the trip down the river.

"Don't tell anybody what we are going to do with the boat, Clip," said Bob. "It will be a fortnight before we start, and I don't care to have much said about the matter beforehand."

Clip promised implicit obedience, but it was not altogether certain that he would be able to keep strictly to his word, for keeping a secret was not an easy thing for him to do.

Of course it leaked out that Bob had bought a ferry-boat. Among others Mr. Wolverton heard it, but he did not dream of the use to which Bob intended to put it. He spoke of it as a boy's folly, and instanced it as an illustration of the boy's unfitness for the charge of the ranch. It was generally supposed that Bob had bought it on speculation, hoping to make a good profit on the sale, and Bob suffered this idea to remain uncontradicted. [Pg 136]

Meanwhile he pushed forward as rapidly as possible the harvest of the wheat, being anxious to get it to market.

When this work was nearly finished Mr. Wolverton thought it time to make a proposal to Mrs. Burton, which, if accepted, would bring him a handsome profit.

CHAPTER XVI. WOLVERTON'S BAFFLED SCHEME.

[Pg 137]

Mrs. Burton was somewhat surprised, one evening, when told that Mr. Wolverton was at the door, and desired to speak with her. Since the time his demand for a second payment of the interest had been met by a production of the receipt, he had kept away from the ranch. It might have been the mortification arising from baffled villainy, or, again, from the knowledge that no advantage could be gained from another interview. At all events, he remained away till the wheat was nearly harvested. Then he called, because he had a purpose to serve.

"Tell Mrs. Burton that I wish to see her on business," he said to the servant who answered his knock.

"You can show Mr. Wolverton in," said the widow.

Directly the guest was ushered into her presence.

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"I needn't ask if I see you well, Mrs. Burton," he said, suavely. "Your appearance is a sufficient answer."

"Thank you," answered Mrs. Burton, coldly.

Aaron Wolverton noticed the coldness, but did not abate any of his suavity. He only said to himself: "The time will come when you will feel forced to give me a better reception, my lady!"

"I have called on a little business," he resumed.

"Is it about the interest?" asked the widow.

"No; for the present I waive that. I have been made the victim of a base theft, and it may cost me a hundred and fifty dollars: but I will not speak of that now."

"What other business can you have with me?"

"I have come to make you an offer."

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Burton, indignantly.

Aaron Wolverton chuckled, thereby showing a row of defective and discolored teeth.

"You misunderstand me," he said. "I come to make you an offer for your wheat crop, which I suppose is nearly all gathered in."

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"Yes," answered the widow relieved. "Robert tells me that it will be all harvested within three days."

"Just so. Now, I am willing to save you a great deal of trouble by buying the entire crop at a fair valuation."

"In that case, Mr. Wolverton, you will allow me to send for Robert. He attends to the business of the ranch, and understands much more about it than I do."

"Wait a minute, Mrs. Burton. Robert is no doubt a smart boy, but you give him too much credit."

"I don't think I do. He has shown, since his father's death, a judgment not often found in a boy of his age."

"She is infatuated about that boy!" thought Wolverton. "However, as I have a point to carry, I won't dispute with her."

"You may be right," he said, "but in this matter I venture to think that you and I can make a bargain without any outside help."

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"You can, at any rate, state your proposition, Mr. Wolverton."

"Have you any idea as to the amount of your wheat crop?"

"Robert tells me there will be not far from fourteen hundred bushels."

Wolverton's eyes showed his pleasure. If he made the bargain proposed, this would bring him an excellent profit. "Very good!" he said. "It will be a great help to you."

"Yes; I feel that we are fortunate, especially when I consider that the ranch has been carried on by a boy of sixteen."

"Well, Mrs. Burton, I am a man of few words. I will give you a dollar and a half a bushel for your wheat, and this will give you, on the basis of fourteen hundred bushels, twenty-one hundred dollars. You are a very fortunate woman."

"But, Mr. Wolverton, Robert tells me he expects to get at least two dollars a bushel."

It must be remembered that grain was then selling at "war prices."

"I don't know what the boy can be thinking of," said Wolverton, contemptuously. "Two dollars a bushel! Why don't he say five dollars at once?"

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"He gained his information from a St. Louis paper."

"My dear madam, the price here and the price in St. Louis are two entirely different matters. You must be aware that it will cost a good deal to transport the wheat to St. Louis."

"Surely it cannot cost fifty cents a bushel?"

"No; but it is a great mistake to suppose that you can get two dollars a bushel in St. Louis."

"I must leave the matter to Robert to decide."

"Excuse my saying that this is very foolish. The boy has not a man's judgment."

"Nevertheless, I must consult him before deciding."

Mrs. Barton spoke so plainly that Wolverton said, sullenly: "Do as you please, Mrs. Burton, but I would like to settle the matter to-night."

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Robert was sent for, and, being near the house, entered without delay.

Mr. Wolverton's proposition was made known to him.

"Mr. Wolverton," said Bob, regarding that gentleman with a dislike he did not attempt to conceal, "You would make a very good bargain if we accepted your proposal."

"Not much," answered Wolverton, hastily. "Of course I should make a little something, but I am chiefly influenced in making the offer, by a desire to save your mother trouble."

"You would make seven hundred dollars at least, out of which you would only have to pay for transportation to St. Louis."

"That is a very ridiculous statement!" said Wolverton, sharply.

"Why so? The wheat will fetch two dollars a bushel in the market."

"Some one has been deceiving you."

"Shall I show you the paper in which I saw the quotations?"

"No; it is erroneous. Besides, the expense of carrying the grain to market will be very large."

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"It won't be fifty cents a bushel."

"Young man, you are advising your mother against her best interests. Young people are apt to be headstrong. I should not expect to make much money out of the operation."

"Why, then, do you make the offer?"

"I have already told you that I wished to save your mother trouble."

"We are much obliged to you, but we decline your proposal."

"Then," said Wolverton, spitefully, "I shall have to hold you to the terms of the mortgage. I had intended to favor you, but after the tone you have taken with me, I shall not do so."

"To what terms do you refer, Mr. Wolverton?" asked the widow.

"I will tell you. I have the right at the end of six months to call for a payment of half the mortgage—fifteen hundred dollars. That will make, in addition to the interest then due, sixteen hundred and fifty dollars."

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"Can this be true?" asked Mrs. Burton, in dismay, turning to Robert.

"It is so specified in the mortgage," answered Wolverton, triumphantly. "You can examine it for yourself. I have only to say, that, had you accepted my offer, I would have been content with, say, one quarter of the sum, knowing that it would be inconvenient for you to pay half."

Bob, as well as his mother, was taken by surprise, but in no way disposed to yield.

"We should be no better off," he said. "We should lose at least five hundred dollars by accepting your offer, and that we cannot afford to do."

"You refuse, then," said Wolverton, angrily.

"Yes."

"Then all I have to say is that you will rue this day," and the agent got up hastily, but upon second thought sat down again.

"How do you expect to get your grain to market?" he asked.

"I shall take it myself."

"What do you mean?"

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"I shall store it on a boat I have purchased, and Clip and I will take it to St. Louis."

"You must be crack-brained!" ejaculated Wolverton. "I never heard of a more insane project."

"I hope to disappoint you, Mr. Wolverton. At any rate, my mind is made up."

Wolverton shuffled out of the room, in impotent rage.

"We have made him our enemy, Robert," said his mother, apprehensively.

"He was our enemy before, mother. He evidently wants to ruin us."

As Wolverton went home, one thought was uppermost in his mind. "How could he prevent Bob from making the trip to St. Louis?"

CHAPTER XVII. WOLVERTON'S POOR TENANT.

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Bob hired a couple of extra hands, and made haste to finish harvesting his wheat, for he was anxious to start on the trip down the river as soon as possible. His anticipations as to the size of the crop were justified. It footed up fourteen hundred and seventy-five bushels, and this, at two dollars per bushel, would fetch in market nearly three thousand dollars.

"That's a pretty good crop for a boy to raise, mother," said Bob, with pardonable exultation. "You haven't lost anything by allowing me to run the ranch."

"Quite true, Robert. You have accomplished wonders. I don't know what I could have done without you. I know very little of farming myself."

"I helped him, missis," said Clip, coveting a share of approval for himself.

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"Yes," said Bob, smiling. "Clip has been my right-hand man. I can't say he has worked very hard himself, but he has superintended the others."

"Yes, missis; dat's what I done!" said Clip, proudly.

He did not venture to pronounce the word, for it was too much for him, but he was vaguely conscious that it was something important and complimentary.

"Then I must buy Clip a new suit," said Mrs. Burton, smiling.

"I'll buy it in St. Louis, mother."

When the grain was all gathered in Bob began to load it on the ferry-boat. Wolverton sent Sam round every day to report progress, but did not excite his nephew's suspicions by appearing to take unusual interest in the matter.

To prepare the reader for a circumstance which happened about this time, I find it necessary to introduce another character, who was able to do Bob an important service.

In a small house, about three-quarters of a mile beyond the Burton ranch, lived Dan Woods, a poor man, with, a large family. He hired the house which he occupied and a few acres of land from Aaron Wolverton, who had obtained possession of it by foreclosing a mortgage which he held. He permitted Woods, the former owner, to remain as a tenant in the house which once belonged to him, charging him rather more than an average rent. The poor man raised vegetables and a small crop of wheat, enough of each for his own family, and hired out to neighbors for the balance of his time. He obtained more employment on the Burton ranch than anywhere else, and Mrs. Burton had also sympathized with him in his difficult struggle to maintain his family. But, in spite of friends and his own untiring industry, Dan Woods fell behind. There were five children to support, and they required not only food but clothing, and Dan found it uphill work.

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His monthly rent was ten dollars; a small sum in itself, but large for this much-burdened man to pay. But, however poorly he might fare in other respects, Dan knew that it was important to have this sum ready on the first day of every month. Wolverton was a hard landlord, and admitted of no excuse. More than once after the rent had been paid there was not a dollar left in his purse, or a pinch of food in his house.

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A week before this time Dan was looking for his landlord's call with unusual anxiety. He had been sick nearly a week during the previous month, and this had so curtailed his earnings that he had but six dollars ready in place of ten. Would his sickness be accepted as an excuse? He feared not.

Wolverton's call was made on time. He had some expectation that the rent would not be ready, for he knew Dan had been sick; but he was resolved to show him no consideration.

"His sickness is nothing to me," he reflected. "It would be a pretty state of affairs if landlords allowed themselves to be cheated out of their rent for such a cause."

Dan Woods was at work in the yard when Wolverton approached. He was splitting some wood for use in the kitchen stove. His heart sank within him when he saw the keen, sharp features of his landlord.

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"Good morning, Dan," said Wolverton, with suavity. His expression was amiable, as it generally was when he was collecting money, but it suffered a remarkable change if the money was not forthcoming.

"Good-morning, sir," answered Woods, with a troubled look.

"You've got a nice, snug place here, Dan; it's a fine home for your family."

"I don't complain of it, sir. As I once owned it myself, probably I set more store by it than a stranger would."

"Just so, Dan. You get it at a very low rent, too. If it were any one but yourself I should really feel that I ought to raise the rent to twenty dollars."

"I hope you won't do that, sir," said Woods, in alarm. "It's all I can do to raise ten dollars a month,

with all my other expenses."

"Oh, well, I'll let it remain at the present figure *as long as you pay me promptly*," emphasizing the last words. "Of course I have a right to expect that."

Dan's heart sank within him. It was clear he could not expect any consideration from such a man. But the truth must be told. [Pg 151]

"No doubt you are right, Mr. Wolverton, and you've found me pretty prompt so far."

"So I have, Dan. I know you wouldn't be dishonest enough to make me wait."

Dan's heart sank still lower. It was becoming harder every minute to own that he was deficient.

"Still, Mr. Wolverton, bad luck will come——"

"What!" exclaimed Wolverton, with a forbidding scowl.

"As I was saying, sir, a man is sometimes unlucky. Now, I have been sick nearly a week out of the last month, as you may have heard, and it's put me back."

"What are you driving at, Dan Woods?" demanded Wolverton, severely. "I hope you're not going to say that you are not ready to pay your rent?"

"I haven't got the whole of it, sir; and that's a fact."

"You haven't got the whole of it? How much have you got?" [Pg 152]

"I can pay you six dollars, Mr. Wolverton."

"Six dollars out of ten! Why, this is positively shameful! I wonder you are not ashamed to tell me."

"There is no shame about it that I can see," answered Dan, plucking up his spirit. "I didn't fall sick on purpose; and when I was sick I couldn't work."

"You ought to have one month's rent laid by, so that whatever happens you could pay it on time."

"That's easy to say, Mr. Wolverton, but it takes every cent of my earnings to pay my monthly expenses. There's little chance to save."

"Any one can save who chooses," retorted Wolverton, sharply.

"Shall I get you the six dollars, sir?"

"Yes, give it to me."

"And you will wait for the other four?"

"Till to-morrow night."

"But how can I get it by to-morrow night?" asked Dan in dismay.

"That's your lookout, not mine. All I have to say is, unless it is paid to me to-morrow night you must move the next day." [Pg 153]

With these words Wolverton went off. Dan Woods, in his trouble, went to Bob Burton the next day, and Bob readily lent him the money he needed.

"Thank you!" said Dan, gratefully; "I won't forget this favor."

"Don't make too much of it, Dan; it's a trifle."

"It's no trifle to me. But for you my family would be turned out of house and home to-morrow. The time may come when I can do you a service."

"Thank you, Dan."

The time came sooner than either anticipated.

CHAPTER XVIII. WOLVERTON'S WICKED PLAN.

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Wolverton was somewhat puzzled when on his next call Dan Woods paid the balance due on his rent.

"So you raised the money after all?" he said. "I thought you could if you made an effort."

"I borrowed the money, sir."

"Of whom?"

"It isn't any secret, Mr. Wolverton. I borrowed it of a neighbor who has always been kind to me—Bob Burton."

Wolverton shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't know he had money to lend," he said.

"He always has money for a poor man who needs it."

"All right! I shall know where to go when I need money," responded Wolverton, with a grin.

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"It suits me well enough to have the boy throw away his money," Wolverton said to himself. "It will only draw nearer the time when he will have to sue me for a favor."

That day Wolverton read in a St. Louis paper that wheat was steadily rising, and had already reached two dollars and six cents per bushel.

"I could make a fine thing of it if I had only received the Barton wheat at a dollar and a half a bushel," he reflected, regretfully. "If I had only the widow to deal with, I might have succeeded, for she knows nothing of business. But that confounded boy is always putting a spoke in my wheel. If he carries out his plan, and markets the wheat, it will set him on his feet for the year to come."

This reflection made Wolverton feel gloomy. There are some men who are cheered by the prosperity of their neighbors, but he was not one of them. He began to speculate as to whether there was any way of interfering with Bob's schemes. Generally when a man is seeking a way of injuring his neighbor he succeeds in finding one. This was the plan that suggested itself to Wolverton: If he could set the ferry-boat adrift when the grain was all stored it would float down stream, and the chances were against its being recovered. It would be mean, and even criminal, to be sure. For the first, Wolverton did not care; for the second, he would take care that no one caught him at it. He did not think of employing any one else in the matter, for he knew of no one he could trust; and he felt that he could do it more effectually than any agent, however trustworthy.

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Wolverton was so full of the plan, which commended itself to him as both simple and effective, that he took a walk late in the evening from his house to the point on the creek where the boat was tethered.

Now, it so happened that Dan Woods, who had been employed all day, had occasion to go to the village in the evening to procure a few groceries from the village store. He delayed for a time, having met an old acquaintance, and it was half-past nine when he set out on his return homeward.

His way led him not only by the Burton homestead, but by the river bend where Bob kept his rowboat—the same point also where the ferry-boat was tied.

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As he approached, he caught sight of a man's figure standing on the bank. Who it was he could not immediately distinguish on account of the darkness.

"It may be some one bent on mischief," he thought to himself. "I will watch him and find out, if I can, who it is."

He kept on his way stealthily till he was within a dozen feet, when he slipped behind a tree. Then it dawned upon him who it was.

"It's Aaron Wolverton, as I'm a living man," he ejaculated, inwardly. "What can he be doing here?"

It was Wolverton, as we know. The old man stood in silence on the bank, peering through the darkness at the shadowy form of the ferry-boat, which already contained half the wheat crop of Burton's Ranch—the loading having commenced that morning. He had one habit which is unfortunate with a conspirator—the habit of thinking aloud—so he let out his secret to the watchful listener.

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"Sam tells me they expected to get half the crop on board to-day," he soliloquized. "I sent him over to get that very information, though he don't know it. It is too early to do anything yet. Tomorrow night the whole cargo will be stored, and then it will be time to cut the rope and let it drift. I should be glad to see the boy's face," he chuckled, "when he comes down to the creek the next morning and finds the boat gone. That will put him at my mercy, and the widow, too," he added, after a pause. "He will repent too late that he thwarted me. I will work in secret, but I get there all the same!"

Wolverton clasped his hands behind his back and, turning, walked thoughtfully away. He did not see his tenant, who was crouching behind a tree not over three feet from the path.

Dan Woods had no very favorable opinion of Wolverton, but what he had heard surprised and shocked him.

"I didn't think the old man was as wicked as that!" he said to himself. "He is scheming to ruin Bob and his mother. Why should he have such a spite against them?"

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This is a question which we can answer, but Woods became more puzzled the more he thought about it. One thing was clear, however; he must apprise Bob of the peril in which he stood. Even if he had not received the last favor from our hero, he would have felt in duty bound to do his best to defeat Wolverton's wicked plan.

The next morning, therefore, he made an early call at Burton's Ranch, and asked for a private interview with Bob. He quickly revealed to him the secret of which he had become possessed.

"Thank you, Dan," said Bob, warmly. "You have done me a favor of the greatest importance. I knew Wolverton was my enemy, and the enemy of our family, but I did not think he would be guilty of such a mean and wicked action. If he had succeeded, I am afraid we should have lost the farm."

"You won't let him succeed?" said Dan Woods, anxiously.

"No; forewarned is forearmed. I shall be ready for Mr. Wolverton!" And Bob closed his lips resolutely.

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He deliberated whether he should let his mother know of the threatened danger, but finally decided not to do so. It would only worry her, and do no good, as whatever measures of precaution were to be taken, he must take. He did not even tell Clip; for though the young colored boy was devoted to him, he was lacking in discretion, and might let out the secret. Bob did not want to prevent the attempt being made. He wished to catch Wolverton in the act.

He did, however, take into his confidence a faithful man who had worked for his father ever since the ranch was taken, thinking it prudent to have assistance near if needed.

That day the rest of the wheat was stored on the ferry-boat. All would be ready for a start the next morning, and this Bob had decided to make. He sent Clip to bed early, on the pretext that he must have a good night's sleep, as he would be called early. If Clip had had the least idea of what was in the wind he would have insisted on sitting up to see the fun, but he was absolutely ignorant of it.

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Wolverton had learned from Sam, who was surprised that his uncle should let him spend almost all his time with his friends, Bob and Clip, that the cargo had been stored.

"When do they start?" he asked, carelessly.

"To-morrow morning, uncle," Sam answered.

"If I had thought of it," said Wolverton, "I would have asked young Burton to take my wheat along, too."

"I don't think he would have room for it, Uncle Aaron. The boat is about full now."

"Oh, well; I shall find some other way of sending it," said Wolverton, carelessly.

About nine o'clock Wolverton stole out in the darkness, and made his way stealthily to the bend in the creek. He had with him a sharp razor—he had no knife sharp enough—which he judged would sever the thick rope.

Arrived at the place of his destination, he bent over and drew out the razor, which he opened and commenced operations. But there was an unlooked-for interference.

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A light, boyish figure sprang from behind a tree, and Bob Barton, laying his hand on Wolverton's shoulder, demanded, indignantly:

"What are you doing here, Mr. Wolverton?"

Wolverton started, dropped the razor in the river, and, with an expression of alarm, looked up into Bob's face.

CHAPTER XIX.

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MR. WOLVERTON MEETS TWO CONGENIAL SPIRITS.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Wolverton?" repeated Bob, sternly.

"Oh, it's you, Bob, is it?" said Wolverton, with assumed lightness. "Really, you quite startled me, coming upon me so suddenly in the dark."

"I noticed that you were startled," responded Bob, coolly. "But that isn't answering my question."

By this time Wolverton was on his feet, and had recovered his self-possession.

"What right have you to put questions to me, you young whelp?" he demanded, angrily.

"Because I suspect you of designs on my property."

"What do you mean?" snarled Wolverton.

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"I will tell you; I think you meant to cut the rope, and send my boat adrift."

"How dare you insult me by such a charge?" demanded the agent, working himself into a rage.

"I have reason to think that you meant to do what I have said."

"Why should I do it?"

"In order to injure me by the loss of my wheat."

"You are a fool, young man! I am inclined to think, also, that you are out of your head."

"If you had any other purpose, what is it?"

Wolverton bethought himself that in order to avert suspicion, he must assign some reason for his presence. To do this taxed his ingenuity considerably.

"I thought I saw something in the water," he said. "There it is; a twig; I see now."

"And what were you going to do with the razor?"

"None of your business!" said Wolverton, suddenly, finding it impossible, on the spur of the moment, to think of any reason. [Pg 165]

"That is easy to understand," said Bob, significantly. "Now, Mr. Wolverton, I have a warning to give you. If anything befalls my boat, I shall hold you responsible."

"Do you know who I am?" blustered Wolverton. "How do you, a boy, dare to talk in this impudent way to a man who has you in his power?"

"It strikes me, Mr. Wolverton, that I hold you in my power."

"Who would believe your unsupported assertion? sneered the agent."

"It is not unsupported. I brought with me Edward Jones, my faithful assistant, who has seen your attempt to injure me."

At this, Edward, a stalwart young man of twenty-four, stepped into view.

"I saw it all," he said, briefly.

"You are ready to lie, and he to swear to it," said Wolverton, but his voice was not firm, for he saw that the testimony against him was too strong to be easily shaken.

"I don't wonder you deny it, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob.

"I won't remain here any longer to be insulted," said Wolverton, who was anxious to get away, now that his plan had failed. [Pg 166]

Bob did not reply, and the agent slunk away, feeling far from comfortable.

"What cursed luck sent the boy to the creek to-night?" he said to himself. "I was on the point of succeeding, and then I would have had him in my power. Could he have heard anything?"

Wolverton decided, however, that this was not likely. He attributed Bob's presence to chance, though his words seemed to indicate that he suspected something. He was obliged to acknowledge his defeat. Yet it would be possible for him to return in an hour or two, and carry out his evil plan. But it would be too hazardous. The crime would inevitably be traced to him, and he would be liable to arrest. No, hard though it was to bring his mind to it, he must forego his scheme, and devise something else.

When the agent had left the scene, Bob Burton said: "Edward, you may go home. I mean to stay here on guard."

"But you will not be in condition to start to-morrow morning. You will be tired out." [Pg 167]

"I can't take any risks this last evening, Edward."

"Then let me take your place. I will stay here."

"But it will be hard on you."

"I will lie later to-morrow morning. You can relieve me, if you like, at four o'clock."

"Let it be so, then! Too much is at stake for us to leave anything to chance. I don't think, however, that Wolverton would dare to renew his attempt."

Meanwhile Wolverton retraced his steps to his own house. There was one lonely place on the way, but the agent was too much absorbed in his own reflections to have room for fear. His occupation of mind was rudely disturbed, when from a clump of bushes two men sprang out, and one, seizing him by the shoulder, said, roughly: "Your money or your life!"

Wolverton was not a brave man, and it must be confessed that he was startled by this sudden summons. But he wasn't in the habit of carrying money with him in the evening, and an old silver watch, which would have been dear at four dollars, was not an article whose loss would have seriously disturbed him. So it was with a tolerable degree of composure that he answered: "You have stopped the wrong man." [Pg 168]

"We know who you are. You are Aaron Wolverton, and you are a rich man."

"That may and may not be, but I don't carry my money with me."

"Empty your pockets!"

Wolverton complied, but neither purse nor pocket book was forthcoming.

"Didn't I tell you so?" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"We won't take your word for it."

The first highwayman plunged his hand into the agent's pockets, but his search only corroborated Wolverton's statement.

"You, a rich man, go without money!" he exclaimed with rough contempt.

"Perhaps I might have expected such a meeting," Wolverton replied, with cunning triumph. [Pg 169]

"You must have a watch, at any rate!"

"I have one that I will sell you for four dollars."

As he spoke, he voluntarily produced the timeworn watch, which had served him for twenty years.

The thieves uttered an exclamation of contempt. Their disappointment made them angry. They hurriedly conferred as to the policy of keeping Wolverton in their power till he should pay a heavy ransom, but there were obvious difficulties in the way of carrying out this plan.

Aaron Wolverton listened quietly to the discussion which concerned him so nearly. He smiled at times, and did not appear particularly alarmed till one, more bloodthirsty than the other, suggested stringing him up to the nearest tree.

"My friends," he said, for the first time betraying a slight nervousness. "I can't see what advantage it would be for you to hang me."

"You deserve it for fooling us!" replied the second highwayman, with an oath. [Pg 170]

"In what way?"

"By not carrying any money, or article of value."

"I grieve for your disappointment," said Wolverton, with much sympathy.

"If you mock us, you shall swing, any way."

"Don't mistake me! I have no doubt you are very worthy fellows, only a little unfortunate. What sum would have paid you for your disappointment?"

"Fifty dollars would have been better than nothing."

"That is considerable money, but I may be able to throw it in your way."

"Now you're talking! If you are on the square, you'll find us gentlemen. We are ready to hear what you have to say."

"Good! But I expect you to earn the money."

"How?" inquired the first gentleman, suspiciously. The word earn might mean work, and that was not in his line.

"I'll tell you."

There was an amiable conference for twenty minutes, but this is not the place to reveal what was said. Enough that it nearly concerned Bob Burton, and involved a new plot against the success of his enterprise. [Pg 171]

CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED PASSENGER.

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The next morning the boys were up bright and early. It was a glorious morning, and Bob accepted it as auspicious of a pleasant and prosperous trip.

Clip was in wild spirits. He was naturally vivacious and fond of change, and the prospect of the river trip made him very happy. Bob, as a practical joke, put on a grave face and said: "Clip, I don't know but I shall have to leave you at home."

"What fo', Massa Bob?" inquired Clip, his face assuming a look of dismay.

"I am afraid my mother won't be able to get along without you. There are so many things to attend to on the ranch."

"I can't do no good on the ranch," said Clip, eagerly. "I'm only a lazy, good-for-nothing nigger."

"Then I don't see how you can help me, Clip," returned Bob, his eyes twinkling as he listened to [Pg 173]

this candid confession.

"Dat's different, Massa Bob. I ain't no good on the ranch, but I'm powerful help on the river. Please take me along, Massa Bob," pleaded Clip.

"Just as likely as not you'll get lost, Clip. Besides, you might meet your old master from Arkansas."

"He won't catch dis nigger," said Clip, shaking his head, resolutely. "Please let me go, Massa Bob."

"Your arguments are so cogent, Clip, that I suppose I shall have to give in."

Instantly Clip's face was radiant. He didn't know what cogent arguments were, but as long as they had accomplished his desire he was content to remain in ignorance.

"But if you give me any trouble, Clip," Bob added, seriously, "I may have to put you ashore, and let you walk home."

Clip gave the most emphatic assurance of good conduct, and was informed that he could go.

There was much to do, even on the last morning, and though the boys were early risers, it was fully ten o'clock before they were ready to start. [Pg 174]

Half an hour before this Bob had a surprise.

Sam Wolverton was seen approaching on a run, breathless and without a hat. He arrived at the landing, just as Bob was putting off in the flat-bottomed boat, with a load of provisions for the voyage.

"What on earth is the matter, Sam?" asked Bob, in surprise.

"Let me get on the boat and I will tell you."

The boat was put back and Sam jumped on.

"Now what has happened, Sam?"

"Do you see this," said Sam, pointing to his right cheek, which was stained with blood.

"What has happened to you? Did you fall and hurt yourself?"

"My uncle knocked me over and I fell against a block of wood."

"What made him attack you?" inquired Bob, indignantly.

"I don't know; he got mad with me for nothing at all. He's been in an awful temper all the morning. Something must have happened to vex him." [Pg 175]

Bob smiled. He could understand what had happened. Wolverton's disappointment at the failure of his villainous plan had no doubt soured him, and, like a born bully, he had vented his spite upon the poor boy who was dependent upon him.

"I wish you'd more spunk, Sam," Bob said. "He wouldn't dare to attack me in that way."

"You're stronger and braver than I am, Bob. I can't be like you. I wish I could."

"Your uncle is no more nor less than a bully. He imposes upon you because he thinks it is safe to do so. He wouldn't dare tackle me, because he knows it wouldn't be safe."

"Bob," said Sam, solemnly, "I've borne it as long as I'm going to. I am not going back to my uncle's house."

"Do you mean this, Sam?"

"Yes, I do. It's the only home I have, but I would rather go without a home than to be beaten and ill-treated by Uncle Aaron." [Pg 176]

"I commend your pluck, Sam. I can't say I think you are doing wrong."

"I have a favor to ask of you, Bob. You are my only friend."

"What is it, Sam?"

"Let me go with you to St. Louis. It would make me happy to be with you, and I should be out of my uncle's way."

Bob paused for consideration, the proposal being unexpected.

"But suppose, Sam, I am charged with abducting you?"

"I'll take all the blame. Let me hide on the ferry-boat, and I won't show myself until you've got miles away."

"That might do," said Bob, smiling. "Perhaps it isn't exactly square, but with such a man as your uncle we must make use of his own methods."

"You will take me, then?" asked Sam, eagerly.

By this time they had reached the boat.

"Clip," said Bob, "go with Sam and hide him somewhere on the boat, but don't tell me where he is concealed. Then, if old Wolverton comes after him I can say truly that I don't know where he is." [Pg 177]

"All right, Massa Bob," said Clip, showing his teeth.

When the contents of the boat had been transferred to the larger craft, Bob rowed back, leaving Clip and Sam together. The boat was roofed over, as already stated. Besides the bins there was a corner in which some bedding had been placed for the accommodation of the young voyagers. But it seemed difficult to find a suitable hiding-place for Sam.

"Where can you put me?" asked the young runaway, with a troubled look.

Clip looked about him, rolling his eyes in perplexity.

At length his face brightened, for an idea had come to him.

In one corner was an empty barrel. Some stores had been brought aboard in it, and it had been suffered to remain, with the idea that it might possibly prove of use. The particular use to which it was to be put certainly never occurred to Bob or Clip.

"Get in there, Sam!" said Clip. "Old Mass' Wolverton won't look for you in there." [Pg 178]

"But I shall be seen."

"You wait and I'll show you how we'll manage; only get in!"

Thus adjured, Sam got into the barrel, and with some difficulty crouched so that his head was lower than the top of the barrel.

"Now I'll show you," said Clip.

He took a white cloth—it was a piece of sail-cloth—and spread over the top of the barrel.

"Now old Mass' Wolverton will have sharp eyes to see you," said Clip, triumphantly.

"That may do," said Sam. "But it isn't necessary to put it on now. It will be time if my uncle makes his appearance. I'll keep out of sight in the center of the boat."

Meanwhile Bob had gone to the house to bid good-bye to his mother.

"I feel anxious about your going off on such a long trip, Robert," said Mrs. Burton.

"You forget that I am almost a man, mother. It is time for me to assume some responsibility."

"But you are only a boy, after all, Robert. Think, if anything should happen to you, what would become of me?" [Pg 179]

"My dear mother, you may depend on my taking excellent care of myself. I don't see what risk or danger there can be in going to St. Louis. It isn't a long trip. I shall be back in less than a fortnight if all goes well."

"It will seem a very long fortnight to me, Robert."

"I have no doubt you will miss me, mother, but you forget I have Clip to look after me."

"Clip is only a poor colored boy, but I am sure he will prove faithful to you," said Mrs. Burton, seriously. "Even the humble are sometimes of great service. I am glad he is going with you."

Bob did not mention that Sam Wolverton would also be his companion, as he foresaw that the agent would not unlikely question his mother on that point.

Bob returned to the boat, and was just about to cast off, when Wolverton was seen on the bank, waving his hat and shouting frantically.

"I guess, Massa Sam, you'd better get into the barrel," said Clip with a grin.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW WOLVERTON WAS FOOLED.

[Pg 180]

"What do you want, Mr. Wolverton?" asked Bob, coolly, as he stood at one end of the boat and surveyed the excited agent.

"Come ashore, or I'll have you arrested," shouted the irate Wolverton.

"You are very kind, Mr. Wolverton; but I am in considerable of a hurry, and have not time to comply with your request."

"You'd better come ashore, if you know what's best for yourself."

"Please state your business! If it is anything to my advantage, I may come; but I am just ready to start for St. Louis."

"Is my nephew Sam on your boat?"

"I don't see him. Why should he be on board?"

"I suspect him of running away, the ungrateful young rascal? I thought he might be scheming to go down the river with you."

[Pg 181]

"Clip," said Bob, gravely, "has Sam Wolverton engaged passage with us?"

"Not as I knows on, Massa Bob."

"If he should, charge him fifteen dollars."

"Yes, Massa Bob," answered Clip, with a grin.

"If you wish your nephew to go to St. Louis on my boat, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob, with ceremonious politeness, "I will take him, being a friend, for fifteen dollars, excursion ticket. You can't complain of that."

"But I don't want him to go," roared Wolverton. "I tell you he has run away."

"That's very strange, considering how kindly and liberally you have always treated him."

Wolverton eyed Bob suspiciously, for he knew well enough that the remark was ironical.

"None of your gammon, young man!" he said, crabbedly. "Send Sam ashore."

"Really, Mr. Wolverton, you must be joking. What have I got to do with Sam?"

"I don't believe a word you say. I mean to search your boat."

[Pg 182]

"You had better do it at once, then, for it is time for me to start."

"But how am I to get aboard," asked the agent, perplexed.

"You might swim," suggested Bob, "or wade. The water is shallow—not higher than your neck, anywhere."

"That is nonsense. Steer your boat to shore, that I may board her."

"It can't be done, Mr. Wolverton. We can only drift down with the current."

"Then how am I to get aboard?"

"That is your lookout."

Just then Mr. Wolverton espied the flat-bottomed boat which Bob proposed to take with him. He had attached it by a line to the stern of the ferry-boat.

"Row over and take me across."

"I can't spare the time."

Wolverton was about to give vent to his wrath at this refusal, when he observed a boat approaching, rowed by a German boy named Otto Brandes.

"Come here, boy, and row me out to yonder boat," he said.

[Pg 183]

Otto paused in his rowing, and, understanding the man with whom he was dealing, he asked, quietly: "How much will you pay me, Mr. Wolverton?"

"Five cents to take me over and back," answered the agent, with some hesitation.

Otto laughed.

"I don't work for any such wages," he said.

"I'll give you ten; but be quick about it."

"Give me a quarter and I'll do it."

"Do you think I am made of money?" said Wolverton, in anger. "That is an outrageous extortion."

"All right! Then hire somebody else," said Otto, coolly.

After a fruitless effort to beat down the price, Wolverton sulkily agreed to the terms, and Otto rowed to the bank.

"Now, row with all your might," said the agent, as he seated himself in one end of the boat.

"Your fare, please," said Otto.

"I'll pay you when the trip is over," said Wolverton. "It's a poor paymaster that pays in advance."

[Pg 184]

"Then you'd better get out of the boat. Railroad and boat tickets are always paid in advance."

"I'll give you ten cents now, and the balance when I land."

"It won't do, Mr. Wolverton. I don't care much about the job anyway; I'm in a hurry to get home."

Otto lived about half a mile further down the creek.

Much against his will, the agent was obliged to deposit the passage-money in the boy's hand before he would consent to take up the oars and commence rowing.

"That rascal Sam is putting me to all this expense," he said to himself. "I'll take my pay out of his skin once I get hold of him."

Clip went up to the barrel in which Sam was concealed.

"Ol' Wolverton is comin', Massa Sam," he said. "Don't you make no noise, and we'll fool de ol' man."

In spite of this assurance, poor Sam trembled in his narrow place of concealment. He knew that he would fare badly if his uncle got hold of him. [Pg 185]

"How's he coming?" he asked in a stifled voice.

"Otto Brandes is rowin' him. He's in Otto's boat."

"It's mean of Otto!"

"No; he don't know what de ol' man is after."

It took scarcely two minutes for Wolverton to reach the ferry-boat. He mounted it with fire in his eye.

"Now, where is Sam?" he demanded in a peremptory tone.

"You can search for him, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob, coolly. "You seem to know more about where he is than I do."

Wolverton began to peer here and there, looking into bins of wheat and all sorts of improbable places.

Clip took a broom and began to sweep energetically. Bob could not explain this sudden fit of industry till he saw Clip slyly slip the broom between Wolverton's legs as he was hurrying along, thereby upsetting the unfortunate agent, who tumbled sprawling on the deck. [Pg 186]

"Why, you black imp!" he exclaimed, furiously, as he picked himself up, "what made you do that?"

"Couldn't help it, Massa Wolverton! I 'clare to gracious I couldn't!" said Clip, rolling his eyes in a most wonderful manner. "Are you hurt, Massa Wolverton?"

"I most broke my knee!" growled Wolverton, as he rose and limped towards the other end of the boat. "I may be laid up for a week."

"It was de ol' broom did it," said Clip, innocently. "Never see such a broom!"

Bob had hard work to keep a straight face, as he heard Clip's odd accusation against the unoffending broom.

This accident seemed to dampen Wolverton's enthusiasm, and the pain in his knee increasing made him desirous of getting home as soon as possible. Besides, he began to suspect that he was on a wrong scent, as he had thus far found no traces of his runaway nephew. He never once noticed the barrel, over which the piece of sail-cloth had been thrown so carelessly. [Pg 187]

"Well, did you find Sam?" asked Bob, composedly.

"No!" snapped Wolverton.

"I seed him jest before you came, Massa Wolverton," said Clip.

"Where?" asked the agent, eagerly.

"Runnin' along the bank."

"In what direction?"

Clip pointed up the creek.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"You didn't ask me, Massa Wolverton."

"Take me ashore quick!" said Wolverton to Otto.

"Hurry up, Massa Wolverton, and mebbe you'll catch him!"

Wolverton was already in the boat, and Otto was rowing him to the shore.

Clip went to the barrel and released the prisoner.

"De ol' man's gone, Sam!" he said.

"I'm glad of it, Clip. I'm almost suffocated."

"Golly, didn't we fool him!" and Clip lay down on his back on deck, and gave way to an explosion of mirth. [Pg 188]

A minute later the rope was drawn in, and the ferry-boat started on its adventurous career down the creek.

CHAPTER XXII. THE FIRST DAY.

[Pg 189]

Bob was accustomed to rowing, but navigation with the ferry-boat presented a new and interesting problem which he was eager to solve. A steering apparatus had been rigged up at the stern, which was found strong enough for the purpose required. Bob took his place at the helm in starting, and managed for the first hour to regulate the direction of his craft. By that time they came to a place where the creek widened considerably, and the boat showed a disposition to whirl round in an eddy. This difficulty, however, was overcome by practice, and Bob began to acquire confidence in himself as a navigator. But it was evident that he could not remain at the helm all day.

"Come here, Clip," he said; "I want you to rest me in steering."

Clip took his place, but his first attempts proved discouraging. He was inclined to steer in just the reverse direction, and twice came near running the boat ashore. [Pg 190]

"What are you about, Clip?" demanded Bob, in excitement. "Don't you see you are running the boat ashore?"

"I done just like you, Massa Bob," protested Clip. "De boat acts contrary; never see such an ol' boat."

"It is you that are contrary, Clip. You don't do as I tell you."

"I 'clar to gracious I did, Massa Bob. I can't never learn to steer."

In fact, Clip, who was naturally lazy, found it very irksome to stand at the helm, and much preferred going here and there on the boat and surveying the scenery on either bank. He hoped that his incompetence would save him from the task. But his dream was rudely disturbed.

"If you can't take your turn in steering, Clip," said Bob, "you won't be of any use to me. I shall have to send you home, and get along with Sam's assistance."

"Oh, don't send me home, Massa Bob!" exclaimed Clip, in alarm. "I'll try—'deed I will." [Pg 191]

"I'll try you a little longer, Clip," said Bob; "but you must not blame me for sending you back, if it is necessary."

No better argument could have been used to insure satisfactory work from Clip, who was naturally careless, and inclined to shirk work. Nevertheless, Bob felt glad that he had another assistant in Sam Wolverton, who proved to possess all the qualities which Clip lacked.

When it was one o'clock, Clip began to show signs of distress.

"I'm pow'ful hungry, Massa Bob," he said, in a pleading tone.

"So am I, Clip," returned Bob, with a smile. "I will see if I can't do something to relieve you."

He had brought from home a basket of sandwiches and a gallon of milk. To these the boys did ample justice, displaying even more appetite than usual. This was not surprising, for they had worked hard, and this in the open air. [Pg 192]

"Sam," said Bob, "I can't hope to supply you with all the delicacies you would get at home, but I hope you'll make it do with our humble fare."

Sam smiled.

"All the delicacies on Uncle Aaron's table wouldn't spoil anybody's digestion. I like my dinner to-day better than any I've eaten for a long time. I don't know what uncle and aunt would say if they could see me here."

"De ol' man would be wild," said Clip, with a guffaw.

"I expect he would, Clip. He isn't fond of me, but he doesn't want to lose me. He will have to do his own chores now, for I don't believe he can get a boy to work for him."

About six o'clock in the afternoon, having arrived opposite a town which I will call Rushford, Bob decided to tie up for the night. He and Clip went on shore, leaving Sam in charge of the boat. He did not dare to leave it unguarded, for the cargo, according to his estimate, was worth not far from three thousand dollars.

He took the opportunity to enter a restaurant, where he bought Clip and himself cups of coffee, and ordered a fresh supply of sandwiches made up, which he arranged to have delivered at the boat early the next morning.

[Pg 193]

"I don't mean that we shall starve, Clip," he said.

Clip showed his teeth.

"Dat coffee's awful good, Massa Bob," he said.

"Yes, but we can't make it on board the boat. I shall have to depend on getting it at the villages on the way."

"How far are we from home, Massa Bob?"

"Well thought of, Clip. I will inquire."

He asked the keeper of the restaurant the distance to Carver.

"I don't know, but I think my waiter comes from that neighborhood. Sam, how far away is Carver?"

"Forty miles," answered Sam promptly.

"I thought it had been more. We have been eight hours coming on the river."

That is because the river (they had left the creek fifteen miles up) was winding in its course.

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On the whole, however, Bob decided that it was very fair progress for the first day, and that only about two-thirds of the time.

Rushford was a town of fifteen hundred inhabitants, and presented as busy an appearance as a town three times the size in the East. Clip, who was fond of variety, was reluctant to return to the boat, but Bob said:

"We must relieve Sam, and give him a chance to come ashore and get some coffee. You come with him, and show him the restaurant."

This arrangement suited Clip, who liked as much variety and excitement as possible.

On returning to the boat Bob was somewhat surprised to find his young lieutenant in conversation with an old lady dressed in antediluvian costume. She had a sharp face, with an eager, birdlike look, and seemed to be preferring a request.

"Here's the captain; you can ask him," said Sam, who seemed much relieved by the return of Bob.

"Is *he* the captain?" asked the old lady. "Why, he's nothin' but a boy!"

[Pg 195]

"He's all the captain we have," answered Sam.

"Be you in charge of this boat?" asked the old lady.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"I want to go down to St. Louis," said the old lady, "and I thought maybe you might find room for me."

"But, ma'am, why don't you take passage on a river steamer?"

"They charge too much," said the old lady. "I hain't got much money, and I s'pose you wouldn't charge me much. Are you any acquainted in St. Louis?"

"No, ma'am."

"I thought maybe you might know my darter's husband. He keeps a grocery store down near the river. His name is Jeremiah Pratt, and my darter's name is Melinda Ann. I want to give 'em a surprise."

"I never met the gentleman."

"When do you start?"

"To-morrow morning about half-past seven o'clock."

"Can't you put it off till eight? I've got to pack my trunk over night, and I've got to eat a bit of breakfast to stay my stummik. How much do you charge? I'd be willing to pay you seventy-five cents."

[Pg 196]

"How much do the steamboats charge?" asked Bob.

"I think it's six dollars, or it may be seven. That's too much for a poor woman like me."

"I think you will have to pay it, madam, for we have no accommodation for passengers on our boat."

"Oh, I ain't a mite particular. You can put me anywhere."

"I suppose you wouldn't be willing to get into a grain bin?"

"Oh, now you're jokin'. Where do you sleep yourself?"

"On a mattress on the floor; that wouldn't be suitable for a lady like you. Besides, we have no separate rooms."

"Then you can't take me, no way?" asked the old lady, disappointed.

"I am afraid not, madam."

"You're real disobligin'. I don't see how I am to get to St. Louis."

[Pg 197]

"I am sorry I can't help you."

The old woman hobbled off in evident anger. Bob heard afterwards that she was a woman of ample means, fully able to afford steamboat fare, but so miserly that she grudged paying it.

"Now, Sam," said Bob, "Clip will show you the way to a restaurant where you can get a hot cup of coffee and a plate of meat, if you desire it."

While the boys were gone, Bob received a visitor.

CHAPTER XXIII. A SUSPICIOUS CHARACTER.

[Pg 198]

Fifteen minutes after Sam and Clip had left him Bob's attention was drawn to a man of somewhat flashy appearance, who, while leaning against a tree on the bank, seemed to be eying him and the boat with attention. He wore a Prince Albert coat which was no longer fit to appear in good society, a damaged hat, and a loud neck-tie. His eyes were roving from one point to another, as if he felt a great deal of interest in Bob or the boat. Our hero was not favorably impressed with this man's appearance.

"I wonder what he sees that interests him so much?" he thought.

"I say, young man, is this here boat yours?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Bob, coldly.

"What have you got on board?"

Bob felt under no obligation to answer, but reflecting that there was no good excuse for refusing, he said, briefly: "Wheat."

[Pg 199]

"Humph! How much have you got?"

This clearly was none of the questioner's business, and Bob replied by another question:

"Do you want to buy?"

"I don't know," said the stranger. "What do you ask?"

"I can't say till I get to St. Louis."

"How much do you calc'late to get?"

"Two dollars and a quarter," answered Bob, naming a price beyond his expectations.

"Ain't that a high figger?"

"Perhaps so."

"Come, young feller, you don't seem social. Can't you invite me aboard?"

"I don't think you would be paid for coming," said Bob, more and more unfavorably impressed.

"Oh, I don't mind. My time ain't valuable. I guess I'll come."

The stranger stepped across the gang-plank, which Bob had laid from the boat to the shore, and entered without an invitation. Bob was tempted to order him off, but the intruder appeared much stronger than himself; and while he was alone it seemed politic to submit to the disagreeable necessity of entertaining his unwelcome visitor.

[Pg 200]

The latter walked from end to end of the boat, examining for himself without asking permission, or appearing to feel the need of any. He opened the bins and counted them, while Bob looked on uneasily.

"I say, young feller, you've got a smart lot of wheat here."

"Yes," said Bob, briefly.

"Got a thousand bushels, I reckon?"

"Perhaps so."

"And you expect to get two dollars and a quarter a bushel?"

"Perhaps I shall have to take less."

"At any rate, you must have two thousand dollars' worth on board."

"You can judge for yourself."

"I say, that's a pile of money—for a boy."

"The wheat doesn't belong to me."

"Who owns it, then."

[Pg 201]

"My mother."

"What's your mother's name?"

"I have answered all the questions I am going to," said Bob, indignantly.

"Don't get riled, youngster. It ain't no secret, is it?"

"I don't care about answering all the questions a stranger chooses to put to me."

"I say, young chap, you're gettin' on your high horse."

"What is your object in putting all these questions?"

"What is my object?"

"That is what I asked."

"The fact is, youngster, I've got a ranch round here myself, and I've got about five hundred bushels of wheat I want to market. Naturally I'm interested. See?"

Bob did not believe a word of this.

"Where is your ranch?" he asked.

"About two miles back of the town," answered the stranger, glibly. That lie was an easy one. "I'm thinkin' some of runnin' down to the city to see if I can't sell my wheat in a lump to some merchant. Mebbe I could strike a bargain with you to carry me down."

[Pg 202]

Bob had even more objection to the new passenger than to the old lady, and he answered stiffly:

"I have no accommodations for passengers."

"Oh, I can bunk anywhere—can lie on deck, on one of the bins. I'm used to roughin' it."

"You'd better take passage by the next steamer. This is a freight boat."

"There ain't anybody but you aboard, is there?"

"Yes; I have two companions."

The stranger seemed surprised and incredulous.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"Gone into the village."

The visitor seemed thoughtful. He supposed the two companions were full-grown men, and this would not tally with his plans. This illusion, however, was soon dissipated, for Sam and Clip at this point crossed the gang-plank and came aboard.

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"Are them your two companions?" asked the stranger, appearing relieved.

"Yes."

Sam and Clip eyed him curiously, expecting Bob to explain who he was, but our hero was only anxious to get rid of him.

"Then you can't accommodate me?" asked the man.

"No, sir; but if you'll give me your name and address, I can perhaps sell your crop for you, and leave you to deliver it."

"Never mind, young feller! I reckon I'll go to the city myself next week."

"Just as you like, sir."

He re-crossed the plank, and when he reached the shore took up his post again beside the tree, and resumed his scrutiny of the boat.

"What does that man want?" asked Sam.

"I don't know. He asked me to give him passage to St. Louis."

"You might make money by carrying passengers," suggested Sam.

"I wouldn't carry a man like him at any price," said Bob. "I haven't any faith in his honesty or respectability, though he tells me that he owns a ranch two miles back of the town. He came on the boat to spy out what he could steal, in my opinion." [Pg 204]

"How many days do you think we shall need for the trip, Bob?" asked Sam.

"It may take us a week; but it depends on the current, and whether we meet with any obstructions. Are you in a hurry to get back to your uncle?"

"No," said Sam, his face wearing a troubled look. "The fact is, Bob, I don't mean to go back at all."

"You mean dat, Massa Sam?" asked Clip, his eyes expanding in his excitement.

"Yes, I mean it. If I go back I shall have to return to my uncle, and you know what kind of a reception I shall get. He will treat me worse than ever."

"I am sure, Sam, my mother will be willing to let you live with us."

"I should like nothing better, but my uncle would come and take me away."

"Would he have the right?"

"I think he would. He has always told me that my poor father left me to his charge." [Pg 205]

"Do you think he left any property?"

"Yes; I feel sure he did; for on his deathbed he called me to him, and said: 'I leave you something, Sam; I wish it were more; but, at any rate, you are not a pauper.'"

"Did you ever mention this to your uncle, Sam?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"It seemed to make him very angry. He said that my father was delirious or he would never have said such absurd things. But I know he was in his right mind. He was never more calm and sensible than when he told me about the property."

"I am afraid Sam, your uncle has swindled you out of your inheritance."

"I think so, too, but I can't prove anything, and it won't do to say anything, for it makes him furious."

"What does your aunt say?"

"Oh, she sides with Uncle Aaron; she always does that." [Pg 206]

"Then I can't say I advise you to return to Carver, although Clip and I are sure to miss you."

"Deed I shall, Massa Sam," said Clip.

"I think I can pick up a living somehow in St. Louis. I would rather black boots than go back to Uncle Aaron."

"I am sure you can. Perhaps some gentleman will feel an interest in you, and take you into his service."

"I want to tell you, Bob, that Uncle Aaron hates you, and will try to injure you. You will need to be careful."

"That's no news, Sam. He has shown his dislike for me in many ways; but I am not afraid of him," the boy added, proudly.

At nine o'clock the boys went to bed. They were all tired, and all slept well. It was not till seven o'clock that Bob awoke. His two companions were asleep. He roused them, and they prepared for the second day's trip.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CLIP MAKES A LITTLE MONEY FOR HIMSELF.

[Pg 207]

About noon the next day, while Clip was at the helm, there was a sudden jolt that jarred the boat from stem to stern, if I may so speak of a double-ender ferry-boat.

Bob and Sam, who had been occupied with re-arranging some of the cargo, rushed up to the colored pilot.

"What on earth is the matter, Clip asked Bob.

"Clare to gracious, I dunno, Massa Bob," asseverated Clip.

Bob didn't need to repeat the question. Clip had steered in shore, and the boat had run against a tree of large size which had fallen over into the river, extending a distance of a hundred feet into the stream. Of course the boat came to a standstill.

"What made you do this, Clip?" said Bob, sternly.

[Pg 208]

"Didn't do it, Massa Bob. Ol' boat run into the tree himself."

"That won't do, Clip. If you had steered right, there would have been no trouble."

"I steered just as you told me to, Massa Bob."

"No, you didn't. You should have kept the boat at least a hundred and fifty feet from the shore."

"Didn't I, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, innocently.

"No. Don't you see we are not more than fifty feet away now?"

"I didn't get out and measure, Massa Bob," said Clip, with a grin.

"Now, own up, Clip, were you not looking at something on the bank, so that you didn't notice where you were steering?"

"Who told you, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, wondering.

"I know it must be so. Do you know you have got us into trouble? How am I going to get the boat back into the stream?"

Clip scratched his head hopelessly. The problem was too intricate for him to solve.

[Pg 209]

"I think, Clip, I shall have to leave you over at the next place we come to. You are more bother than you are worth."

"Oh, don't, Massa Bob. I won't do so again. 'Deed I won't."

Bob didn't relent for some time. He felt that it was necessary to impress Clip with the heinousness of his conduct. At length he agreed to give him one more chance. He had to secure the services of two stout backwoodsmen to remove the tree, and this occasioned a delay of at least two hours. Finally the boat got started again, and for the remainder of the day there was no trouble.

Towards the close of the afternoon they reached a place which we will call Riverton. It was a smart Western village of about two thousand inhabitants. Bob and Sam went on shore to get some supper, leaving Clip in charge.

"Now, Clip, you must keep your eyes open, and take good care of everything while we are gone," said Bob.

"All right, Massa Bob."

About ten minutes after the boys went away Clip was sitting on a barrel whistling a plantation melody, when a slender, florid-complexioned young man stepped aboard.

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"Good-evening, sir," he said, removing his hat.

"Evenin'," answered Clip, with a grin. He was flattered by being addressed as "sir."

"Are you in charge of this boat?"

"Yes; while Massa Bob and Sam are gone ashore."

"Are they boys like yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you three all that are on board—I mean all that man the boat?"

"Yes, massa."

"Where are you bound?"

"To St. Louis."

"Do you think they would take me as passenger?"

Clip shook his head.

"They won't take no passengers," he answered. "An ol' woman wanted to go as passenger, and another man" (Clip was unconscious of the bull), "but Massa Bob he said no."

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"Suppose I make a bargain with you," said the man, insinuatingly.

"What you mean, massa?" asked Clip, rolling his eyes in wonderment.

"Can't you hide me somewhere without their knowing I am on board?"

"What for I do dat?" asked Clip.

"I'll make it worth your while."

"What's dat?"

"I'll give you five dollars."

"For my own self?"

"Yes; for yourself."

"And I won't have to give it to Massa Bob?"

"No; you can spend it for yourself."

"But Massa Bob would find out to-morrer."

"If he finds out to-morrow I shan't mind."

"And you won't take back the money?"

"No; you can keep the money at any rate."

"Where's the money?" asked Clip, cautiously.

The stranger took out a five-dollar gold piece, and showed it to Clip. Clip had seen gold coins before, and he understood the value of what was offered him.

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"Where can I put you?" he said.

"We'll go round the boat together, and see if we can find a place."

The round was taken, and the stranger selected a dark corner behind a bin of wheat.

"Will Massa Bob, as you call him; be likely to look here?"

"No; I reckon not."

"Have you got anything to eat on board which you can bring me by and by?"

"I'm goin' on shore soon as Massa Bob gets back. I'll buy something."

"That will do."

The stranger ensconced himself in his hiding-place, and soon after Bob and Sam returned.

"Has anybody been here, Clip?" asked Bob.

"No, Massa Bob," answered Clip, solemnly.

Poor Clip's moral convictions were rather obtuse, and a lie did not impress him as seriously wrong.

"What have you been doing while we were away?"

"Nothin', Massa Bob."

"That's what you like best to do, Clip, isn't it?"

[Pg 213]

"Dat's where you're right, Massa Bob. Yah, yah!"

"Well, you can go to your supper, Clip. Here's some money."

"All right, Massa Bob."

Clip did not seem in any great hurry to go. He was rather afraid that Bob and Sam would explore the boat while he was away. Finally he walked away with slow steps, looking back from time to time.

"What's got into Clip?" said Bob, wonderingly.

"I guess he isn't hungry," answered Sam, with a laugh.

Ten minutes later Bob's attention was drawn to a crowd of men and boys who were approaching the boat. He naturally wondered what was the object of the assemblage.

The leader called out to Bob, when he had approached sufficiently near:

"I say, boy, have you seen anything of a man with dark hair, florid complexion, wearing a light suit, running along the bank?"

"No, sir. Why?"

"A man of that description has stolen a sum of money from a dry-goods store in the town. He was seen running in this direction. We thought you might have seen him."

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"No, sir; I have seen nothing of such a man."

Bob little dreamed that the thief in question was concealed at that moment within twenty-five

feet of where he was sitting.

CHAPTER XXV. CLIP'S SECRET MISSION.

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The man who had addressed Bob eyed him sharply on receiving his negative answer.

"It is a pretty serious thing to connive at the escape of a criminal," he said.

"That remark does not affect me, sir. I know nothing of any criminal. If I had seen him I would tell you."

Bob talked so frankly and honestly that it seemed impossible to doubt his word. The leader of the pursuing party turned to consult with a friend.

"The boy seems straightforward," he said. "What do you think?"

"I agree with you. Still, the man was seen to run in this direction."

The first questioner was the one most concerned in the capture of the guilty party, for it was his store that had been robbed.

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"Have you been here all the time?" he asked, turning once more to Bob.

"No, sir; my friend and I have been to the village to get supper."

"Did you leave no one on board?"

"Yes, sir; a colored boy in my service—a boy named Clip."

"Did he mention having seen any suspicious party, or any man who seemed to be running away?"

"No, sir."

"Where is he? I would like to speak with him."

"He has gone to the village to get his supper."

If Clip had been present he would no doubt have been questioned, but as he was absent the party of investigation did not think it worth while to wait.

"That's rather curious, Sam," said Bob, when they were again alone. "We were suspected of screening a criminal."

"I wouldn't give much for the fellow's chance of escape. They are evidently determined to catch him."

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These words were all distinctly heard by the man in hiding.

"I was lucky to fall in with the little nigger," he reflected. "Them boys would have refused to help me. They would give me up now if they knew I was on board. I must be careful."

Clip came back at the end of half an hour. If Bob had taken notice of him, he would have noticed that the boy's pockets bulged out as if crowded with articles. But he had no especial reason for suspecting Clip of any underhand proceeding, and sat with Sam talking about home matters, leaving his young colored servant to his own devices.

Clip was faithful to his trust. He had agreed to take care of his concealed passenger, and he was determined to do so.

As soon as he could do so without observation, he went to the man's hiding-place and poured out the contents of his pockets. There were some buns and small rolls and a few round cakes.

"Will they do you, mister?" he asked, in a low voice.

[Pg 218]

"Yes; but I'm terribly thirsty. Have you got any whisky aboard?"

Clip shook his head.

"We ain't got no 'toxicating liquors," he answered.

"Can you bring me a glass of water?"

"I'll try. If you'd let me tell Massa Bob you were on board, I guess he'd give you some milk."

"Milk be—hanged! No, I'll make it do with water. Don't you tell this Bob, on any account, that I am here!"

"All right, massa!" answered Clip; but he was getting more and more puzzled. "Are you goin' to stay in dat place all night?"

"Yes."

"You'll find it mighty uncomfor'ble. If Massa Bob knew you was here—"

"He is not to know, do you hear?" said the other, impatiently.

"All right, massa! You know best."

"Of course I know best."

By this time Clip was missed.

"Where are you, Clip?" asked Bob.

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"I'm jst loafin' around, Massa Bob," said Clip, a little startled.

"There's something strange about you to-night, Clip; I don't understand it."

"I'm thinkin' of old times down in Arkansaw, Massa Bob."

"Would you like to be there now, Clip?"

"No, Massa Bob, I'd rather live with you and your mudder. My ol' massa use to give me plenty of lickin's. I don't want to go back, never no more."

Clip still continued to be restless and uneasy. He knew he had no authority for taking a passenger on board, and feared that Bob would take away the five dollars if he learned that Clip had accepted so large a sum. To do Clip justice, he had no idea that the man whom he had hidden was an offender against the laws, and that the police were in search of him. Even if he had known this, however, it is not certain that Clip would have been prejudiced against the offender. In truth, his prejudices were against the agents of the law rather than against those who had offended.

Bob and Sam usually retired early; but to-night, to Clip's discontent, they remained up later than usual, talking about matters at home.

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"Isn't you ever goin' to bed, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, at last.

"What is your hurry, Clip? Are you sleepy?"

"Awful sleepy, Massa Bob," answered Clip; "can't hardly keep my eyes open."

"Then you can go to bed any time. Sam and I will soon follow."

This was not altogether satisfactory, for Clip meant to get up as soon as Bob and Sam were asleep and visit his passenger, who had expressed a wish to have him do so. However, there was nothing to be said, and Clip withdrew to his bunk and lay down; but, as may readily be guessed, his mind was too active for sleep.

There was some one else who was anxious to have Bob and Sam retire. This was the hidden passenger, who found his quarters contracted and uncomfortable.

"What's the matter with those confounded boys?" he growled to himself. "They seem determined to sit up on purpose to vex me. When they are once asleep I can get up and stretch my limbs."

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In about twenty minutes the boys, judging from their deep and regular breathing, had fallen asleep.

Clip, who had been waiting anxiously, raised himself on his elbow and eyed them closely.

Feeling that it was now safe for him to do so, he slipped out of bed cautiously and began to feel his way toward the hiding-place of his new acquaintance.

"They're asleep," he whispered. "Now, what you want, massa?"

"It's high time they were," growled the man. "I thought they were going to sit up all night."

"So did I," returned Clip.

"Are you sure there is no whisky on board?"

"No, massa."

"I suppose you could get some for me on shore. There's a saloon only three minutes' walk from this place."

[Pg 222]

Clip was reluctant to go on shore on such an errand; but finally the offer of fifty cents for himself induced him to do so. He took a tin cup which Bob had brought with him from home, and started on his errand.

At the saloon he was asked, "Do you want this for yourself? We don't sell to boys."

"No, massa; it's for a sick man."

"Where's the sick man?"

"On board a boat."

Upon this representation the whisky was obtained, and Clip started on his return. His curiosity

led him to take a swallow of the whisky he was carrying, but it did not commend itself to Clip's palate.

"It's nasty stuff!" he said with a grimace; "I don't see what fo' people drink it."

He carried the drink safely to the passenger, who drank it and smacked his lips over it. "It goes to the right spot," he said.

"Do those boys sleep sound?" he asked.

"Yes, massa."

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"Then I'll get out of this beastly hole and take a turn on deck."

"Be keerful, massa!" said Clip anxiously.

"Oh, yes; I won't make any noise."

Clip crept back to bed and succeeded in resuming his place without disturbing or arousing Bob or Sam.

CHAPTER XXVI. WAS IT THE CAT?

[Pg 224]

Usually Bob Burton slept all night; but to-night, unfortunately for Clip, he awakened about two o'clock in the morning. By an equally perverse chance, just as he awoke, the concealed passenger, now enjoying the freedom of the deck, broke out into a stentorian sneeze. Bob heard it, and so did Clip, whose uneasiness made him sleep more lightly than usual, and both were startled.

"I hope Massa Bob won't hear dat," thought Clip.

But Bob did hear it.

"What's that?" he asked, half rising in bed.

"It's me!" answered Clip, preferring to admit the sneeze rather than have Bob suspect that there was any one else on the boat.

"Do you mean to say you sneezed, Clip?" asked Bob, in amazement.

[Pg 225]

"Yes, Massa Bob."

"You must be dreaming. The sneeze came from another part of the boat."

"Are you sure?" asked Clip.

"Yes. What made you tell me that it was you who sneezed?"

"I t'ought I did, Massa Bob."

"When did you wake up?"

"Just now."

"The sneeze must have waked you up."

"I dunno," answered Clip, dubiously.

"There must be some one on board, unless we both dreamed about the sneeze."

"Mebbe it's a cat!" remarked Clip, ingenuously.

Bob laughed. "It must be a very remarkable cat that would sneeze like that," he said.

"Jus' so, Massa Bob," assented Clip, meekly, hoping that Bob would drop the subject.

"I think, Clip, I shall get up and search for that cat."

"Don't you do it, Massa Bob. He—he might bite you."

[Pg 226]

"I hope I am not such a coward as to be afraid of a cat."

Bob rose and lighted a candle which he had with him. Then, followed by Clip, he advanced to the other end of the deck. But the passenger had warning, having heard the conversation which had taken place between Bob and Clip, and had hurriedly retreated to his former hiding-place. It did not occur to Bob to look there, and he returned from his fruitless search more mystified than ever.

But, Clip being close beside him, he caught the aroma of the single swallow of whisky which Clip had taken, and he immediately began to suspect poor Clip of having indulged in much deeper potations than he was guilty of.

"Clip," he said, suddenly, "I smell whisky."

"Does you, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, feeling that he was getting into a scrape.

"Yes, I do, Clip; and where do you think it comes from?"

"Don't know, Massa Bob; 'deed I don't."

"It comes from your mouth, Clip. You've been drinking!"

[Pg 227]

Drops of perspiration stood on Clip's forehead. He could not excuse himself, or explain matters, without betraying his secret. Not thinking of anything to say, he said nothing.

"Tell me the truth, Clip; have you been drinking?"

"I jes' took a little swaller."

"Where did you take it?"

"On sho'."

"What made you do such a thing? I didn't dream that you were getting intemperate, Clip."

"You see, Massa Bob, a gen'leman asked me to bring him a drink of whisky, and I t'ought I'd jest see how it tasted."

"Who asked you to bring him some whisky?" asked Bob, who believed this to be a pure fiction on the part of his young companion.

"A gen'leman."

"What gentleman?"

"He didn't tell me his name."

"I think you are telling me a lie, Clip."

"No I ain't, Massa Bob; it's as true as de Bible."

[Pg 228]

"I don't think you know much about the Bible, Clip."

"It's all true what I told you, Massa Bob. If I find de gen'leman, I'll bring him here to tell you."

The witness referred to smiled to himself grimly when he heard this statement.

"That little nigger's a brick!" he said to himself. "As to that other boy, I'd like to throw him overboard. He's too fond of meddling with other people's business."

It may occur to the reader that this was hardly a fair way of stating the case. As the boat belonged to Bob, and he was the commander, it might safely be assumed that he had a right to inquire into anything that excited his suspicion.

"Are you goin' back to bed, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, uneasily.

"Wait a minute, Clip; I want to get a drink of water."

Again poor Clip was in bad luck. The tin dipper had been used to procure the whisky, and of course it still smelled strongly of that liquor.

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"Clip," said Bob, as soon as he had raised it to his lips, "you got some whisky in this cup."

"Ye'es," admitted Clip.

"And you drank it yourself instead of giving it to any gentleman."

"No, I didn't, Massa Bob," stoutly, and as we know truly, asserted Clip.

"I'm ashamed of you, Clip. If you are going to act in this way, I shall have to send you home. You have been acting very queerly this evening. Sam and I both noticed it, but I didn't think you had formed a taste for whisky."

"I don't love it, Massa Bob. I hate it. It's awful nasty stuff."

"And you didn't drink this dipper full, then?"

"No, I didn't."

"What did you do with it?"

"Throwed it away, Massa Bob. I only took one swaller. I couldn't drink it if you gave me half a dollar; 'deed I couldn't."

"I hope this is true, Clip. I shouldn't like to tell my mother that you had become intemperate."

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"What's the matter?" was heard from Sam's bed at this juncture. "Where are you, Bob?"

"Here I am, Sam."

"What made you get up?"

"I thought I heard a noise on deck; so Clip and I got up."

"What was it like?"

"A sneeze. Clip thought it might be a cat."

Bob and Sam laughed at the ludicrous idea, and Clip joined in, glad that Bob's embarrassing cross-examination was over.

"You'd better come to bed, both of you. Very likely you dreamed it."

At that moment, and before Bob had put out the candle, there was a most unlooked-for corroboration of Clip's singular theory.

An immense tom-cat ran swiftly between Bob's legs, from some place of concealment. Both he and Clip saw it, and the latter was quick to take advantage of the opportune appearance of the animal.

"Dare's de cat, Massa Bob," he shouted, triumphantly. "Didn't I tell you it was a cat?"

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Bob was temporarily nonplussed. Clip seemed to have the best of the argument.

"All I can say is, it is a remarkable cat," he said. "I wish it would sneeze again."

The rest of the night passed without anything remarkable happening. All three boys slept soundly. Indeed, it was later than usual, probably on account of their sleep being interrupted during the night, that they awoke.

According to custom, the boys took turns in going out to breakfast.

"Clip, you and Sam can go out together," said Bob. "I will take my turn afterwards."

"I ain't in no hurry, Massa Bob," said Clip. "You an' Sam go first, and I'll go afterwards."

Bob thought this a little strange, but did not object.

When Clip was left alone he went at once to see his charge.

"Hope you pass de night good," said Clip, politely.

"I'm awfully cramped up," groaned the other. "But you're a trump, Clip. You stood by me like a Trojan."

"Thank you, massa. I'm afraid Massa Bob'll find you out. How long you goin' to stay?"

[Pg 232]

"Till I get a few miles from this town. Then he may find me and welcome."

Clip felt that it would be a great relief to him when there was no further need of concealment.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS PASSENGER IS DISCOVERED.

[Pg 233]

Bob Burton started on his trip down the river quite unaware that he carried a passenger; Clip's peculiar nervousness attracted his attention, and he wondered at it, but finally was led to attribute it to the whisky, of which he credited Clip with having drunk a considerable amount. We know that he was mistaken in this, but those who practice deception are apt to be misjudged, and have no right to complain.

One more discovery puzzled Bob. Clip happened to have a hole in the pocket in which he carried the money given him by the mysterious passenger. At first it was not large enough to imperil the safety of the coin; but Clip thrust his hand so often into his pocket, to see if the money was safe, that he had unconsciously enlarged the opening. As a result of this, as he was walking the deck, a two-dollar-and-a-half gold piece, obtained in change, slipped out, and fell upon the deck. Bob happened to be close at hand, and instantly espied the coin.

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Clip walked on without noticing his loss.

Bob stooped and picked up the coin.

"A gold piece!" he thought, in amazement. "Where can Clip possibly have got it?"

He had not missed any of his own money. Indeed, he knew that none of it was in gold. Certainly the case looked very mysterious.

"Clip," he said.

"What, Massa Bob?" returned Clip, innocently.

"Is this gold piece yours?"

Clip started, and, if he had been white, would have turned pale.

"I reckon it is, Massa Bob," he answered, with hesitation.

"Where did it come from?"

"From my pocket," he answered.

"But how did it come into your pocket, Clip?"

"I put it there."

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"Look here, Clip," said Bob, sternly. "You are evading the question."

"What's dat, Massa Bob?"

"You are trying to get rid of telling me the truth. Did you steal this money?"

"No, I didn't," answered Clip, indignantly. "I nebber steal."

"I am glad to hear it. Then, if you didn't steal it, how did you get it?"

Clip scratched his kinky hair. He was puzzled.

"I done found it," he answered, at length.

"Where did you find it?"

"In de—de street."

"When and where?"

"Dis mornin', when I was comin' from breakfast."

"If you found it, there would be no objection to your keeping it," he said, "provided you could not find the original owner."

"Can't find him now, nohow," said Clip, briskly.

"Come here a minute."

Clip approached, not understanding Bob's reason for calling him.

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Bob suddenly thrust his hand into Clip's pocket, and drew out two silver dollars, and a quarter, the remains of the five-dollar gold piece, Clip having spent a quarter.

"What's all this?" he asked, in amazement. "Did you find this money, too?"

"Yes, Massa Bob," he answered, faintly.

"Clip, I am convinced you are lying."

"No, I'm not."

"Do you mean to tell me you found all these coins on the sidewalk?"

"Yes, Massa Bob."

"That is not very likely. Clip, I don't want to suspect you of dishonesty, but it looks very much as if you had been stealing."

"No, I haven't, Massa Bob," asserted Clip, stoutly.

"Do you still tell me that you found all this money?"

Clip began to find himself involved in the intricacies of his lie, and his courage gave out.

"No, Massa Bob. Don't you get mad with me, and I'll tell you the trufe."

"Tell it, then."

[Pg 237]

"A gemman gave it to me."

"A gentleman gave you this money. What did he give it to you for?"

"He—he wanted to go down de ribber," stammered Clip.

"Wanted to go down the river? Suppose he did," said Bob, not yet understanding; "why should he give you money?"

"He wanted me to let him go as a passenger on de boat."

"Ha!" said Bob, a sudden light breaking in upon him. "And you agreed to take him?"

"Ye-es, Massa Bob."

"Where is he now?"

It was not Clip that answered this question. There was heard a noise from the corner as of some one moving about, and from his sheltered place of refuge, the mysterious passenger stepped forth. He coolly took out his silk handkerchief and dusted his coat and vest.

"Really," he said, "I can't say much for your accommodations for passengers. Have you got such a thing as a clothes-brush on board this craft?"

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Bob stared at him in amazement, and could not find a word to say for the space of a minute.

"Who are you, sir?" he asked, at length.

"Who am I? Well, you may call me John Smith, for want of a better name."

"When did you come on board?"

"At the last landing. I made a bargain with that dark-complexioned young man"—with a grin at Clip—"who for the sum of five dollars agreed to convey me to St. Louis. It wasn't a very high price, if I had decent accommodations."

"Why didn't you tell me this, Clip?" demanded Bob.

"I—de gemman didn't want me to," stammered Clip.

"Quite right," corroborated the stranger. "I told Clip he needn't mention our little arrangement, as he thought you might object to it. I don't blame him for telling you at last, for you forced him to do so. I suppose you are the captain."

"I am all the captain there is," answered Bob.

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"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, really. I assure you I am glad to get out of that dusty hole, and presume you will now allow me the freedom of the deck."

The stranger was so cool and self-possessed—cheeky, perhaps it might be called—that Bob eyed him in wonder.

"Why did you select my boat in preference to a regular passenger steamer?" he asked.

"A little whim of mine!" answered the other, airily. "The truth is, I am a newspaper reporter, and I thought such a trip as I am making would furnish the materials for a taking article. I mean to call it 'In the Steerage; or, a Boat Ride on the Missouri.' Good idea, isn't it?"

"Why, yes, it might be," said Bob, dryly; "but I think the owner of the boat ought to have been consulted."

"Accept my apologies, Captain Bob," said the passenger, with a smile. "If there was a saloon near, I would invite you to take a drink with me, but—"

"Never mind. I don't drink. Here, Clip!"

"Well, Massa Bob."

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"You did wrong to take this man's money, and you must return it."

At these last words Clip's countenance fell.

Bob counted the money and handed it to the stranger.

"There are twenty-five cents missing," he said. "I will make that up from my own pocket."

"Let the boy keep the money. I don't want it back."

"I cannot allow him to keep it."

Clip's face, which had brightened at the stranger's words, fell again.

"What is your objection?" asked the passenger.

"I may as well be frank with you. I understand your reason for embarking on my boat in preference to waiting for a river steamer. You were in a hurry to leave the town."

"That's what I said."

"Shall I mention the reason?"

"If you like."

"Because you had been implicated in robbing a store—perhaps several. This is stolen money."

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"I deny it. I may have been suspected. In fact, I don't mind admitting that I was, and that I thought it my best policy to get away. The good people were likely to give me a great deal of trouble. Thanks to you—"

"Not to me."

"To Clip, then, I managed to elude their vigilance. It makes me laugh to think of their disappointment."

Bob did not appear to look upon it as a joke, however.

"Of course I shall not allow you to remain on the boat," he said.

"I'll give you twenty-five—thirty dollars," said the stranger, earnestly.

"I decline. It would be making me your accomplice. I would be receiving stolen money."

"What do you propose, then?"

"I will steer the boat as near the shore as I can, and request you to land."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said. "We must be eight or ten miles away from my accusers. I think I can manage for myself now." [Pg 242]

In ten minutes the stranger stepped jauntily ashore, and, lifting his hat, bade Bob a cheerful good-bye.

CHAPTER XXVIII. SAM FINDS A RELATION.

[Pg 243]

As my readers may feel interested in the subsequent adventures of the mysterious passenger, I may state that his extraordinary coolness did not save him. A description of his appearance had been sent to the neighboring towns, and only a few hours after he had left the ferry-boat he was arrested, and taken back to the scene of his theft. A trial was held immediately, and before the end of the week he found himself an inmate of the county jail.

On the day succeeding his departure, Bob brought the boat to anchor at a place we will call Sheldon.

There was no restaurant, and Bob and Sam took supper at the Sheldon Hotel.

Clip had been sent on shore first, and the boys felt in no hurry to return. They accordingly sat down on a settee upon the veranda which ran along the front of the hotel. [Pg 244]

As they sat there, unknown to themselves they attracted the attention of a middle-aged man with sandy hair and complexion, whose glances, however, seemed to be especially directed towards Sam.

Finally, he approached the boys and commenced a conversation.

"Young gentlemen," he said, "you are strangers here, I imagine?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bob.

"Are you traveling through the country?"

"We have a boat on the river, sir; but we generally tie up at night, and start fresh in the morning."

"How far do you intend going?"

"To St. Louis."

"Pardon my curiosity, but it is not common for two boys of your age to undertake such an enterprise alone. Are you in charge of the boat?"

"He is," said Sam, indicating Bob.

"And you, I suppose, are a relative of his?"

"No, sir; I help him."

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"Have you come from a distance?"

"Decidedly," thought Bob, "this gentleman is very curious."

Still there seemed to be no reason for concealment, and accordingly he mentioned the name of the village in which Sam and himself made their home.

Their new acquaintance appeared to take extraordinary interest in this intelligence.

"Is there a man named Wolverton who lives in your town?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Bob, in surprise; "Aaron Wolverton."

"Exactly. This young man," indicating Sam, "has the Wolverton look."

Now it was Sam's turn to be surprised.

"I am Sam Wolverton," he said. "Do you know my uncle?"

"I not only know him, but I knew your father, if you are the son of John Wolverton."

"That was my father's name."

"Then I am a relative. My name is Robert Granger, and I am a cousin of your mother."

"My mother's maiden name was Granger," said Sam, becoming very much, interested. "Do you live here, sir?" [Pg 246]

"Yes; I have lived in Sheldon for the last ten years. I came from Ohio originally. It was there that your father met my cousin Fanny, and married her. Do you live with your Uncle Aaron?"

"I have been living with him," answered Sam, hesitating.

"Does that mean that you have left him?" asked Mr. Granger, quickly.

Sam looked inquiringly at Bob. He hardly knew whether it would be advisable for him to take this stranger, relation though he were, into his confidence.

Bob answered his unspoken inquiry.

"Tell him all, Sam," he said.

"I have left my Uncle Aaron," said Sam, "without his consent. I hid on board Bob's boat, and got away."

"You have run away, then?"

"Yes, sir; you may blame me for doing so, but you would not if you knew how meanly Uncle Aaron has treated me!"

"I know Aaron Wolverton, and I am far from admiring him," said Robert Granger. "But in what way has he ill-treated you?" [Pg 247]

"He made me work very hard, and would not always give me enough to eat. He keeps a very plain table."

"But why should he make you work hard?"

"He said I ought to earn my living."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, whenever I complained. He asked me what would have become of me if he had not given me a home."

"The old hypocrite! And what has he done with your property?"

"My property!" repeated Sam, hardly believing his ears.

"Yes. Of course you know that you have property, and that your Uncle Aaron is your guardian?"

"I never knew that I had a cent of money, sir. Uncle always said that my father died very poor."

"Your father, to my knowledge, left property to the amount of five thousand dollars."

"That is all news to me, Mr. Granger."

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"And to me," added Bob. "I heard Mr. Wolverton tell my father the same story, that John Wolverton died without a cent, and that he had taken in Sam out of charity."

"He seems to have taken him in, emphatically."

"In what did the property consist?" asked Bob.

"In a house, situated in St. Louis—a small house in the outskirts of the city—and some shares of bank stock."

"He thought Sam would never find out anything of it."

"I should not, if I had not met you, Mr. Granger."

"Old Aaron Wolverton is a long-headed man; but even long-headed men sometimes over-reach themselves, and I think he has done so in this instance."

"But what can I do, sir? I am only a boy, and if I should say anything about the matter to Uncle Aaron he would deny it, and perhaps treat me the worse."

"There is one thing Aaron Wolverton is afraid of, and that is the law. He doesn't care for the honesty or dishonesty of a transaction, but he doesn't mean to let the law trip him up. That is the hold we shall have upon him." [Pg 249]

"I believe you there," said Bob. "He has already tried to swindle my mother, and he is scheming now to get possession of our ranch. It is partly on that account that I started on this trip down the river."

"Do you carry freight, then?"

"Yes, sir; I carry a thousand bushels of wheat—rather more, in fact—intending to sell them in St. Louis."

"Couldn't you have sent them?"

"Yes, sir; but by taking the wheat to market myself I shall save the heavy expense of freight, and commission for selling."

"You seem to be a smart boy," said Robert Granger, eyeing Bob with interest.

"I hope you are right," Bob answered, with a laugh.

"My young cousin accompanies you to help, I suppose?"

"He came on board at the last moment, having determined to run away from Aaron Wolverton." [Pg 250]

"I wish you could spare him; I should like to take him home to talk over family matters with myself and my lawyer, and we would concert some way of forcing Aaron Wolverton to give up his property. I have some children of my own, who would be glad to make his acquaintance."

"Would you like to accept Mr. Granger's invitation, Sam?" asked Bob.

"But I am afraid you will need me, Bob."

"No; I have Clip. I think it will be well for you to stay. I will call on my way back."

So it was arranged that Sam should leave the boat and stay over. Bob returned to the boat alone.

The next day proved to be an eventful one.

CHAPTER XXIX. ROCKY CREEK LANDING.

[Pg 251]

Twenty miles further down the river, at a point called Rocky Creek, two men of questionable appearance were walking slowly along the bank. One of them has been already introduced as visiting the boat, and displaying a great deal of curiosity about the cargo. The other, also, had the look of one who preferred to live in any other way than by honest industry.

"Suppose the boy doesn't touch here?" said one.

"Our plan would in that case be put out," said his companion; "but I don't think there is any doubt on that point. Last night he was at Sheldon, and this would naturally be the next stopping-place."

"He is drawing near the end of his cruise. It won't do to delay much longer." [Pg 252]

"You are right, there."

"I wasn't in favor of delaying so long. We have risked failure."

"Don't worry, Minton. I'm managing this affair. I've got just as much at stake as you."

"If all comes out right, I shall be satisfied; but I need the money I am to get for it from old Wolverton."

"That's a trifle. I am playing for a larger stake than that."

"What, then?"

"The paltry fifty dollars divided between two would not have tempted me. Do you know, Minton, how large and valuable a cargo there is on that old ferry-boat?"

"No; do you?"

"Not exactly; but I know this much, that there are at least a thousand bushels of wheat, which will easily fetch, in St. Louis, two thousand dollars."

"How will that benefit us?"

"You seem to be very dull, Minton. When we have once shut up young Burton in the place arranged, you and I will take his place, drift down the river, and dispose of the cargo, if necessary, at a point below the market price, and retire with a cool thousand apiece." [Pg 253]

"You've got a head, Brown!" said Minton, admiringly.

"Have you just found that out?" returned Brown, complacently.

"Do you really think there is a chance of our succeeding?"

"Yes; of course we must be expeditious. Two or three days, now, ought to carry us to St. Louis. Then, by selling below the market price, we can command an immediate sale. Then, of course, we will clear out; go to California, or Europe, or Canada."

"But we must get Wolverton's money."

"If we can without risk. It won't be worth that."

"I don't like the idea of the old man escaping scot-free."

"He won't; you may be sure of that," said Brown, significantly. "He has placed himself in our power, and we will get a good deal more than fifty dollars out of him before we get through, or my name isn't Brown."

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"What a head you've got!" repeated Minton, with cordial admiration of the sharper rascal.

"Then there's the other affair, too!" said Brown. "We are safe to make a good round sum out of that."

"Yes; but how can we look after the other? It won't be safe for us to remain anywhere in this locality if we sell the cargo."

"Leave that to me, Minton. I will get Joe Springer to negotiate for us."

By this time the reader will have guessed that these two men were those already referred to as having stopped Wolverton on the night preceding Bob's departure. The arrangement then made, Brown had improved upon. He had engaged to remove the boys from the boat, and set it adrift. But it had occurred to him, after ascertaining the value of the cargo, to sell it for the joint benefit of his confederate and himself. It was the most promising job he had undertaken for a long time, and he was sanguine of ultimate success. He had followed the boat down the river, and had finally selected Rocky Creek as the point most favorable to the carrying out of his design.

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Meanwhile Bob and Clip were on their way down the river. Sam, as already described, had left them at Sheldon, and was enjoying himself as the guest of Captain Granger, as he found his kinsman was called. Bob missed him, not finding Clip, though improved, as reliable as Sam. But he was drawing near the end of his voyage and was willing to make the sacrifice, since it seemed to be so favorable to Sam's prospects. The information which had been communicated to them touching Aaron Wolverton's breach of trust did not, on the whole, surprise him, except by its audacity; for Wolverton had thus far been careful not to place himself within reach of the law and its penalties. He was delighted to think Sam had found a new friend and protector, who would compel the unfaithful guardian to account for his dishonesty.

Clip heartily sympathized with Bob in his feeling upon the subject. He liked Sam, but disliked Wolverton as much as one of his easy, careless disposition was capable of doing.

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"It seems lonely without Sam," said Bob, while standing at the helm, with Clip sitting on deck whistling just beside him.

"Dat's so, Massa Bob."

"But I am glad he has found a relation who will help him to get his money."

"I'd like to see ol' man Wolverton when Sam come back with Massa Granger."

"Probably you will have a chance to see him. If he hadn't driven Sam away by his bad treatment he would never have found out how he had been cheated."

"Dat's so, Massa Bob. I'd like to be in Sam's shoes."

"You'd have to make your feet smaller, then, Clip!"

"Yah! yah!" laughed Clip, who enjoyed a joke at his own expense.

Bob found his work harder now that Sam was not on board to relieve him of a part of his duty. But they were making good speed, and there seemed a chance of reaching St. Louis within three days. All was going well, yet an indefinable anxiety troubled Bob. Why, he could not explain.

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"Clip," he said, "I don't know how it is, but I feel as if something were going to happen."

"What can happen, Massa Bob? De boat is all right."

"True, Clip. I suppose I am foolish, but I can't get rid of the feeling. Clip, I want you to be very careful to-night. Don't let any mysterious passenger come on board."

"No, Massa Bob. I won't do dat agin."

"We shall soon be in St. Louis, and then our care and anxiety will be over."

"Where will we stop to-night?"

"At Rocky Creek."

It was a quarter to five when Bob reached the place where he had decided to tie up. There was a village of about five hundred inhabitants situated a little distance from the river-side. A small knot of loungers was gathered at the landing, and with languid interest surveyed the river craft and the young crew.

Among them Bob recognized the man who had visited them two or three stations back. He knew him by his dress; the Prince Albert coat, the damaged hat, and the loud neck-tie. But apart from these he remembered the face, dark and unshaven, and the shifty black eyes, which naturally inspired distrust. The man made no movement towards the boat, but leaned indolently against a tree.

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"Clip," said Bob, quietly, "look at that man leaning against a tree."

"I see him, Massa Bob."

"Have you ever seen him before?"

"Yes, Massa Bob; he came aboard de boat one day."

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken. I wonder how he comes to be here. Can he be following us?"

It was too hard a problem for Clip, who only shrugged his shoulders.

Just then another man from the assembled group lounged on board. It was Minton.

"Boat ahoy!" said he, jauntily. "Are you the captain?"

"I'm all the captain there is," answered Bob.

"Have you any wheat to sell? I am a grain merchant."

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He looked more like a penniless adventurer, Bob thought.

"I have no wheat to sell here," said Bob, coldly. "I am on my way to St. Louis."

"Perhaps I can do as well by you as the grain merchants in St. Louis."

"I don't care to sell here," said Bob, shortly.

"No offense, young man! I suppose a man can make an offer?"

"Certainly, sir."

But the stranger did not leave the boat. He walked about, scrutinizing the arrangements carefully.

"You've got a pretty big cargo, boy," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"How many bushels now, about?"

"Why do you wish to know?" asked Bob, eying the stranger keenly.

"I thought I might like to load a boat like this some time, and it might be of use to know how much it would carry."

"Do you live in Rocky Creek?" asked Bob, suddenly.

"Ye-as."

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"May I ask your name?"

"Smith—James Smith," answered the other, with hesitation.

"Very well; when I have sold my cargo I will write you the number of bushels the boat contains."

"Thank you."

"Decidedly, the boy is sharp!" said Minton to himself. "He's no milk-and-water boy!"

He left the boat, and presently joined his friend Brown.

CHAPTER XXX. AN UNLUCKY EVENING.

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Bob was still in the habit of getting his supper, and breakfast the next morning, at the different points where he landed. He left Clip on board, in charge of the boat, while he sought a good place to obtain a meal. He found that Rocky Creek possessed but one hotel, and that of a very modest character, bearing the rather imposing name of the Metropolitan Hotel.

He registered his name, and intimated his desire for supper.

"Supper is on the table," said the clerk.

Bob entered the dining-room, a forlorn-looking room of small dimensions, containing a long table, at which sat two persons, a drummer from St. Louis, and an old man with a gray beard, who kept the principal dry-goods store in Rocky Creek.

Bob was assigned a place between the two.

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"Good-evening," said the drummer, sociably.

"Good-evening," responded Bob.

"Are you a regular boarder?"

"Oh, no; I never was in the place before."

"How did you come?"

"By river."

"Indeed!" said the drummer, puzzled. "Has any steamer touched here to-day?"

"No; I came on my own boat."

"Bound down the river?"

"Yes."

"Business, I suppose?"

"Yes; I have a load of wheat which I propose to sell in the city."

"What house shall you deal with?"

"I don't know; I'm not acquainted in St. Louis. I shall inquire when I get there."

"Then let me recommend you to go to Pearson & Edge. They will treat you liberally."

"Thank you. I will call on them and see what I can do."

"Present my card, if you please, and say I sent you there."

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The drummer produced his card and handed it to Bob. From this our hero learned that his companion was Benjamin Baker, traveling for Dunham & Co., wholesale grocers.

"Shall you stay at the hotel this evening?" asked Baker.

"No; I shall pass the night on my boat."

"How many have you on board?"

"Only myself and a colored boy from home—Clip."

"Isn't that rather a small crew?"

"Perhaps so; but we haven't much to do, except to let the boat drift, keeping her straight meanwhile."

"By the way, speaking of Pearson, senior member of the firm I have recommended, he is in great trouble just now."

"How is that?"

"He had a very pretty little girl of about six years old—little Maud. Two or three days since, as I hear from a friend in the city, the little girl mysteriously disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Just so. Her parents think she must have been kidnapped, as a suspicious-looking person had been noticed by the nurse hovering near when they were out walking together."

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"They must be in great trouble and anxiety," said Bob, in a tone of sympathy, "if they believe this."

"They would be glad to believe it, for in that case the little girl is alive, while otherwise she may have strayed to the river and been drowned. Mr. Pearson, who is wealthy, has offered a reward of one thousand dollars to any one who will restore his little girl to him."

As they sat at table, Bob noticed through the window the man Minton, who had called upon him on the arrival of the boat.

"Do you know that man, Mr. Baker?" he asked, suddenly.

The drummer shook his head.

"I am a stranger, too," he said. "But perhaps this gentleman, who is in business at Rocky Creek, may be able to give you some information."

Thus appealed to, the old gentleman looked from the window.

"It isn't any one I know," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

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"Because he called upon me on my arrival, representing himself as a grain merchant, and proposed to buy my cargo."

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"He looks more like a tramp than a grain merchant," he said.

"I agree with you," assented Bob, with a laugh.

"Did he mention his name?"

"He called himself James Smith; but as he answered my questions in a hesitating manner, I concluded that it was an assumed name."

"Very likely."

"Then he doesn't live in the village?"

"No; but he has been here for a day or two."

"I wonder what could have been his object in representing himself to me as a grain merchant?" said Bob, thoughtfully.

"Oh," answered the drummer, "he probably wanted to strike up an acquaintance which would justify him in borrowing a few dollars of you. I have met plenty of such characters They live by what they can borrow."

When supper was over Bob and the drummer rose together.

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"Won't you have a cigar, Mr. Burton?" asked the latter.

"No, thank you; I don't smoke."

"Oh, well, you'll learn after a while. At any rate, sit down and keep me company for a while."

"Thank you, but I shall have to go back to the boat and give Clip a chance to get his supper."

Clip returned from supper at half-past seven, and Bob, feeling wide awake, decided to go on shore again. He did not care to go to the hotel, but took a leisurely walk through the village and beyond. It was an unfortunate walk, for it made him an easy prey to the men who were scheming against him. In a lonely place two men sprang upon him suddenly, and before he could understand what was going on, he was gagged and helpless. In this condition the two men, taking him between them, hurried him to a lonely house at some distance from the road.

Bob Burton was brave, but this sudden and mysterious attack startled and alarmed him not a little. He would have expostulated, but was unable, from being gagged, to utter a word.

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Reaching the house, a short, sharp knock at the door was answered by a rough-looking man, dressed in a suit of faded and shabby cloth.

"So you've got him!" was his laconic greeting.

"Yes, Joe! Now where shall we put him?"

"Come upstairs."

The two men set Bob down, and pushed him forward, and up a staircase, steep and dark. He was thrust into a room with a sloping roof, and the gag was removed from his mouth.

"What does all this mean?" he asked, angrily, turning to the two men whom he recognized by the light of the lantern which Joe Springer carried in his hand.

"It's all right, my lad!" said Brown. "All you've got to do is to keep quiet, and no harm will come to you."

"How long do you mean to keep me here?" asked Bob, with, a feeling of despair in his heart. He suspected now what it all meant.

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"Two weeks, perhaps; but you will be well taken care of."

The men went out leaving the lantern behind them. Bob heard the bolt shot in the lock. He looked around him. There was a low pallet in the corner. He threw himself on it, and, brave boy as he was, came near shedding tears.

CHAPTER XXXI. HOW CLIP WAS CAPTURED.

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Everything had gone well with Bob so far, and he was looking forward hopefully to the end of his journey, and the final success of his expedition. Now all was changed. He was a prisoner, and though Clip was on board the boat, he was utterly incompetent to take the place of his master. Bob hardly dared trust himself to think of the future. He knew not what would become of his valuable cargo, but that it was lost to him seemed probable. This meant utter ruin, for he and his mother would have nothing to live upon till the next harvest, and meanwhile Aaron Wolverton would foreclose the mortgage. Certainly, Bob had reason to shed tears, and could not be charged with being unmanly if for a time he gave up to a feeling of despondency and almost despair.

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Leaving him for an hour, we will accompany the two conspirators on their return to the boat.

Clip was on deck, anxiously watching for the return of Bob. He was beginning to feel a little troubled.

"Can't think what's 'come of Massa Bob," he said to himself. "He said he'd be back in fifteen minutes. If anything's happened to him, what'll 'come of Clip?"

Instead of fifteen minutes, an hour passed, and still Bob had not returned. Clip was seriously thinking of going on shore and looking for him, when two men came to the river bank.

"Hallo!" they said. "Are you Clip?"

"Yes," answered Clip, in some surprise, not understanding how these two strangers could know his name.

"You are sailing with Robert Burton?"

"Yes, massa."

"Where is he?"

"Gone on shore for a walk. Did you see him anywhere?"

"Yes; we come from him."

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"Why don't he come himself?"

"The poor fellow has met with an accident. He has broken his leg."

"Massa Bob broken him leg!" ejaculated Clip, turning as pale as his complexion would admit. "How came he to do dat?"

"I can't explain," said Brown. "My friend and I came up just after it happened, and we took him to a house near by, where he was put to bed. He asked us to come for you and bring you to him."

"Yes, massa; I'll go right off," said Clip, with alacrity. Then he hesitated at the thought of leaving the boat. "What'll I do about de boat?" he asked, in perplexity.

"Pooh! no one will run off with it. Probably your friend will want to be brought on board; we will help to bring him. Meanwhile I will stay here and look after things, and my friend will take you to Massa Bob, as you call him."

Clip saw no objection to this plan. He was too simple-minded to suspect a trick, and being very much attached to his young master he was anxious to be taken to him.

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He put on his hat and expressed himself ready to go.

"Very well; Minton, show him the house, and see if the boy is fit to be moved."

Clip did not see the wink that accompanied the last words.

The two started on their journey. Clip, though the smaller, walked so fast that Minton was obliged to quicken his pace. He plied Minton with questions till the latter was tired.

"I can't tell you much about it," said the man, at length. "My friend and I saw young Burton lying by the side of the road. He was groaning with pain. We took him up and carried him to a house close by."

"He won't die?" faltered Clip, in a tone of anxious inquiry.

"Oh, no! He's as safe to live as you or I. A broken leg doesn't amount to much."

"I don' see why he lef' the boat," said Clip, mournfully.

"Well, accidents will happen," said Minton, philosophically.

"Do you think we can get him on de boat, massa?"

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"Oh, yes. I have no doubt of it. You needn't feel worried. It'll all come right."

Clip, however, felt that there was sufficient reason for feeling troubled.

He was rather surprised at the length of the walk.

"What made Massa Bob go so far?" he asked.

"He said he was just exploring a little—wanted to see the country, you know."

"He couldn't see much in de dark."

"Well, he will explain the matter to you; I can't."

At length they reached the lonely house.

"This is where your friend was carried," said Minton.

Clip thought it was a gloomy place, but his mind was now so occupied with thoughts of Bob, whom he was to see immediately, that he said nothing.

Minton knocked at the door.

It was opened by Joe Springer, whose appearance rather frightened Clip.

"Oh, so you're back?" he said to Minton. "Who is this?"

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"It's a friend of the boy with the broken leg," answered Minton, with a significant look.

"Ho! ho!" laughed Joe, to Clip's surprise. He could not understand what there was to laugh at.

"I hope the poor boy's more comfortable," said Minton.

"I reckon so," answered Joe, with another grin.

"Has he been quiet?"

"Yes, he hasn't made any noise; but he's been walking round the room."

"Walkin' round wid a broken leg!" repeated Clip, amazed.

"What a fool you are, Joe!" exclaimed Minton, in a vexed tone. "How could he walk round with a broken leg?"

"I only meant it for a joke," said Joe, in a half-sullen tone. "How did I know his leg was broken?"

"My friend, here, was not in when we brought the boy," said Minton, in an aside to Clip. "Now, Joe, we'll go upstairs. Clip, here, has come to keep his friend company."

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"I hope he'll like it," returned Joe, with another incomprehensible grin.

"Well, get a light, and show us upstairs."

Clip thought the house far from pleasant.

He had just started to go upstairs, when a little girl ran crying through the door of the adjoining room.

"I want to go home," she cried. "I want to go to my papa."

She was followed by a tall, gaunt woman, who seized the child in her bony grasp.

"You're a very naughty girl," she said. "Your papa sent you to stay with me."

"No, he didn't. My papa doesn't know you."

"If you talk like that I'll give you a whipping. I am your aunt—your father's sister."

"No, you're not. I wouldn't have such an ugly aunt."

"Of all the perverse imps, this 'ere one is the most cantankerous I ever see," said the woman.

"I should think you'd ought to be able to manage a little girl," said Joe, roughly.

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"So I be. There's only one way of managin' one like her. I've got a strap in the other room, and she'll feel of it if she keeps on."

Clip followed Minton up the steep, narrow staircase, and the two paused before the door of the chamber occupied by Bob Burton.

"He is in here," said Minton, briefly.

He opened the door, and by the faint light of the lantern, Clip recognized the figure of a boy stretched out on a pallet in the corner.

Bob looked up, and when he saw Clip, he sprang to his feet.

"You here, Clip?" he asked.

"Yes, Massa Bob. Which of you legs is broke?"

"My legs broke! Neither."

"The man told me you broke you leg," said Clip, bewildered.

He turned to appeal to Minton for a confirmation of his words, but the door was shut, and his conductor was already on the way downstairs.

CHAPTER XXXII. THE BOYS IMPRISONED.

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"Now sit down and tell me all about it, Clip," said Bob. "So you were told my leg was broke. Who told you?"

"De two men."

"I think I know the two men. One of them brought you here. Where is the other?"

"He stayed on board the boat till we come back."

"Was there anything said about our going back?" asked Bob, in surprise.

"Yes, Massa Bob. Dey said you leg was broke, and you wanted me to come for you. De man said

we would take you back with us."

"Clip," said Bob, sadly, "these men deceived you. We are in a trap."

"What's dat?"

"They have made us prisoners, and I don't dare to think what they will do next."

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"Dey won't 'sassinate us?" asked Clip, who had picked up the word somewhere.

"No; but I'll tell you what I think they will do. They will take the boat down the river, and sell the grain in St. Louis, and run off with the money."

This was the conclusion to which Bob was led by Clip's story.

"We won't let 'em, Massa Bob," said Clip, in excitement.

"How shall we help it, Clip?"

"We must get out, and run away."

"I wish I knew how," said Bob.

"If we can get out, we'll take a boat to the city, and git there ahead of 'em."

Somehow Clip's words seemed to reassure Bob. Misery loves company, and the presence of his trusty friend and servant perceptibly lightened Bob's spirits.

"You are right, Clip," he said. "To-morrow we will see what we can do. We can't do anything to-night."

"Who is de little girl, Massa Bob?" asked Clip, suddenly.

"What little girl?"

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"Haven't you seen her? De little girl downstairs."

"I haven't seen her. Tell me about her."

Clip described her as well as he could, and succeeded in conveying to Bob a general idea of her appearance, and that of the woman who had charge of her.

Bob listened, thoughtfully.

"You don't think the little girl was any relation to the woman, Clip?" he said.

"No, Massa Bob; no more'n you is relation to me. De girl was a little lady, and de woman was awful ugly."

"Did the little girl say anything in your hearing?"

"She asked to be taken back to her fader."

Suddenly there came into Bob's mind the story about a little girl abducted from St. Louis.

"Clip," he said, "I think the little girl has been stolen from her home. I think it is the same one we heard about the other day."

"I pity de poor girl. De ol' woman shook her, and treated her bad."

"If we could only run away from this place and take the little girl with us, it would be a capital idea. I would like to get her away from these wretches."

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"I'm wid you, Massa Bob," said Clip, enthusiastically.

"Hush!" said Bob, suddenly raising his finger.

A little girl's voice was heard, and it was easy to judge that she was ascending the stairs.

Bob put his ear to the keyhole.

"Take me home to my papa!" said the poor child. "I don't want to stay here."

"I'll whip you," said a harsh voice, "if you are not good. It's time little girls were a-bed. I'm going to put you to bed, and you can sleep till morning."

"I don't want to go to bed."

There was a little scream, for the woman had slapped her.

"I'd like to get at that woman, Clip," said Bob, indignantly.

They heard the door open—the door of the room adjoining.

The partition was very thin, and it was easy to hear what was going on. Not only this, but Clip discovered an auger hole about eighteen inches above the floor, of sufficient size to enable him to look through it.

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"Who was that black boy?" he heard the little girl say. "He's a funny-looking boy."

"He's come to stay here with the other boy," answered the woman, glad to find something of interest to take the place of the complaints.

"Where are they?" asked the girl.

"They are sleeping in the next room, so you need not be afraid if I go down and leave you."

"May I play with them to-morrow?"

"Yes, if you will be a good girl," said the woman, willing to promise anything.

Then there was a little pause, spent in undressing the child.

"Now, get into bed, and go to sleep as soon as you can."

"Will you take me to my papa to-morrow?"

"No," answered the woman, shortly. "Your papa wants you to stay with me."

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"Won't I never see my papa again?" asked the child, almost ready to cry.

"Yes; perhaps he'll come to see you next week," answered the woman, fearing that the child might sob and compel her to remain upstairs.

"Clip," said Bob, who had taken Clip's place at the hole in the partition, "there's no doubt of it. The girl has been stolen. I wish I could go into the room, and asked her about her father and her home."

He went to the door and tried it, but it was firmly locked, and it was quite useless to try to get out.

Meanwhile, Joe and his wife were conversing downstairs.

"Joe," said the woman, "I hope I'll get rid of that brat soon. She's a heap of trouble."

"We shall be well paid," said Joe.

"Who's to pay us?" asked the woman.

"Brown. He's the man that's got charge of the job. She's got a rich father, who'll shell out liberal to get her back."

"Did he pay you anything in advance?"

"I squeezed five dollars out of him."

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"Where is it, Joe?"

"Don't you wish you knew, old woman?" said Joe, with a grin. "I can take care of it."

"Half of it belongs to me."

"How do you make that out?"

"Haven't I the care of the child? It don't trouble you."

"It's all right, old lady. You won't be forgotten."

"How much more is Brown to pay you?" asked the woman, appearing dissatisfied.

"Forty-five dollars."

The woman's eyes sparkled. To her this seemed a vast sum of money.

"And how much am I to have?"

"What do you want money for?" demanded Joe, impatiently.

"I do want it, and that's enough."

"Well, I can't say yet, old lady, but maybe you'll get ten dollars."

"Altogether?"

"Of course. Ain't that enough?"

"No, it isn't. We ought to divide even."

"Pooh, you're a woman. You don't need money."

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An unpleasant look came over the woman's face, but she said nothing.

"Come, old woman, I've got something that'll put you into good humor. See here!"

Joe produced from an out-of-the-way corner a suspicious-looking jug.

"Do you know what's in this?"

"What is it?" asked the woman, looking interested.

"Whisky. Get some boiling water, and I'll make you some punch. We'll make a night of it."

His wife brightened up. Evidently she did not belong to the Temperance Society, any more than her husband. She moved about the room with alacrity, and, assisted by her husband, brewed a punch which was of considerable strength. Then they put it on the table, and set about enjoying themselves.

"Here's your health, ol' woman!" said Joe, and he tried to sing a stave of an old drinking-song.

Together they caroused till a late hour, and then fell into a drunken sleep, which lasted till a late hour in the morning. [Pg 285]

About seven o'clock the little girl woke up, and, as is usual with children, wished to be dressed at once.

"Aunt," Bob heard her say, "I want to be dressed."

But no one came at her call.

After a little waiting, she got out of bed and went downstairs, but returned in a minute or two, crying.

Bob called through the partition.

"What's the matter, little girl?"

"There's nobody to dress me. Are you the boy that came yesterday?"

"Yes. Where is the woman that put you to bed?"

"She's downstairs—she and the man. They're lying on the floor. I can't wake them up."

An idea came to Bob.

"Come to our door, little girl, and see if you can draw back the bolt. We are fastened in."

"Will you take me to my papa?"

"Yes; I will try to."

The child came to the door, and, following Bob's directions, with some difficulty slipped back the bolt. [Pg 286]

"Clip," said Bob, in a tone of triumph, "We're free. Now do as I tell you, and we'll get away, and reach St. Louis ahead of the boat."

CHAPTER XXXIII. A LUCKY ESCAPE.

[Pg 287]

"Now," said Bob to the little girl, as they descended the steep and narrow staircase, "will you do as I tell you?"

"Yes," answered the child, placing her hand confidently in his.

"Then make as little noise as possible. We don't want them to wake up. If they do they will prevent your going away."

"Will you take me back to my papa, certain sure?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I am so glad."

"Clip," said Bob, warningly, "mind you remain perfectly quiet. We must go through the room where the man and woman are sleeping. Any little noise might wake them up."

"Don't be afeared for me, Massa Bob," said Clip.

The staircase led into the main room below, so that, as Bob said, it was necessary to pass through it. [Pg 288]

Entering the room on tip-toe, they witnessed a reassuring, but disgusting spectacle. Joe Springer was stretched out on the floor on his back, breathing heavily; while his wife, seated in a chair, rested her head on the kitchen table. She, too, seemed to be in a drunken stupor.

The little girl regarded the woman nervously, remembering the harsh treatment she had received from her.

There was one more ordeal, and one more danger to run. The outer door was locked, but the key was in the lock. There was a creaking sound as Bob turned it. But he opened the door successfully, and once more they breathed freely in the clear air of morning. As the door opened they heard a muttered sound from Joe Springer. It sounded like "more whisky!" He was probably

dreaming of his potations of the previous night.

Bob hurried along his two companions till they had reached a point some half a mile distant from the place of their imprisonment. Then he thought it best to question the little girl. [Pg 289]



LITTLE MAUD'S ESCAPE FROM HER ABDUCTORS.

"What is your name?" he asked, gently.

"Don't you know my name?" asked the child, in surprise. "My name is Maud."

"What is your other name?"

"Pearson—my name is Maud Lilian Pearson."

"Just as I thought, Clip," said Bob, triumphantly. "This is the little girl that was stolen from her parents in St. Louis."

"Yes; my papa lives in St. Louis. Will you take me to him?"

"Yes, Maud. Only be a good little girl, and do as I tell you."

"And you won't let that ugly woman take me away?"

"No; we will hide you away from her. Did she treat you badly?"

"Yes; she shook me, and said she would whip me. She said she was my aunt; but it isn't true."

"Who brought you to her?"

Maud thereupon described the man whom we know as Brown, the abler one of the confederates who had stolen the ferry-boat. [Pg 290]

"I wonder whether our boat is gone?" said Bob.

"Mebbe we can see from the hill," suggested Clip.

There was a small elevation near by. Bob ascended it, and looked towards the point where his boat had been tied up. There was no sign of it. It had disappeared. Though still early, Brown and Minton, fearing interference, had cut loose about four o'clock, and were, by this time, several miles on their way to the great city.

"It's gone, Clip," said Bob, sadly.

"Never mind, Massa Bob, we'll catch 'em," answered Clip, energetically.

"Yes, if there is any boat starts down the river to-day."

This, however, was something which he was not sure of. Moreover, he felt that the sooner he got away from Joe Springer and his estimable wife, the better. But where could he take refuge? Not at the hotel, for Springer would find him out and reclaim the little girl. While he was considering, in his perplexity, what course to pursue, he fell in with two boys, who appeared to be about fifteen years of age. They regarded Bob and his party with curiosity. [Pg 291]

Bob eyed the boys closely, and decided that they could be depended upon. They seemed to be just the friends he was in search of. He introduced himself, and learned that their names were John Sheehan and Edward Bovee.

"Can you tell me, boys, when the next steamer will start for St. Louis?"

"Yes," answered John; "there is one at seven o'clock to-morrow morning."

"That is the earliest?"

"Yes," said John.

"Do you know of any private house where we can stay till that time? I am willing to pay a fair price."

"You can come to our house," said Edward Bovee. "I am sure my mother will take you in. But you won't get as good meals as at the hotel."

"I don't mind that. I shall be glad to stay at your house. Could we go there to breakfast?"

[Pg 292]

"Yes; follow me, and I will lead the way."

Edward Bovee led the way to a neat cottage, where his mother, a pleasant-looking lady, welcomed them, and readily undertook to keep them till the boat started for St. Louis. Bob, feeling the necessity of concealment, took Mrs. Bovee into his confidence, and readily secured the co-operation of the good lady, who took a motherly interest in little Maud.

Now that the children have found a safe retreat, we will return to Joe Springer and his interesting wife.

About half an hour after their young prisoners had escaped, Mrs. Springer raised her head from the table, and looked about her in a bewildered way. The bright sunshine entering at the window revealed to her that she had spent the night in a drunken stupor, even if Joe's prostrate form had not been a visible reminder. She went to her husband, and shook him roughly.

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"Get up, Joe!" she said. "It's morning."

He opened his eyes, and looked around him with stupefaction.

"What's up, old woman?" he asked.

"I am, and you ought to be," she answered, sharply.

"Where's the whisky?"

"You've had enough. Now get up and hustle round, if you want some breakfast. I'll go up and dress the little girl."

Mrs. Springer went upstairs, but came down again two steps at a time, in a state of high excitement.

"Joe," said she, quickly, "the little gal's gone!"

"*What?*"

"The little gal's gone! Run out and see if you can't catch her. If we lose her, we lose fifty dollars!"

"Are the boys all right?"

"Yes; the door is bolted. They couldn't get out."

This was true. Bob had taken the precaution to lock the door, after leaving the room. For this reason, it was half an hour later before Joe discovered that all his prisoners had escaped. Then, as might have been expected, there was a wild scene of recrimination, ending in a fight, in which Mrs. Springer did her part, for she was by no means a weak or delicate lady, but a woman without fear, who believed in the right of self-defense. The worthy pair instituted a search throughout the village, but failed to discover any trace of the lost children. The next morning, however, Joe Springer got up unusually early, for him, and strolled to the steamboat-landing. The boat was already out in the stream, when on the deck he discovered Maud and the two boys.

[Pg 294]

"Stop the boat!" screamed Joe, in excitement.

"What's the matter?" asked the man beside him.

"Those three children. They have run away!"

"From you?"

"Yes; from my house."

"Why, man, you must be drunk. You have no children."

[Pg 295]

"I had charge of 'em, particularly the little gal! Stop the boat, I say!"

"Has that man any claim on you?" asked the captain, who chanced to be standing near Bob.

"Not the slightest," answered Bob.

"Or the little girl?"

"No; her father lives in St. Louis, and I am taking her to him."

"Stop the boat!" screamed Joe, frantically.

"He's drunk!" said Joe's neighbor. "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

This settled the matter so far as the captain was concerned. Bob paid the full passage-money for the party, and they were enrolled as regular passengers.

Towards the middle of the afternoon a surprise awaited them. They saw, not far ahead, their own boat, which was drifting down the river, with Brown at the helm.

"Do you see that, Clip?" asked Bob.

"Yes, Massa Bob."

"Quick, hide! Don't let them see us. I have no objection to their working their passage down to the city. When they get there, we will be on hand to take possession." [Pg 296]

"Dat's a good joke! Won't they be s'prised, dough?" said Clip, showing his white teeth.

So the steamboat swept by, carrying the three children past the two conspirators, who fancied them safely housed in Joe Springer's house up the river.

CHAPTER XXXIV. MR. WOLVERTON'S LETTER.

[Pg 297]

While the boys are meeting with adventures, on their way down the river, we will return to the town of Carver, in which, as it will be remembered, the Burton ranch was located.

There was no one more interested in the progress of the expedition than Aaron Wolverton. It was against his wishes and his interest that Bob should succeed in carrying out his plans. He wanted to get possession of the Burton ranch, and force Mrs. Burton to take him for her second husband. Most of all, perhaps, he wanted to humble the pride of "the Burton boy," as he styled Bob, for he cordially hated him, and was well aware that Bob disliked and despised him. If he could only bring about the failure of Bob's trip, and the loss of his cargo, he would have both Bob and his mother in his power. [Pg 298]

Wolverton had been anxiously awaiting intelligence from his agents, and the postmaster was somewhat surprised at his numerous visits to the office for letters.

At length, one morning, Aaron Wolverton's patience was rewarded.

A letter was handed him, directed in an almost illegible scrawl to

MR. A. WOLVERTON, ESQ.

It was written by Brown, who was by no means an accomplished scholar.

Wolverton opened it eagerly, and read the following lines:

MR. WOLVERTON: I write you these few lines from Rocky Creek. I am pleased to say we have got the bote, and are jest starting for St. Louis with the cargo onboard. If you want to know about the boys, bob burton and the little nigger are locked up in a house in the village belonging to one of my friends, and they won't be let out till it is perfectly saif. We got hold of them by a nise trick. I haven't time to tell you about it now, but when we meat, you shall kno all.

Send that fifty dollars to Mr. J. Brown, St. Louis Post Office. Don't forget! This is important. [Pg 299]

Yours to command,
J. BROWN.

This letter, ill-spelled as it was, seemed to give Aaron Wolverton unbounded satisfaction. A gratified smile overspread his face, and he said to himself: "That will bring down the Burton pride. That young whipper-snapper will come home with a few less airs than when he set out. The chances are that he'll have to walk home or buy a passage."

Wolverton chuckled at this agreeable thought. He would be revenged upon poor Bob for all the mortifications to which the boy had subjected him: and, to a man of Wolverton's temperament, revenge was sweet.

"You have received good news, Mr. Wolverton," said the postmaster, observing the land agent's evident glee.

"What makes you think so?" asked Wolverton, cautiously.

"I judged from your smiling face."

"It wasn't the letter. I was thinking of something." [Pg 300]

"That is only a blind," thought the postmaster. "I saw his face light up when he read the letter. Let me see; it was mailed from Rocky Creek. I will bear that in mind, and some day I may discover the secret."

As Wolverton picked his way through the mud from the post-office to his office, he fell in with Mrs. Burton, who had come to the village on business. He smiled to himself, and prepared to accost her.

"I hope I see you well, Mrs. Burton," he said, with gravity.

"Very well, thank you, Mr. Wolverton," answered the widow, coldly.

"What do you hear from your son?"

"I received a letter yesterday. All was going well with him."

"I am really glad to hear it," said Wolverton, with a queer smile. "Still you must remember that 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.'"

"What do you mean, Mr. Wolverton?" asked Mrs. Burton, quickly.

"What should I mean?" said Wolverton, in apparent surprise.

[Pg 301]

"Have you heard any bad news of Robert?"

"Oh, dear, no! I am sorry to say that your son is prejudiced against me, and would hardly favor me with any letter."

Mrs. Burton looked relieved.

"I was only warning you on general principles. 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall,' as the Scriptures have it."

"Thank you for the caution," said Mrs. Burton, dryly. "By the way, have you heard anything of your nephew, Sam?"

Wolverton's face darkened.

"No," he answered. "I did think, I confess, that he might have run away with Bob, but I don't think so now."

"If he did, I know nothing of it."

This was true. For obvious reasons, Bob had not taken his mother into his confidence on this subject.

"The boy has shown base ingratitude to me," continued Wolverton, bitterly. "I cared for him and kept him from starving, and how has he rewarded me?"

"If his home was so agreeable as you represent, it is certainly surprising that he should have left you. Good-morning, Mr. Wolverton."

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"What did she mean?" Wolverton asked himself. "Some of her sarcasm, I suppose. When she becomes Mrs. Wolverton, I will get even with her."

As nothing had been said of Sam in the letter of his confidential agent, Wolverton no longer suspected that he had gone down the river with Bob Burton. On the whole, as he had Sam's property in his possession, he did not care whether the boy ever returned, except that he would have liked to give him a good flogging.

CHAPTER XXXV. BOB'S ARRIVAL IN ST. LOUIS.

[Pg 303]

Meanwhile Bob and Clip were steaming rapidly down the river. Now that he was pretty sure of recovering his boat and cargo, Bob gave himself up to the enjoyment of the trip, and was fain to confess that he enjoyed it better than working his passage on the ferry-boat. As for Maud, she seemed to feel as much confidence in our hero as if she had known him all her life. She seemed also to appreciate Clip, but in a different way.

"You're a funny boy!" she said.

"Yah, yah, little missy!" laughed Clip.

"Where's your mother?"

"Dunno, missy! I expect she dead."

"My mamma's dead, too. She's in heaven. Is your mamma there too?"

"S'pect so, little missy."

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Bob questioned the little girl as to the manner of her abduction. He learned that she had been carried off from the street in which she lived by Brown, who secured her consent by a promise of candy. Then she was put into a carriage, and given something to drink. When she woke up she was on a river steamer, being landed at length at the place where Bob found her.

"Did my papa send you for me?" she asked.

"No, Maud," answered Bob, "but I heard you had been stolen, and I determined to carry you back, if I could."

"On what street does your father live?" asked Bob, later.

"On Laclede Avenue."

"Can you tell me the number?"

This also Maud was able to tell. At the first stopping-place, after he had obtained this information, Bob, appreciating the anxiety of Maud's friends, telegraphed her father as follows:

I have discovered your little daughter, and am on my way to the city with her. She was taken to Rocky Creek, and confined there. Our steamer—the Gazelle—will probably arrive at her wharf to-morrow morning.

[Pg 305]

ROBERT BURTON.

When this telegram was received, Mr. Pearson was suffering deep grief and anxiety; but the message comforted him not a little.

When the steamer reached the pier, a middle-aged man of medium size and dark complexion was waiting on the wharf.

"That's my papa!" exclaimed Maud, clapping her hands; and the little girl danced on the deck in her joy.

In a moment she was in the arms of her father.

"My darling Maud?" he exclaimed, caressing her fondly. "Thank Heaven I have you back again! Where is Mr. Burton?"

"My name is Robert Burton," said Bob, modestly.

"What, a boy!" exclaimed Mr. Pearson, in amazement. "I supposed the person who telegraphed me was a man."

"He's a nice boy," said Maud, putting her hand confidingly in Bob's.

[Pg 306]

"I am sure of it," said Mr. Pearson, cordially, grasping the hand of our hero.

"And *he's* a funny boy," continued Maud, pointing out Clip.

"Yah, yah!" laughed Clip, with a broad grin on his shining face.

"Clip is a companion of mine," explained Bob, "and we came down the river together."

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Clip," said Mr. Pearson, smiling, and taking Clip by the hand.

"Yah, yah!" laughed the delighted Clip.

"Now, boys," said Mr. Pearson, as they passed over the gang-plank and set foot upon the wharf, "I shall take you both home with me. I have not yet had an opportunity of asking questions about how you came to find my dear child, and rescue her from her terrible captivity. There stands my carriage. Get in, both of you, and we will go to my home at once."

It was a strange sensation to Clip to find himself riding in a hansom carriage, the favored guest of the wealthy proprietor. He was not sure whether he were awake or dreaming.

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They drove rapidly for perhaps a couple of miles, and then stopped in front of an elegant mansion in the upper part of Laclede Avenue. The two boys never expected to enter St. Louis in such grand style.

CHAPTER XXXVI. A THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD.

[Pg 308]

A little awed by the splendid appointments of the merchant's house, Bob and Clip entered, following Mr. Pearson.

A stout, pleasant-looking woman of middle age—the housekeeper—appeared at the door of a side room. She darted forward, and clasped Maud in a fond embrace.

"My darling Maud, how glad I am to see you back!" she said. "I thought we had lost you."

"This is the young man who rescued Maud, Margaret," said Mr. Pearson, pointing to Bob.

"And *he* so young! I must kiss him, too!" said Margaret; and, considerably to our hero's embarrassment, Margaret gave him a resounding kiss.

"This boy also assisted," said Mr. Pearson, indicating Clip, with a smile.

[Pg 309]

Margaret hesitated a moment—she was not quite prepared to kiss a colored boy—but compromised by shaking his hand cordially.

"You look like a nice boy, Clip," she said.

"So I is, missus; yah, yah!" responded Clip, laughing.

"Now, Margaret, can you give us something to eat?" said Mr. Pearson.

"It's all ready, sir. I thought you and Miss Maud would be hungry."

"I suspect we are all hungry," said Mr. Pearson, leading the way into a handsome dining-room.

"Now, boys, take your seats," he said.

Clip felt a little awkward, for he was not used to being a guest at a rich man's table, but he did not allow his bashfulness to interfere with the gratification of an excellent appetite.

When the meal was over, Mr. Pearson invited the boys into his library, and seated himself at a desk.

He drew a check-book from a drawer and wrote for a minute. Then he tore off a check, and handed it to Bob.

"This is the reward I offered for the return of my dear daughter," he said. "I have made the check payable to your order." [Pg 310]

Bob took it and read as follows:

"FIRST NATIONAL BANK,
"Pay to the order of Robert Burton,
One Thousand Dollars.
"\$1000. JOHN PEARSON."

"I don't like to take this large sum, Mr. Pearson," said Bob. "I did not rescue your daughter for money."

"I am quite aware of that, my dear boy, but it is a pleasure for me to give you this proof of my gratitude. I am sure you will spend it creditably."

"I shall find it very useful, sir; and I thank you sincerely. May I ask if you do not deal in wheat?"

"That is a part of my business."

"I shall have about fourteen hundred bushels to dispose of if I recover my boat."

"I will give you two dollars and a quarter a bushel, if it is in good condition."

"I accept, sir," answered Bob, promptly. "Now, may I ask your advice as to how to proceed to regain possession of the boat?" [Pg 311]

"When do you expect it to arrive?" asked the merchant.

"Probably not till to-morrow, but I can't guess at what part of the day. It depends on how well the thieves succeed in managing the boat."

"I will order my carriage and drive round with you to the Central Police Office. The police will take proper measures to recover the boat and arrest the rascals who robbed you of it."

"Won't it be too much trouble, sir?"

"I shall not count it a trouble, for I shall at the same time be punishing the men who abducted my dear Maud. They will be tried for both offenses, and will probably get a long term of imprisonment."

In an hour information had been lodged at the Central Police Office, and orders had been given to watch the river, and to keep a good lookout for the boat, of which Bob furnished a description.

That night Bob and Clip slept at Mr. Pearson's house, being treated as honored guests.

CHAPTER XXXVII. BROWN AND MINTON WALK INTO A TRAP.

[Pg 312]

Little suspecting the reception awaiting them in St. Louis, Minton and Brown were laboriously guiding their stolen craft down the river. Not being accustomed to labor of any sort, they found the confinement irksome, but the prize for which they were striving was so large that they took it very good-humoredly. They whiled away the time by indulging in visions of future ease and prosperity, and in exchanging witticisms at the expense of Bob, the youthful owner of the boat.

"I wonder how the young captain is enjoying himself," said Minton, as he lay back, with one of the bins for a support, while puffing at a choice cigar.

"He is ready to tear his hair out, I presume," said Brown. "He's a conceited young popinjay, and deserves to have his pride taken down." [Pg 313]

"You're right there, Brown. We shall make a tidy sum out of our venture."

"Yes; we can afford to retire for a time. Of course I shall want more than half."

"I don't see that," said Minton, quickly.

"Why, man, I've done all the headwork. What have you done to compare with me?"

"We are equal partners," said Minton, doggedly.

"That is where you are mistaken. I don't mind, though, giving you half of what we get for the girl."

"How shall we arrange to get anything? It is rather a ticklish business—"

"That's where the headwork comes in. I shall wait upon old Pearson, and tell him that I have a clew, and suspect I know who abducted the child. Then I'll work him up to a point where he'll shell out liberally."

"Won't there be risk?"

"How can there be? Leave the thing to me and I'll arrange it. The fact is, Minton, you are a man of no ideas. If I depended on you, you wouldn't make a cent out of one of the neatest jobs I've ever been concerned in." [Pg 314]

Minton was conscious that there was some truth in this, and it helped to reconcile him to the evident determination of his companion to appropriate the lion's share of the fruits of their questionable enterprises.

"I suppose Joe's all right?" he said, after a pause.

"Of course he is. What would he make by proving false to us?"

"Nothing, that I can see. Still, if he should do so, it might upset our plans. The boy could afford to pay him well for releasing him."

"That is true," returned Brown, thoughtfully. "On all accounts it will be necessary for us to expedite matters. I sha'n't waste any time once we are in St. Louis."

"You mean in disposing of the cargo?"

"Precisely. I am in no position to haggle about prices. I'll offer it at a bargain to some large dealer. He will naturally think I'm a country gentleman, and clinch the bargain at once. Do you see?" [Pg 315]

"Yes, Brown. You've got the right idea."

"Of course I have," said Brown, complacently. "It takes a long head to outwit me. Got another cigar, Minton?"

Minton drew out one and handed to his confederate, and presently took his turn at the rudder.

So time passed, the boat making good progress, and about three o'clock in the afternoon the boat reached an obscure pier in the lower part of St. Louis.

There were some interested persons watching its arrival. Among them were Bob and his friend Clip, and a small squad of policemen. Not suspecting anything, Brown and Minton busied themselves in bringing the boat to anchor. Meanwhile Bob, without being observed, stepped aboard.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brown! I hope you had a pleasant trip," he said, quietly.

Brown felt as if he had been struck by lightning. Wheeling around suddenly, he saw Bob's eyes fixed upon him. He was absolutely speechless with amazement and consternation.

"Who are you?" he finally ejaculated, quickly resolving to brazen it out, and deny Bob's claim to ownership. [Pg 316]

"I think you know me, Mr. Brown!" replied Bob. "I have only to thank you for taking charge of my boat and bringing it safe to St. Louis."

"Look here, young feller!" said Brown, roughly, "you must be crazy. I never saw you before in my life, and here you come on board my boat and claim it as your own. If you don't clear out I'll have you arrested."

"There will be no difficulty about that, Mr. Brown. Here are policemen close at hand."

Mr. Brown's face grew pale as he saw three stalwart policemen marching on board the boat.

"I guess it's all up, Minton!" he said, and made a dash for liberty; but he was not quick enough. He and Minton were quickly secured and marched off, with handcuffs on their wrists. As we are now to bid these gentlemen farewell, it may be said briefly that they pleaded guilty in hopes of a lighter sentence, and were sent to prison for seven years. Thus far the community has been able to spare them without inconvenience. [Pg 317]

Bob and Clip resumed charge of the boat, and during the next day disposed of the cargo to Mr.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. WHAT BOB BROUGHT HOME.

[Pg 318]

After disposing of his cargo, Bob was puzzled to know what to do with the ferry-boat. Finally he had an offer of one hundred dollars, from a speculative Yankee who had drifted out to St. Louis, and gladly accepted it. This sum paid all expenses, including his and Clip's return fare, and left him with a handsome sum to his credit, viz.:

1,400 bushels wheat, at \$2.25,	\$3,150
Reward,	1,000
	———
	\$4,150

This sum, with the exception of one hundred and fifty dollars, by advice of Mr. Pearson, he deposited in a St. Louis bank, and then started for home.

He could not make the whole passage by steamer, but went part way by railroad, and then engaged a carriage to a point four miles from home. Thence he and Clip walked. He wanted to surprise not only his mother, but Wolverton. He knew now that Brown and Minton had only been agents of his more crafty enemy, Brown having made a written confession, not so much out of friendship to Bob as out of spite against Wolverton, whom he held responsible for getting him into this scrape.

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With soiled shoes and clothes covered with dust, Bob and Clip entered the village, and purposely walked by Wolverton's office.

The latter, spying them through the window, smiled maliciously, and hurried out to meet them.

"Aha, my young friends," he said, with a pleased glance at their soiled clothes, "so you have returned?"

"Yes, sir," answered Bob, soberly.

"And what luck did you have, may I ask?"

"We had good luck at first, but at Rocky Creek two rascals entrapped us, and stole our boat and cargo."

Wolverton laughed outright. So it was true, after all.

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"Excuse my smiling," he said; "but you seem to have come out at the little end of the horn."

"It does seem so, sir."

"You remember what I told you before you started?"

"What was that?"

"That you were too young for such an expedition. It would have been much better for you to accept my offer."

"It seems so," answered Bob again.

"Seems so! Of course it would have been. But the trouble was, you were so puffed up by your own self-conceit that you thought you knew best."

"I plead guilty to that, sir; I did think so," answered Bob, candidly.

"I am glad you admit it. So you had to walk back?"

"You can judge for yourself, Mr. Wolverton."

"Well, you certainly do look like two tramps. The next time you may feel like following my advice."

"I may," answered Bob.

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It did occur to Mr. Wolverton that Bob's answers were rather unusual, and his manner rather queer; quite unlike his usual tone and manner. But this he readily accounted for. The boy's pride had been humbled. He knew now that he was in Wolverton's power, and he had the sense to be humble, in the hope of making better terms.

"But it won't do," said the agent to himself. "He will find that I will have what is mine, and he cannot soften my heart by any appeal to my pity."

"It appears to me you are in rather a scrape," he said, after a pause.

"How is that."

"Why, a part of your mortgage comes due in a short time. I hope you don't expect me to wait."

"No doubt you will be considerate, Mr. Wolverton, remembering what luck we have had."

"No, I won't!" snarled Wolverton. "Don't flatter yourself so far. I am not responsible for your misfortune, or folly, as I call it."

"Still, Mr. Wolverton—"

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"Oh, it's no use to talk!" continued the agent, raising his hand impatiently. "You have been a fool, and you must suffer the penalty of your folly."

"Has Sam got back, Mr. Wolverton?" asked Bob, changing the subject, rather to Mr. Wolverton's surprise.

"No; have you seen him?" asked the agent, eagerly.

"Yes, sir."

"Where?" asked Wolverton, quickly.

"The fact is, we discovered him on our boat soon after we started."

"You did!" ejaculated the agent, his eyes almost starting out of his head. "Why didn't you send him back?"

"Because he said you didn't treat him well, and begged to stay."

"Young man, do you know I could have you arrested for abducting my nephew?" demanded Wolverton, angrily.

"Was it my fault that he hid himself on my boat?"

"Where is he now?" asked Wolverton, abruptly.

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"He left the boat at a point on the way."

"Where was it?"

"You must excuse my answering that question. Sam wouldn't like it."

"What difference does that make?"

"Sam is my friend. I think, however, you will soon know, as he means to come back."

Wolverton smiled triumphantly.

"I shall be glad to see him," he said, significantly. Bob knew what that meant.

"You must excuse me now, Mr. Wolverton," said Bob. "I must hurry home, as mother will be anxious to see me."

"Tell her I shall call very soon—on business."

"I will."

When they were out of hearing the boys laughed in amusement. They had a surprise in store for Wolverton.

CHAPTER XXXIX. CONCLUSION.

[Pg 324]

There was another arrival at Burton's Ranch the next day. Sam Wolverton came in charge of his new-found relative, Robert Granger. They took a carriage, and reached the ranch without attracting the attention of Aaron Wolverton.

Mrs. Burton welcomed her visitors, and expressed great pleasure at the discovery that Sam's fortunes were likely to be improved. Mr. Granger proposed to make a call upon the faithless guardian, but was saved the necessity, as Mr. Wolverton called early in the afternoon of the same day. He was in a hurry to show his power, and foreclose the mortgage. It was arranged that Sam and Mr. Granger should remain out of sight at first.

Robert answered the knock at the door.

"Is your mother at home?" asked Wolverton.

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"Yes, sir; will you walk in?"

"I believe I will."

He entered the sitting-room, and Mrs. Burton soon made her appearance.

"I see your son has returned, widder," remarked the agent.

"Yes; it seems pleasant to have him back. I missed him greatly."

"Humph! I s'pose so. It's a pity he went at all."

"I don't know that."

"Why, it stands to reason," said Wolverton, impatiently. "He went on a fool's errand."

"What makes you say that?"

"He might have known a boy like him couldn't succeed in such an enterprise. If he had taken up with my offer, he would have been all right."

"He said you offered him much less than the market price."

"And so he started off to do better, and lost his whole cargo," sneered Wolverton, smiling unpleasantly.

Mrs. Burton was silent.

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"I came to tell you that I should require not only the interest, but a payment of half the mortgage, according to the conditions. It is due next Saturday."

"Won't you wait, under the circumstances, Mr. Wolverton?"

"No; I will not."

"Do you think that is kind?" asked Mrs. Burton.

"Kindness is kindness, and business is business, Mrs. Burton. Still, I am willing to spare you on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you become Mrs. Wolverton."

Mrs. Burton made a gesture of repulsion.

"That is entirely out of the question," she said.

"Then I shall show no mercy."

Mrs. Burton went to the door and called "Robert."

Bob entered.

"Mr. Wolverton demands his interest and the payment of half the mortgage, according to the terms."

"It is not due yet."

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"It will be, next Saturday," said the agent, triumphantly. "And I won't listen to any palaver or any entreaties to put off the payment. As you have made your bed you can lie upon it."

"What do you propose to do if we don't pay?" asked Bob.

"Foreclose the mortgage!" exclaimed the agent, bringing down his fist upon the table before him.

"In that case, I think, mother, we will pay," said Bob, quietly.

"You can't pay!" snarled Wolverton.

"That is where you are mistaken, Mr. Wolverton. I will not only pay what you ask, but I am ready to take up the whole mortgage."

"Is the boy crazy?" ejaculated Wolverton.

"Not that I am aware of," answered Bob, smiling.

"You haven't got the money."

"Mistaken again, Mr. Wolverton."

"When did you get it?" gasped Wolverton. "Wasn't your cargo stolen?"

"Yes, by emissaries of yours!" was Bob's unexpected reply; "but I recovered it, and sold the grain for two dollars and a quarter a bushel." [Pg 328]

"You recovered it?" said Wolverton, turning pale.

"Yes; and the men that stole it are now in jail. I have a letter from one of them, declaring that he was employed by you."

"It's a lie!" hastily exclaimed the agent; but he looked frightened.

"I have reason to believe it is true. Mr. Wolverton, your base conspiracy failed."

"I guess I'll go," said Wolverton, rising. He wanted time to think.

"Not just yet! Here are two persons who wish to see you"; and, to Wolverton's surprise, Sam and Robert Granger entered the room.

"You didn't expect to see me, Aaron Wolverton," said Captain Granger. "I have come here with your nephew to demand restitution of the property which you have appropriated to your own use, giving him to understand that he was living on charity."

Wolverton looked like a man in a state of collapse. He didn't dare to deny what he knew Captain Granger would have no difficulty in proving. He glared at Sam as if he would like to have him in his power for a short time. [Pg 329]

"Are you coming back with me?" he asked.

"I will answer for him," said Captain Granger. "Sam is of an age when the law authorizes him to select his own guardian. I have accepted the trust, and I demand the transfer of his property to me."

If there had been any chance of success, Wolverton would have contested the matter, and, as it was, he interposed all the obstacles in his power. Finally, Sam got his own, however, much to Wolverton's disappointment.

Five years have passed. The mortgage on Burton's Ranch has long since been paid, and Bob is making a handsome profit every year for his mother and himself. Clip is still a member of the family, and, though he cannot be called a model of industry, he is a favorite through his good nature and love of fun. He is thoroughly loyal to the Burtons, and hates Wolverton as much as it is in his nature to hate anybody. Wolverton is getting worse in temper as he grows older, and his ill-gotten gains do not bring him happiness. The sight of Bob's prosperity is gall and wormwood to him; but for this Bob cares little. Sam is employed in a store under his new guardian's charge, but every summer he comes to Burton's Ranch and stays a month, where he, Bob, and Clip have fine times. Mrs. Burton is happy in her prosperity, and is thankful to God for having given her so good a son. Bob has made more than one trip down the river, but none so eventful as the one described in this story. [Pg 330]

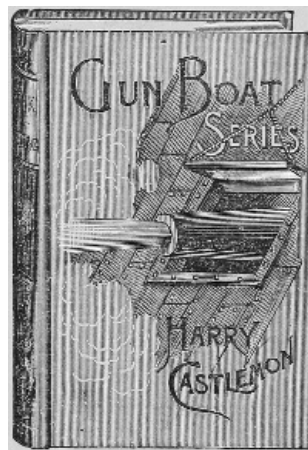
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