

HORATIO ALGER

BOB BURTON

Horatio Alger

Bob Burton

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Horatio Alger Jr. Bob Burton / 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 – preturnaturally 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."

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."

"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."

"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.

"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."

"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."

"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."

"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."

"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?"

"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

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:

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.

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."

"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?"

"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.

"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."

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."

"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.

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."

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."

"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.

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?"

"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."

"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.

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."

"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?"

"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

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.

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.

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.

"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.

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.

"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.

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 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:

"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

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.

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.

"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.

"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.

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."

"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."

"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?"

"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?"

"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

"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."

"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.

"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.

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!"

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.

"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."

"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?"

"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."

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

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.

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.

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."

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.

"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?"

"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.

"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.

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 Arkansaw. I 'spec' de old chap's done dead afore this," concluded Clip, with a sigh.

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

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.

"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.

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.

"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.

"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.

"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."

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?"

"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

"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?"

"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. "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."

"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?"

"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."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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