

Stratemeyer Edward

**The Rover Boys on the Plains:  
or, The Mystery of Red Rock  
Ranch**



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### CHAPTER I ON THE HOUSEBOAT

"Say, Tom, what's that big thing coming down the river?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Sam. It's big enough to be a house." replied Tom Rover.

"Maybe it is a house," came from Dick Rover, who was standing beside his brothers on the rear deck of the houseboat which was taking them down the Mississippi River.

"A house?" broke in a distinctly German voice. "Did you mean to said dere vos a house floating der rifer town, Dick Rofer?"

"Why not, Hansy, my boy?" replied fun-loving Tom Rover, before his big brother could answer. "Hasn't a house got a right to take a float if it wants to? Perhaps it's out for its health."

"Ach, you vos choking, Tom!" cried Hans Mueller. "Of a house been der rifer on, dere peen somedings wrong mit him alretty."

"It's a lumber raft, Hans," said Dick. "And a whopping big one, too," he added, as he took another look at the object that was approaching the houseboat.

"Hope it doesn't give us such a close shave as that raft we met two days ago," said Sam anxiously. "I was almost certain they were going to run into us."

"They have got no business to run so close to this houseboat," grumbled Tom. "They know well enough that we can't turn out of our course very well. I think some of those lumbermen are the toughest kind of citizens."

"If they get too close, I'll shout a warning through the megaphone," went on Dick, after a brief pause. "It certainly does look as if they intended to crowd us," he continued anxiously.

"Oh, Dick, do you think there is any danger?" came from a girl who had just joined the crowd.

"Not yet, Dora."

"Perhaps we had better run in close to shore until the raft has passed," continued Dora Stanhope, with an anxious look in her pretty eyes.

"Don't do it!" cried Tom. "We have as much right to the river as they have. Tell 'em to keep their distance, Dick."

"I shall – when they get close enough."

"If that raft hits our houseboat, we'll be smashed to kindling wood," was Sam's comment. "I'd rather they'd give us a wide berth."

The Rover brothers were three in number, Dick being the oldest, fun-loving Tom coming next and Sam coming last. When at home, they lived with their father and their uncle and aunt at Valley Brook Farm, pleasantly located in the heart of New York State. From this farm they had been sent to Putnam Hall, as related in the first volume of this series, entitled, "The Rover Boys at School." At this institution of learning they had made a large number of friends, and also some enemies.

A short term at Putnam Hall had been followed by a chase on the ocean and then a trip to the jungles of Africa, in search of Mr. Anderson Rover, who has disappeared. Then came a trip out West and one on the great lakes, followed by some adventures during a winter in the mountains.

After being in the mountains, the Rover boys had expected to go back to school, but a scarlet fever scare closed the institution, and they took a trip to the Pacific, as related in "The Rover Boys

on Land and Sea," the seventh volume of this series. They were cast away on an island and had many thrilling adventures, but escaped, to receive a warm welcome when they arrived home.

The scarlet fever scare was now a thing of the past, and the boys went back to Putnam Hall, to participate in the annual encampment, as told of in "The Rover Boys in Camp." Here they had plenty of sport, and the outing was voted "the best ever."

What to do during the summer vacation was a question quickly settled by the brothers. Their uncle, Randolph Rover, had taken a houseboat for debt, and it was voted to go aboard this craft, which was located on the Ohio River, and take a trip down that stream, and also down the mighty Mississippi.

"It will be the outing of our lives," said Tom. "We can just take it easy, and float, and float, and float."

The arrangements for the outing were quickly completed. With the Rover boys went their old school chums, "Songbird" Powell, who was always making up doggerel which he called poetry; Hans Mueller, already introduced, and Fred Garrison. The houseboat was a large one, and to make the trip more pleasant, the boys invited two ladies to go along, Mrs. Stanhope and Mrs. Laning. With Mrs. Stanhope came her only daughter, Dora, whom Dick Rover thought the nicest girl in the world, and with Mrs. Laning came her daughters, Nellie and Grace, intimate friends of Tom and Sam.

As those who have already read "The Rover Boys on the River" know, the trip on the houseboat started pleasantly enough. But, before long, one of their old enemies, Dan Baxter, turned up, accompanied by an evil-minded boy named Lew Flapp. These fellows succeeded in making prisoners of Dora Stanhope and Nellie Laning, and ran off with the houseboat. But they were followed by the Rovers and their friends, and, in the end, the girls were rescued, the houseboat recovered and Lew Flapp was made a prisoner, to be sent East to stand trial for his various misdeeds. Dan Baxter escaped, and for the time being there was no telling what had become of him. But he was destined to show up again, as the chapters to follow will prove.

After the houseboat was once again in the possession of the Rovers and their guests, there was a general jollification on board, lasting several days. All felt much relieved, to think that matters had turned out so well for them.

"We are well out of that mess," had been Dick Rover's comment.

"And I hope we never get into such another," answered Dora Stanhope.

"I was really frightened to death when I was a prisoner."

"I would feel a great deal better if Dan Baxter had been captured."

"Oh, Dick, do you think he will try to harm us further?" and Dora's face paled a trifle.

"Well, he seems to be like a bad penny – he turns up when you least expect it."

"Anyway, he won't have Flapp to aid him."

"That is true. But I never feared Flapp – he was too much of a coward at heart."

"Then you do fear Baxter, Dick?" and Dora looked at her best friend curiously.

"It's not exactly that, Dora. I don't want you to have any trouble.

I don't care for myself."

"I shall do my best to keep out of his way. What a pity it is that Baxter can not turn over a new leaf."

"It isn't in him to do so," put in Fred Garrison, who had come up.

"But his father has reformed," said Dora.

"I really think Dan is worse than his father," returned Dick. "There is a certain viciousness about him that is lacking in his father's make-up."

"Dan Baxter doesn't believe in forgiving or forgetting an injury," put in Sam, who had joined the crowd. "Once, after something went wrong, he said he'd get square if it took a hundred years. I believe he remembers that injury yet."

"He might do well, if he'd only settle down to something," said Fred.

"He isn't dumb, by any means."

"He is not smart, only cunning, Fred," answered Dick. "In regular business I don't believe he'd ever make his salt."

"Do you think he is still following the houseboat?" was the question put by Songbird Powell.

"I can't say as to that. If he is, he must hustle pretty lively, for we are now making a good many miles a day."

After this conversation, the days had gone by swiftly and pleasantly enough. Soon the broad Ohio River was left behind, and the houseboat started down the Mississippi. Stops were made at various points, and the young folks, as well as the two ladies, enjoyed themselves to the utmost. They had a few friends in the South, and, when-ever they stopped off to see these, they were treated with great cordiality.

"No more troubles of any kind for us," said Sam one day, but he was mistaken. That very afternoon a lumber raft came close to hitting the houseboat, frightening all who chanced to be on the deck at the time.

"Phew!" was Tom's comment. "No more such close shaves for me. That raft might have smashed us to smithereens!"

Two days went by, and the boys and girls enjoyed themselves by going fishing and by watching the sights on the river and along the shore. The weather was ideal for the outing, and they had not a care until the second big lumber raft came into sight, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, and threatened, as the first had done, to run them down.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BIG LUMBER RAFT

"Py chiminy! dot raft vos coming dis vay so sure like nefer vos!" cried Hans Mueller, after an anxious moment had passed.

"We ought to warn 'em off with a shot-gun," growled Tom. "Even if they don't hit us, they haven't any right to make my hair stand up like quills on the fretful porcupine."

"Vot has der porkerpint to do mit your hair?" questioned Hans innocently.

"You'll soon find out – if that lumber raft hits us, Hansy. Got your life insured?"

"Mine life insured?"

"That's it. If you haven't, better take out a policy for 'steen dollars and some cents, payable at nine cents a week in advance."

"Tom, this is no joking matter," broke in Dick. "Be quiet, till I use the megaphone."

"Dot's it!" cried Hans. "Use dot magnify-phone by all means."

There was a fair-sized megaphone on the houseboat, used to call to persons on shore, if necessary, and, bringing this out, the eldest Rover placed it to his mouth.

"On board the lumber raft!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Sheer off! Don't run us down!"

"We are not running you down," was the surly answer from a man at the front of the raft.

"Yes, you are, and we want you to keep off."

"Go on in toward the west shore and you will be all right," said the man. He was a burly looking individual, with an unusually long nose.

By this time the lumber raft was sweeping closer. The raft and the houseboat were moving in the same direction, and this kept them for the time being apart.

"If you don't keep off, there will be trouble," cried Sam.

"Oh, you boys dry up!" was the reply from the man with the long nose, and now they recognized him as a fellow they had met in a hotel at their last stopping place. The man had had a row with a porter, and had made himself generally disagreeable.

The houseboat was under the immediate command of Captain Starr. The captain, a rather strange individual, was not feeling very well, and had gone off to take a nap. Now it was thought best by all to call him.

"The overgrown wood-choppers!" growled the captain as soon as he had come out on deck and taken in the situation. "Sheer off!" he yelled. "Do you hear?"

"Turn in toward shore," was the answering cry.

"We can't – it's too shallow."

"Is it really too shallow?" asked Dick.

"I think so. We are not in the channel as it is."

"I'm going to get a gun," came from Tom, and off he rushed to secure the firearm.

The raft had now swept so close that several on board could be seen plainly. They were a rough-looking sort, and the man with the long nose was the shrewdest of the lot.

"We'll have to turn in, or we'll be hit!" ejaculated Sam. "Those side logs are bound to strike the cabin!"

He pointed to some timbers that projected over the edge of the raft. They were only a few feet off and might crash into the cabin of the houseboat at any moment.

In anger at being forced to change his course, Captain Starr turned the houseboat toward the bank of the river. Then the big raft began to pass them, just as Tom reappeared, shotgun in hand.

"I ought to have you arrested for this!" stormed Captain Starr. His words were always louder than his actions.

"Bah!" answered the man with the long nose, in derision.

"Maybe you'd like to have a taste of this?" put in Tom, holding up the gun.

"Don't you dare to shoot!" yelled the man, and lost no time in sliding from his seat and out of sight.

At that moment those on the houseboat felt a slight shock, and then the craft's headway was checked.

"What's up now?" cried Dick.

"We're aground, that's what's the matter," muttered Captain Starr.

"Those rascals ought to suffer for this!"

In a moment more the big raft had passed the houseboat. The latter now began to swing around with the current.

"I hope we are not stuck in the mud for good," grumbled Fred Garrison.

"Look! look!" burst from Sam's lips. He was pointing to the raft.

"What's up now?" came from several of the others.

"Unless I am mistaken, Dan Baxter is on that raft."

"Baxter!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"He was sitting on that pile of boards in the rear. As soon as he saw me, he slid out of sight."

"Are you sure it was Baxter?" questioned Songbird Powell.

"If it wasn't him, it was his double."

"If it was Baxter, we ought to try to catch him," suggested Fred.

"I don't see how we are going to catch anybody just now," sighed Dick. "We are stuck hard and fast."

"Oh, Dick, are we really aground?" questioned Dora.

"We are that," said Captain Starr.

"Is there any danger?" asked Nellie Laning, who had joined the others, accompanied by her sister Grace.

"No immediate danger, miss. It depends on whether we can get off or not."

"We'll have to get off," said Tom decidedly.

"Rub a dub dub!

We're stuck in the mud

As hard as hard can be!

Shall we ever,

Or shall we never,

Set the houseboat free?" came softly from Songbird Powell.

"Great Caesar, that's a fine thing to make a rhyme about," returned Sam reproachfully.

"Let's make Songbird wade out in the mud and shove us off," suggested Tom, with a wink at his companions.

"Wade out in the mud?" cried the youth who was given to rhymes. "Not much!"

"Mud bath is the finest thing in the world, Songbird," went on Tom.

"Bound to cure hay fever, warts, squint-eye and lots of things."

"Then you go take it yourself," murmured Songbird.

"We'll have to get out the rowboat and see if we can't pull her off," said Captain Starr.

"Yes, and the sooner the better," said Dick. "If we wait, we may get harder aground than ever."

It did not take long to let the rowboat over the side of the *Dora*, as the houseboat was named. Then Dick, Sam, Tom and Fred got in to do the rowing, while the others remained on the houseboat, to try what they could do toward poling off. A line was made fast between the rowboat and the *Dora*, and the boys began to pull away with might and main.

"Is she moving?" asked Dick, after several minutes of hard pulling.

"Not yet," answered Captain Starr. "Keep at it, though."

"Let us shift some of the heavy things on board," suggested Songbird, and this was done. Then the boys rowed with all their might and those on the houseboat used their poles to the best advantage.

"Hurrah! she vos coming!" shouted Hans. "Dot's der time vot you did sometings, ain't it!"

"Keep at it, boys!" came from the captain. "We'll be all right in a few minutes more."

"Mind you, we don't want to tow the houseboat down to New Orleans," said Tom, who was perspiring freely in the warm sun.

"There she goes!" came a moment later. "We are all right now," and a little hurrah went up.

"I wish I had those lumbermen here – I'd give 'em a bit of my mind," said Sam, who felt tired out from the hard rowing. "It was all their fault."

"Of course, it was their fault," answered Dick. "More than likely, though, we'll never meet them again."

"What an awfully long nose one of them had."

"I don't believe that fellow was a lumberman. He wasn't dressed like the others and didn't act like them."

The rowboat was soon placed aboard of the houseboat once more, and the *Dora* continued on her course down the river. All told, a half hour had been lost, and the lumber raft was scarcely a speck in the distance.

"I'd like to know for certain if that was Dan Baxter on board," said Dick to Sam. "If it was, and he saw us, he'll do his best to make trouble again."

"Well, the best we can do, Dick, is to keep our eyes open."

"Do you think that lumber raft will tie up somewhere below here?" asked Tom.

"The raft is certain to tie up somewhere, Tom. But it may go a good many miles before that happens," answered the eldest Rover; and there the subject was for the time being dropped.

## CHAPTER III

### A "PEPPER" GHOST

Mrs. Stanhope and Mrs. Laning had been taking a nap, and they were much interested when they awoke and learned of what had occurred.

"Let us be thankful that the raft did not run us down," said Dora's mother, who was a widow.

"It was mean to make us run aground," was Mrs. Laning's comment.

"Some folks try their best to get others into trouble."

"That fellow with the long nose got out of sight in a hurry when he saw the shotgun," observed Tom.

"Oh, Tom, you wouldn't have shot him, would you?" cried Nellie.

"I only meant to scare him. But, if they had really run us down, I don't know what I would have done."

It was not long after this that the lumber raft passed entirely out of their sight. Gradually the talk changed, and all began to wonder where they were to tie up for the night.

"I did hope to reach Masterville," said Captain Starr. "But I don't think we can make it."

"Do we need anything in particular in the shape of provisions?" asked Dick.

"I don't think so. You might ask Aleck."

The person referred to was a colored man who was in the employ of the Rovers, and had been with the boys on many of their outings. His full name was Alexander Pop, and he thought the world and all of Dick, Tom and Sam.

"Hullo, Aleck!" called out Dick, going to the cook's galley.

"Yes, sah! Comin', sah!" was the answer, and in an instant Aleck's smiling ebony face showed itself at the doorway.

"Have we got enough provisions on hand until to-morrow?"

"Yes, sah."

"Then we won't have to go ashore for anything?"

"No, sah; less yo' want sumfin' very special," and the colored man grinned.

"Are you going to give us a pretty good supper, Aleck?" asked Tom, walking up.

"Lamb chops, sah, an' green peas, sweet potatoes, an' cake an' cut-up peaches."

"That's first-rate, Aleck," said Dick, smiling.

"Any quail on toast?" asked Tom.

"No, sah."

"Any bear steaks, or salmon eggs?"

"Ain't seen none ob dem t'ings yet, Massa Tom."

"How about butterflies' wings on toast?"

"Wha – what's dat?"

"Or milkweed stewed in onion fat?" went on Tom earnestly.

"Gracious sakes alive, sah! I didn't know dat – "

"Or firefly fritters, Aleck. Don't you love fire-fly fritters, especially when they are rolled in lemon skin and cheese?"

"Say, Massa Tom, ain't you a-foolin' dis darkey?"

"Fooling? Why, Aleck, you know I never fool." Tom gave a sigh. "That's the way of the world, when a fellow is trying to do his best." And he walked off, leaving the faithful Aleck staring after him doubtfully. But soon the colored man began to smile to himself.

"Dat's some moah ob his jokes, dat's what dat is," he murmured. "Dat boy couldn't lib, 'less he was playin' a joke on sumbody!"

The houseboat had now gained a portion of the river where the shore was lined with a beautiful forest, and, as the sun began to set over the treetops, all came out on the deck to enjoy the scene.

"If it wasn't for the troubles we have encountered, this would be an ideal trip," said Dora, as she stood by Dick's side.

"Let us forget the troubles, Dora," said the youth softly, and gave her hand a little squeeze. "I am so glad you are with us. If you weren't, I think it would be rather lonely for me."

"Oh, Dick, you mustn't talk so," cried the girl, and blushed. But she was pleased, nevertheless.

Just where the forest ended there was a point of land stretching out into the river, and there it was decided to tie up for the night. An early supper was had, and then about half of the party went ashore – Dick and Dora to take a stroll in the moonlight, and Tom, Sam and some of the others to do a little exploring.

"The forest looks a little bit spooky," said Fred, as they walked along.

"Spooky?" came scornfully from Songbird Powell. "Why, it's grand – fairly breathing the essence of poetry," and then he continued:

"Down in the depths of a forest grand,  
Where many a hoary tree doth stand,  
And many a little babbling brook  
Gives music to each shady nook,  
'Tis there I love a walk to take – "

"And step upon a rattlesnake." finished Tom. "Better keep your eyes open, Songbird, or the rattlers will be after you. They love music and poetry, you know."

"Rattlesnakes! Horrible!" shuddered Songbird. "That's enough to drive the poetry out of a fellow for a week."

"Do you think there are any rattlers here?" asked Sam.

"I ton't vos afraid of raddlesnakes alretty," put in Hans. "I vos know a fine vay to kill dem," and his mild eyes began to twinkle.

"What's the way, Hans?" asked Tom.

"First, you got some poison in a pottle."

"Yes."

"Den you go py der voots till you come py Mr. Raddlesnake."

"All right, proceed."

"Den you got dot Mr. Raddlesnake py der neck, oben his mouth und put der boison on der insides. In an hour, Mr. Raddlesnake vos so dead like nefer vos alretty."

"Sold! That's the time Hans caught you, Tom!" exclaimed Sam, and set up a roar.

"Yah, I vos chust vaiting to cotch you, Tom," and now the German youth joined in the hilarity.

"All right, that's one on me," said Tom. "My move next," he added, but under his breath.

"There's a rattlesnake now!" yelled Fred a moment later, and all gave a jump, Hans as lively as the rest. But it was only a small reptile, and harmless, and quickly disappeared from view.

In a clearing, the boys built a fire, and sat around this, telling stories and talking over the events of the day.

From one thing and another the conversation gradually drifted around to ghosts, and Fred told a ghost story that was thrilling in the extreme.

"Don't you believe in ghosts, Hans?" questioned Sam.

"Not much, I ton't," answered the German youth. "Da vos all humbugs alretty."

"Then you wouldn't run if you saw a ghost?" queried Songbird.

"Not von sthep," said Hans positively.

This talk set Tom to thinking, and on the way back to the houseboat he called Sam to his side.

"I've got an idea."

"What is it?" questioned his brother.

"You heard what Hans said about ghosts?"

"To be sure I did."

"Well, I've got an idea for some fun."

"Good for you, Tom."

"We'll fix up a ghost."

"Oh, that's old."

"So it is; but this particular kind of ghost isn't old."

"What is it to be?"

"One full of pepper."

"Pepper?"

"Exactly. And when Hans hammers it – why, look out, that's all."

The matter was talked over for a few minutes, and Sam readily fell in with his brother's ideas.

Reaching the houseboat, the pair went to one of the staterooms and procured a sheet and a bolster.

Then Tom ran off to the galley and obtained a box full of pepper.

The pepper was sprinkled over the sheet and the bolster.

"Now, we'll take the outfit to Hans' room," said Tom, and this was done without the German youth being aware of what was taking place.

The others were then let into the plot, and just before retiring Tom called Hans to one side.

"Hans, I want to give you a tip," he whispered tragically.

"Vot for?"

"Some of the fellows are going to scare you. They have fixed up a ghost in your room."

"Is dot so?"

"When you go to bed, don't be frightened."

"Not much I von't pe, Tom. Maybe I vos hammer dot ghost, hey?"

"That's the talk. Take a switch along and lock your door. Then you can switch the ghost good."

"Ha! ha! dot's a goot blan," roared the German youth. "Maybe somepody ton't catch him!"

A few minutes after that, the boys and the others separated for the night, and Hans retired to his own stateroom.

As it was bright moonlight, no lights had been lit, nor did the German youth make any.

Tom had deceived him completely, and behind his back he carried a heavy switch. He intended to "lather" the ghost good before giving the joker, whoever he might be, a chance to get away.

As he closed the door, he caught sight of something white and ghost-like standing near the head of his berth. He shut the door softly and locked it.

"Oh, my!" he cried. "A ghost! a ghost!" And then he raised his switch and brought it down on the white object with all his might. Blow after blow was delivered in rapid succession, for he wanted to get in as many cracks as possible before the joker should expose himself.

"Dere you vos, you pad ghost!" he cried. "I dink you vos – "

At this point Hans stopped short. Something had entered his nose – something that tickled exceedingly.

"Ker-chew! ker-chew!" he sneezed. "Vot is – ker-chew! I dink – ker-chew! Oh, my! Ker-chew! I vos schneeze mine head – ker-chew! Stop dot, somepody – ker-chew! Oh, dear – kerchew! Oben der door – ker-chew!"

Blinded, and sneezing violently, Hans dropped his switch and made for the door. Throwing it wide open, he ran out to get some pure air, for the stateroom was filled with floating pepper.

"I fix somepody for dis – ker-chew!" he roared. "Chust wait, you chokers!"

Then he caught sight of Tom, who stood nearby, grinning.

"Dot vos your drick!" he went on. "Chust you come here!"

"Thank you, not to-night, Hansy, my dear boy," said the joker, keeping at a safe distance.

"Vell, den, you go 'long mit your old ghost," went on Hans, and, picking up the peppered bolster and sheet, he threw them into Tom's room, where the fun-loving youth had the pleasure of disposing of the mess as best he could.

## CHAPTER IV

### TROUBLE WITH NEGROES

"The rolling, the rolling,  
The rolling river for me!  
The rolling river, the rolling river,  
That carries us down to the sea!"

So sang Songbird Powell the next morning when he came out on deck after a refreshing night's rest.

"Songbird, you're a regular lark," remarked Dick.

"I feel like one," was the answer. "Who wouldn't feel good on such a glorious morning as this?"

"Maybe you didn't haf some ghosts drouble you?" put in Hans with a grin.

"Forget it, Hans," answered Dick. "It's too fine a morning to think of ghosts."

It was indeed a glorious morning, clear and balmy. The ladies of the party were much pleased, and so were the girls. All gathered on the deck to take in the sights before breakfast was announced by Aleck.

A big schooner was passing with all sails set, and, not long after this, a large steamer, bound up the Mississippi, hove into sight.

"Now, we'll get some big swells," remarked Sam, and he was right. Soon the houseboat began to rock in a fashion that pleased the boys, but alarmed the girls.

"When the houseboat rocks like that, I'm always afraid we'll be swamped," said Grace.

"There is little danger of that," said Captain Starr. "The wash would have to be much heavier before it could do any damage."

The morning passed pleasantly enough. The ladies spent the time over their fancy work, while the girls and boys read, played games and also sang and played. There was a piano on the *Dora*, and the boys had a guitar and a banjo along.

They were at dinner and discussing their next stopping place, when, without warning, there came a shock that threw Aleck flat on the floor, with a trayful of cup-custards over him.

"Fo' de lan' sake!" gasped the colored man. "Has we struck a stone wall?"

"Whow!" ejaculated Fred, who had had some hot coffee spilled on his knee. "This isn't pleasant, I can tell you."

Dick was already running on deck, and the others followed. They saw that Captain Starr's face was full of concern. Not another craft of any kind was in sight, and they were a good two hundred feet from shore.

"Didn't we strike something, Captain?" asked the eldest Rover.

"Reckon we did, sir," was the answer.

"What?"

"A sunken tree, most likely. They are the worst things to be met with on the Mississippi. More than one boat has been sunk by a hidden tree trunk."

"Did the snag poke a hole into us?" asked Tom. "If it did, we had better make for shore."

"I'll look around and see," said the captain, and did so, accompanied by the boys and Aleck. For the time being, dinner was forgotten.

Fortunately, no great damage had been done. One side board had been loosened, but this was easily nailed tight, and then the houseboat proceeded on her way as before.

"I've heard of boats being wrecked by these snags," said Songbird.

"One boat I was on, some fifteen years ago, was wrecked that way," said Captain Starr. "She was running at full speed, when we struck a big tree that had rather a sharp point. The point ran through into the cabin and killed two people, and the boat sank in ten minutes."

"Excuse me from such a disaster as that," was Fred's comment, while Nellie, who had heard the story, shuddered.

That evening, they tied up close to the village of Canston. Not far south was a large plantation, employing a great number of negroes, and some of these came down to take a look at the houseboat.

As soon as the *Dora* was tied up, Captain Starr made a thorough examination of the craft, to make certain that she had received no injury below the water-line. Dick accompanied him, and so did Songbird.

"She is O. K.," announced the captain. "There isn't a leak as big as a flea anywhere."

Aleck, Tom and Sam went down into the village to procure some stores for the houseboat, and while there learned that there had been a row at the plantation and two negroes had been seriously hurt. As a consequence of the quarrel, one burly negro called Watermelon Pete had run away.

"He's a bad egg, that Watermelon Pete," said the storekeeper in speaking of the affair. "I wish he'd leave this locality for good."

When the boys got back to the houseboat, they found the others hunting all over the *Dora* with lanterns.

"What are you looking for?" asked Tom.

"Grace thinks she saw a big negro come on board," answered Dick. "We are trying to root him out."

The houseboat was searched from end to end, but nothing could be discovered of any intruder.

"Must have sneaked off again," said Sam. "If he did, I hope he didn't steal anything."

"We'll keep our eyes open after this," said Captain Starr.

The night passed quietly enough, but, for some reason she could not explain, Grace awoke long before the others. She tried to go to sleep again, but, finding that a failure, dressed and went out on the deck.

She had been out only a few minutes, when, on walking past the dining-room window, she saw a sight that filled her with amazement. By the closet was a burly negro, filling a carpetbag with silverware!

"Oh!" she cried. "Stop that!"

At the sound of her voice, the burly negro turned and scowled viciously at her.

"Yo' dun keep quiet!" he said in a low, intense voice.

"I shall not," answered Grace. "Help, some-body!" she called.

"Hush up, yo'!" fairly hissed the burly intruder, and sprang for the doorway. In another moment he had Grace by the arm. "Don't yo' make anudder sound, or yo'll git sumfing yo' won't lak!"

"Oh!" gasped the poor girl. She wanted to say more, but the words stuck in her throat. The negro still, held her, and his grasp was like that of steel.

"Are yo' gwine to shut up?" asked the intruder.

"Le – let me go, please!"

"Ain't gwine to let yer go. Be still now, heah?"

Grace did hear, and, as the negro glowered at her, her heart almost stopped beating. She gazed around, and so did the negro. Not another person was in sight.

"Come into de room," went on the negro after a painful pause, and he literally dragged her forward to the door. "If yo' be still, yo' won't git hurt."

Holding her with one hand, he continued to fill his carpetbag with the other. Spoons, knives and forks were rapidly stowed away, and they were followed by some napkin rings and other articles of value.

As the negro worked, Grace recovered some of her self-possession. She did not dare to cry out, and tried to think of some other method of arousing the others on the boat. Her eyes fell upon a bell pull hanging from the wall and, on the sly, she gave it a violent jerk.

The rope connected with a bell in the cook's galley. This was close to where Aleck was sleeping, and it caused the cook to arouse with a start.

"Dis chile mus' hab done overslept hisself," he exclaimed, and then, as the bell rang once more, he sprang up in a hurry. "Sumt'ing wrong, dat's suah as yo're boahn!"

Throwing himself into some of his clothing, he ran out on deck and to the dining-room. One glance was enough, and he raised a shout which aroused everybody on the houseboat.

The shout told the intruder that his game was up, and, carpetbag in hand, he started to run away. But Aleck put out his foot, and the other negro went sprawling at full length.

"Yo' stay right dar!" roared Aleck Pop wrathfully. "Don't yo' 'tempt to git away, nohow, 'less yo' want to go to yo' own funeral."

"Yo' ain't gwine ter stop me!" yelled the thief, and sprang up, hurling the cook to one side. Then he started for the shore.

By this time Sam was coming out of his state-room. He saw the fleeing negro and made after him, catching the rascal just as he was about to leap ashore.

"Not so fast!" he sang out, and caught him by the arm.

"Yo' can't hole me!" stormed the burly fellow, and tried to twist himself loose. But, before he could break away, Captain Starr was at hand, quickly followed by Tom and Hans.

"Vot's der madder, vos he a robber?" asked Hans. "Schoot him der spshot on!"

"Git back, dar, I'se a dangerous coon!" ejaculated the burly negro, and suddenly produced a big revolver of the old civil war kind. "Don't dare lay han's on me ag'in!"

At the sight of the pistol, all fell back, and in a twinkling the negro was over the side and running for the nearest patch of woods.

"Let us go after him," said Dick, and the others agreed. But pursuit was useless, the burly negro was gone. Later they learned that he was Watermelon Pete, the rascal who had gotten into a row at the nearby plantation.

"Are you hurt, Grace?" was Sam's first question after the chase had come to an end.

"No, but that colored man nearly scared the life out of me," she answered, and then told her story.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again," said Fred.

"Most likely not," answered Dick. But he was mistaken. He was to meet Watermelon Pete, and under circumstances as surprising as any that he had yet encountered.

"Well, there is one satisfaction," remarked Songbird. "He didn't get away with any of the stuff."

"No, but he mussed de dinin'-room all up!" growled Aleck. "An' dat silber has got to be shined up ag'in befoah we kin use it."

During the day, several half-intoxicated colored men came on board of the *Dora* and made it decidedly unpleasant for all hands.

"We may as well get out of here," said Dick, and the others agreed with him.

Two negroes were on board at the time, and Captain Starr ordered them ashore.

"Give us some rum, an' we'll go," answered one of them impudently.

"You're going, and without any rum!" cried Dick wrathfully, and ran the colored man to the gangplank. Sam and Tom caught hold of the other colored man and did likewise.

"Let go ob me!" roared one of the fellows, and then both of them began to struggle and use language not fit for polite ears to hear.

"Dump them into the river – the bath will do them good," suggested Songbird, and in a trice this was accomplished, and both went down with a loud splash. By the time they had managed to crawl

to the shore through the mud, the houseboat was a good distance out into the stream. The negroes shouted and shook their fists, but the Rovers and their friends, and even Aleck, laughed at them.

"Dem fool niggers don't know nuffin'," growled the cook. "I'se 'shamed ob 'em, I is!"

"Perhaps they won't be so fresh when another houseboat comes along," said Fred.

"Or else they'll do their best to get square," put in Tom.

The journey down the river was continued, and soon the plantation and the village were left far in the distance.

## CHAPTER V

### DAN BAXTER APPEARS

Two days later found the houseboat moored to one of the docks at a small city in Arkansas. It was a bustling place of perhaps four thousand inhabitants and commanded a fair river trade.

The whole party was willing enough to go ashore, and the Rover boys hired several carriages, in which all were driven around to various points of interest.

"I'll tell you what I wouldn't mind doing," said Sam, while driving around. "I'd like to get on horseback and take a trip out on the plains."

"Perhaps we can do that before this trip comes to an end," answered Dick. "You must remember, we have a good part of our outing before us."

There was a parade in the town that day, and they watched this with interest. Then the girls and the ladies went back to the houseboat, leaving the boys to continue their rambles.

"I see some lumber rafts here," said Sam. "I wonder if that one stopped here that tried to run us down?"

"It might be," answered Fred.

Dick was out buying some special supplies, and his errand took him to a quarter of the town which was by no means of the better sort. As he hurried along, he heard several voices in dispute.

"You must settle that bill at the hotel," a heavy voice was saying.

"You can't leave us until you do settle," said a second voice.

"I paid my bill! I am not going to pay for you – I didn't invite you to come with me," came from a third person.

Dick thought he recognized that voice, and, looking in the direction, was astonished to see Dan Baxter. The bully was in the hands of two lumbermen, who held him by the arm.

"He must be in trouble," thought Dick, and he was right. Soon the dispute waxed hot, and one of the men hit Baxter in the face.

"Stop that!" cried Dick, running up. "Stop it, I say!"

At the sound of his voice, the men started back in alarm.

"He must be the new sheriff," whispered one. "They say he looks like a boy!"

"Then we had better light out," said the second lumberman, and on the instant both took to their heels and disappeared around a corner.

When Dick reached Dan Baxter's side, he found the former bully of Putnam Hall pale and much agitated. He, too, wanted to run away, but Dick held him.

"So we meet again, Baxter?"

"Let go of me!" growled the bully.

"What are you doing here?"

"That's my business."

"What were the men doing?"

"They wanted me to pay their hotel bill for them, but I didn't propose to do it."

"Do you know that Lew Flapp is under arrest?"

"I don't care."

"I think I'll have to have you arrested, too."

"Not much, Dick Rover!"

"You came down the river on that big lumber raft, didn't you?"

"What if I did?"

"Those rascals did their best to run us down."

"Ha! ha! They gave you a fine scare, didn't they?" and the bully laughed boisterously.

"Did the raft stop here?"

"No, but I did."

"Well, you had better come with me, Dan."

"Where to?"

"The lock-up."

"Never!" The big bully drew back. "You let me alone."

Dick caught hold of Baxter once more, but now the bully hauled off and hit him a stinging blow on the chin. The eldest Rover retaliated by a blow that blackened the bully's left eye. Then they clinched and rolled on the ground.

"Hi, what's the matter here?" called out a planter, running up at this moment.

"He is a thief!" cried Dan Baxter. "Take him off of me!"

"A thief, eh?" said the planter, and he caught Dick by the arm. "Come, let him up, you rascal!"

He was a powerful man, and hauled Dick back with ease. In a trice Dan Baxter scrambled up and drew back a few paces.

"I'll get an officer," he called out, and ran off, to disappear down an alleyway between a group of negro shanties.

"Come after him," said Dick. "He is the real thief. You have blundered."

"You can't fool me, suh," said the planter firmly. – "What, won't you come after him?"

"Nary a step. I allow I know a thief when I see one."

"Do you mean that for me?"

"I surtainly do, suh."

"Well, you're a big fool, that's all I have to say," cried Dick, and, watching his chance, he got out of the planter's clutches and ran after Dan Baxter.

The chase led into the worst portion of the town, but Dick did not give up until a good hour had passed. Then he returned to the houseboat much downcast, and told his story.

"And the worst of it is, my watch is missing," he announced.

"Perhaps you dropped it during the struggle," suggested Songbird.

"Either that, or Dan Baxter got his fist on it while we were talking.

He is bad enough now to do almost anything."

"Better go back and see if you can't find the watch," said Tom. "I'll go with you."

They walked to the spot and made a thorough search, but the watch failed to come to light. Dick gave a long sigh.

"I'm out that timepiece, and I guess for good," he murmured.

They were about to return to the houseboat, when Dick saw the planter approaching once more.

"Ha, so you have come back, suh!" he cried.

"Did you see anything of my watch?" remanded Dick sharply.

"Your watch?"

"Yes; it's gone."

"I saw nothing of a watch."

"I suppose that other fellow came back with an officer, didn't he?" went on the eldest Rover sarcastically.

"I did not – ah – see him, suh."

"I'm out my watch, all because of your foolishness."

"Suh?"

"You needn't 'suh' me, I mean what I said. My watch is gone. If you didn't take it yourself, you helped that fellow to get away with it."

"This to me, suh! me, Colonel Jackson Gibbs, suh, of the Sudley Light Artillery, suh! Infamous, suh!"

"So is the loss of my watch infamous."

"I shall make a complaint, suh, to the authorities."

"Go ahead, and tell them that I lost my watch, too," and walked off, leaving Colonel Jackson Gibbs of the Sudley Light Artillery gazing after him in amazement.

"Do you think he will make more trouble?" asked Tom.

"Not he. He is too scared that I will hold him responsible for the loss of the watch." And Dick was right; they never did hear of the planter again.

That night, all on board did nothing but talk about Dan Baxter and the way he had managed to escape.

"He is as bad as Paddy's flea," said Dora. "When you put your finger on him, he isn't there."

The houseboat left the town the following afternoon, and the course was now down the Mississippi in the direction of a village called Braxbury, where Mrs. Stanhope had some friends of many years' standing.

"They used to have quite a plantation," said the lady. "If they still have it, we'll have a good chance for a nice time on shore."

"And we can go out for that ride on the prairies," added Sam.

"Want to scalp a few noble red men?" asked Tom, with a wink.

"No red men in mine, Tom. But wouldn't you like an outing of that sort, just for a change?"

"Don't know but what I would. But we couldn't take the girls along very well."

"No, we could leave them with their friends at the plantation."

On the following day it began to rain, and all had to keep to the cabin of the houseboat. At first, the rain came down lightly, but towards noon it poured in torrents. Out on the river the weather grew so thick that they could not see a hundred feet in any direction.

"Better run for the shore and tie up," said Dick to Captain Starr. "We don't want to run the risk of a collision, especially when our time's our own."

"I was just going to suggest it," said the skipper of the *Dora*, and soon they were turning toward shore. A good landing place was found and the houseboat was tied up near several large trees in that vicinity.

Instead of abating, the storm kept increasing in violence. So far, there had been but little thunder and lightning, but now several vivid flashes lit up the sky, and some sharp cracks made the girls jump.

"Oh, I detest a thunder storm," cried Nellie. "I wish it was over."

"So do I," answered Dora. "But I suppose we have got to make the best of it."

"Do not sit so close to an open window," said Mrs. Laning.

"I was going to close the window," came from Mrs. Stanhope. "I never sit with a window open during such a storm as this." And then the window was closed, and also the door.

"I'm going out for some fresh air," said Tom a little later, when the worst of the lightning seemed to be over. "I hate to be cooped up like a chicken in a hen-house." And, getting out his rain-coat, he went on deck, and presently Dick followed him.

"This will make the river swell up," remarked Dick, gazing around curiously. "Gracious, how it pours!"

"The wind is rising. That's a sign it is going to clear up."

"Not always, Tom. I think this storm will last all day, and perhaps to-night, too."

The boys walked from one end of the houseboat to the other and gazed out on the rolling river. Then a gust of wind almost took them from their feet.

"Phew! we can't stand much of this," observed Dick. "We'll get drenched in spite of our rain-coats. I think –"

Dick got no further, for at that moment there was a weird flash of lightning, followed by an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Then came a crash of another kind.

"Look out! One of the trees is coming down on the houseboat!" ejaculated Dick.

As he uttered the words another crash followed, and down came the trunk of a big tree, cutting into the companion ladder and the cabin of the *Dora*. One of the branches of the tree swept over poor Tom, and before he could save himself, he was hurled into the river.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE EFFECTS OF A BIG STORM

"Tom!" cried Dick, as he saw his brother swept from view.

There was no answer to this call, and, much alarmed, the eldest Rover leaped over a limb of the fallen tree and ran to the edge of the houseboat.

The rain was again coming down in torrents and for the moment Dick could see little or nothing. He heard a cry from the cabin of the *Dora*, and this increased his dismay.

At last he caught sight of Tom's head, about ten feet away from the houseboat. A glance showed him that his brother was unconscious and on the point of sinking again.

"I must save him!" muttered Dick to himself, and, without an instant's hesitation, he leaped overboard.

"Dick! Tom!" The cry was uttered by Sam as he came running out of the houseboat, hatless and in his shirt sleeves.

The fallen tree obstructed his view, and it was several seconds before he caught sight of his brothers in the water.

"Dick!" he yelled. "What's the matter?"

"Throw me a rope," was the answer, and it did not take Sam long to obey instructions. Then Dick caught Tom under the shoulders, and both were hauled back to the side of the *Dora*.

"Did the tree knock you overboard?" asked Sam anxiously.

"It knocked Tom over," answered Dick.

Just as he was placed on deck again, Tom opened his eyes and stared around him.

"Who – where am I?" he demanded faintly.

"You are safe, Tom," answered Dick kindly. "Don't you remember, the tree knocked you overboard?"

"Oh!" The fun-loving Rover drew a long breath. "Did you fish me out?"

"I jumped in after you, and Sam fished us both out."

"Good enough."

By this time some of the others were stepping forth from the wreck of the cabin. All were more or less excited, and the girls and ladies came out hatless and coatless despite the rain, which now seemed to come down with renewed fury, as if to add to their misery.

"Is anybody hurt?" demanded Dick.

"I was hit by a broken board," answered Mrs. Laning. "But it scared me more than anything else."

"One of the broken windows came in on me and covered me with glass," came from Songbird. "But wasn't that a crack of thunder! I thought it was the crack of doom!"

"And were you really hurled overboard?" asked Nellie, rushing up to Tom and almost embracing him. "You poor boy! How glad I am that you were not drowned!"

"Well, come to think of it, I'm glad myself," he returned with a little smile.

"Oh, Tom, it's nothing to joke about!"

"That is true, Nellie."

"Say, I ton't vont no more oxcitements like dot!" cried Hans. "I vos schared out of mine vits alretty, ain't it!"

"We were all scared," said Fred. "But hadn't we better get inside again? We are all getting wet to the skin."

"The cabin is in an awful mess," declared Dora, and she told the truth. Daylight was streaming through a hole in one corner and the rain was entering in a stream.

"Let us get a tarpaulin and cover that hole," said Dick. "I'll do it," he added. "I can't get any wetter than I am," and he gave a short laugh.

"And I'll help," said Tom, who had recovered rapidly from his involuntary bath.

"We shall need a carpenter to make repairs," said Captain Starr, who had been working to shove off the fallen tree. "This smash-up is a pretty bad one."

The boys remained outside, and all went to work to remove the tree trunk and to cover the hole with a heavy tarpaulin. It was a task lasting the best part of an hour, and when it had come to an end, the rain was slackening up.

"We shall certainly have to lay up somewhere for repairs," said Fred.

"We can't continue the journey in this condition."

"Let us hire a carpenter at the next town we stop at," suggested Sam, and to this they agreed.

The mess in the cabin was left for Aleck to clean up, and then the ladies and the girls straightened things out as best they could. As soon as the storm cleared away, the journey down the Mississippi was continued.

"I can't help but think of what might have happened if that stroke of lightning had hit the houseboat," said Songbird. "It makes me shiver."

"We certainly had a narrow escape," answered Dora. "I never wish to get quite so close to another stroke."

On the following day, they stopped at a place which I shall call Ramontown. From one of the dock owners, they learned where they could find a master carpenter, and they called upon this individual and had him look at the damage done.

"I can fix up the craft as good as she ever was," said he. "But it will take at least a week, and it will take several days more to give her two good coats of paint."

The matter was talked over, and they decided to remain tied up and have the houseboat put in first-class condition once more. Then Mrs. Stanhope sent a long letter to her friends at Braxbury, stating she would call with some others, and mentioned the houseboat trip.

Just twenty-four hours later, a middle-aged man came down to the houseboat and shook hands warmly. His name was Carson Denton and he was the husband of Mrs. Stanhope's friend.

"I am more than glad to see you," he said. "I just got your letter to Clara, and as she wanted me to open any letter that might be at the Braxbury post-office for her, I read it. We do not live in Braxbury any longer, but further west, at a place called Silver Creek, where I have a good-sized plantation."

"Is that so? When did you move, Mr. Denton?"

"Only a few weeks ago, which accounts for you not having known of the change. I had a good chance to trade my place in town for a plantation, or ranch, as my son Bob calls it, and I took it. We have a fine place, and Clara will be much pleased, I am sure, to have you and your friends pay us a visit."

"Oh, mamma, let us go!" cried Dora. "I don't wish to stay on the houseboat while the repairs are being made."

The matter was talked over for an hour, and the boys and girls took Mr. Denton over the houseboat, from end to end.

"I've heard of you Rover boys," said he to Dick, Tom and Sam. "Mrs. Stanhope has written to us about you, and how you once saved her from a fellow named Josiah Crabtree. If you and your chums wish to visit our place, I'd like you to do so. I've got a son Bob who, I know, would like to meet you."

"Well, I wouldn't mind taking a trip inland," answered Dick.

"Can't we go on horseback?" put in Sam eagerly.

"We might do that."

"Certainly, you could make the trip in that way," said Mr. Denton. "But it would take some time, for the roads are not of the best down here. We usually take a train as far as Docker Crossing, and then ride the rest of the distance, twelve miles, in a carriage or on horseback."

"I'll tell you what's let do," suggested Tom. "The girls and the ladies can go with Mr. Denton on the train, and all us boys can hire horses and make the trip that way. We can leave Captain Starr and Aleck in charge of the houseboat until we get back. We need not hurry ourselves, for our time is our own."

When talked over, this plan met with universal approval, and it was decided to put it into execution without delay. Mr. Denton wished them to make an extended stay at his plantation, and the boys decided to take their own time in getting there.

"It will be just the outing on horseback that I have been looking for," said Sam. "I hope we have nothing but clear weather."

"We ought to have, after such a storm," said Fred. "See how clear the sky is to-day."

"That trip to the plantation on horseback will take about five days," said Dick. "That will make quite an outing."

"Puts me in mind of our trip out West," said Tom. "What are we going to do when night comes on? Go to some ranch, or make our own camp?"

"Oh, let us go into our own camp!" cried Songbird. "It will be such fun!"

"That's the talk," chimed in Sam.

"We can camp out on the way if the weather proves good," decided Dick. "But if it rains good and hard, I reckon all of you will be glad enough to get under cover."

"Pooh! who's afraid of a little rain," put in Fred. "Why, that will make us grow!"

So the talk ran on, and finally all arrangements were completed for the trip inland. Aleck Pop was sorry he could not accompany the boys, but Dick thought it best that he remain behind.

"You know how Captain Starr is, Aleck – a bit queer at times. The *Dora* is a valuable craft, and I shall feel safer if I know you are helping to keep watch over her."

"All right, Massa Dick. I will do my best to see dat no harm comes to de houseboat. But I'd like to be wid you boys, no use er talkin'."

"Perhaps you can go along next time," said Dick, and with this the colored man had to be content.

It did not take the ladies and the girls long to get ready for the trip, and they left on the following morning, the boys going to the railroad station to see them off. There was a hearty handshake all around. Then the train came in and the party was off with a waving of handkerchiefs.

"And now to get ready for our own start," came from Tom.

Through the carpenter who had taken the contract to repair the houseboat, they were introduced to a man who owned a number of horses, and for a proper consideration this individual let them have the use of the steeds they wanted. They were all good animals and used to the saddle, and the man guaranteed that the lads would not have any trouble whatever with them.

"But I want to tell you beforehand that the road is none of the best," said the horse owner. "It is pretty fair for the first fifteen miles or so, but then it is bad for thirty miles after that. You want to beware of sink holes."

"We've been on some pretty bad roads before this," answered Sam. "I guess we'll know enough to take care of ourselves."

"Well, I didn't think there would be any harm in telling you."

"Oh, that's all right."

The Rover boys were so used to traveling and to camping out that they knew exactly what to take along. The other lads were also well informed, because of the military encampments in which they had participated. They carried only what was necessary, so that their steeds might not be too heavily burdened.

"Looks like yo' was ready fo' a reg'lar outin'," remarked Aleck when they were ready for a start. "I dun hopes yo' all come back safe and sound."

"Why, of course we'll come back safe and sound!" exclaimed Sam. "What put that into your noddle, Aleck?"

"I dunno, Massa Sam. But dis am a queer country, ain't it?"

"Not in the least. We expect to have a fine outing, and nothing else."

"And we'll be back here inside of two weeks," added Dick. "That is, unless we make up our minds to stay at Mr. Denton's place for a while."

"All right, sah."

"And when we get back, I shall expect to see the houseboat in first-class order," continued Dick to Captain Starr.

"I shall do my best," answered the captain.

A moment later, all of the boys mounted their horses and the journey inland was begun. Little did they dream of the strange adventures and perils which lay ahead of them.

## CHAPTER VII

### A DAY ON THE ROAD

"Vot kind of a horse you vos call dis, annahow?"

The question came from Hans, after about four miles of the journey had been covered. So far, his steed had acted well enough, but now, without warning, the animal began to balk and paw the turf.

"Something is wrong, that is certain," replied Dick. "Perhaps you haven't got a tight enough rein, Hans."

"Dot reins vos so tight as nefer vos. I dink dis horse got somedings der madder mit him."

As the German boy finished, he gave the horse a slap on the neck with his hands. In a twinkling, up came the steed's hind heels, and poor Hans slid out of the saddle and down to the neck.

"Voah, dere!" he bawled. "Voah, I said! Vot you wants to do, annahow, drow me your head ofer? Sthop, und do it kvick!"

But the horse did not stop. Instead, he began to back, and then of a sudden he leaped high up in the air, to come down on all fours with a thump that nearly jounced poor Hans to pieces.

"Hello, Hans has got a bucking bronco!" cried Tom. "Hans, what will you take for him?"

"I gif him away!" bawled the poor German youth. "Oh!"

For the steed had made another leap, and now Hans went over his neck in a jiffy, to land in a heap of dust on the side of the road. Then the horse took to his heels and disappeared up the trail like a flash.

"Are you hurt?" questioned Dick, leaping to the ground and running to the German youth's assistance.

"Vere is dot horse?" sang out Hans as he scrambled up and wiped the dust from his mouth and eyes. He was not injured, but was greatly excited.

"The horse has run away."

"Vell, I nefer! Go after him, somepotty!"

"I'll go after him!" cried Tom.

"So will I," added Fred, and away they sped, with Sam and Songbird after them.

"Be careful!" called Dick. "That horse may prove to be a pretty high-strung beast."

"I think I can manage him," cried Tom. "But we have got to locate him first."

Those in pursuit of the horse had to travel the best part of a mile before they came in sight of the animal, quietly grazing by the roadside.

"Looks as meek as a lamb," observed Fred. "Whoa, there!" he called out.

At the call, the horse pricked up his ears and looked at them curiously.

Then he took half a dozen steps forward.

"He is going to run away again!" came in a warning from Songbird.

"Not to-day!" sang out Tom, and riding forward, he leaned over and caught the dangling reins. Then, watching his chance, he leaped into the other saddle.

Scarcely had he done this, than the runaway steed began to prance, and kicked up his heels as before. But Tom was on guard, and try his best, the horse could not dislodge the boy.

"Beware, Tom!" cried Sam. "Don't let him throw you, or he may step on you!"

"I don't intend to let him throw me!" was the panting answer.

Finding he could not throw Tom, the horse adopted new tactics. He gave a sudden bound forward and was off with the speed of the wind.

"He is running away with Tom!"

On and on went the steed, and Tom did his best to pull him in, but without result. Then the fun-loving youth smiled grimly and shut his teeth hard.

"All right, Old Fireworks, if you want to run, I'll give you all you want of it," he murmured.

On and on they flew, until a bend in the road shut off the others from view. A mile was covered, and the horse showed signs of slackening his speed.

"No, you don't," said Tom. "You wanted to run, now keep it up for a while," and he slapped the animal vigorously.

Away went the horse, and another quarter of a mile was passed. Then the horse slackened up once more.

"Another run, please," said Tom, and slapped him as before. The horse went on, but at a reduced speed, and came to a halt before another quarter mile was passed.

"Had about enough, eh?" questioned Tom. "Well, you can run a little more, just for good measure."

By the time the next run came to an end, the horse was covered with foam and tired out, for the road was very rough. Tom now turned him back and made him journey along at a fairly good rate of speed.

"Well, I declare, here comes Tom back!" cried Fred on catching sight of the fun-loving Rover. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit."

"And the horse?" asked Sam.

"As meek as a lamb – shouldn't wish for a better animal. He wanted a little run, that's all, and I gave it to him."

Soon Dick came up, with Hans riding behind him. The German boy looked at the captured horse with awe.

"Did he bite you?" he questioned.

"No."

"Didn't he hurt you at all?"

"Nary a hurt, Hansy."

"Vonderful!"

"Do you want him back?"

"Not for a dousand tollars, Tom. Of I got to ride him, I walk," continued Hans decidedly.

"Then, supposing you try my horse. He is gentle enough."

"Ton't you been afraid of dot beast?"

"No."

"All right, den, I dook your horse. But of you got killed, it ton't vos mine funeral," added Hans warningly.

The animal Tom had been riding was close by, and soon the German youth was in the saddle and the journey was resumed. They could not go fast, however, for Tom's horse was all but exhausted.

"I think he has learned his lesson," said Tom to his brothers. And so it proved, for after that single "kick-up," the horse gave them no further trouble.

About four o'clock that afternoon, they rode into a place called Harpertown, which was something of a horse-trading center. Some of the horse dealers thought they had come in to do some trading, but lost interest when the boys told them that they were simply on a journey to the Denton plantation.

"We may as well stop here for a while," said Sam. "Perhaps we can get a good supper at the hotel."

"Thought we were going to camp out," remarked Fred. "Build our own camp fire, and all that?"

"We can try that to-morrow, when we are among the hills," said Dick, and by a vote it was decided to stay in Harpertown for supper.

They put up their horses at the livery stable attached to the hotel, and then went to the lavatory to wash up. On coming out and going to the general room of the hostelry, Dick ran into a man who looked familiar to him.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Monday?" he cried, and put out his hand.

The man looked startled at being addressed so unexpectedly. Then he recognized Dick, and smiled faintly.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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