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# **The Rover Boys on the Plains The Mystery of Red Rock Ranch**

Edward Stratemeyer

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THE ROVER BOYS ON THE PLAINS

or

THE MYSTERY OF RED ROCK RANCH

By Arthur M. WinField

Grosset & Dunlap Publishers

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## INTRODUCTION

My Dear Boys: "The Rover Boys on the Plains" is a complete story in itself, but forms the tenth volume of a line known under the general title of "The Rover Boys' Series for Young Americans."

Ten volumes make a great number, and, as I look back, I wonder how I have been able to write so many. As I have said before, when I started this series I had in mind to pen three volumes and possibly a fourth. But no sooner had "The Rover Boys at School," "The Rover Boys on the Ocean," "The Rover Boys in the Jungle" and "The Rover Boys Out West" appeared than there was a demand for another volume, and then more, and so I have had to take the boys from time to time, "On the Great Lakes," "In the Mountains," "On Land and Sea," "In Camp" and "On the River," where we last left them.

The present tale tells of adventures on the mighty Mississippi River, and then on the great plains, where Dick, Tom and Sam, and some of their friends, have a variety of adventures and assist in unraveling the mystery surrounding a lonely ranch. Of course, their old enemy, Baxter, is bound to make himself known, but the Rover boys do not fail to take care of themselves, as of old.

Again, I thank the many thousands who have shown their appreciation of my efforts to amuse and instruct them. I earnestly hope the present volume will not disappoint them.

Affectionately and sincerely yours,

**ARTHUR M. WINFIELD.**



# THE ROVER BOYS ON THE PLAINS

## 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 encamp-

ment, 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 chimney! 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 sumfing 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.