

## PERCY RAY'S TRICK BOAT

By Nathan Haskell Dole

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**“FATHER,** I’m going to build a boat.”

“Build a boat! You couldn’t build a boat!”

There was no conviction in the father’s tone. Alexander Ray, who was satisfied with himself, with all his possessions, and, above all, with his only son, in his heart believed that his son could do anything, just as he believed that he himself could do anything. Percy looked like his father. He had the same bright blue eyes, the same aquiline nose, the same determined mouth. His hair stood up on his head with the same aggressive fierceness. They both had a quick, eager way of speaking.

“What is your plan?” asked Percy’s father.

“Well, I’m going to build it in the barn. I’ll get some wood over at the sawmill. I saw some over there which looked just right.”

“What kind of a boat?”

“No flat-bottomed punt, I tell you! I want one that will sail. I’ll build her with a keel and a rudder.”

“Have you made a sketch of it?”

“No; only in my own mind.”

“You want a carefully drawn sketch of it. I’ll help you.”

Mr. Ray got some large sheets of brown paper, and he and Percy were soon deeply engrossed in making measurements to scale. Both had considerable skill in drawing, and the boat as it took shape gave promise of being a joy forever. They reckoned about how much lumber would be necessary, and Percy borrowed a team of a neighbor and went to the mill to make his purchase.

The old harness-room in the barn had been converted into a carpenter’s shop; it contained a solid bench, and a fairly complete assortment of tools. The main body of the barn afforded ample room for the boat-building. The big folding doors could be flung wide open, and the view, as one looked out, comprised a small grove of maple-trees with one big oak and one tall pine, and, far beyond, the main village and the slope of a high hill covered with old apple-trees. Out of sight lay the wide river into which the boat would be launched. The barn stood lower than the house, which was of brick, with huge chimneys. One could stand on the front door-step and fling a stone into the water.

Percy went to school in the morning; he had, therefore, only three or four afternoon hours and his Saturdays in which to work on the boat. If he had not

been eager to have it finished by the beginning of the summer vacation, he would have been rather jealous, and have objected to his father's pushing it forward while he himself was engaged in reading how Caesar constructed the bridge or Odysseus made his raft. Mr. Ray puttered more or less, but Percy did the larger part of the work. It was wonderful to see the boat grow. The keel was laid with great care, and the ribs, skillfully shaped, took their proper places. One thing Percy's father could do, and that was to make shavings. He handled the plane like a master, and he did yeoman's work in smoothing the boards. It was to be a lapstreak.

The pounding and general clatter could not fail to attract attention, and there was always a little crowd of critics who watched the operations with the keenest interest. When the work began, the ice was still in the river. It went out as usual on Sunday, and there was even a first-class freshet. Another barn, standing a little lower, was inundated, and Caleb Loring had to take a flat-bottomed punt and rescue the Widow Jones's cow. Percy was sorry that his craft was not in readiness to engage in such a deed of mercy.

At last, the school examinations were finished, and the boat was ready to be launched. All the boys of the village, and not a few men, gathered to watch and assist. In the olden days, before the bridge was built, long before the war, there had been a ferry, and the road leading diagonally down the rather steep bank still existed. Indeed, it was always used in winter when there was teaming on the ice. Percy arranged two pairs of wheels taken from a hay-cart, and, with the assistance of willing hands, got the boat safely and steadily established between solid crutches. Strong ropes were attached to the forward axle. Ropes were also fastened to the rear axle, so as to hold back when going down the incline. A team of shouting boys were waiting the word of command to march forward with the glittering equipage. Glittering? It was painted white, with two parallel green lines. The name, *Speranza*, was delicately lettered on the stern. Two parts of brass rowlocks were in place. Four small boys disputed the honor of carrying the four oars.

The procession started. An excited crowd was on hand to witness the launching. Percy had in some way procured a small yacht-cannon. It was all ready to fire a salute to the young queen of the river. Everything went like clockwork. The lads at the ropes walked in step. A couple of the taller ones moved at each side to give a steadying hand if it were necessary. Under the tall hackmatack trees that lined the street, the sunlight pouring down from a cloudless sky, went the boat. It soon reached the old ferry road. The team changed places, taking hold of the rear ropes. It was all admirably managed. Percy's heart swelled with pride. He realized that he occupied a commanding position among his fellows. Everyone in town had been praising his enterprise and ingenuity. This was his day of triumph.

The river flowed by in a calm and sedate manner. There was not a breeze. Every bush and tree was reflected in its soft brown water. Occasionally, a little fountain of bubbles would mount to the surface—gas from some decaying log buried in the muddy bottom. Now and then a fish would leap and cause a spreading circle to mar the images depicted on the mirror. There was a beach of clean white sand; the bottom sloped gradually for perhaps ten feet, and then went down suddenly. It was an ideal place to launch the bonny craft. It did not take much imagination to see that the *Speranza* was quivering with anticipation. It seemed to be actually alive. Very carefully she was pushed out into the stream until she floated. Then Percy, taking the end of the painter, towed her round to his float. This was constructed of large logs fastened together with parallel planks and securely anchored. All the boys would have piled in at once, but he kept them off. “No,” said he, “I’ll try it myself first. You shall have your show afterward.” He took one pair of the oars, and carefully, so as not to scratch the paint, stepped in. He was just inserting one oar into the rowlock, having drifted away a few feet from the float, when suddenly, without the least warning, the boat rolled over, tipping the proud owner into the river. A shout went up from the crowd on the bank; but they all knew Percy could swim like a duck. He came up sputtering, but a few strokes brought him and the boat to shallow water.

Here Mr. Ray asserted himself.

“You were careless,” he said; “there’s no sense in managing a- boat like that! I thought you knew how to handle oars. Here, give it to me. I will show you how!”

It was hot in the sun, so there was no danger of Percy’s getting cold, though the water was streaming from his clothes and from his thick hair.

Mr. Ray, assisted by several of the boys, brought the boat to the float again.

He took the oars, and crept cautiously over the bow and seated himself on the middle thwart. He then tried to insert both oars simultaneously, saying rather boastfully, “I was brought up in a boat. I know all about them—” The next instant he was floundering in the water. When the crowd saw the expression of his face, a mighty howl of unholy joy went up which might have been heard a mile. It was too bad, but Mr. Ray, in spite of many admirable qualities, enjoyed among his fellow-townsmen the reputation of being a little too boastful. He was so often justified in his pretensions that, to see him for once humiliated, relieved the disappointment which all felt at the failure of the *Speranza* as a passenger-carrying craft. Both oars and Mr. Ray’s new hat went sailing down the current together. Percy had to swim after them and bring them back.

As poor Mr. Ray waded ruefully ashore, he was overwhelmed with suggestions as to what should be done. One thought that the keel should have a lead shoe; another proposed to get some bricks for ballast.

“She sets just like a swan,” said Harry Manning. “She doesn’t look as if she’d be so cranky. Here comes Caleb Loring; perhaps he’ll try her.”

Caleb Loring was a half-witted fellow who got his living from the river. He had a flat-bottomed punt which he navigated backward or forward with a paddle. With it he collected cords of driftwood; from it he fished near the sunken piers of the old bridge that had been carried away during a January thaw, many years before. Caleb Loring was always the first to cross the river on the ice after it had closed over.

“What’s the trouble?” he asked as he came lumbering down over the bank. He wore a ragged straw hat, a blue flannel shirt, and trousers hitched to his shoulders by pieces of hemp rope. He was barefooted. “Oh, I see,” he continued, “boat too high-studded. Wait, I’ll get a stun’.” He went a few rods up the bank, and soon returned, bringing a water-worn boulder which he had used for an anchor. “There!” he exclaimed, “this’ll make her set deeper. Now she’ll be all right.”

“You try her, Caleb,” shouted several.

“I’d ruther paddle her,” said Caleb; “I’ll use the oar f’r a paddle.”

With perfect confidence he stepped into the *Speranza*, but he had not taken two strokes before the mischievous craft, with all the agility of a bucking bronco at a circus, flopped on her side, spilling Caleb Loring, just as she had spilled Percy and his father, into the smiling river.

Loring came up puffing like a grampus—a most ludicrous object. His straw hat and one oar went sailing down the current. The boat righted herself and floated gracefully, looking as innocent as she was beautiful.

“There’s something wrong with her,” said Mr. Ray, with the water still dripping from all his garments; “I can’t imagine what it is. She was built on measurements. We’ve got to take her up to the barn again.”

This time it was more like a funeral than like a wedding procession. The boys hauled her out of the stream and lifted her on the wheels. Then they all took hold and rushed her up the bank, and back to the place of her nativity. Nothing was talked about in the village during the next few days except Percy Ray’s “bucking boat,” and those who missed the great spectacle of Alexander Ray following Percy over her side, had no difficulty in imagining the scene, so vividly was it narrated by the various eye-witnesses.

Percy and his father were sitting, a few days later,—in dry clothes, of course, and with a somewhat chastened spirit—talking about the still unsolved problem of the bucking boat, as it was universally called. The door-bell rang. The visitor was the proprietor of a little hotel at “the Pond.” This was a resort about six

miles from the village. Picnic parties frequently went there for sailing, swimming, rowing, and fishing. Ebenezer Junkins had originally been a farmer, and his acres skirted the Pond. He had found it more profitable to rent his grove, to take boarders, and gradually to enlarge his fleet of boats, than to practice farming. He was a character. He had very blue eyes, sandy hair, and a straggly beard under his chin. His clothes consisted of a pair of very baggy pantaloons, a rusty black coat, and cowhide boots. He was regarded as extremely shrewd. He took a seat, and, twisting his broad-brimmed rusty black hat in his big, hairy hands, which carried around with them a goodly share of the rich soil of his farm, he hemmed and hawed for a while, and then burst out suddenly:

“I hearn tell about that there boat o’ yourn. That was plum funny—the way she upsot ye. I’d ‘a’ giv’ a dime to ‘a’ seen that circus-show. What I come f’r is to find out if ye’d sell her.”

“I don’t think it would be fair to palm her off on anyone,” said Mr. Ray; “do you, Percy?”

“Why, no; it wouldn’t be safe for any one to try to go out in her,” said the boy.

“Well, I’d take the resk o’ that,” eagerly urged Mr. Junkins. “I’ve got quite a stack o’ boats, and I’m mighty keerful how I let ‘em. What will ye take f’r her?”

“Let me see,” mused Mr. Ray. “It cost us about twenty dollars, didn’t it, Percy?”

“I kept the accounts very carefully,” replied Percy. “Not reckoning our time, the bare materials stood us about twelve dollars. That doesn’t include the oars. One of them went down the river.”

“I’ll give ye six dollars f’r her. She ain’t no good to you nohow.”

“I don’t think I want to sell her,” decided Percy. “I’m bound to discover what was the trouble with her, and if I can’t make her carry me, I’ll take the material and build another. What do *you* want of her, anyway?”

Ebenezer Junkins’s desire to get the boat was so evident that the boy’s bright mind was filled with all sorts of conjectures.

“Ef ye don’t want to sell her, will ye rent her to me?”

“Tell us what you want to do with her,” insisted Mr. Ray.

“If ye’ll either sell her or rent her, I’ll tell ye what my scheme is,” replied Ebenezer, after a little consideration, during which he scratched his sandy hair vigorously.

“I’d just as lief rent it,” said Percy. “Now tell us what you propose to do.”

“Wall, I went to the circus onc’t, and I see a bucking mule named Maud. Ther’ was a standin’ offer of five dollars to any one who’d stay three minutes on her back, an’ I never see no one git it. When I heerd about your ‘buckin’ boat,’ ‘t occurred to me that I might try the same scheme: with *her*. I’ll offer a

dollar to the boy or man who will row or paddle her across fr'm the float over to the p'int 'thout gittin' tipped over—'t 's about as fur's fr'm here up to the corner yonder. I'll charge ten cents a try at it. There's hundreds o' boys an' men come every season an' go in swimmin'. "I'll be a grand card."

"What would *you* be willing to pay for it for the summer?"

At first he offered a lump sum, but, after some bargaining, it was decided that Percy should have twenty-five percent of all the profits.

"I come down in my hay-cart," said Ebenezer, "an' I s'pose I may's well take her now's any time. That's all right, ain't it?"

A little later, the village was astonished to see Ebenezer Junkins, whom everyone knew, deliberately driving through the streets and across the bridge with the *Speranza*, apparently enjoying the sensation she was creating.

A week later, the Sunday-school which Percy was regularly attending held its annual picnic at the Pond. Everyone was going. It was known that Percy's trick boat would be going through her paces. All the boys and a good many of the girls carried their bathing-suits, and an extra dime and the resolution to conquer the mischievous little craft. It was a perfect summer day, not even the prospect or threat of a shower to mar its festivity. There was the usual motley array of equipages—wagons which looked as if they had been made before the flood, old-fashioned chaises, barges, and carts piled high with sweet-scented new hay. Baskets filled with home-made goodies were not lacking, and the train started off promptly, with shouts and songs.

Percy, though he was going to play on the side of the Academy boys against the outsiders in a game of base-ball, managed, first of all, to steal away and get a look at his masterpiece—the bonny *Speranza*. Yes, there she floated, demure and graceful! He could not help feeling proud of her nice lines—a pride tempered, indeed, by the consciousness that she had played him false. Ebenezer saw him as he stood contemplating her.

"She's a swan!" exclaimed Percy, with a burst of enthusiasm he could not repress.

"I sh'd call her a duck!" chuckled Ebenezer. "Nobody ain't tamed her yit. More 'n forty's tried her so fur. That gives ye a dollar. Guess we'll make ye another today."

There was a hurry call for Percy, whose heart, it must be confessed, was not in the game. At least he did not play so well as usual. Nevertheless, the Academy boys came out ahead: the score stood five to four. When the nine innings were finished, there was a rush for the water. Three or four boys piled into each of the bath-houses, and, in an incredibly short time, the pond was alive with heads of every color—black, yellow, brown, red. Some dived from the Boat; others jumped; many raced in, leaving a foamy wake and making a prodigious splash. Several tried to see how far they could swim under water.

But after the first general cooling off, there was a simultaneous convention gathered to tame Percy's trick boat. Ebenezer supervised the trials. A painted sign announced the terms: each competitor was to pay ten cents; any number might try at once. Whoever succeeded in propelling the *Speranza* from the float to the point without overturning should receive a dollar.

Percy himself was the first to try the game. He had an inward lurking hope that his first experience with his beautiful boat might have been only a dream—a dreadful nightmare. But the trick boat was true to her principles. She seemed to be actually alive. She took a mischievous delight in deceiving, for a moment, the careful venturer, and then, with a little shake, flinging him into the shining waters of the pond, the next moment riding calm and serene, as if no such impulse had ever entered her perverse feminine heart.

Half a dozen of the larger boys in succession tried to tame her; they all floundered, one after the other. Then companies of twos, threes, and fours, and, finally, half a dozen at once, experimented. The *Speranza* stood nobly to her reputation. She was no Atalanta: she would not be bribed by a golden apple; she was as tameless as Pegasus. She and her antics made the event of the picnic. Even the girls—a few of them, at least—with no little self-confidence, thought they might have better success; but the *Speranza* was proof against even this appeal to the sex pride—she refused to be wheedled.

Ebenezer pocketed the dimes.

It chanced that a sailor on shore leave arrived at the Pond. He heard of the unruly lady of the waters. He knew he could conquer her. He scorned to take off his watch. "I never saw a boat yet that I couldn't manage," he boasted. The *Speranza* heard him; she played with him after the manner of her kind. She let him row away ten or a dozen strokes from the dock. "This is an easy one!" he was saying to himself; but—the thought was finished in the cooling, gurgling waters. From the shore it could be seen how the tameless one exulted in her pride. The sailor knew not how to swim, but half a dozen of the boys bore down to his aid, and got him ashore, where he stood for a rueful moment, his wide trousers clinging limply to his legs, and streams of water like tears running from his head; then he disappeared, all his boastfulness melted within him.

All that summer, Percy Ray's trick boat was the drawing attraction of Ebenezer Junkins's picnic grounds. Her fame traveled far and wide; men came from distant places to discover the cause of such a freak. As the *Speranza* sat on the water, she looked as innocent and harmless as a dove. Yet ever there lurked that tricky spirit of mischief, ready to spill the would-be conqueror.

Percy's receipts for the season amounted to about fifty dollars. When the autumn came, it was the time for fairs; in such places as had streams or ponds easily accessible, there Ebenezer exhibited the *Speranza*, offering a prize of ten dollars for the successful mastery of the boat, and charging a quarter for the

privilege. As the price went up, the boat's pride increased. She bridled with the witchery of her unconquerable nature. One would have thought that a more docile spirit might have come to her in time—that she would have tired of exhibiting what has been called “the total depravity of inanimate things.” Inanimate? If ever a boat was animate, she was! She exerted an irresistible fascination. Men could not seem to help making the futile attempt to manage the fickle creature. But never once did the ten-dollar gold piece change hands.

When the weather became too cold, the *Speranza* was stored in a shed on Ebenezer Junkins's farm. One October morning, the shed was burned to the ground. It was supposed that some tramp who had slept in it had smoked his pipe and thrown a match into rubbish. The *Speranza* perished in the conflagration, with several more innocent boats. Ebenezer was inconsolable. She was the only boat of her class. Percy, with a part of the money which he received as his share of the season's proceeds, bought a second-hand motor-boat at a great bargain. It was an innovation on the river, and he soon covered the cost of it in taking excursion parties to the Glen and the Old Indian village, and other points of interest on the river.

But he will wonder to his dying day what caused the *Speranza* to deceive the promise of its beautiful lines.