


The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter I: Under Sealed Orders

“Now KEEP your word, Frank, and tell us the news!”

“Yes, you got us to come to your house tonight under a promise, remember. What wonderful thing has happened to make you look so tickled?”

“Talk to me about the Sphinx! Frank has the old relic beaten to a frazzle!”

Three boys gathered eagerly around the fourth as they bombarded him after this fashion. Frank Langdon looked at the faces of his chums and laughed again.

“Well, it would be a shame to keep you squirming on the anxious seat any longer, boys, and I’m going to take you into my confidence just as fast as I can. Sit down and hold your oars. Jerry, pull that stool up; Will, the settee must do for you and Bluff. Now, are you ready?” he asked, tantalizingly.

“Crazy to hear!” was the characteristic reply of Bluff, otherwise Richard Masters, son of Centerville’s greatest lawyer.

“Tell me about that, will you?” exclaimed Jerry Wallington.

“Please go on before we explode!” begged Will Milton.

“These things always have a beginning, you know. This one happens to be founded on the fact that we are close to our annual Christmas vacation, and that this year it happens that we’re going to enjoy two full weeks—you know that?” said Frank.

“Of course we do, thanks to that steam-heater getting out of order. But don’t rehash old stuff. That’s history by now. What we want is the meat in the cocoanut. Please hit for the bull’s-eye, first chop,” pleaded Will.

“I was wondering what we would do with ourselves during that time. There’s old Jesse Wilcox, the trapper, who invited us up to spend a week with him and see how he runs out his string of traps in cold weather, catching muskrats, mink, ‘coons, foxes and all such things in more or less abundance. We had about decided that we would accept, and I was even getting ready to go when something happened.”

“Talk to me about your tantalizing chaps, did you ever meet up with one as bad as Frank can be when he knows the rest of us are so keen to hear?” cried Jerry.

“What was it?” demanded Bluff.



“I had a letter that changed my mind,” replied Frank.

“Not from old Jesse?”

“Well, hardly, for I don’t believe the old fellow can write. This was from one of my cousins, a fellow several years older than myself. You met him about a year ago when he stopped with us a few days.”

“You must mean Archie Dunn,” said Will.

“Go up head, Will. Archie it was. I was glad enough to get a letter from him, but when I read what he had to propose I thought I should have a fit.”

“Just as we will, unless you hurry your yarn,” growled Jerry, moving uneasily.

“Well, Archie wrote that he had laid out a plan for his amusement this winter. You know he is independent, having come into quite a snug fortune. He is as fond of outdoor life as any member of this club, and, having a tutor to accompany him, is able to do lots of splendid stunts that less fortunate chaps can only dream about.”

“The lucky dog!” commented Bluff, enviously.

“It seems that this year he was about to carry out a long-cherished plan of his. He purchased a beautiful little motor-boat, about twenty-seven feet long, and carrying a twelve horse-power engine. He says she can make twelve miles an hour if pushed, but being beamy she is as steady as a church floor and mighty comfortable; just the kind of a craft for cruising along a river or the bays of a coast.”

Jerry groaned.

“You’re killing me by inches! To tell us all this and then ask us to settle on going up there into the woods for a two-weeks’ spin! It’s a crime, that’s what!” he exclaimed.

“Wait!” said Frank, mysteriously; and the others immediately drew a bit closer, almost holding their very breath with eagerness and anticipation.

“He had this boat taken to a Southern town on the railroad, where a navigable river flows through Northern Florida into the Gulf. Here he also shipped all his provisions, intending to make a start just before Christmas, when the unexpected happened. He had an accident—broke through the ice when skating, came near being drowned, and has been laid up with pneumonia ever since!”

“Poor chap! That’s awful!” declared Bluff.

“But that isn’t the worst by any means, from our standpoint, boys. His doctor has strictly forbidden him to take that voyage this winter and is sending him off with his tutor to some baths in Southern Europe or some old place where he may recover his strength.”

The three boys groaned in concert.

“A rough deal all around,” said Jerry.

“What a disappointment it must have been, and he with his heart set on the trip!” exclaimed Will.

“But they tell us that ‘it’s a poor wind that blows nobody good.’ So he has written me this letter, making a proposal,” went on Frank, calmly.

“What!” shouted Jerry, clutching the arm of his chum.

“Oh! he hates to leave his fine, dandy little launch there at that town, where there is really no accommodation for her, and would like to have some one take her over the course to Cedar Keys, Florida, to put her up with a boat builder he knows. And so he wrote to me,” continued Frank.

“Do you mean he has asked you to go down there and take that boat, just as he intended doing?” gasped Bluff.

“Yes, only that instead of taking two months loitering along I could do the job in ten days, perhaps,” was the answer.

“Oh! what a lucky dog you are,” sighed Will; “think of the innumerable chances for taking magnificent snapshots along the way.”

“Hold on. I didn’t tell you that in his letter he says particularly, ‘you and those bully good chums of yours, the whole three—plenty of sleeping accommodations for the lot aboard!’” cried Frank, with a smile.

Then there was a scene! Jerry gripped Bluff, and gave him a hug a bear might have envied, while Will was shaking Frank’s hand as though it were a pump handle.

“Glorious!”

“The finest ever!”

“It beats the Dutch how Frank runs into snaps!”

This last, of course, from Jerry, who was taking his turn now at squeezing the hand of his chum.

“But, I’m afraid, fellows, that we won’t ever get the consent of our parents,” sighed Will. “My mother would hate to have me go so far away. You know she only has my twin sister Violet and myself. Oh! it’s sure too good to be true.”

“Now don’t cross a river until you come to it, fellows. To tell you the truth, that part of the programme has already been attended to. My father and myself have been the rounds unbeknown to any of you, and got the consent of Will’s mother, as well as the parents of Bluff and Jerry. It’s a settled thing, boys!”

They sat there and stared at each other. Evidently none of them could fully grasp the wonderful proposition entirely. They thought they must be dreaming.

“Please don’t wake me up; this is too bang-up for anything,” said Will.



“Frank, your equal never existed. Talk to me about your chums, no fellows ever had such a boss comrade as your fellow-members of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club!” declared Jerry.

“When do we start?” demanded Bluff, as though ready to run for the train at that very minute.

“The day after to-morrow. School closes in one more day, and father thought it wouldn’t matter much if we slipped off a bit ahead of time. He will fix it with the Head all right. So, now you’ve got to be as busy as bees getting your duffle in readiness between now and the time the train goes, eight A.M. sharp.”

“That governor of yours is certainly the finest ever. How did it come that he fell in with the idea so quickly? Did you have to beg hard?” asked Will.

“That’s the strangest part of it, as I’ll tell you presently. He fairly jumped at the idea when I told him about Cedar Keys. But we must spend the whole evening settling just what we are to take along with us,” ventured Frank.

“What did you say about grub?” queried Bluff, whose appetite never failed him.

“Archie wants us to accept all he has laid in, and encloses the list. I need add only a few little things that I happen to know one or the other of us fancies especially, and we are fixed for two weeks. You see there were two of them, and they expected to be afloat two months, so he laid in a large quantity of bacon, coffee, tea, sugar, and all substantial, much more than we can ever use; and I know Archie well enough to make sure they came from the best grocery in New York.”

“Oh! the darling, won’t we remember him in our prayers, boys, and hope he gets good and strong over at that cure in Europe? There will be never a meal but that our thanks will ascend for this good deed of Cousin Archie. He belongs to all of us; this club adopts him as its one honorary member; and I hereby propose three cheers for the biggest-hearted chap going. Hip, hip, hurray!”

Doubtless Frank’s father and mother exchanged smiles when this hearty cheer came to their ears from Frank’s den; but Mr. Langdon, even though a staid banker now, never forgot that he had once been a boy himself; and they understood the enthusiasm that must inevitably sweep over the three chums of Frank when they heard the glorious news.

So the boys proceeded to go into executive session, and jot down lists of such things as they would be apt to need on the outing.

“I understand that Archie had some heavy fishing tackle in his supplies, which we can count on to carry us through. Take your heavy rods only, and your guns, with proper ammunition,” suggested Frank.



“And I’ll lay in a stock of films and such things, for I expect to get lots of fine pictures among those wonderful Southern scenes. I’ve always wanted to see that Spanish moss trailing from the swamp trees like it is in all Southern views. I’m the happiest chap in Centerville tonight, Frank!” exclaimed Will.

“But see here,” interrupted Bluff, “how about that matter connected with your good dad, Frank—why was he so pleased at the idea of you going to Cedar Keys?”

“Yes, tell us about that,” burst out Jerry.

“It’s a big mystery, fellows. Father smiled and nodded his head when I read him Archie’s letter. ‘What a remarkable coincidence. I was just thinking of going to that city myself, or sending a trusted messenger, and now you can do it all for me,’ he said.”

The boys exchanged looks.

“Don’t it just beat all?” remarked Jerry, weakly.

“Why, we’re having the luckiest streak of our lives, that’s what. But see here, Frank, didn’t he tell you more?” remarked Bluff, who always wanted to know, being the son of a lawyer.

“He gave me this little packet, done up in a stout manila envelope, and told me not to open it until I came in sight of Cedar Keys. Inside would be found full instructions as to what errand he wanted me to carry out.”

“Better and better! We sail under sealed orders, fellows. That should add a little zest to the voyage. I know I’ll be consumed with curiosity every minute of the time wanting to know what under the sun it can be that your good dad has waiting for you to do,” said Will, seriously.

“Well,” remarked Frank, “you see me put the packet away, not to be opened until the proper time; and now we’d better go on with our lists.”