

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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter VII: A Florida Sheriff

There was an upheaval of various blankets, three faces peeped forth, and then came a wild scramble for weapons.

“Wow! What is it, Frank!” bellowed Bluff.

“My camera! Who took it away from where I placed it?”

“Talk to me about that, will you! That fellow will howl after his blooming box when he goes to cross the Styx after he dies,” grunted Jerry.

Frank had paid no attention to his comrades. His eyes were glued upon the shadowy spot where he felt positive he had seen some creeping figure drawing closer to the boat, inch by inch.

They heard him laugh aloud, as though something he had seen amused him.

“Was it a thief? And did you shoot him?” asked Will, appalled.

“A thief, all right; but I didn’t shoot the beggar. Wish I had, now,” responded the watch, with regret in his voice.

“Then it couldn’t have been a human thief, for you’d never say that. Did you see the critter go?” came from Jerry, as he peered forth, gun in hand.

“I fired high on purpose, for I was afraid it might be poor old George sneaking back to see if he could get away with any more of that fine bacon. Whatever it was, it made a flying leap back into the shadows. I thought I heard an angry or startled snarl, but you fellows made so much confusion as you bounced up that I couldn’t be sure.”

“Jumped away, eh? Then I take it the thing must have been a bobcat,” said Jerry.

“Something along the cat family, anyway,” replied Frank.

“Look here! You don’t mean to say it was—a panther?” demanded the other.

“I’m not saying anything; but in the morning we’ll go and take a look at the ground behind that second log over there. If there are any tracks, they ought to tell the story,” remarked Frank, who, no matter how positive he might feel that this was just what he had seen, would not commit himself without some proof.



“That’s what I get for waking Frank up so soon. Oh! why didn’t I hold out a little while longer? Nothing ever happens when I’m on duty, it seems. I must be a Jonah, that’s what!” sighed Will disconsolately.

“Why, what would you have done?” demanded Bluff.

“Shot the intruder, but by snapping the trigger of my little flashlight pistol, and in that way I’d have taken a picture of the beast as it crouched there. I sat here, holding that pistol, and my camera, ready, for two mortal hours, in vain. I’m the most unlucky dog going.”

“Well, I notice that, after all, you manage to gather in your share of pictures. The trouble is, you want to corral everything going. Well, me to the bench again for another snooze. Wake me when you get tired of sitting up, Frank. If the critter comes again, let him have a charge,” said Jerry.

“I certainly will, if I can make sure that it doesn’t happen to be a man,” was the reply of Frank.

Apparently, the report of the shotgun had alarmed the beast, for he certainly did not show himself again. Whatever it was, the attractive smell around the vicinity of the campfire must have drawn him out of the neighboring swamp, just as it had Black George, earlier in the night.

Both Jerry and Bluff took their turns, and in this way daylight found them undisturbed. Jerry had left his shotgun at home, and carried a rifle on this trip. He and Bluff had entered into many an argument because this new weapon was a six-shot gun; for Jerry had made all manner of fun over Bluff owning a shotgun built after the same principle, nor could they settle the dispute, Jerry claiming that it was all right in a rifle, as a man hunted big game with that, and his life might be in danger; while with the other weapon he usually only shot birds and inoffensive small animals; while Bluff declared that what was black for the pot was also black for the kettle.

Going ashore, soon after getting up, Frank knelt down alongside the log where he had seen the shadowy figure bound off.

“I say, Jerry!” he presently called out.

“Want me?” asked that worthy, folding up his blanket so that it could hang and get the breeze, whether they moved on or remained where they were.

“Yes. Come here. You’ll be interested, I think.”

Jerry quickly reached his side.

“What’s doing?” he asked, eagerly searching with his eyes the ground near Frank.

“Bend lower, for the sign is rather faint. What d’ye make of that, and that? Is it the paw of a bobcat?” asked the one on his knees, with an expressive smile.

“Great Jehosaphat! No! Then it was a panther, after all!” cried Jerry.

“I think I’m safe in saying yes to that question,” replied Frank.

“And now don’t you wish you’d shot him?”

“Well, yes, if I had been positive, which I couldn’t be, under the circumstances, you see. Perhaps I may be lucky enough to run across one of the breed again when there can be no uncertainty, for I would like very much to say I’d knocked over a panther,” was the reply Frank made.

“Say! Shall we cook breakfast again on the shore?” called Will from on board the boat.

“We might as well. There will be plenty of occasions when we’ll just have to do it aboard, and this fire seems cheerful like,” replied Jerry.

Frank agreeing with him, they carried the necessary utensils ashore, and preparations were begun looking toward the getting of a bounteous meal.

“Wonder how our good friend, Black George, feels this morning? Hello! We’re going to have visitors, I see. Look what’s coming down the river, boys!”

As Bluff spoke they ceased eating and turned to gaze upstream. A boat was advancing rapidly, with the aid of the current and a pair of stout ashen oars. Several men occupied the craft which was quite roomy.

“Say, they’ve got some dogs there. Ain’t those bloodhounds, Frank?” whispered Will, for the boat was now close by, the men craning their necks to look at the launch.

“I believe they are. Perhaps this is the sheriff on the run for our black friend, George,” returned Frank.

“Oh! I hope not. I don’t believe the poor chap is as dangerous as all that. I have an idea he’s more sinned against than sinning,” replied Will, who always looked on the better side of those he met, and hence was an easy mark for sharpers.

The men in the boat came ashore. Our friends then saw that the dogs were of a black-and-tan color, with long ears, and the aspect that distinguishes bloodhounds.

“Mornin’, neighbors. Takin’ a trip down the river, I see. That’s right. Like to see youngsters enjyin’ themselves. I’m the sheriff o’ this heah county, an’ these gentlemen is my deputies. We’re a-lookin’ fo’ a desprit scoundrel thet hes been doin’ heaps o’ mischief ‘round heah. His latest work was tuh rob the house o’ a cotton planter named Davis, an’ nigh about kill the old man. We want him, an’ we’re jest ‘bout determined not tuh go back without the skunk. Don’t s’pose yuh could ‘a’ set eyes on sech a pizen critter, gents?” said the leader.



He was a tall, lean man, with a hawklike nose and keen blue eyes. He wore a long frock coat, considerably the worse for wear, and this, with his slouch hat, gave him the appearance of a Western marshal, in the eyes of Jerry, at least.

“Who was this scoundrel?” asked Frank uneasily.

“His name is Bob Young, an’ he’s really the son o’ a minister upcountry, but long ago his father cast him off as a scamp. He’ll sure swing one o’ these days,” replied the sheriff, looking keenly at Frank, as though he suspected he might know something that he wanted to hear.

“Then he’s a white man?” asked the other quickly, and with evident relief.

“Shore he is, an’ the toughest ever. Seen any sign o’ him, stranger?”

“Not a thing. We had a coon in camp last night, starving, and we fed him. He was Black George, the man they ran out of town some time back,” ventured Frank.

He saw that the dogs were nosing about, and feared lest they should set out on the trail of the poor wretch by mistake.

The sheriff laughed.

“Oh, our time’s too valuable to fool away with that black trash. He ain’t wuth shootin’. Come on, then, boys. Like tuh sit up with yuh, friends, an’ have a snack, but we got to be on the move afore the trail below gits cold. Yuh see, we hed word ‘bout Bob, an’ we wanter git him this clip, sure. So-long, an’ good luck! Thet thar is sure the boss little boat yuh got.”

And presently the sheriff and his posse faded from view under the long streamers of hanging Spanish moss that overshadowed the river below.

“I’m just as glad. He gave me the creeps. That eye of his was fierce,” said Will.

“Oh, that’s because you’ve got a guilty conscience, I guess,” laughed Jerry. “Now to me he was a picture of a strong character that would have made a good showing in our album,” and he looked severely at Will.

“Oh! What beastly luck! Why didn’t I think of it in time? Another chance gone glimmering! I think you fellows are too mean for anything, not to remind me of these things in time. He would have embellished our album handsomely—and those dogs, too! How picturesque bloodhounds are! I feel sick.”

Will jumped up, snatched his camera, and stalked off beyond the edge of the camp, as if to brood alone. Presently they heard him calling:

“Oh, Frank! Won’t you come here for a minute? I’m just taking the picture of a big snake, and he’s as angry as you please. There’s a locust somewhere close by, too, keeping up a tremendous rattling. Please hurry! He won’t wait long!”



Frank, followed by Jerry, was off like a shot. His face turned white with sudden apprehension as he ran. Coming upon Will, kneeling there, and watching, he seized him by the shoulders and whirled him back, exclaiming:

“Why, you greenhorn, don’t you know that’s a diamond-back rattler, coiled up and ready to launch himself at you?”

