


The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter VIII: Will Does It

“Talk to me about babes in the woods!” gasped Jerry.

He was staring at the enormous rattler, that still kept up a buzzing with his rattle, and which sound poor Will had believed was made by a locust.

“Shoot the thing, Jerry! You’ve been wise enough to fetch your gun!” said Frank.

“That just suits me. Have you got all the snapshots you want, Will?” demanded Jerry, falling on one knee and elevating his rifle.

“There! He’s reforming! You see, he did actually think of me, for once. Oh, yes. I snapped him three times. I rather think he didn’t like the sound, for he darted his head at me wickedly. I suspected it might be a rattlesnake, though,” replied the photographer calmly.

Then came a sharp report.

“Keep back!” called Jerry as the snake’s folds suddenly flew out; but its head was almost blown from its body, and there was no more danger to be feared.

“I’ll get the rattle, to remind you of your narrow squeak, Will,” said Jerry.

“That’s kind of you, now; but I rather think you are getting it to remind you of your first shot at game with the new rifle,” remarked Will.

The others had by now come up to stare at the enormously thick snake, with more or less of a shudder.

“How about having that skin, to make a belt or something?” suggested Bluff.

“You’re welcome to it, if you can take it off and properly dry it; but you’re so squeamish about snakes I’d hardly think you’d care for the job,” remarked Jerry.

“I’ll see. I heard Nellie say she always wanted a belt made out of a skin like that, and perhaps I may try to get it,” concluded Bluff.

“Are we going to proceed, or put in a day around here, fellows?” asked Frank.

“I say stay. We may not get another chance at a swamp before we reach the open gulf, and I want to snap a dozen fine views off around here. I mean to take the little dinghy and push into the swamp a bit,” ventured Will.

“Say! he’s getting real venturesome, ain’t he?” laughed Jerry.

“Next thing he’ll be getting lost, and we’ll have a deuce of a time finding him again. Make him take a compass along, Frank, and that old revolver of yours,” growled Bluff.

“Don’t you worry about me, now. Perhaps you’ll find I’m able to look out for myself far better than any of you give me credit for,” returned the other, with a show of indignation.

He went aboard to get ready, taking another roll of films along, for, as he remarked, there could be no telling what might turn up.

“Try to keep your wits about you, Will, and don’t venture too far away. If in doubt, fire the pistol three times, and we’ll answer you,” said Frank, who was not wholly easy about the exploring trip.

“Got some grub along?” asked Bluff, for that was a very essential part of any undertaking, in his eyes.

“Yes to everything. So-long, fellows! Don’t let anybody run away with the motor-boat while I’m gone.” And, with a merry laugh, Will dipped his paddle into the water, sending the little dinghy gliding toward the more quiet lagoons of the swamp.

He was soon under the spell of his surroundings. These were so weird that the ardent photographer really forgot everything else. As he paddled along he saw a dozen pictures around him, and when he thought the light fair enough he took a time exposure.

So an hour passed away. In all that time he had seen no evidence of life, save a few alligators, some wary ‘coons, a ‘possum hanging from a tree by its tail, and some birds, mostly crows or bluejays.

In the water he had noted a variety of snakes. Remembering what Frank had told him about these gliding reptiles, Will was careful not to bother with them; for in all probability they were water moccasins, whose bite, if not so deadly as that of the diamond-back rattler, would cause a wound that might never heal, since it seems to put a certain poison into the flesh that brings about a running sore.

Perhaps he ought to go back. He had succeeded in taking all of half a dozen good views, besides several of which he was not so certain.

Then it dawned upon Will that, after all, he was not so sure that he knew which way he ought to go. True, he had a compass, and could tell where the north lay, as well as all other cardinal points, but the question was, did the camp lie east or south of where he happened to be just then?

He cudgled his brains to try to remember, so as to place himself.

“Say! Perhaps I am lost, all right,” he remarked, with a laugh, for it did not look at all serious just then, but more like a joke.

Then he suddenly remembered that he had the only boat.

“If they wanted to hunt for me they couldn’t do it. To move about in this swamp without a boat would be impossible; that is, for a stranger; and the launch could never come here. Guess I’ll shoot up a few and get my points.”

So saying, he banged away three times.

Presently there was an answering series of shots, but very far distant.

“Whew! I didn’t dream I’d gone so far,” he said, and having noted the direction from which the sounds seemed to come, he started to paddle hard.

After half an hour’s work he halted, tired, and perspiring freely.

“This is no fun, I tell you. Wonder if I’m anywhere near? I might try again.”

This time there was no answer. The wind possibly kept those in camp from hearing the fusilade. Will began to grow alarmed. It was now high noon, and he felt hungry, so he disposed of the lunch he had carried, at Bluff’s suggestion. Incidentally, he blessed his chum for thinking of such a thing.

After that he paddled some more, until he grew very tired.

“This begins to look some serious. What if I have to spend a night here? Gee! I won’t like that much, I guess. Hello! What’s that over yonder? Seems to me it might be some sort of a shack, made of palmetto leaves. Wonder who lives there? Ugh! What if it turns out to be that desperado the sheriff is hunting—Bob?”

The idea oppressed him, and he felt like paddling away; but his case was desperate, and he determined to creep up and try to ascertain just who lived in the primitive-looking native shack.

So, finding a chance to land on the little island among the dark waters of the lagoon, he started to advance cautiously in the direction of the dwelling, which was really the first Will had seen made of leaves.

In spite of his fears, the fever of picture-taking was so strong in his breast that he had to stop once and level his camera at the picturesque shack. Then the familiar click announced that he had secured what he wanted.

Perhaps that sound may have reached other ears, and been misconstrued to mean something else. Will might have realized this much could he have seen the dark figure creeping up on him, and lying flat on his stomach most of the time.

As the boy reached the lonely shack he was about to put out his hand in an endeavor to draw aside some of the dry leaves so that he might peep within, when, without warning, a heavy form fell upon him, flattening him out on the sa

