


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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XI: All the Comforts of Salt Water

“Why are you slowing up, Frank?”

“Yes, just when we ought to make a grand burst of speed, too,” said Jerry.

“You forget that the sun is low, and evening close at hand,” replied Frank,

“Tell me about that, and what it has to do with us. I’m a greeny when it comes to running a motor-boat.”

“Oh, the boat has little to do with it; but please remember that the Gulf of Mexico is a larger affair than Camalot Lake. In fact, it means the ocean, with all that implies. Suppose we were caught off-shore the very first night with no place to go?”

“That would be tough, for a fact. I think I see what you mean, Frank. We’ll anchor in the mouth of the river to-night—is that it?” continued Jerry.

“Just what I wanted to say. Then in the morning, after we have studied our gulf chart, we can lay out our day’s work, if the wind is favorable.”

“Wind! Why, we can go whether it blows or not!” ejaculated Will, who had already taken a snapshot of the picture presented by the open water beyond the island in the mouth of the river.

“Particularly when not. If anything of a south wind is on, the waves are apt to stagger such a little boat as this.”

Frank had kept his eyes about him while he talked. He now brought the Jessamine alongside the bank at the most favorable spot he could see.

Jerry was ashore immediately.

“Make her additionally secure to-night,” said Frank.

“Why, what d’ye expect—a hurricane?” And Will looked anxiously at the clear sky.

“Oh, I guess not; but you see we are now in the region of tides, and a change might swing us around, perhaps break the boat away from shore. We’d feel nice if we woke up in the morning to find ourselves out of sight of land,” laughed Frank.

Of course he was joking, but Will looked serious for some time. He even went ashore, after Jerry had finished his job, and Frank, watching out of the corner of his



eye, was amused to see him bending down and examining the ropes, as if to make certain they were securely tied.

Will was the possessor of a different nature from his three chums. He could show courage, when necessary, but, as a usual thing, was much more given to sentiment, and in physique he could hardly compare with any of the others.

Bluff had also gone ashore, and vanished from view. Frank could easily give a guess as to what sort of an errand he was on. It hardly needed glimpses of him bending over the spots where there were shoals along the tideway to understand that he was looking to see whether the one dearest wish of his heart was about to be fulfilled.

“I guess he’ll find some, at last,” laughed Frank, after calling Jerry’s attention to the fact that the other had gone.

“Bluff is daft on the subject of oysters, all right. He never seems to tire of eating them in season, and yet he says he never picked one up on the spot where it grew. He seems to be coming back, Frank!” exclaimed Jerry, who was working with some fishing tackle that he had found aboard, and which Cousin Archie had used before in Southern waters.

“Hey! They’re right here, and in tremendous quantities! Where’s that oyster knife, Frank? Give it to me, please. I want to try a few right on the bed where they grew. Give me a tin kettle, too, and I’ll open a mess for supper!” cried the boy ashore, as he reached the boat.

“Take care you don’t cut your fingers. If these oysters are small, and stand up on edge, in clusters, they’re called coon oysters, and have a sharp shell that is like a razor,” said Frank as he handed the articles over.

“Why coon oysters?” demanded Bluff, who always wanted to know.

“Perhaps because they lie on shore, exposed at low water, and the ‘coons manage to get a mess occasionally,” put in the wise Jerry.

So Bluff hurried away around the bend, to amuse himself to his heart’s content opening native oysters right where they grew, something he had looked forward to doing with almost childish delight.

Jerry, having arranged his tackle, got ready to do a little fishing, for it was still half an hour to sunset. He had discovered that there were mullet jumping out of the water here and there, “acrobats of the gulf,” Frank called them.

Among other things aboard the motor-boat they had found a contraption which Frank said was a small Spanish cast-net. It had a row of leads along the bottom, with leading strings passing up through a central ring. Frank had read directions how to use this, and he amused himself making a few trials while Jerry was busy.

At first he came near pulling a few teeth out, for it is a part of the program that one of the leads must be held between the teeth while others are gathered up in the hands as the net is flung out over the water by a sharp rotary motion that spreads it open as it strikes.

The leads instantly sink, covering a space often ten feet or more in diameter; then, by drawing quickly at the rope, the cords are pulled through the ring and the net closes in like a purse, holding whatever fish it may have covered when thrown.

After a few trials Frank succeeded in catching a couple of silver mullet that had been unable to escape his clumsy attempts.

“I’ll get the hang of it after a while,” he said, as he tossed these into the little dinghy where Jerry was taking his place, “but those may do you for bait this evening, old fellow.”

“Bully for you, Frank! Always coming to the rescue. I was just wondering what I should use, and had an eye on some big blue crabs swimming along there on the bottom. With the dip-net I might have caught a few. If Bluff sees them he’ll never stop talking about fried crabs.” And Jerry pushed off.

“Good luck to you, sportsman!” called Frank.

He had a number of things he wanted to do himself, and only cast an occasional glance out to where Jerry had anchored the dinghy, opposite to where the motor-boat was tied up.

Will was fussing around, doing something or other. He always made so much bustle whenever he had anything on hand that his chums frequently called him an “old woman,” but this never seemed to bother the ardent photographer, who pursued his way in spite of laughter or ridicule.

After a while he came and sat down near where Frank was arranging the three little single blue-flame stoves that formed the cooking range of the boat.

“I was just thinking, Frank,” said he, “that I’ve never heard you say a word about that mysterious packet your father entrusted to you before we left home.”

“Well, I’ve often thought about it as I felt it in my pocket, but you see there’s nothing to be done until we sight Cedar Keys. Then I’ll break the seal and read further directions,” replied Frank.

“Of course you’ve speculated about it?” went on Will.

“Lots of times, but always arrived at the same old point—that I couldn’t guess in a year what it meant,” laughed the other.

“Do you think it could be a joke?” asked Will.



“Never. My dad was too serious when he gave it to me; and besides, he never jokes like that. We must wait a little while, and then learn the truth. Depend on it, he had a good reason for what he did. I expect we’ll get something of a big surprise.”

“There comes Bluff, and I really believe the fellow’s got some oysters opened, by the way he carries that kettle,” said Will.

“And just look at the expression on his face, will you? A fellow who had won a first prize in school could hardly seem more tickled.”

“Oh, I’ve got ‘em, all right, boys, about a big quart, too, and only cut myself half a dozen times,” cried Bluff, laughing as he scrambled aboard.

“And I give you fair warning that those cuts will hurt worse to-morrow than they do now. Let me see. Well, they do look pretty fine. I reckon you’ve got lots of broken shells in with the oysters, so I’ll take care to strain the mess. How shall we have them for the first, boys?” asked Frank.

“I’m just hankering for scalloped oysters, but perhaps a stew would be easier to start with. We have the unsweetened milk, you know, and they say that answers first rate. How are you on that, Frank?”

“I can manage it first rate. Are you fond of a stew, Will?”

“Yes. I like them any way. But I was watching Jerry out there. What under the sun is he doing?”

Frank cast a quick glance out over the water.

“He’s got a fish on, and it seems to be a big one, too!” he exclaimed.

“Why, it’s pulling his boat around like fun! Look at that, will you? Say! be careful, Jerry, or overboard you go!” shrieked Will.

“There! He’s headed this way, now, and going faster than ever! I never saw such a thing before, in all my life! What can it be, Frank?” cried Bluff, excited.

“I don’t know for certain, but I’d venture to say he’s fast to a shark!” answered Frank, hurrying to the side of the motor-boat to see better.

“A shark! Great Caesar’s ghost! What will become of him? Why, the brute is carrying our pard off! There he goes, faster and faster, and headed straight out toward the open gulf! Jerry, let him go!” called Will in his excitement.

Jerry, in the little cockleshell of a dinghy, was whirling past as this cry rang out. He turned to wave a hand at his chums, and they heard him singing:

“A life on the ocean wave for me, my boys!”