


The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XV: A Visit to the Mysterious Sharpie

Jerry made a reach for his gun, that happened to be hanging from a couple of hooks close by his hand.

“Oh! What was that?” asked Will in a trembling voice.

“Sounded to me like a child. I reckon they’ve got a boy along with ‘em, and the brutes are whaling him!” growled Bluff.

“It’s a shame, then, that’s what!” declared Will, showing unwonted anger, for, as a usual thing, he seldom gave way to his emotions in this line.

They listened for a time in silence. Jerry declared that he felt sure he heard a sound not unlike a child crying, but the heavy voices of the men drowned this.

“Can’t we do anything?” asked Will.

“Well, we’re only a lot of boys, and they are big strapping men. Probably they’ve got the law on their side, too,” suggested Frank, shaking his head.

“What do you mean by that, Frank?” queried Bluff indignantly.

“Why, the chances are ten to one that the boy, if it is a boy, must belong to one of the men—his own son, I mean—and you know, Mr. Lawyer, that a fellow has to be mighty careful how he steps in between a man and his son. That same law allows even a brute a certain right to punish a rebellious child,” said Frank.

So they talked it over a long time. Apparently, nothing could be done that night to ascertain the cause of the outbreak. All was silent now in the direction of the sharpie, and not even a riding light marked the spot where the boat lay.

Frank had recommended that they put out their own lights, all but one lantern, which was to be fastened in such a way that it would mark the anchorage of the little modern motor-boat.

“It’ll be an invitation to the sharks to visit us,” remarked Bluff.

“Not at all. If they mean to drop in on us during the night, the presence of one lantern, or its absence, will make mighty little difference,” responded Frank.

“Do you really think they’ll do anything?” asked Will pointedly.



“No, I don’t. In the first place, they must know that there’s quite a crowd of us aboard. Then such boats as this are apt to carry a few guns along. Just sleep in peace, Will. The chances are ten to one the only thing apt to arouse us to-night may be the howl of a norther,” said Frank soothingly.

About ten o’clock both Bluff and Will began yawning.

“Go to bed, you fellows. Jerry and I will manage the first and second watches between us. If we want help, we’ll knock you up,” observed Frank.

He gave Jerry a wink at the same time, as if to notify him to remain up; and the observant Jerry understood that Frank had a card of some sort up his sleeve.

“Say, what’s in the wind?” he asked in a whisper, when they were left alone.

Frank put his finger on his lips, as he said in an equally guarded tone:

“Not so loud. I don’t want them to hear.”

“Then you really expect trouble with those rascally spongers?” demanded his chum.

“That depends. But I’ll tell you what I’ve decided to do, Jerry.”

“Go on; I’m all ears.”

“After a bit, I’m going to take the dinghy and paddle over to that sharpie.

Somehow or other, I feel that there is some one there in need of assistance. Perhaps it’s none of our business, and I’m silly to even think of running such a risk, but something seems to impel me to go; I can’t tell you just what.”

“Not alone, Frank? Why not take me along, too?” pleaded Jerry.

“No. One can get along in that stumpy little boat fine, while with two it is a clumsy affair. You know that. I only mean to hover near, in the darkness, and find out, if possible, what’s doing. Perhaps I may not go closer than fifty feet—unless something happens!”

Jerry did not insist. He realized that what Frank said was the truth, for he had had experience with that same cranky little craft when a second party occupied a place in it.

They sat and talked in low tones for half an hour. Frank made all his plans, and arranged with his chum a set of signals by means of which they might communicate with each other even while both were unseen.

“It’s getting darker all the while, I do believe. Sure you know where to find that sharpie?” remarked Jerry as he saw his comrade beginning to make a move.

“I located her by some palmetto trees that stand up high above all others on the key there. Unless they’ve changed their anchorage, which is unlikely, as we would have heard the noise, I can go straight to the spot,” replied Frank confidently.

“Taking your gun along, of course?”

“I think it wise. Those are tough fellows, and there’s no telling what might happen. Better be on the safe side,” remarked the other sagely.

“Well, I’m going to keep my rifle close by, I tell you. And Bluff has his Gatling gun on the hooks, where he can get hold of it in a hurry. But I hope we don’t have any need of them,” continued Jerry as he assisted Frank to climb over into the little dinghy astern, where the light of the lantern did not penetrate.

“Be careful how you shoot, at any time, and listen for my signal. I’d hate to be peppered with shot, or get a bullet in my shoulder from my chums.”

“Oh, you can depend on me to keep a sharp lookout; and no danger of any accident like that. I never act on impulse, like Bluff. Good-by, and good luck, Frank!”

The dinghy dropped astern with the flowing tide, and was immediately swallowed up in the gloom, which, as Jerry truly said, seemed more dense than ever as the clouds gathered overhead and shut out even the light of the stars.

Frank took up the paddle and set to work. He was by this time something of an adept in the use of a spruce blade, as most canoeists become in time. That is, he could propel a boat silently, not a swirl or a dripping blade betraying the labor that sent it on. Guides in the Maine woods had taught Frank how to approach a deer at night time on a lake without hardly rippling the water.

In this wise he approached the spot where he knew he would find the mysterious sharpie anchored.

Presently he could see the tops of its tall masts against the dark sky; but only for the fact that he was looking for this, it would have passed unnoticed.

There was not a light about the boat. Listening, Frank could hear no sound at first, but as he drew silently nearer he fancied he caught what seemed to be an occasional deep sigh. Then, as his eyes sought the outlines of the little gulf vessel he detected what seemed to be a bowed figure at the stern.

It was from this point that the sighs seemed to come, and he fancied that the huddled-up object must be the figure of a boy, placed on watch while the three big hulking men slept in the cabin near by.

Now he caught the sound of heavy breathing, bordering on snores. From the fact that these suggestive noises were partly muffled, he believed they came from inside the sharpie’s cabin.

Foot by foot Frank found himself nearing the stern of the sharpie. He did not need to use the paddle at all, for the current was gently wafting him along in just the direction he wished to go.

So softly did he come that when he reached the sharpie's counter all he had to do was to just put out his hand and fend off.

He now saw that it was really and truly a boy sitting there. The other seemed to be not over ten years of age, judging from his size. He was barefooted, and without either hat or coat, though the night was getting cold now.

Several times he sighed deeply, and once Frank was sure he heard what seemed to be a stifled sob, as though he would have cried had he dared.

Obeying an impulse he could not control, Frank put his hand on the other's arm, at the same time whispering softly:

"Don't make a noise, please. I'm from the other boat, and I want to help you, if I can. You may trust me, my boy, to the limit!"

The crouching figure started, and Frank saw a small face bent down close to his own; then a trembling hand caught his, and there came a whisper:

"Oh! if you only could get me out of this scrape! I'll die if I stay here! They kick me and beat me terribly! Please take me away, mister!"

Frank's first impulse was to draw the lad into the dinghy, then his natural caution caused him to hesitate.

"Who are you, boy?" he whispered.

"Joe Abercrombie; and I guess it's near killed my mother, because they think I run away," came the quick answer.

"Is your father aboard this boat?"

"I ain't got any father. He's dead long time ago. I live with my mother and sister down at Cedar Keys. Please get me off here, mister! I'll do anything for you, if you only can!" the boy kept on saying, and unconsciously raising his voice in his excitement.

Frank's determination was taken. He would accept the chances of trouble and assist this poor little chap, whose condition seemed so miserable, as the slave of the trio of big, rough spongers.

Before he could say another word, or draw the boy into his dinghy, a gruff voice came booming out of the cabin:

"Hey! Who yer talkin' to out thar, younker? Wake up, fellers! I reckon we're boarded by some reptiles! Hank! Carlos! Git at 'em!"

"Oh!" exclaimed the lad piteously. "They've heard us! They're coming out to kill you! Don't stop for me, but go!"

But Frank Langdon was not built that way.