

The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XVIII: Trouble

“Oysters! Yum! yum! Who said oysters?” cried Bluff, crawling forward to look.

“Just jump overboard, and you’ll get your fill—millions of ‘em around!” declared Jerry, prodding with his pole in an effort to release the bow of the boat, but in vain.

“Hold on, there! Don’t you do it!” cried Frank as Bluff gave indications of being half inclined to betake himself to the water.

“Why not?” asked the hungry oyster fiend plaintively.

“Because you’ll cut your shoes to ribbons on the sharp edges, and perhaps your feet, in the bargain. Remember what you got before,” said Frank.

So the impatient one refrained, but he cast many envious looks downward, and a little later could have been seen stretched out on his stomach, prying off bunches of the ‘coon oysters with a knife, and enjoying a little side treat.

It was easy to run upon the reef, but to get off was another matter, especially with a falling tide. The motor churned the water, but at first seemed to make no impression. Even when all the boys went aft, so as to lighten the bow, there was no release.

“Something’s holding her, I tell you! It may be one of those octopus fish we hear so much about,” suggested Will.

Jerry, who had been pulling on a pair of heavy old shoes, with the intention of going overboard, so as to put his shoulder to the bow, and lifting while the motor worked, looked a little dubious.

“Humbug! Can’t be any such thing, eh, Frank?” he asked, turning to the one in whose opinion he always felt the most implicit faith.

“What’s holding her is that ridge of ‘coon oysters. They grip like all creation, Joe, here, says. Wait till I get some old shoes on, Jerry, and I’ll be with you,” he observed.

Presently both of them were over in the water, which only came to their knees.

“Ready, now, Will. When I say the word, turn on all speed astern. How about it, pard?” Frank said to Jerry.

“Right, here,” came the reply.

“Then go!”



After the motor started working, the two in the water lifted. Just as Frank had anticipated, the thing was easy. Back went the Jessamine with a rush; indeed, Jerry was not quick enough in trying to draw himself aboard, and they left him there, marooned on the 'coon oyster bar.

"Hi, you! Come back here after me! Think I'm Bluff, and want a mortgage on the whole blooming bed, don't you? Shove me the little dinghy, if you're afraid of scratching more of the varnish off Cousin Archie's boat!" he shouted.

"Hold on! Please wait! I want to get a picture of him standing there in the big bay, just as if he owned the sea. It's Neptune, coming out of the water, you know," called Will beseechingly.

So Jerry felt constrained to humor the artist, and assume a position that, according to Will's idea, accorded with his condition of lonesomeness.

"I think we'll just pole along, fellows, and not run the motor. I guess we don't want to go very far in, anyhow, for we'll have the dickens of a time getting out again in the morning," remarked Frank.

"There's some sort of a shack over yonder on the mainland," remarked Will.

Frank took a look.

"Possibly the place where some of those turtlers put up when out after their game. They keep the green turtles in what they call a 'crawl,' until ready to set sail for Cedar Keys. I'm told we'll see lots of them there," remarked Frank.

"I can see an old boat drawn up on shore, but not the first sign of life about the place. There's a buzzard sitting on a dead tree—yes, a row of 'em! My! I hope there ain't anybody dead in there!"

Will had brought out Frank's marine glasses, and was looking through them as he gave utterance to this forlorn expression.

"Oh! let up on that, Will! You give a fellow the creeps. Just why should there be any one dead yonder? Buzzards are found everywhere in Florida, millions of 'em. I reckon the shack is deserted. To prove it, I'm going to paddle over and see, just as soon as we get fast to our mudhook again," remarked Jerry.

"And that will be right now," said Frank. "Give it a toss, Bluff. Here we seem to be in a little spot deeper than the rest of the bayou, and with room to swing around with a change of wind without fouling our anchor or going aground again on any miserable oyster bed."

"Look here! I've got a grievance," remarked Bluff.

"All right. Let's hear it," laughed Will.



“If he takes the dinghy, how in the world am I going to gather the oysters for our supper? Frank said the very next mess we got he would give us scalloped oysters, and I’m just feeling hungry that way,” complained Bluff.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll be back in half an hour, at the most. Besides, if you want to, you can put on these heavy shoes of mine, drop over the side, and wade to the bar. It’s warm in the water, and delightful,” remarked Jerry, slipping over into the small boat, with his rifle in his hand.

“Well, there’s no depending on you. Half an hour, did you say? More than likely that means about dark, if there’s any temptation to hunt ashore. So I suppose I’ll just have to duck, and do the great wading act. For I count it next door to a crime to be so near delicious oysters and not have them at least once a day.”

Bluff was as good as his word. He put on the heavy shoes, and some old garments. Then, getting a bucket, he crept overboard, found that the water only came to his waist, and, having marked out his course, was speedily on a reef, digging at the largest oysters he could find.

“Boys, they’re just the finest ever! Some whoppers out here, too. No ‘coon oyster about that chap,” and he held up one that was half again as large as his hand.

Now and then, as he worked, they could see him stop to try an extra fat-looking fellow. When this had been repeated a dozen times, Will reproached him.

“Where do we come in? Do we get the culls?” he demanded.

“Why, hang it, my bucket’s as full now as it will hold! I’m coming across to dump ‘em on the deck, and get another helping. Why, I could keep at this business all day. It’s just fascinating, that’s what!” called Bluff.

“I see your finish, all right, my fine boy. You’ll never go back to Centerville again. Either you’ll turn into an oyster, after devouring so many tons of ‘em, or else hire out to the owner of a sharpie engaged in the business,” laughed Frank.

He had to admit, though, when Bluff opened one of the big fellows and allowed him a chance to taste its flavor, that they were the best he had ever run across.

“Barring none,” declared Bluff vigorously, holding the oyster knife aloft.

“Barring none,” affirmed Frank, also erecting his fingers, as though willing to go on record.

Then, of course, Will had to try them, also, and also frankly pronounced them delicious.

“Let me have that knife, Bluff, and I’ll be opening some while you’re off after another supply. The hatchet will be all you want to loosen any tight ones. Don’t look



at me that way. I can be trusted not to eat more than one in five. And my appetite for oysters isn't one-third what yours is," laughed Frank.

Bluff seemed to think he could stand that, for he yielded up the opener.

"Don't you let that scoffer, Will, have another one. I'll bring back another bucketful in about ten minutes. There's millions of 'em. They set me wild to think of such riches going to waste. I'll dream about 'em, fellows."

Grumbling thus, he stalked through the water to the reef, and set to work again.

Frank had watched Jerry push in to shore and vanish among the tangled undergrowth. Some little time had passed since, but there was no sign of his returning.

"I guess it's lucky Bluff didn't take his word for it, and wait," he remarked.

"Yes," replied Will, who was watching the fat bivalves drop into the kettle as his chum deftly manipulated the opening knife, "I rather think we'd have missed connections with this savory mess, all right, and all of us would have been sorry."

"I wonder if he found anybody in that old shack?" mused Frank, looking again.

"Hardly likely. What would you say, Joe? Ever been ashore here?"

The boy shook his head in the negative.

"Not me. This is my first trip up this far. Been down the coast, below Cedar Keys, more'n once. But I believe Jerry likes to hunt. Perhaps he might think it a good time to look around, and see if there happens to be a deer waiting to be cooked up."

Frank laughed.

"You've got Jerry sized up to a pretty fine point, boy. That's his weakness to a dot, and I wouldn't put it past him to wander off. I only hope he doesn't go and get lost. That would delay us, even if nothing worse came of it"

"There!"

As Will made this utterance there came the sharp report of a gun from the mainland, and undoubtedly the rifle was that of their absent chum.

"Wonder what he's struck now?" said Frank.

There came two more reports, in quick succession.

Bluff was already hastening in from the oyster bar, staggering under his load.

"Hey! D'ye hear all that shooting, fellows? Jerry's in some sort of trouble, I'll bet my hat!" he shouted excitedly.

"And we are unable to get ashore, for he has the only boat, and the water is too shallow to push the big craft in. The question is, what shall we do?"

Frank looked into the faces of his two chums, and saw by their increasing pallor that they more than shared the fears that were beginning to gnaw at his heart in connection with the safety of the genial, good-natured Jerry Wallington.