

The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XIX: What Happened to Jerry

“I’d give something for a pair of wings just now!” exclaimed Will regretfully.

“Or that bally old balloon of Professor Smythe’s, eh?” echoed Bluff, as he surveyed the stretch of water separating them from the mainland.

“But something must be done! Bluff, get your gun!”

Frank was hastily removing the tennis shoes he wore aboard the boat.

“What’re you going to do?” demanded Will, as Bluff made haste to obey.

“Two of us must get ashore. Perhaps Jerry needs help.”

“Oh! I see! And you think you can wade there?” queried Will, as he saw Frank drawing on the second pair of heavy shoes, that had already been in the water.

“That’s what we have to do. Ready, Bluff?” cried Frank, snatching up his own double-barreled shotgun.

“Where do I come in?” demanded Will as they slid overboard.

“You’re the goalkeeper this time. Hold the ship, with Joe, here, till we get back.”

“And they’ve taken all the guns along,” grumbled Will as he watched his two chums making their splashing way in the direction of the shore.

Happening to bethink himself of the old revolver on board, Will presently armed himself with the same, and tried to imagine that he presented an imposing appearance as the guardian of the motor-boat. Truth to tell, he would have really been far more dangerous handling his favorite camera, for he did not have it in him to harm a flea, if he could help it.

Meanwhile, Frank and his comrade were pushing for the shore as rapidly as the conditions allowed. By exercising a certain amount of discretion they were able to follow up one of the oyster reefs that thrust out from the bank like the fingers of a human hand.

“We’ll make it all right,” declared Bluff presently.

“Yes, and without getting in deeper than half way up. But I’m wondering why we don’t hear anything more from Jerry. He had six charges in his rifle, you know.”

From Frank’s tone it was easy to understand that he was worried.



“Say, perhaps that was meant for a signal,” suggested Bluff suddenly.

“There were three shots, just as we’ve always agreed, but then they were scattered somewhat. I hardly agree with you, Bluff, though it may be true. I hope it is, and yet Jerry must have known we had no boat. He would hardly want us to come ashore unless he was in a mighty serious pickle.”

“Anyhow, we’re nearly there, and must soon know the worst,” said Bluff, whose face looked a bit peaked under the suspense.

More through accident than design, they landed close to the spot where the old palmetto shack could be seen. Frank pointed to an enclosure along the edge of the bayou, made by piling up logs and pieces of coquina rock.

“Turtle crawl,” he said, as they hurried past, and Bluff only gave it one look, for his attention was taken up with the more serious matter that had brought them ashore.

Advancing to the shack, Frank looked in, but there did not appear to be a living soul around.

He surveyed his surroundings with anxiety. Great live-oaks, with their crooked limbs covered with the trailing Spanish moss; tall palmettos, and shorter young ones of the same type; gumbo-limbo trees, wild plum, and several wild orange trees, made up the immediate surroundings.

“Oh! if we only had some idea which way he could have gone!” exclaimed Frank.

“Perhaps he left a trail,” was the bright thought of Bluff.

“Almost impossible to map it out in this black sand,” Frank replied; but, nevertheless, he started to look, since there was nothing else to do.

A dozen impossible things flashed through Frank’s brain as he bent over to try and pick up the tracks of his missing chum. Whatever could have happened to Jerry? Usually he was able to take good care of himself; could it be possible that some inmate of the dilapidated shack had stolen upon him, bent upon robbery? In that case, how account for the shots?

“Let’s shout,” said Bluff again.

“A bright thought, and surely it can do no harm. Let me call singly, Bluff.”

Thereupon Frank lifted up his voice and shouted:

“Jerry! Jerry! Where are you?”

The call rang through the thick jungle under the live-oaks. A small animal, possibly a ‘coon, scurried through the undergrowth. In an adjacent tree a Florida bluejay gave forth a discordant scream. A fox-squirrel barked saucily, and with a flirt of his bushy tail scrambled around to the other side of a hickory tree.

Then came a shout that thrilled them:

“Ahoy, there, Frank!”

“It’s Jerry!” cried Bluff, ready to throw his hat into the air.

Frank himself was tremendously relieved. No matter what had happened, their chum was alive, and could call to them.

“Hello! What’s the matter? Where are you?” he shouted, for the voice of Jerry had come from a little distance away, and seemed strangely muffled.

“Straight into the woods from the shack!” came back the reply.

“We’re coming to you!” called Frank, still puzzled to know what it all meant.

“I wonder what he has dropped into now?” speculated Bluff as he trotted along at the heels of his leader.

“Sounds as if he wanted us to come to him, all right. Keep your gun ready, Bluff, for there’s no telling but what you may need it,” Frank went on.

“It’s in apple-pie shape for business at the old stand. Jerry laughs at it, but before now he’s found that it could help a fellow out of a hole. Suppose you try him again?”

Bluff’s suggestion was a good one, and Frank raised his voice in a shout. This time the answer came from a point closer at hand. Still, although they were peering eagerly through the dense foliage, they could see nothing out of the way.

“This beats the Dutch! Where under the sun can the fellow be?” said Bluff, after they had gone still further.

“What’s that?” asked Frank suddenly, pointing.

“I declare if it doesn’t look some like a dead deer, a little fellow, too; perhaps a fawn,” came from Bluff as he hurried forward.

“No, it’s a full-grown deer, all right, and just killed, too. They run very small down here, you know. But that doesn’t tell us where our chum is, even if he shot the game, and had to fire three times in order to down it,” declared Frank.

“As sure as you live, here’s his gun!” cried Bluff.

Frank stared at the rifle, that lay at the foot of a particularly big live-oak, parts of which seemed to be rotting away, as there were dead limbs strewn the ground underneath it. Then he cast his eyes upward, as if under the impression that he might discover Jerry perched upon a limb, laughing at them.

“He isn’t up there. I’ve examined every limb on the old tree. What under the sun do you suppose could have happened to him?” ejaculated Bluff.

“Hark!” said Frank, holding up his hand.

“He’s laughing at us! I tell you that was Jerry’s chuckle, for all the world! Now, what tomfoolery is he up to, do you suppose? Bringing us ashore through all that



beastly water just to have a shy at us! Hi, Jerry, you old joker! Show up!” cried Bluff indignantly.

The only answer was a second laugh, louder than the first.

“I declare he’s up in that blessed tree, after all, and yet for the life of me I can’t get a squint at him. Serve the old chap right if we went and took the dinghy back, leaving him to wade,” grumbled Bluff.

Frank was looking around him. He noticed several little things just then. Among others was the fact that there were scratches on the bark of the big old oak, as though some one might have scrambled up its trunk recently. An air-plant lay on the ground, evidently detached during the progress of that party.

“I’m beginning to smell a rat,” Frank said, slowly.

“Then let me in, please. I’m just devoured with curiosity to know what it all means,” pleaded his chum.

“Listen! Don’t you hear a strange buzzing up there?” demanded Frank.

“Now that you mention it, I believe I do. Sounds to me like a hive of bees.”

“That’s just what it is, and Jerry knew it as soon as he heard it. A hive of bees in this old live-oak, with perhaps a big store of honey laid up. Bluff, doesn’t that tickle your palate? Well, it did Jerry’s, for sure. He climbed up!”

“After he had shot that deer, then?” asked Bluff.

“Undoubtedly. I remember, now, that honey always appealed to Jerry more than any other sweet stuff. He was remarking, only the last time we had flapjacks, that it was a beastly blunder we had none of us thought to bring a bottle of honey along.”

“But he isn’t up there, now, for I can see the whole tree. Still he keeps on chuckling. I can’t make it out, Frank. But you know, for I see it in your face! Where is Jerry?”

Frank deliberately rapped on the trunk of the big oak.

“Hello, Jerry! Anybody at home in there?” he called.

“Only a stranger and a pilgrim, who wants to get out the worst way, and can’t,” came in a muffled voice.

Bluff gave a roar of amazement.

“Why, he’s inside the tree!” he ejaculated.

“Just what he is. Stepped on some punky, rotten wood above there, that must have given way under his weight, and our fine chum shot down into the hollow trunk of the big king,” laughed Frank.

“Correct, Frank. Just how it happened. I’ve tried again and again to climb up to that hole where I came in, but the plagued walls are too slippery, and I fell back every

time. Please mount the tree, and lower a coat or something for me to get a grip on,” came in muffled tones to their ears.

Both Frank and Bluff rolled upon the ground with shrieks of laughter. If the sounds of their merriment carried to the ears of Will, he must have been greatly mystified as to the cause of the same.

But Jerry was getting impatient.

“Hurry up, and get to work! It ain’t over nice in here, I tell you,” he called; and so the two climbed up the tree to effect his rescue.

Bluff had a coat, so they lowered that by a sleeve, stretching down as far as possible. Jerry managed to scramble up far enough to lay hold on the other sleeve, and was, after one or two efforts, assisted to the opening. He came out looking a bit dilapidated, yet just as determined as ever to get some of that honey before leaving the vicinity.

The others were not averse to laying in a supply of the same, and promised to arrange it for the morning, for night was now close at hand, and nothing could be done looking to an attack upon the bee tree.

They carried the doe down to the water’s edge. Jerry had come upon the animal soon after entering among the trees, and she had startled him by her sudden jump, so that it took three shots from his rifle to drop her. Then, as he stood over his game, the buzzing of the bees had attracted his attention, as the late comers arrived, laden with honey; and unable to resist the inclination to investigate, he had climbed up, with the disastrous result as stated.

Bluff and Frank waded out to the motor-boat, allowing Jerry to ferry his venison in the little dinghy. Will greeted their coming with delight, for he saw great possibilities for future feasts in the game acquired.

Of course he was wild to hear the story, which was told amid much merriment all around while they dined off fresh venison steak and scalloped oysters.