


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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XXI: A Strenuous Night

Fortunately, Frank was a quick-witted boy.

He had his gun held in such a position that it required only a simple movement to swing it upward. To aim, under the conditions, was out of the question. He had to depend entirely upon guesswork, or what might be called intuition.

Imagine the astonishment of the others, crouching close by, when a flash of flame pierced the darkness, and the crash of Frank's gun was instantly followed by a fierce scream in which both pain and fury were mingled!

Frank had no sooner fired than he threw himself backward. Knowing something about the habits of these animals, he understood that the panther would make its leap, no matter how seriously it might be wounded.

Frank did not claim to be an acrobat, but he certainly made a record for himself in the line of back tumbling.

"Who shot?" shouted Jerry in amazement.

"Where's the bear?" came from Joe, equally amazed and confused.

Frank had by this time managed to scramble to his feet. He was somewhat scratched, and would perhaps feel a bit sore from his tremendous effort, but his heart beat high with anticipation when he realized that all was still in the quarter where he had been snugly lying.

"Stir up the fire, Jerry, and fetch a torch here!" he called, holding himself in readiness for another shot, if such should be needed.

"You just bet I will!" cried the other, bounding forward.

Frank saw him give the smoldering fire a kick that started it into new life. Then, bending over, he snatched a brand and came running back.

"Where are you, Frank? What under the sun happened? Not hurt, are you?" was what he was singing out, his voice trembling with eagerness and anxiety.

"Everything all right, Jerry. Come this way. Now poke the blaze over yonder."

Jerry gave a shout.

“Something’s moving! It’s kicking its last, by the great horn spoon! Frank’s got his bear—no, I’ll be hanged if it is! A panther, Joe, a panther!”

He stood there like a statue, holding the torch and staring at the sleek gray form stretched out under the tree, and which was, in fact, giving the very last kick, as he had declared.

Frank laughed, a little hysterically, it may be assumed, for the strain on his nerves had been tremendous.

“Unexpected visitor, eh, Jerry? Didn’t send out an invitation to this slippery gentleman, did we? But he insisted on joining the family circle, and I just had to ask him in,” he said, trying to steady his voice, while, unseen by Jerry, his hands were shaking as he clutched his gun.

“Tell me about that, will you! Oh, yes, he came, all right. That was a warm invitation he couldn’t resist. But how did you see him, Frank? Where was the sly old cat? Say! he must have jumped for you, I guess, for that was just where you were squatting!”

Frank shuddered as he saw that this was true. Only for his quick action in vacating his position he must have been torn by the poisonous claws of the dying beast.

“He was sitting just above my head, on that limb there,” he remarked quietly.

“Talk to me about your cute ones, what could equal that? Do you think the old slinker was there all the time?” demanded Jerry, shaking his head.

“Oh, no. That is out of the question. Our coming must have alarmed him if he had been so close by. I imagine he crept through the trees while we lay here waiting, like so many mummies.”

“I say, Frank, do panthers like honey?” demanded the other.

“Well, now, you’ve got me there. Never having had any experience in that line, I’m in the dark. How about it, Joe?” laughed Frank.

“I never heard of one that did. S’pect he was snoopin’ around to see what we was a-doin’ here. Then there was the smell of the blood from the deer, you know,” explained the Florida boy wisely.

“Why, of course! That’s it. But I say, Frank, do we cut out the bear hunt now?”

“That’s for you to say. I’ve had my shot, but if you’re satisfied to stay, why, count on me to keep you company.”

“I had my heart set on bear steak. The only thing is, will old Bruin come now, after all this rumpus?” said Jerry disconsolately.

“If half that I’ve heard about his liking for wild honey is true, a dozen rackets like that couldn’t keep him away. Joe, you know. Tell us if that isn’t so?” asked Frank.



“Oh, he’ll come, all right, if he smells that honey,” returned the boy confidently.

“That settles it, then. We stay a while, at any rate,” declared Frank.

Jerry was secretly pleased. Perhaps he did have a little streak of envy in his composition, for it galled him to have others succeed in his beloved sport while fortune denied him a fair share of the honors. But, taken all in all, Jerry was square enough, and would quickly change places with a companion in a boat when it appeared that all the fish were lying at his end.

Frank moved his position a little. Then they settled down to wait. Of course, every one of the three boys cast rather frequent and apprehensive glances up into the branches overhead. Sometimes these panthers hunted in pairs, and how were they to tell but what the mate to Frank’s victim might be even then watching for a chance to leap down upon them?

An hour passed. Then Jerry heard a grunting sound somewhere close by. It was accompanied by a rustling in the bushes.

His pulses thrilled, while Joe, who had taken up a position alongside him after the adventure with the panther, put out a hand and nudged Jerry several times.

“Bear!” he said, in the lowest of whispers.

Again and again came the grunting and the swishing of bushes. Bruin was sniffing the delightful aroma of honey. It was so strong that his usual caution was apparently thrown to the winds, and he pushed forward straight toward the spot where the broken tree hive had scattered much of its delicious contents over the ground.

Now Jerry could see his bulky figure as he shuffled forward with eager mien. The repeating rifle began to come up, though Jerry was in no hurry to fire. He wanted to get a fair view of the animal’s side, so that he could bring Bruin down with a single shot.

They could hear the beast grunting in delight as he started in to devour some of the bees’ rich treasure. Perhaps he had long cast an envious eye on that same tree hive, and hoped for the time to come when a storm might lay it low.

Frank held his fire generously. He could have shot the bear several times, and with the buckshot shells that were in his gun had no fear about killing his game with ease; but it was really Jerry’s turn.

Finally came the sharp report. They saw the bear roll over, try to stagger up again, struggle vehemently, and then gradually grow weaker.

“Hurrah, Jerry! He’s your bag!” shouted Frank, as genuinely happy as though it had been his own shot that did the business; perhaps more so.



“Oh! what a night! Bring on your bears and panthers, your crocodiles and tomcats!” cried Jerry. “We can take care of a whole menagerie. Talk to me about your hunting preserves! Did you ever meet up with anything that equals this?”

Realizing that the boys on board the motorboat must be consumed with eagerness to know what the result of these two shots might be, Frank now proposed that they go aboard.

“We want some sleep, you see. In the morning we’ll be able to attend to these fellows. I guess nothing will bother them until then,” he said.

He and Joe entered the little dinghy, and it was ferried across the water to the anchored boat. There they were met by both Will and Bluff, who, being aroused by the first shot, had sat there, swathed in blankets, watching for the return of the mighty Nimrods.

“What luck?” called Bluff, evidently repenting that he had not accompanied them.

“Oh, Jerry got his bear, all right,” sang out Frank indifferently, while he kept on pushing the smaller boat closer to the other.

“But didn’t you shoot? Will declared it was your shotgun that awoke us first—it must have been hours ago,” went on Bluff curiously.

“Why, yes. I had a shot at a gray visitor who threatened to jump down on me from the tree.” And Frank began climbing aboard so that Joe could go back after the other chum.

“What! Do you mean a panther?” burst out Bluff.

“Sure! Wait till you see the chap, in the morning. Looks like a dandy,” replied Frank, trying to appear unconcerned.

“Then you got him?”

“It was a case of getting him before he got me.” And then, taking pity on the boys, who were fairly burning with eagerness to hear, he told how he had happened to discover the crouching beast that had crept into the tree without their knowledge.

Presently Jerry came aboard. Both of the hunters, as well as young Joe, were too sleepy for further conversation.

“You’ll see it all in the morning. And Will, we can hang up the game so that you’ll have a fine shot at the scene, bee tree and all. Every time we look at it our mouths will water at the thought of all that fine honey going to waste,” and with this parting remark Frank crawled under his blanket.

Nothing happened to disturb the outdoor chums during the balance of the night. With the coming of morning they were astir. Breakfast was a hurried meal. Then they went ashore in detachments, Joe remaining behind to look after the boat.



Will managed to get a good picture of the trophies, with the two gallant hunters standing beside the defunct bear and panther. Then, after the former had been washed, being sticky with the honey, Frank assisted Jerry to get the skin off. It was here the boys profited by the advice given by the old trapper, Jesse Wilcox, when they visited him in his camp above Rocky Creek, which was a feeder to the lake upon which their home town was located.

Before noon they were all aboard again. Both skins had been secured, besides the choice portions of the bear meat. Bluff even managed to fill another kettle with the honey, though stung unmercifully by the angry bees that were so busily working to transfer their stores to a new home.

After a bite of lunch they started out again on the gulf, since the conditions invited an afternoon cruise. Frank knew they would find a good holding place not more than twenty miles further along the shore, and he aimed to reach it before the coming of night.

It was just four o'clock when they pushed in behind another key and made their way to the mainland, for here the water was quite deep.

"I move for a camp ashore, for a change," suggested Jerry.

"Second that motion. My back's nearly broken from these hard boards," grunted Bluff. "Oh, dear! If we only had our air mattresses along, Frank!"

"Yes, if we only had!" exclaimed Jerry. "Then you'd soon quit claiming that you had bigger lungs than I've got. You know I beat you in blowing up my bag."

"Yes, just once more than I came in winner. Isn't that so, Frank?"

Frank poured oil on the troubled waters, but he and Will winked at each other, for the joke always amused them.

They erected the tent, and had their jolly campfire, which reminded them of many in the past. It was, of course, thought a good thing to secure the boat with chain and padlock, so that no prowling scamp could make off with it while they slept, for they meant to keep no watch.

Joe found a place on board, as there was no room in the tent. Besides, he had not a temperament that delighted in such things, and would only too gladly have always felt sure of having a good roof over him at night.

The four boys were a bit crowded. Still, they joked over the thing as they settled down, and after a time only the glow of the still burning fire told that human beings were somewhere near by.

They slept soundly, despite the close quarters, since the air was cool, and, for a wonder, no mosquitoes worried them. Those who were dreaming must have imagined



the end of the world had suddenly arrived, for the tent was, without the least warning, knocked down, leaving the four amazed boys scrambling and shouting under the canvas, and trying to crawl out from the wreckage.

