


The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XXII: A Message from the Air

“What struck us?” And Bluff poked his head out from under the canvas, looking for all the world like a tortoise, Frank thought, as he followed suit.

“Tell me about that, will you! Where’s the villain who cut the ropes? I can whip him with one hand!” panted Jerry, struggling in a mess of camp necessities, and kicking around among the aluminum ware that Frank prized so highly.

“Where’s my camera? Some fellow has run off with my camera!” wailed Will.

By this time Frank had extricated himself from the wreckage and began to assist the others to regain their feet. No one seemed to be seriously injured, and the mystery was great. What had happened to smash down their tent in that strange way?

“The ropes were never cut, fellows!” announced Bluff, after a hasty examination.

“Something fell on us, that’s what!” observed Jerry, shaking that wise head of his in his obstinate fashion as he surveyed the ruins of the tent.

Frank seized upon the idea quickly.

“I believe you’ve struck the truth, Jerry!” he exclaimed.

“Then it must have been a shooting-star or a piece off a comet,” said Will.

“Not much. I am sure I heard voices calling out, and laughing over the joke. I tell you somebody’s playing a nasty trick on us, that’s what!” declared Bluff.

“Voices, did you say? Are you sure?” demanded Frank, stopping in his fumbling around the tent, while Jerry was throwing some dead palmetto leaves on the fire to induce a speedy blaze, so that they might have more light.

“Yes, I’m sure; and they were out there, too,” continued Bluff, pointing beyond the motor-boat.

“I heard ‘em, too!” called Joe, at this juncture, as his head appeared in view above the combing of the craft.

“Out on the bayou?” asked Frank, anxious to solve the strange mystery.

“Sure! And there was something like the creaking of sails, too. But I don’t think they was makin’ fun of us. I kinder thought one of ‘em called out somethin’ that sounded like, ‘Help us!’” went on Joe breathlessly.



“Talk to me about your mysteries! Who ever ran up against a worse one than this?” gasped Jerry, scratching his head, as he shivered in the cool air.

“What time is it, anyhow?” demanded Will, who had now found his camera, and was feeling satisfied, because it did not appear to have sustained any injury.

“Time? I declare if that isn’t dawn in the east, fellows! Time we were up, I guess,” remarked Frank, stooping over again, determined to learn the secret of the sudden and violent collapse of the tent, accompanied by such strange whispering voices that seemed to die away in the distance.

“Well, all I can say is that if dawn comes with such a swoop down in this blessed country, it’s me back to my native heath again,” grumbled Jerry, who had received a few bruises in the mix-up. Up to now he had paid no attention to them, but they were beginning to make themselves manifest.

“What’s this?”

Frank uttered the cry as he bent over and stared at something which he had discovered under the canvas.

“Hold on! I’ve got my gun handy!” exclaimed Bluff, thinking that if it were a wild animal his time had come to distinguish himself.

“Oh! What is it?” echoed Will, crowding near.

The fire was now leaping madly up as the tinder-like dried palmetto leaves and stalks caught, so that every one could easily see.

“Why, it’s a bag!—a big bean bag!” exclaimed Will, in amazement. “Where, in the name of goodness, did that come from, fellows?”

“A bean bag! Tell me about that, will you?” said Jerry. And then, as he bent over to clutch hold of it, he went on: “Why, as sure as you live, it’s a sand bag! Who ever could have shied that thing at us and then run away?”

Frank was more than startled. He had seen just such bags before, and filled with sand, too. He knew to what uses they were put.

“Say! What do you think, that bag is ballast from a balloon or airship?” he cried.

“Ballast!”

“From an airship!”

The four outdoor chums stood there and stared, first at each other and then at the suspicious bag that lay there on the canvas. There could be no mistake about its contents, for one seam had broken, and the sand was trickling out even now.

“Then a balloon passed over us in the night, and they threw out a sand bag to lighten her! What do you think of that?” gasped Jerry, as if hardly able to grasp the strangeness of the affair.

“Why would they want to lighten her?” asked Bluff.

Frank was quick to perceive facts.

“Listen, fellows! Joe, here, says the voices were out yonder, toward the key, and that they gradually grew less distinct. That would happen, you know, if a balloon were gradually drifting out toward the open gulf.”

“Tell me about that, now! Do you really think they were being run away with?” asked Jerry in a tense tone, as he tried to picture the alarm that must overwhelm aeronauts under such conditions.

“Didn’t Joe say he was sure he heard some one cry out, ‘Help us’? Wouldn’t that indicate danger for the balloonists? I tell you what, boys, this was the most remarkable thing that ever happened to us. To think that the sand bag, and maybe an anchor, knocked our tent down with a smash, and didn’t kill or seriously injure a single one of us beats the record! But I’m sorry for those fellows, though.”

“So am I, Frank. I wish we could do something to help them,” remarked Will.

“Couldn’t we put out right away? They may fall into the gulf any minute, and be drowned! Say! Why not go, Frank?” pursued Jerry.

“Get some clothes on, the first thing, fellows. We’re not going back to bed again now, anyway. The dawn is surely coming on, and we could get out on the gulf in a short time, if we concluded to try it.”

They had left their outer garments aboard the motor-boat, so that it was easy enough to find them now. Hastily they dressed, all the while chattering like a lot of magpies. But it might have been noticed that every one was in favor of doing something to assist the drifting balloonists, who had apparently gone out to sea in a helpless airship.

Frank was dressed a little before any of the rest. Something seemed to have come into his mind, for he hurried ashore again, as if bent upon examining the sand bag once more.

“What’s he up to?” asked Bluff, for the daylight was now growing strong enough for them to see to some extent.

“Wants to look at that bean bag of Will’s again, I guess. Perhaps he thinks we may have a good supper off the contents,” jeered Jerry.

“Now I think he expects to get a clue, somehow. Perhaps there may be a name sewed on the old bag. Seems to me, balloonists do that, so the people below may report their passing over, especially when there’s a race on,” remarked Will calmly.

“And that’s just what he’s up to,” declared Bluff, “for you see he’s turning the bag over now. There! He’s struck something, by the way he grabs! It’s a letter, fellows, as sure as you live!”

“A letter from the skies! Tell me about that, will you!” whistled Jerry as he bounded ashore and hurried to join Frank.

“What’s doing?” he asked anxiously, as he came to where the other was standing, staring at the piece of paper he held in his hand.

“Remarkable! Who would ever have believed it?” Frank was saying.

“Well, please take pity on the rest of us, and let us have a little light,” Will broke out with.

“It came from the Kentucky, fellows!” Frank observed, shaking his head, as if he could hardly believe his senses.

“That was the name of the balloon our good friend, Professor Jason Smythe, expected to pilot in the drift from Atlanta to Savannah, to test the air currents.”

This from Jerry, who was equally amazed.

“How do you know?” asked Bluff, of course, since he never accepted anything without abundant proof.

“The name is sewed on the bag. I found it underneath. But there was something more, boys—this letter, written, with others of the same kind, and sent down in the hope that one of them might fall into the hands of some person who would notify the government station at Pensacola or Cedar Keys.”

“Read it to us, Frank!”

“Yes, don’t keep us in suspense. Besides, if we’re going to do anything, we’d better not waste so much time here,” Jerry remarked wisely.

“Then listen. Here is what it says, scribbled so that I can hardly make it out:

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““On board the balloon Kentucky, and drifting toward the gulf. Our valve refuses to work, and we dare not attempt to land in the dark. Ballast nearly gone. We fear we may be swept out to sea. Please notify station at Pensacola to send assistance—a tug, if possible. We may keep afloat a short time if we fall into the gulf.

““JASON SMYTHE.””

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The boys looked awed at the remarkable coincidence of that sand bag, possibly thrown out at random, striking their tent; and they who knew the professor so well.

“But, come, fellows! We must be off! Leave these few things here till we get back. To save that daring aeronaut’s life I’d sacrifice ten times as much!” cried Frank

as he leaped aboard the boat and started the motor, while the others tore loose the two remaining hawsers.

