“How about it, Frank? Ought all of us to go?” asked Jerry.
“Do you think any one wants to remain behind?” asked the party addressed.
“Speaking for myself, nothing could induce me to stay,” came the reply.
“So say we all of us,” declared Bluff, who had overheard the question.
“Besides, I think it wise that we stick together. If anything should happen that we
couldn’t come back here, it wouldn’t matter much. You see, we’ve been able to tumble
most of our stuff aboard in a scramble. It can be straightened out as we go. All ready,
Jerry?” questioned Frank, as the other gave a shout.
“All ready! Get aboard, and start her. It’s light enough to see, now. Oh! I only hope
we can find the professor!” cried Jerry as he embarked.
“If Fortune is kind, we must, boys. Now we’re off!”

With these words, firmly spoken, Frank opened up, and the power-boat began to
move through the water. Fortunately, it was deep in this shelter, so that they could make
decent speed from the beginning. Had they anchored in such a shallow bayou as their
last stopping place, it must have taken an hour to get clear of the various oyster bars,
running out in finger-like ridges from the shore.

Presently they cleared the point of land marking the upper end of the sheltering
key, and the limitless gulf lay before them.

Morning was now rapidly advancing. The far eastern heavens had begun to take
on a beautiful rosy flush, such as can be seen in no place in the wide world to better
advantage than in Florida, of a winter’s morning.

Every eye was instantly engaged in scouring that expanse of water, searching
eagerly for a sign of the castaway balloonists. Frank even had his marine glasses
leveled, and, first of all, scanned the horizon, hoping that possibly the air craft might
have been able to keep afloat thus far through strenuous methods known to such a
veteran sky pilot as the professor.

He was disappointed, however, for the only things that met his gaze were a few
white gulls.
“What’s that floating on the water over yonder, Frank?” demanded sharp-eyed Will, pointing down the coast a little.

A thrill passed through every heart. Had the lost air voyagers been sighted, and would they be rescued, after all?

Frank had his glasses focussed upon the object almost instantly.

“Too bad, fellows! Only a bunch of brown pelicans floating on the sea and waiting until breakfast time comes around,” he said at once.

A chorus of remarks indicative of disappointment followed. Meantime, as the speed of the boat was rushed up to near the limit of twelve miles, and they fairly flew over the comparatively smooth gulf, each boy continued to scan the water, hoping to be the first to report success.

“How long since they passed over, do you think?” asked practical Bluff.

“I should say all of an hour,” was Frank’s ready response.

“One good thing, there wasn’t any sort of a breeze. If it had been blowing fairly hard, the balloon would be twenty miles away by now, even if afloat.”

“That’s a fact Bluff; and as there wasn’t an air current of more than a few miles an hour, one thing seems positive.”

“What’s that, Frank?” demanded Jerry.

“The balloon must have dropped into the water. If it was still in the air it could be seen through these powerful glasses miles away.”

The others recognized the truth of his words.

“You seem to be heading straight out. Have you any reason for such a thing?” asked Bluff, seeking information.

“I have. Before we started I carefully noted my bearings. I also made sure that what little air was stirring came direct from the land, which, in this case, was almost due east. You can easily see from that which way the balloon must have drifted up to the minute it dragged in the water.”

“Frank, what you say is sound, practical good sense. We must come on some sign in a short time, if we keep straight on and the conditions remain the same. I’m only afraid we may be too late,” remarked Jerry sadly.

No one else spoke for several minutes as the motor-boat sped merrily along on her mission of mercy. It was a time of great strain. They hoped for the best, and yet were conscious of a terrible fear lest the professor and his assistant might have gone down long ere this.

“The breeze is freshening,” remarked Bluff presently.
Frank had noted this, too. It was only natural, for after dawn the air currents that may have become sluggish during the night were in the habit of awakening and taking on new life.

He looked back. The land was several miles away by this time. If they were fated to meet with success in their errand, something must be showing up very soon now.

Sick at heart with apprehension, Frank handed the glasses over to Jerry, and was pretending to pay strict attention to the motor. Truth to tell, his nerves were keyed up to a high tension, as he counted the seconds, and kept hoping for the best.

Frank had noted one thing that gave him not a little concern. This was in connection with the fact that the easterly breeze seemed to have bobbed around to the southwest. Now, from all that he had heard this was a quarter that nearly always brings one of those howling “norters” that prove such a bane to Florida cruisers.

“How about that, Joe—is the fact that the wind is in the southwest apt to bring bad weather?” he asked, when he could get the cracker lad aside; for Frank did not wish to further alarm his chums.

“Most always that happens. When the wind rises now, unless she goes back once again to the south, you see she will be squally,” returned Joe, also lowering his voice cautiously.

“And that squally wind develops into something stronger, I guess?” pursued the Northern boy, always seeking to learn.

“It jumps around to the northwest like a pompano skipping along the water in a shoal. Then for three days it blows like a railroad train, out of the north, and we all shiver,” was the characteristic reply.

“Well, I only hope the squall part of it holds off until we pick up the poor professor. We saved him once from the fire, and now it seems up to us to pull him in out of the wet, if we have any decent sort of luck.”

Noting the look of surprise on the little fellow’s brown face, and realizing that he was totally ignorant in connection with what his words meant, Frank proceeded to tell how the hotel in Centerville was burned, and what a part Jerry and himself had had in the rescue of the balloonist, who had taken a sleeping powder, and lay in his room, unconscious of the tumult and peril.

Jerry meanwhile was making as good use of the marine glasses as he knew how.

“See anything that looks like the wreckage of a balloon on the water?” asked Frank, as he swept the horizon with his naked eye, but in vain.

“Not a beastly thing,” returned the other, in a disappointed tone.
“Oh, I’m afraid we’ve come in the wrong direction,” sighed tender-hearted Will, shaking his head dubiously; “and it’s just terrible to think that those poor chaps may be drowning right now, and our little boat so near at hand!”

“Tell me about that, will you? There he goes as usual, making us feel like murderers or something, when we only want a chance to get in our fine rescuing act. Stop him talking that way, Frank, won’t you?” pleaded Bluff, who had emptied all the sand out of the bag dropped by the drifting balloonists, and declared he meant to hang the same up in his den at home as a memento of the wonderful incident.

Frank stood up to see the better.
Carefully he scanned the horizon, beginning at the furthest possible quarter toward the south, and ranging to one equally improbable northward.
And everywhere it seemed to be the same dead level line, with not a break that gave signs of promise.

“And the strange thing about it all is that there doesn’t seem to be a solitary vessel, big or little, in sight anywhere. It would be hard at any other time to find the gulf around here so utterly forsaken,” he remarked, beginning to feel discouraged himself.

“It certainly looks as though we had the field to ourselves,” remarked Bluff; “here we’ve come some miles from shore, which is getting ‘hull-down,’ as the sailors say, in the distance, and yet not a peep of the lost balloonists. How much further ought we go, Frank?”

“Just as long as there seems to be the slightest chance of our striking those we’re looking for, or we can see shore with the glasses. I, for one, would never be satisfied to give up, and then later on feel that we might have found them if we’d only kept out another mile or two.”

“My sentiments, exactly,” declared Will, who possessed a tender heart, as his chums knew from experience.
So the time crept on.
Frank was bending above the motor, but all the while he kept one eye over his shoulder on the bow of the boat where his chum stood, still sweeping the sea ahead with the marine glasses.
In fact, every one aboard seemed to have his gaze focussed on Jerry by this time, as though he might be the one to decide whether the hunt had better be abandoned right then and there, or kept up still longer.
And Frank almost held his breath awaiting the verdict.
Suddenly he saw Jerry start, and screw the glasses more eagerly to his eyes, as he craned his neck to see the better. With the increasing wind the waves had commenced to rise a little, consequently any floating object might at times be difficult to discern.

“I had a glimpse of something then, fellows! But, after all, it might have been another bunch of old pelicans!” he exclaimed.

“Not that. Pelicans would not be so far out. They hug pretty close to the shore, where the water is more shallow, and the fish come in to feed. Still, it may have been the fin of a shark cutting the water like that one—” started Frank, when Jerry interrupted him:

“There it is again! As sure as you live, I believe it’s a man clinging to some sort of wreckage! Here, take the glasses, Frank! Right over there, dead ahead! Now be ready! There! See?”

“It is a man! Yes—two of them! Fellows, we are in time!” cried Frank.

“Hurrah!” the others shouted in chorus.

And the breeze, coming off shore, must have carried that volume of cheering sound to the ears of the almost despairing balloonists as they clung there to the wreck of their disabled air craft, possibly arranged to float for a time if it dropped into the sea.

“Yes. There! I can see one of them waving his hand! Give the poor chaps another shout, boys! This is great luck for us!” exclaimed Frank, and his own sturdy voice helped to swell the sound that rolled over the water.

If it was a happy moment for the rescuers, imagine the feelings of the two who clung there, expecting that every minute might see them without any support, as the waterlogged balloon sank under them!

Fast though the motor-boat was shooting through the waves, she seemed to fairly crawl, such was the impatience of the young voyagers.

So they swept alongside the floating balloonists. When Professor Smythe discovered the identity of those who were coming to his aid his astonishment knew no bounds. It was the most remarkable coincidence he could remember meeting with in an adventurous career extending over many years.

“Was that your camp we passed over, a little while back?” he asked, as, having been helped aboard, and some instruments being passed up by his assistant, he helped the latter to crawl over the gunwale of the motor-boat.

“Just what it was,” laughed Frank, “and you came near wrecking us, too. The sand bag struck the tent, and carried it down in a heap.”

“Incredible! And yet that very fact goes to prove my assertion that in war time dynamite could be easily dropped into a fortress by means of a dirigible balloon, or an
aeroplane. That was a happy thought of mine to send a message. Only I hope none of you brave boys received any injury!” cried the professor.

“Luckily not. But what is to be done with this wreckage?” asked Frank.

“Nothing. It will sink presently. We have secured all our valuable instruments and records. I’m only too happy over escaping from a watery grave. Simms and myself were making up our minds that our time had come when you hove in sight.”

“We are heading for Cedar Keys, but in no hurry to get there, professor. What would you like us to do for you?” asked Frank presently, after they had given both men blankets to throw about their shoulders, for the air was “nippy.”

“There is smoke on the horizon, to the west I believe it must be a steamer bound for Tampa. Do you think it would be possible to intercept her and put us aboard?” asked the scientist eagerly.

Frank took a look at the weather.

“We’ll make a try, anyhow. But to do so we must head straight out, for she will go miles to the south of us,” he said.

They sped on for an hour. The land was dim in the distance. It thrilled them to know they were like a speck out in the midst of the great Gulf of Mexico. By now the coast steamer was in plain view, and signals were made for her to stop.

When the captain learned who the two men were, and that he could further the work of the government, he gladly took them aboard; and the last the boys saw of the aeronauts was their waving hats as the steamer went on her way.