


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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter II: Caught in a Fire Trap

It was late that night ere the three visitors thought of going home. There was so much to talk over that it seemed as though they could never break away.

“Listen!” exclaimed Will, finally, as they were about to depart.

“That’s the fire-bell, as sure as you live!” cried Bluff.

“Tell me about that, will you!” cried Jerry. “A cold night to get burned out!”

Frank snatched up his coat and cap.

“I’m going with you, fellows, as far as the corner, anyway, and see if it is a real fire, or a fake,” he remarked.

Accordingly the quartette rushed out of the door and down the street. There was snow on the ground, and the air was pretty keen.

“It’s a fire all right; look, you can see the light, and the smoke!” said Will.

“Say, fellows, isn’t that the square, and doesn’t it look like it might be the Sherman House?” asked Frank.

“As sure as you live,” replied Bluff. “That would be a tough thing, for the people there to climb out near midnight, and the mercury hovering half way down to zero!”

“Hurry! Perhaps we can help some!” exclaimed good-hearted Jerry, and they increased their pace.

It was the hotel, beyond all doubt. As the boys came into the open square they saw a scene of confusion that thrilled them. Smoke was pouring out of the lower windows of the big frame building, and in some places it was accompanied by red tongues of flame, licking up the dry wood.

“She’s a goner!” announced Jerry grimly.

They saw people come hastily out of the doorway, some scantily clad, and with blankets around their shoulders. Luckily there were only a few guests in the hotel, since the best trade came in summer.

Loud shouts told that the local fire company was coming with their hand-engine. Probably the Chemical Company would also be on hand, although it was too late for



anything to be done but try and save adjoining buildings, none of which, fortunately enough, were very close to the doomed hotel.

Frank and his chums thought that possibly they might help out at pumping, or doing something of the sort. At a fire in a country town every one assists to carry out furniture, or work the machine, while the regular members of the organization enjoy the exclusive privilege of carrying the hose and smashing in windows.

Amid the greatest excitement the water was finally started. By this time one end of the building was all on fire, and every person knew it would be a complete wreck before the flames ceased feeding.

It chanced that the boys were standing near some of those who had issued forth from the hotel. Among them was the proprietor, plainly excited as he saw his property going up in smoke and flames, and still getting some consolation from the fact that he had a good insurance on it all.

Just then a man came limping and seized hold of the hotel proprietor.

“Have you seen my brother, the professor?” he demanded, in a trembling voice.

“Oh! that you, Mr. Smythe? Your brother—no, I don’t remember seeing him. But I guess everybody got out all right. He must be around somewhere,” replied the other.

“I’ve asked a dozen people, and nobody has seen him. I tell you, man, he’s asleep up in that room yet, and will be burned to death!” exclaimed the gentleman, whom Jerry knew quite well. He was very lame and walked with difficulty.

His brother, a balloonist of national reputation, had been visiting him recently, and on account of some sickness at the house, had taken a room at the hotel.

“But no sane man could sleep through all this beastly row; and sure we haven’t seen any one at the windows, have we, boys?” went on the fat hotel man.

“But you don’t understand. I tell you he has been unable to sleep for several nights, and just before he left me early to-night he took a sleeping powder that he said would make him dead to the world for eight hours! He’s up in his room yet, and will be lost unless some one goes and drags him out!” cried Mr. Smythe.

“Which is his room, Mr. Ten Eyck?” demanded an eager voice.

The stout hotel man looked at the speaker, who was none other than Jerry.

“You see that window over there at the end of the house, third floor—that’s his room! But the stairs must be ablaze by now, boy! It would be suicide to think of trying to go up there!” he cried.

“Come on, Frank; we’ll take a look in, anyhow!” shouted Jerry as he dashed off, followed by his chum, equally excited.

Still, Frank was ordinarily a cool-headed fellow, and accustomed to weighing chances somewhat before imperiling his life. In this case, of course, he knew that more or less risk must be taken if they hoped to save the sleeping balloonist.

One look they took in at the front door. The whole place was ablaze.

“Get out of the way, boys; we’re going to put the hose in there!” cried one of the wearers of the fire-hats and coats, as he advanced.

“No chance there!” exclaimed Frank, in despair, as he moved back.

Jerry clutched his arm.

“Come along with me. Perhaps the back stairs may not be burning, yet. They happen to be further along toward the safe side. There’s a chance!” he panted.

Half a minute later they had turned the corner, and were close to the rear exit.

“See, the smoke is coming out, but no fire. Shall we risk it?” asked the eager Jerry.

Frank swept a quick look above and around. He was weighing the thing in his mind, so that they might not be carried by impulse to their doom.

“It’s worth while. At the worst we can jump into that tree from the window. And it’s just terrible to think of the professor sleeping on until he is caught. Lead the way, Jerry; you know about it better than I do. Remember, on the third floor, and turn to the left!”

They darted in. Several persons near by shouted warnings, but the words fell on deaf ears, for already the daring lads were rushing up the narrow stairs. Around them the smoke was dense. It smarted their eyes dreadfully, so that they were compelled to rub them from time to time in order to see at all.

Reaching the first landing, Jerry turned to the left. Frank had hold of his chum’s coat, for he did not want to get lost in that smoky interior, and Jerry was the one acquainted with the situation.

Now they had reached the second flight of stairs. A burst of red fire further along the hall served to show them for a brief space of time how matters stood. Up the stairs they stumbled, gaining the upper landing. Again Jerry turned to the left.

“He said the last room, didn’t he?” he gasped.

“Yes, go on!” answered Frank, still gripping his comrade’s garment.

“Then here’s the door!”

“Shut?”

“Yes, and locked, too! What shall we do?” exclaimed Jerry.

“Kick it in—any old way, but we must be quick!” answered the other.



Then the two threw themselves upon the door. It quickly gave way before their combined assault. They pushed into the room. The smoke had gained a footing here, but on account of the closed door it was not nearly so bad as in the halls.

Immediately they saw a figure stretched across the bed. The balloonist had evidently been overcome by sleep before he thought to undress, and dropped over just as he had come from his lame brother's house.

"Wake up, professor, the house is on fire!" shouted Frank in the ear of the man.

Jerry, meanwhile, was shaking him vigorously; but all their efforts seemed to be of no avail. The man slept on as peacefully as though a babe, such was the power of the drug he had taken.

"We can't stay here long," said Frank, as the smoke thickened in the room. "And as he won't wake up, why, we'll have to try and carry or drag him down."

Fortunately, the man was not a very large person, or they might have despaired of ever accomplishing such a thing.

"Take hold on that side, Jerry. Now, lift, and drag his heels. That's the only way we can do," exclaimed Frank, who feared that even short as their stay in that room had been they would find conditions changed for the worse when they again reached the hall.

The professor paid not the least attention to what they were doing. He had possibly taken an overdose of his sleeping-powder, and only for the coming of the two chums must have perished miserably, like a rat in a trap.

When Frank threw open the door of the room again he uttered a cry of alarm. The back stairway was a mass of flame. Although hardly more than two minutes had passed since they came up those stairs, it was now manifestly impossible to pass down again.

He slammed the door shut and found Jerry staring at him in the half light.

"Talk to me about your fiery furnaces, that beats them all!" exclaimed Frank's chum, as he let go the professor's shoulders. "What shall we do now?"

Frank ran over to the window and threw up the sash. He looked out and then came back to where Jerry stood, trembling with excitement. Frank was as cool as ever in his life.

"There's a chance, Jerry," he shouted. "No fire below! Take hold here; tear up these sheets and knot them into a rope. Work for your life, and if the fire only holds back we may be able to save both the professor and ourselves! But work! work!"