

The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter III: Headed South

They did work with a vim, for the smoke was getting more oppressive with each passing second; and from the glimpse they had taken of the stairway it was plain to the boys that presently the fire would wrap the whole south end of the building in its grip, when their case would indeed be desperate.

Each tore and knotted until as if by magic a long rope was fashioned. True, it might betray them at the last and break, but Frank believed the sheets to be of good material and nearly new.

He had not time to even test the frail rope, but fastened it around the sleeping balloonist, under his arms.

“Now help me lift him over the window-sill,” he cried.

They had little difficulty in doing that, for the professor was a small, slight man. Once he was passed over the ledge, they began to lower away.

Frank only hoped in his heart that the fire might restrain its fury for a brief space of time. If it darted out below it must catch the human burden which they were lowering so speedily.

Shouts were heard outside. It seemed as though fully an hundred voices were raised to applaud the daring feat of the two boys, as the figure of the professor was seen coming rapidly down at the end of the rope made of torn sheets.

“If it’s only long enough!” gasped Jerry.

“Hurrah! they’ve got hold of him! He’s saved!” roared Frank, as the tremendous pull suddenly ceased.

They had about reached the end of the rope, so that this happy event came just in the nick of time. Frank hurriedly fastened that end to the bed-post.

“Climb out, Jerry, and slide down. Not a word now, or we may lose our chance!”

Jerry had been about to object, wishing his chum to go first. He realized the truth of what Frank said, however, and how foolish it would be to stand back on a matter so small. Accordingly he clambered over the window-sill and vanished from view.



Frank got in position to follow, and only waited until he had reason to believe his chum had reached safety. The rope had done bravely, but it certainly could never stand the strain of two of them at the same time.

And even as he waited there was a flash of fire below, as the flames ate through the sheathing of the house. A tremendous yell went up.

“Come down, Frank—oh! quick!” he caught above the clamor, and he knew that it was Will’s shrill voice he heard.

The fire was perilously close to the rope. In a second it might catch and be severed. Frank did not hesitate. He was accustomed to meeting emergencies promptly, and doing the right thing.

Down he slipped, passing the threatening flame, in fact shooting through it just as the rope began to be consumed in its hot breath. Frank had almost reached the point of safety when he felt his support collapse, and he dropped downward.

Something caught him, something that seemed endowed with life—the extended arms of his three chums eagerly fashioned into a net, and he was not injured, beyond a little singeing of his hair as he passed through the fiery torch.

The boys were glad to get away from the crowd of enthusiastic admirers who wanted to lift Frank and Jerry on their shoulders, and carry them around town in triumph, something that felt repulsive to the lads.

But the lame brother of the man they had saved, seized upon them ere they went off.

“A thousand thanks to you, for your brave deed!” he cried. “You have saved a human life to-night, boys, and one of more than ordinary value. My brother is employed by the Government to experiment with balloons and aeroplanes, and his discoveries may prove a great thing for our nation in case of a foreign war. To-morrow he will thank you himself, and from his heart. Your mothers have cause to be proud of their sons, and I shall tell them so myself.”

From a distance the boys watched the hotel burn, and talked over the affair just as though they might have been casual watchers, and had no particular interest in the matter. And yet two of them had come very close to sacrificing their young lives in attempting to save that of another.

Both Bluff and Will had suffered tortures while their chums were inside the doomed structure. Their voices had led all the rest as the sheet-rope fell from the upper window, with the form of the professor dangling at the end, for they knew the daring plan of their mates had been a brilliant success.

The fire did not jump to any of the nearby dwellings or stores, thanks to the efficient labors of the department, the members of which worked like Trojans in order to confine it to its original field.

When it had died down the boys separated once more, and the hearty grip that passed between them was evidence of the sincere affection that bound this quartette of clean, manly fellows in common.

Neither Frank nor Jerry said a word to their parents about the heroic part they had played in the rescue of Professor Smythe. Imagine the astonishment of Frank's father when that gentleman, in company with his brother, a respected business man of Centerville, called at the house, the next morning after breakfast, and related the whole circumstance.

And when Frank and Jerry were called down from the den, where, in company with the others, they were doing some packing, they blushed under the hearty words of praise heaped upon them by the two gentlemen.

"Why, I'm going South myself, boys," declared the balloonist, when he heard of their contemplated trip, "and wouldn't it be a queer thing now if we happened to come across one another down in Dixieland? I'm heading for Atlanta, to steer my big balloon to the eastward at the first favorable chance, in order to settle some questions about air currents that have long been baffling us all. Depend on it, if I could do you any sort of a favor I'd go far out of my way to try and even up the debt I owe you."

Little did any of them suspect under what strange conditions their next meeting would really be.

All Centerville was ringing with the story of the brave exploit of Frank and Jerry. When the latter reached home that noon he was overwhelmed with hysterical words of praise from his mother; while his father had come home from his office, beset by a dozen acquaintances desirous of congratulating him on having a son of such heroic mould.

Jerry was very uneasy under all this favorable comment. He did not like to be looked upon as differing in any degree from other boys.

"Any fellow would have done the same thing. We were lucky enough to have the chance, that's all," he insisted, as his mother kissed him again and again, crying a little at the same time at the thought of what might have happened; while his father gripped his hand and patted him on the back affectionately.

By afternoon the boys decided that they had everything packed they could think of, and after that they began to try and possess their souls in patience.



“No sleep for me to-night, fellows,” declared Jerry, as he prepared to go home, as supper-time came around.

“I’d advise you to try and get a few winks if you can. To-morrow night we’ll be on the train, and not much chance then. It’s a lucky thing that all of us know something about machinery. Our experience with our motor-cycles will come in good play now. And here’s Jerry been studying up on the running of an automobile with that retired chauffeur, Garrison, who’s teaching Andy Lasher how to run a car.”

“Yes, but, Frank, how about you taking lessons about the engine of a motor-boat? I know you’ve got several books on the subject since your father half promised to put a little craft on Lake Camalot next season,” remarked Jerry.

“Well,” laughed Frank, fairly caught, “between the lot of us it’ll be strange if we don’t know how to handle that dandy boat of Cousin Archie’s—the *Jessamine* he calls her.”

“Three cheers for the *Jessamine*, then!” said Bluff.

They were given with a will, after which the boys separated. Since this would be their last night at home for two weeks they had sensibly decided to spend it in the bosom of their families. Everything was done, at any rate, so that it was useless to bother about that matter any more.

In spite of Frank’s warning it is very unlikely that any one of the four slept very soundly. The near future beckoned to them with such grand possibilities concerning the sport they loved, that they could not get it out of their minds; and innumerable plans for the happy times ahead kept their brains busy the major portion of that last night under the parental roof-trees.

Finally the morning dawned, with a light snow falling. There was a bustle in at least four homes that day, and presently the intending travelers gathered at the station long before the train was due that would take them on to Philadelphia, and then, with a change of cars, to the beckoning sunny Southland.

And when finally the parting moment came, there were hurried good-byes, the bags were thrown into the baggage car, and as the train pulled out those of their school friends who had come down to see them off, as well as their relatives, waved a shower of handkerchiefs amid a chorus of shouts.

“Hurrah!” cried Bluff, as he settled down in his seat, “we’re on the way to the greatest time of our lives!”