


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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter V: The First Campfire

“Tell me about that, will you!” gasped Jerry, as he bobbed above the surface.

He was swimming industriously to keep from being swept down with the current.

Frank, finding that the motor worked smoothly, and no damage had been done by the concussion, started it backing just enough to keep the boat steady.

He darted to the bow, where Bluff and Will were already hanging.

“What was it?” called the swimmer, who, now that he was in, seemed disposed to make a picnic of the affair, after his usual joking way.

“A snag, of course. I thought you were going to sing out if we came on one?” said Frank.

“I did, and you all heard me yell,” asserted Jerry.

“Yes, while you were passing through the air. Much good that would do,” observed Bluff, disposed to refuse such evidence.

“But there was nothing in sight. The snag must have been down under the surface, and the water is so brown I couldn’t see it. My! but that was a vault! Talk about your high divers, there never was a prettier leap than that.”

“Just my luck, again!” whimpered Will. “What a magnificent picture of the Jumping Frog that would have made in our scrap-book. Why on earth didn’t you tell me you were going to do it, and I could have been ready to snap you off?”

“Hear that man, with me down in this ooze, soaked to the skin! Wait till I find a chance to get at him!” groaned Jerry, shaking his fist upward, in mock anger, though at the time he was grinning amiably.

“While you are down there, pard, why not take a look, and see if we scraped the paint off the boat’s nose when we banged that log,” suggested practical Frank.

“That’s so. Make the best of a bad bargain. Why, no; nothing doing, boys. This stem is made of solid brass, and could stand many a hard bump. I think Cousin Archie must have been warned in advance, and had her made doubly staunch,” sang out Jerry.

“Can you see the snag anywhere around?” asked Frank.

“Not here. Perhaps we’re down below it now.”



“Or it may have been an alligator, fellows. Some of the natives told me there are a few in this old stream,” observed Bluff.

“Yes, and there he is now!” shouted Will. “He crawled up on the bank to dry off, and is going to jump in again! Oh! why wasn’t I ready! Look out, Jerry! He’s coming for you!”

Jerry was already in motion. The notion of meeting an alligator might have appealed to him, but not under these circumstances. He struck out like a madman as he struggled to get to a point where he could reach up and clasp the eager hands extended down to him, for he had heard the splash that announced the reptile’s taking to the water.

Of course, the little six-foot ‘gator was by long odds the more scared of the two, but then Jerry, being a greenhorn, did not know that. When finally the others managed to drag him, dripping, one deck, he was panting like a tired dog and puffing like a grampus.

“Talk to me about your narrow squeaks, they don’t appeal to me one little bit!” he gasped. “Where’s the old alligator monster now, Will? Did you snap him off?”

“He never came up again. That’s just my luck, you know.”

“Better times coming, Will. You’ll take many pictures of ‘gators on logs and sunny banks before we finish this little trip,” laughed Frank.

“Yes, I know what you’re laughing at,” grunted Jerry, “and I suppose I did look like a big frog as I sailed away off the bow. After this the lookout ought to be tied to his seat. It was lucky, though, you had so little headway on, Frank. We might have ended our cruise half an hour after we began it.”

The air was balmy, and Jerry seemed nothing loth to sit there and dry off, as the journey was resumed down the river.

“Any game along here, do you think?” asked Will presently.

“They told me there was plenty, only you have to look sharp, and not get lost in the swamps. Men have gone out hunting and never come back again; though, of course, these were strangers, and not the natives. Nobody ever knew whether they were lost or fell into the hands of some black criminals who were hanging out hereabouts.”

Jerry volunteered this information. He was always making inquiries in connection with the possibilities of game.

“I saw a blue heron just then, swinging downstream below us. And there’s something snow-white over there. Yes, it must be a crane standing in the water, with his fishing-rod ready for business; and there goes a string of white birds, over yonder. Do you know what they are, Frank?” asked Will.

“I’m not sure, but I think they belong to the ibis family. Look at that ‘coon scurrying up that log, running from the water. He’s been trying to scoop out a dinner of fish, too. Nearly everything feeds on fish down here, even many of the wild ducks. Got him that time, did you, Will?”

“I think so,” replied Will complacently, for he had snapped his camera while the striped “bushy-tail” was still moving up the slanting log.

They were making fair progress all the while. So the afternoon began to wear away. The current was almost enough to carry them on at the rate of several miles an hour. With the prospect of meeting hidden snags at any minute, Frank did not deem it wise to put on any speed. That would come when they were upon the open gulf, and obstacles no longer worried them.

They had entered a section that undoubtedly bordered on a swamp. The trees grew thicker, and shut out much of the light, so that it seemed actually like dusk. And to the delight of Will, the long streamers of Spanish moss hung everywhere.

“Say, perhaps we’d better pull up soon for the night. This sort of work needs all the eyesight we’ve got, and it’s getting some gloomy just now. I wouldn’t dare attempt an exposure with this shadow on everything,” remarked Will.

“Always something wrong, eh, Will? However, putting the picture-getting aside, you’ll admit that this is a mighty comfy position to be in. There’s Bluff writing up the menu he expects to spring on us the first meal out,” laughed Frank.

“I own up I was thinking of something along that line. Wish I had some of the fine oysters they tell us grow down South. Your sister Nellie gave me several recipes to try, and I’m going to spring them on you the first chance, see if I don’t.”

“Well, I only hope you have better success than the said Nellie usually has. My dad threatens to send her to cooking school before she kills off the entire family with her experiments. But as to the oysters, you must wait till we get out of the river. This is fresh water. Mussels or fresh-water clams grow in such places, but hardly oysters,” observed Frank.

“I’m going to tell Nellie what you said, when we get back,” declared Bluff.

“Well, it encourages me to know that you expect we will survive the operation. But then, ten to one they are recipes she clipped from some paper, and wants you to try for her. I’m going to keep an eye on you whenever you hang around the fire, remember. You can bear watching,” Frank continued.

“Glad to hear that, for some people can’t,” remarked the other calmly.



At which the laugh was on Frank; but he took it good-naturedly, as always. It required a good deal to make him show signs of being provoked; but like most people of that temperament, if ever he did lose his temper, he was apt to be very angry indeed.

Presently they found what seemed to be a good place to tie up for the night. A small boat, called the dinghy, or dinky, was trailed behind. This might come in handy whenever they wanted to go ashore while the motor-boat was anchored; or one of the boys might wish to use it for fishing, gathering oysters, or shooting shore birds, later on.

The ground being high and dry just at that particular spot, they built a fire and determined to cook supper ashore. There would likely be plenty of opportunities for doing this aboard, later, and they could not resist that chance for an open campfire.

Bluff was assisted by Jerry in getting the first supper. It turned out to be appetizing. They had been in the woods so much now that even the poorest cook in the club, Will, was picking up quite a little knowledge of the art, and felt an occasional desire to show off.

The boys never got over joking poor Will about his first experience in cooking rice, however. He had put the entire four pounds in a pot while the rest were away. One of them, coming back to camp presently, found Will in distress. He had filled every kettle and pannikin with the swelling rice, and despite the glistening heaps the original kettle was still boiling up heaps of it, so that it threatened to even smother the fire.

He knew better now.

After the meal was over they sat around, taking things easy. Frank was writing in his logbook, Will monkeying with his camera, while Jerry and Bluff sat there discussing something that had to do with their respective lung power—a question never, as yet, fully settled, although they had had many a friendly contest to thresh out this rivalry.

“Frank, don’t look up, please! Listen to me!” said Will in a low voice.

“Well, what is it?” asked the other, simply pausing in the act of writing a word.

“I saw something moving over behind that bunch of saw-palmettos on your left. Pretending not to be looking, I squinted out of the tail of my eye. What do you think I saw? The head of a black man raised—an awfully wicked-looking head, too, Frank. What had we better do about it?” went on Will, his whispering voice quivering.

“Nothing. Leave it to me. Don’t show any signs of excitement, please, but just keep on with what you are doing,” and Frank allowed his left hand to slowly creep in the direction where his shotgun lay on the ground.