


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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter VI: The Swamp Fugitive

“Now, my friend behind the bunch of saw-palmetto, won’t you join us?”

Frank had slowly risen, picking up his gun as he gained his feet. There was a movement in the quarter where his gaze seemed directed, then a human figure began to crawl into the camp, looking more like a great dog than a man.

“Great Caesar’s ghost!” ejaculated Bluff.

“Tell me about that, will you!” exclaimed Jerry, making a dive for his own gun.

“Quiet, fellows! There’s no need of any excitement. It’s only a visitor from the swamp, come to have a cup of coffee with us,” remarked Frank steadily.

He made no attempt to aim his weapon, being satisfied to let the negro see that he was armed, and ready for action. The wretched outcast was almost in tatters. He looked thin and haggard, in marked contrast with the sleek and well-fed darkies the boys had generally noticed since reaching the Sunny South.

Having reached a spot in front of Frank, the man arose to his full height. There was a look of trouble on his face. He had been hunted like a wolf for so long that naturally he believed every man’s hand was against him.

But Frank saw at once that Will had been mistaken when he remarked upon the vicious look of the fugitive. He had taken the expression of fear for that of maliciousness.

“Well, who are you, and what do you want here?” Frank asked directly.

The black started, and looked at him a little eagerly.

“I’s got lost in de swamp, boss, ‘deedy I has, an’ I smelled de vittals a-cookin’, so’s I couldn’t keep away. Didn’t mean to skeer yuh, suah I didn’t. Yuh wouldn’t hurt a pore ole brack man, would yuh, little marse?” he droned, still keeping his eyes fastened apprehensively on Frank and his gun.

“I guess it’s a fairy story he’s putting up, Frank. They told me about him up at the town. He answers the description of George Walden, all right,” said Bluff.

Frank saw the man start at mention of the name, and shiver.



“That’s your name, all right, I can see. Now, George, what have you been doing to make you hide out like this in the swamp?” demanded the other sternly.

“Reckons as how I ain’t wanted ‘round dis section, boss. Ain’t done nothin’ so very ba-ad, but seems like we-uns kain’t git on. Some o’ the white gentlemen dey got it in fo’ me, an’ it was either a case o’ hidin’ out er takin’ a coat o’ tar an’ feathers. I reckoned I’d rather lay in de swamp a while. But, boss, I ‘clar tuh Moses I’s mighty nigh starved tuh death, I is.”

The man had evidently come to the conclusion that these Northern lads, with the motor-boat, could hardly be hunting fugitive blacks in the swamp. He was beginning to recover a little of his courage.

“How about that, Bluff? What did the people in the town say he had done?” asked Frank.

“Oh, nothing much, only, just as he says, he’s an undesirable citizen around the place. I think they said he had a weakness for chickens, and could not keep from sneaking into a coop if half a chance presented itself,” replied the other.

Frank smiled.

“Well, I believe that has never been called more than a weakness with a colored man, in the North. People who keep chickens should see to it that a poor fellow is not tempted beyond his strength. Locks are cheap enough. Then our friend George has not been doing anything particularly villainous?”

“Deed an’ ‘deed I ain’t, boss. I’s only wantin’ tuh git outen dis kentry. I’s got a darter married, an’ livin’ at Chattanooga. If I kin on’y git up dar, she’d nigh die wid happiness. An’ if I felt a little stronger I’d try an’ walk de hull way, so I would, young marse!” exclaimed the other eagerly.

They could see him sniffing the air, after the manner of a hungry dog that scents a bone near by.

“Sit down, George. I’m going to make you a pot of coffee such as you never tasted in all your life,” said Will at this juncture.

The negro turned his eyes upon him gratefully. He might be a ne’er-do-well, and a genuine nuisance around the town on the river where he had grown up, but to the generous-hearted lads from the North he was only a poor hungry human being, and fortune had been very good to them.

“And I’ll cook him some bacon. I bet it’s been a long time since he put a bit between his teeth,” declared Bluff, wishing to be in the game.

“Good for you, boys! I think, myself, that this old fellow may have been more sinned against than sinning; though perhaps he’s wise in wanting to make a change of

base since they're all down on him around here. We ought to show our thanks for the many favors that have been showered on us, and the best way to do it is to help some less fortunate fellow."

"Talk to me about your Good Samaritan! We've got several of 'em right here in this camp, and as I don't want to be left out in the cold, I'm going to make George here a present of that shirt I took such a dislike to. He won't mind the objectionable color, I reckon," spoke up Jerry.

The black man sat there, grinning from ear to ear. He could hardly believe his hearing. These campers, whom he had at first feared were there to drag him back to town, so that he might afford sport for the young hotbloods, had turned out to be the only friends he had known for many a day.

He tried to express his gratitude, but, of course, stumbled so that they told him they were ready to take it all for granted.

When the meal was ready he ate until he could contain no more. Jerry watched him with a queer expression on his face, and for once he realized how near starvation a human being may get at times.

At the same time, George was a bit uneasy. He kept looking around, as though he feared lest others might appear who would not be so kindly disposed toward him. Hence, after he had finished his supper, he showed a disposition to depart, telling them that he had a shack in the swamp.

Frank did not attempt to hinder him, for he saw that the man could not wholly get over his suspicion that there might be some trick back of this generous hospitality. George had evidently been educated in the belief that no one ever assisted a black man unless he had an ax to grind.

Before he went they gave him some bacon and a little can of ground coffee. As Cousin Archie had supplied much more than they could ever use on the trip, all of them thought they could easily afford to be a bit generous, since the occasion had come to their very door, as it were.

When George had faded away in the shadows the boys resumed the tasks his coming had interrupted. Naturally enough, their conversation was in connection with the great questions which the South had had to struggle with since the emancipation proclamation had freed so many million blacks and placed them on their own responsibility.

"I don't suppose any of you want to get the single tent out and sleep ashore to-night?" said Frank finally, as he saw his comrades yawning, as if ready to turn in.

"Not me," answered Bluff immediately.

“Some time later on I’m going to try it, but I want to get used to these queer scenes first,” remarked Will.

“He thinks an alligator might crawl up out of the river and gobble him up,” laughed Jerry.

“Well, we haven’t heard from you yet. Are you getting out the tent?” asked Frank.

“I would, only it’s such a bother. On the whole, I’m contented with the snug little bunky on board,” came the answer, at which Will shrugged his shoulders, as if to say he knew it would be so.

“All right, then; let’s go aboard. I’ll fix up the fire here so it will burn a few hours anyway. Kind of cheerful to see it as a fellow sits out his watch. This log, pushed over to the blaze, might answer,” observed Frank, suiting the action to his words.

“Then we do keep a watch?” queried Bluff.

Frank looked around at their gloomy and impressive surroundings and then raised his eyebrows in an expressive manner.

“You just bet we do!” exclaimed Jerry. “Here’s a swamp with all manner of wild animals in it, from alligators and wildcats to mosquitoes by the million. How do we know but what some of them might take a notion to come aboard in the night? I can see myself waking up to find a bobtailed cat cuddling up under my blanket with me; or a ten-foot ‘gator sprawled out across Will, here, asking to have his picture taken. Tell me about that, will you, fellows?”

“And then there may be other coons in hiding here; chaps who are wanted for something far more desperate than poor old George. They might murder us all in our sleep. Oh, yes, let us have a watch, by all means. I agree to sit it out for the first two hours if Frank will take the second,” cried Will.

So it was settled. They went aboard, and made preparations for sleep. Of course, there were no regular bunks aboard the Jessamine, since the space was too limited to admit of such luxuries. When the cruisers wanted to retire, two of them made beds of the seats, and the others found a suitable couch in the bottom. In case of rain, the automobile top would protect them; but in dry weather it could be left partly off, so as to insure more air.

Frank and Will had the seats first on this night, for it had been so arranged that they would change around each night, so as to give every fellow a chance. As Bluff put it, “just like we were playing a scrub game of ball, each one getting a chance to pitch and catch in turn.”

Will took up his place on the side toward the shore. It was some little time before his comrades all settled down, but finally he knew they slept. He sat there, watching the

fire burn near by, and thinking of many interesting things, until, on striking a match, and examining his watch, he found that it was time he awoke Frank.

He took the place of his chum when the other assumed the duties of guard, and being really sleepy by this time, quickly dropped off.

Frank sat there, with his gun across his knees, also watching the fire. He had little idea that there would anything occur to disturb the serenity of the night, but believed “an ounce of prevention better than a pound of cure.”

“The old log seems to do its duty handsomely, after all. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was still burning at daylight,” he mused, as he continued to watch the fire creeping along the dry wood and slowly eating its way toward the other end.

Then Frank started, as he saw a distinct movement in a little shadowy spot. It happened that the firelight did not reach this particular place, so that, strive as he might, he could not see distinctly.

“There’s something crawling along right there. I can see a dark figure move,” he said to himself as he strained his eyesight the harder.

Of course, his first thought was of the negro whom they had just fed. Perhaps to an irresponsible fellow like poor old George the temptation to try and steal something had been irresistible, and he was now creeping toward the motor-boat with the intention of getting aboard and laying hands on anything of value.

Then, again, it might be another entirely, some rascal much more to be feared than George. Frank was not more than half a minute in making up his mind what the best course for him to pursue under the circumstances would be.

“I’ll give him a shot, firing far over his head. Whoever it is, the report must make him skedaddle like hot cakes,” he thought, for he could not bear the idea of doing a fellow human being any bodily harm, no matter whether he were white or black.

Having so decided, Frank raised his gun a trifle further, so that it bore on the tops of the cabbage palms beyond. Then his finger pressed the trigger, and with the sudden report he gave a tremendous yell.