

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

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by Captain Quincy Allen



## Chapter IX: The Motor-Boat and the Prowlers

The unlucky young photographer gave a shriek. He could only think of that panther Frank had seen on the previous night, and believed that he was now in the power of the ferocious beast.

As he fell forward he managed to twist himself around so that he lay almost on his back. This enabled him to look up into the face of the man who was pinioning him down so fiercely to the earth.

“George!” he exclaimed.

It was the same fugitive black who had visited their camp on the preceding night. He stared hard at the face of the one he was holding down.

“Gorry! Am it you, young marse?” he exclaimed, as he released his savage clutch, and even attempted to help Will up.

“Yes. I’m lost, you see. Tried to do too much. Taking pictures in the swamp, and kind of got a little mixed. But I’m glad to meet you again, George. Is this the place where you hold out?”

The negro was breathing hard. He had evidently been greatly excited, under the belief that the creeping form had been one of his enemies, bent on effecting his capture, with the idea of furnishing sport for the idlers at the river town, through the medium of a little “tar and feathers party,” so popular in some sections of the Southern backwoods.

“I heerd a sound like it wor a gun bein’ cocked. Dat must ‘a’ been de black box heah, suh. Gorry! but I’s glad it wan’t dem white trash from de town. I’s jest a-gittin’ ready tuh vamoose outen heah right smart now. I’s gwine tuh Chattanooga, tuh jine my darter. An’ dat grub yuh guv me’ll kerry me part o’ the way.”

“That’s all right, George. Suppose you just take the time to paddle me back to our camp. I’ll promise you a lot more provisions, and some money in the bargain. This is a serious scrape for me, and while my life may not amount to much, it does seem a pity to waste all the fine views I’ve taken in this old swamp. Will you go?”



“Deed an’ I will, right peart, suh. You-all hev bin mighty good tuh me, an’ I ain’t gwine tuh forgit dat you sed as how I mightn’t be just as bad as dey paint me. Git into de leetle boat, young mars, an’ I’ll paddle yuh home,” said the old negro, with alacrity.

“Hold on a minute, George! I want to shoot you first,” observed Will.

“Gorry! Will it hurt, marse?” asked the other, beginning to look worried as he saw the mysterious black box being aimed at him.

“Not one-tenth as bad as having a tooth pulled out,” laughed Will. “In fact, you probably would never know it. Please step back a little. You see, I’m trying to get the shack in, too. That’s part of the game.”

Will snapped the camera shutter.

“That’s all. Didn’t feel it, did you, George?”

“Not so’s I kin notice, suh. An’ will dat show me an’ de leetle shack w’en it’s done fixed?” asked the fugitive wonderingly, eyeing the camera with respect.

“Fine. And if you leave me your address, or that of your married daughter up in Chattanooga, I promise to send you a copy later on, George.”

“Oh! I’ll do dat, marse, ‘deed I will! Nebber hed my pictur’ took yet. My gal, she’ll be sure surprised tuh see dat!” exclaimed the negro, still grinning.

“Well, we had better go now. Are you sure you can paddle me around to where the boat is tied up, George?”

“Easy as fallin’ off’n a log, suh. Git dar in ‘bout a hour er so.” And George dipped deeply, with the air of one who was accustomed to the paddle.

Indeed, Will learned presently that he had a dugout canoe hidden near by, and in which he was accustomed to navigate the intricate channels of the great swamp. He had lived out here some time, and knew the place thoroughly.

Will was sensible enough not to mention the fact that the sheriff and his posse, together with the two bloodhounds, had passed along that morning. Had he done so, the negro might have taken the alarm, and declined to accompany him farther.

Things had turned out well, after all. If he had a faculty for tumbling into a scrape, at least he was usually fortunate enough to get out again all right.

Before the hour was really up they came out of the swamp, and in sight of the tied-up motorboat. At sight of the dinghy the three boys gave shouts of delight.

“Tell me about that, will you!” said Jerry, as he stared at Will, seated comfortably in the bow of the short little craft, while the old negro, crouching in a limited area farther aft, plied the spruce paddle. “He comes back in style, with a guide to show him the way!”

“Better that than to stay in that gloomy place, eh, Frank? Oh, I got lost, all right, but happened to find the shack of our good friend George, who rescued me.”

“Ain’t he the honest chap, though? Ready to acknowledge the corn, no matter what the consequences,” declared Bluff.

“And I promised George some more of our extra provisions, if you have no objections, fellows. He’s going to start for Chattanooga right off. I didn’t mention about the sheriff and his posse, for I was afraid it might alarm the poor fellow. Better not say anything to him about it,” remarked Will aside.

“And they don’t want him, anyhow. Give George just what you and Frank think we can spare. I feel sorry for the old man, too. Say! did you get his photo this time, Will?” asked Jerry.

“Thank you, I did, and standing beside that wonderful shack, made of palmetto leaves. I’m glad to see that you’re beginning to take an interest in my work. Keep it up, Jerry. We’ll all enjoy the pictures later on,” remarked Will.

The boys had eaten lunch, but that did not deter them from getting another ready, and both Will and the negro did full justice to it.

“Here, George, is the package of food for you to carry on your long trip. And I want you to take this, also. It’s only five dollars, but it may help out on the way to Chattanooga,” said Will, slipping the bill into the old fellow’s black hand.

George looked at it as though he could not believe his eyes.

“Five dollahs! Gorry! dat am mo’ dan I done see dis t’ree yeahs, suh! Five dollahs! If I kin on’y keep dat till I sees my gal, Cleopatricks, how her eyes’ll stick out!” he said, scratching his white wool in delight, while his eyes glistened.

“Say that name again, will you?” murmured Jerry, gripping the arm of Frank as if taken suddenly ill.

“Cleopatricks. Dat’s my darter, suh. She merried a right smart nigger, an’ he’s got a barber shop up dar. His name it am Samuel Parker White, an’ if so be yuh ebber wants tuh send me one ob dat pictur’, jest drap it dar. I’s over-whelmed wid gratefulness, ‘deed I is. Dey won’t ebber be troubled wif George Duval ‘round these diggin’s ag’in, dat’s so, suh.”

“But think of the henroosts up there about poor old Chattanooga,” said Jerry in Frank’s ear, though the latter frowned at him for saying it.

After a short time old George took his departure on foot. He said that it was his intention to start immediately for the North. He had a few things at his shack he wanted to get, when he would depart from the soil of Florida forever.

“Happy Florida!” muttered the irrepressible Jerry.



Nevertheless, each of them shook the old darky's hand, in parting, and wished him the best of good luck.

"Well, what had we better do, boys?" asked Frank when they found themselves once more alone.

"I'm for getting out," said Will.

"That surprises me some, for it was you who wanted to stay," remarked Bluff.

"Well, we stayed, didn't we? I only want to mention the fact that I'm satisfied, if the rest of you are. I've secured all the swamp scenes I care for," retorted Will.

"I say move on. We can find a better place than this to sleep to-night. Why, the skeeters nearly carried me away last night," declared Jerry.

"And I'm beginning to be anxious, myself, for a glimpse of that wonderful gulf, not to say a taste of those delicious oysters," put in Bluff.

"That settles it, then. Let's get the things aboard, and drop downstream a few miles, anyway."

Frank suited his action to his words by picking up some of the cooking utensils and starting to clean them. This task was soon accomplished, and by degrees all their property that had been taken ashore was stowed away on the boat.

Then finally, Jerry, whose business it seemed to be to mind the hawsers, unfastened the rope that held the bow of the boat, still pointing with the current, just as they had stopped.

"Tell me when!" he called out as he stood by to repeat this maneuver with the second hawser at the stern.

The motor began to chug away cheerily.

"There's life about that sound, all right," laughed Will, who had been impressed with the dreadful monotony and stillness of the swamp.

"Let her loose!" called Frank, at the wheel.

So they once more started toward the open sea. There were still quite a few miles to be traversed, however, before they could set eyes on that same open water. The river was as "crooked as a New York alderman's record," as Jerry declared, and so it was that in order to advance five miles in a straight line they were compelled to navigate three times that distance on the water.

When the afternoon had waned they found a good place for a halt.

Again they cooked a royal supper. When four healthy boys are off on a lark of this sort the subject of eating is always one of their chief concerns, which must account for the space which it occupies in records of cruising and camping trips.

Will did not go ashore that evening. Indeed, somehow, none of them cared to stay alone, though Jerry did build up quite a roaring fire, just because he was fond of seeing the flames leap up in frolic.

As before, they divided the night into four watches, and this time Will chose to take the one that would bring him on deck from about midnight to two.

When it came his turn he sat there holding his camera faithfully, and hoping for something to happen; but it did not come, and he was finally forced to arouse Bluff to take his place.

The latter did so rather unwillingly. Bluff was unusually sleepy, it seemed, and inclined to believe that this watch business was all humbug, anyway. What did they need to fear? Possibly there was not a human being within five miles of where the motor-boat was tied up.

So Bluff grew a bit careless. Two or three times he napped while on duty, and as nothing came of it he made up his mind that there could not be any danger. So he settled himself more comfortably on the seat and allowed his eyes to close once more.

How long he slept Bluff never knew. He was awakened by some sound, but he could not tell what it was.

He did not move, but sat there trying to remember just where he was, and after satisfying his mind with regard to that point, wondered what it was that had disturbed his dreams.

Not hearing any repetition of the noise, he was about to drop off again, his eyes feeling very heavy, when he saw something move. Was that Frank, or one of the other boys, who had been ashore, climbing back to the boat?

Bluff gripped his gun, and kept on the watch. Whoever it might be, he evidently did not want to arouse the sleepers, for he was very careful how he stepped after he had come aboard.

Bluff caught a glimpse of the other's face as the dying fire on shore chanced to flare up. He made the alarming discovery that it was a white man, but a stranger; and then and there he remembered about the sheriff's hunt for the desperado!