

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

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter X: Bluff's First 'Gator

"Don't you move a hand or foot, you rascal!" cried Bluff sternly as he suddenly sat up, with leveled gun.

The unknown pillager was only a comparatively few feet away, so that it was easy for him to see the weapon covered him. Immediately he elevated his hands, as if to signify that he surrendered.

"What is it, Bluff?" asked a quiet voice, and Frank appeared from the bottom of the boat.

By then the thief must have determined that unless he took chances he would be made a prisoner. He gave a sudden yell, and threw himself over the gunwale of the boat. By chance it was the side toward the water, and they heard the splash that announced his arrival below.

"Some fellow aboard, bent on stealing everything we had!" exclaimed Bluff.

"Was it George?" gasped Will, aghast at the possibility of such ingratitude.

"No; a white man. See! There he goes, swimming across the river!"

The light was not very good, but they could see a sort of phosphorescent glow on the water, where some object was struggling for the opposite bank.

Bluff half leveled his gun, when Frank shoved it aside.

"You wouldn't want to kill him, even if he is a desperate case. I guess he got little or nothing. Let him go. The sheriff will be along after him soon," he said.

"But what is that trailing after him, Frank?" echoed Will.

"Where?" demanded the other quickly.

"Why, look right there! And whatever it is, it's catching up with him fast, too! I believe it must be an alligator!" exclaimed Will.

"I had a glimpse of a big fellow hovering under the boat at dusk. I think he was after the refuse we threw over. Would he hurt a swimmer?" asked Bluff.

"I don't know. I wouldn't want to try his appetite, that's all. Could you give the beast a shot without hitting the man, Bluff?" asked Frank eagerly.

"Why, yes; for at this short distance the shot won't scatter much."

As he spoke Bluff took quick aim. He was only too glad to be able to make use of his gun in so good a cause. The thief might be all they painted him, and yet he was a white man, and a minister's son in the bargain, the sheriff had said.

With the heavy report there was a combination of sounds. The man in the water gave a yell, as though he fancied the shot had been aimed at him. A short distance away, the water was being threshed wildly by some unwieldy object.

"I hit him all right!" shouted the excited marksman.

Some vigorous language came floating across from where the man was now dragging himself out of the river.

"Say, Bob Young! You didn't think we shot at you, did you? There was a big 'gator after you, and he'd got you, too, only for that shot. Better make yourself scarce around these regions. The sheriff is after you, with dogs and a posse."

Frank called this out after the fleeing shadowy figure that was just halting on the edge of the bank opposite.

"Thanks!" came in a hoarse voice, followed by a reckless laugh. "But he'll find it a hard job to corner me, you bet!"

That was the last they ever saw of Bob Young. In the morning, sure enough, the baying of a hound was heard, and presently along came the sheriff with his two dogs and the grim deputies.

"Mornin', boys! Reckon yuh may 'a' seen sumpin o' my man this heah time, as he's sure been close tuh yuh!" he called out while still some distance off.

"Yes. He tried to rob us last night, and jumped overboard when discovered," returned Frank.

"And swam across to the other side. He was followed by a 'gator, that might have got him, too, only for our chum, Bluff, here, giving the reptile a shot," proceeded Jerry; while aside he said: "Get busy, Will, with that shebang of yours. Now's your chance to snap him off!"

"What's that, suh? If anybody tries to snap me off they're sure liable tuh get punctured some!" exclaimed the sheriff, whose ears were as keen as his eyes.

Frank laughed as he said:

"He means with a camera, Mr. Sheriff. My friend was sorry he didn't get your picture before, that's all. But if you want to cross over we can let you use our little dinghy here."

"Now, that's very considerate o' yuh, suh. I accept with pleasure, and when we round that rapsallion up, as we surely will before callin' the game off, yuh can have the satisfaction of knowing yuh hev helped the forces of law an' order, suh, to put an



end tuh the career o' a most notorious rascal. I neglected tuh tell yuh before that this Bob Young is wanted fo' many crimes."

Frank tied a long rope to the dinghy, so that after the sheriff and his men and dogs were well over he could pull the boat back again. The dogs swam across, and the three men filled the small craft so full that there was danger of its capsizing.

However, they managed to get over in safety, and Will took a fine view of the strange ferry, with the dogs swimming alongside, while they were in midstream. The sheriff was so obliging as to actually pose for the picture.

"Heah's yuh 'gator over on the bank, suh. He must have crawled out to die, a most unusual thing for the varmints to do, as they generally sink like a rock, tuh stay down fo' several days!" he called out.

Then the posse vanished on the fresh trail of the desperado.

"I rather think they'll get Bob," ventured Frank. "That sheriff is a determined man, and he's enlisted in this hunt for keeps. How about going over to view the remains, Bluff?" he asked as he pulled the dinghy in.

"That's just what I was about to propose. My first 'gator, so perhaps I'd like to get his hide, if possible, or some of his teeth, anyway," returned the other, getting into the small boat with Frank.

Sure enough, they found a dead alligator up on the bank. The load of shot, fired at such a short distance, must have gone pretty much like a bullet. Some of them had entered his protuberant eyes, and by accident must have pierced his brain.

"A lucky shot, all right. I don't believe it could ever happen again, especially when the one who fired was almost behind the 'gator," commented Frank.

"How big is he?" asked the one who had slain the reptile.

"I should say all of ten feet, perhaps even eleven. They seldom grow bigger than twelve down here, I'm told, so this one is something of a whopper. If the alligator man I talked with at Coney Island a year ago told the truth, then this one must be several hundred years old."

"Whew! Perhaps he saw Columbus land!" suggested Bluff humorously, for he could not quite believe any such tale.

He concluded merely to knock out a tooth or two, to remember the event, but when Will heard about it he insisted on being ferried over so as to get a picture of their first Florida 'gator, with the proud Bluff standing beside it, to prove its length.

They got under way about eight o'clock.

Just at that time Jerry said he heard some distant shooting. It seemed to come from the direction the sheriff and his party had gone, so they wondered if they could have



come up with the fugitive Bob, and whether those shots had any reference to the two hounds.

"I think the fellow must have been armed, and unless his gun became useless after his bath last night, his first care would be to shoot down the dogs, so as to cut off pursuit," ventured Frank.

They afterward learned, however, by making inquiries, that the sheriff got his man, wounded, and that Bob later on paid the penalty of his crime.

By noon that day they came to a sawmill, where a party of convicts, under guard, were making cypress shingles. Our boys did not put in, for the sight was anything but pleasing to them; although Will did think it wise to get a picture of the camp, so as to add variety to his collection.

About three o'clock they suddenly came to a little town. Here they stopped only a brief time, Frank going ashore to post some letters and purchase a few things he had on his list.

Once more they were afloat.

"I've got some pleasant news for you, fellows," said Frank, about an hour or so after they had lost sight of the settlement in the woods.

"Along what line?" asked Will.

"I think I can guess. For some time I've been sniffing the air, and ready to declare that it had a whiff of salt in it!" exclaimed Jerry.

"And I could, in imagination, smell those fine fat oysters roasting," said Bluff, smacking his lips in anticipation.

"You're on, all right. The gulf is close at hand. Indeed, I'm adding a little speed just now, in the hope that we may be able to open it up before night," remarked Frank.

"How about that bend, just below? Somehow, it strikes me that once we round that something may be doing. It's just a sneaking notion, but you wait," ventured Jerry.

Ten minutes later they swept around the bend in question, and a cry burst from every lip, for there, in the light of the declining sun, lay the great Mexican Gulf, stretching as far in the distance as the eye could see.

The river cruise was ended, and another kind of adventure lay before them.

