


The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XVI: Joe

With one sweep of his arm Frank drew the little fellow into the dinghy.

Then he snatched up his paddle, and dipped it deeply into the flood. The corklike boat answered instantly to the demand, and backed away from the side of the anchored sharpie.

Even though but a few seconds had passed, the racket aboard the boat had become tremendous by now. The men were shouting at each other as they groped around in the dark for the boy.

Frank knew that the very sounds they made were apt to assist him in his escape, for they helped to drown what little noise he was compelled to make in his quick and positive work with the paddle.

Then one of them must have reached the conclusion that the boy had been kidnapped by some unseen visitor, coming in another boat.

“Keep still, you fools, an’ listen!” he shouted.

They seemed to guess his reason, for the chorus of loud voices ceased. Frank also stopped paddling, momentarily. He hoped the listening spongers would be unable to locate him in the darkness.

“Have they any small boat?” he whispered in the ear of the cowering boy.

“No. It broke loose three days ago, in a squall,” came the reply.

“Bully!”

That one word expressed all the gratitude that was in Frank’s heart. It seemed as though fortune was acting mighty kindly toward the rescuing expedition.

Just then there came a flash and a sharp report. One of the men had fired in the direction he believed the passing boat to be lying.

The bullet splashed in the water, and seemed to go humming over the surface of the lagoon. Then a shout came from the sharpie:

“I seen ‘em then! Hey! You thar! Come back with that kid, or it’ll be the worse for ye! D’ye hear?”

But Frank, instead of wasting his breath in replying, was once more paddling industriously. He had changed his course, in the hope that should a second bullet follow the first, it might not touch either himself or his charge.

Just as he anticipated, there was a second shot, followed by half a dozen more, seemingly fired at random.

No damage resulted, and Frank believed the incident was closed, at least as far as immediate results went. He now headed directly for the motor-boat, the swinging lantern guiding him.

Those on the sharpie could be heard talking loudly, as though endeavoring to get the truth of the affair, and doubtless making terrible threats as to what they would do to the audacious invader later on.

Frank gave the signal agreed on with Jerry, and in another minute he was lifting his charge aboard the anchored boat.

“Don’t ask questions now, fellows,” he said, realizing that the others were all agog with excitement, and both Bluff and Will consumed with curiosity. “We must douse the glim, and in the dark change our anchorage. Then, if they come poking over here to-night, looking for us, they won’t find anybody at home.”

“Hear! hear!” muttered Jerry, who in an emergency always looked to Frank to do the right thing.

He immediately extinguished the light.

“Don’t make the least noise, if you can help it. Get the anchor off the ground, but don’t attempt to bring it aboard,” continued Frank in a whisper.

“Going to start the motor?” asked Bluff.

“Certainly not! It’s shallow here, and the push-pole will have to move us along.” Saying which, Frank possessed himself of the useful article in question, without which no small boat ever cruises in Florida waters.

“I hope we don’t get mixed up, and run afoul of those chaps,” breathed Will.

“I’ve got them located, all right. We’ll go in closer to the island, that’s all. Perhaps they won’t come at all until daylight.”

“But if they do, Frank?” asked Bluff.

“We’ve got a right to protect ourselves, and we will,” declared the other between his set teeth, for he was now silently pushing with the pole, Jerry having raised the anchor at the bow.

This sort of thing kept up for ten minutes. By that time Frank knew they were as close to the shore as prudence allowed.

“Let the anchor sink slowly, Jerry, and don’t make a sound, if you can avoid it,” said Frank.

“It’s already on the bottom. Why, we’re in only four feet of water here!” came back the whispered answer.

“Now what about the boy you pulled off that craft?” asked Bluff.

“Come here, Joe,” said Frank kindly.

Instantly he felt a hand clasping his eagerly, and a boyish voice exclaimed softly:

“Oh! I want to thank you ever so much for what you did, and my mom’ll say the same thing when she sees you!”

“That’s all right, Joe. All of us are only boys, older than you, of course, but ready to hold out a helping hand to a poor chap in trouble. Suppose you tell us, in a whisper now, what brought you aboard that sharpie. Who are those three men, and how did you happen to be sailing with them?”

“They’re Hank, and Carlos, the Cuban, and my Uncle Ben,” came the reply.

“Hello! He’s got an uncle aboard!” said Jerry uneasily.

“But he’s the worst of the whole lot. He beats me, and calls me bad names. My mother is afraid of him. She didn’t want to let me go on this trip with Uncle Ben, but he just made me. His name is Baxter. You see, he’s her brother-in-law, not her real brother. I always called him uncle, but he ain’t, either. I hate him, and I’d sooner die than go back there again!”

“Don’t be afraid, my boy. We have no intention of letting them get you again. It happens that we’re bound for Cedar Keys ourselves, and we’ll see you safely home. Your mother lives there, you say?” went on Frank, patting the trembling little hand, with its hard palm, that told of much hard work for so young a lad.

“Yes, sir; but we’re awful poor. We used to live in Pensacola when dad was on his job, but he got killed in his engine long ago. Then mother had a chance to do something in Cedar Keys, and we came on. But things went wrong, sister got sick, and it’s been hard work to get enough to eat. Still, my mother never complains; she ain’t one of that kind; and a feller just has to be up and doin’ somethin’ to help out. That was why I came along when Uncle Ben promised good wages, and without letting her know.”

It was a whole life story in a nutshell. Frank had never come so closely in touch with tragedy before. He continued to squeeze the hand he held, while deep down in his heart the generous fellow was making resolutions that would bring a little of sunshine to the Abercrombie home when they landed in the key city.



“Well, we’ll have lots of time to talk all these things over to-morrow, and the other days to come. The rest of you pile off again, and leave me here to sit out my watch. I promise to awaken you if anything threatens us,” he said finally.

A place was easily found for little Joe. Indeed, as Bluff remarked in a whisper, the motorboat seemed capable of expansion.

“Just like an elevator or an electric car, there’s always room for just one more,” was the way he put it.

Frank sat there, listening and thinking, for a couple of hours at least. There was no alarm. Once he thought he heard sounds such as might be made by the movement of a push-pole; but if so, the searching party failed to locate the anchored motor-boat in its new lodgings.

Jerry took his place a little later, and then Bluff wound up the night, Will being allowed to sleep in peace.

Frank was up at peep of dawn. The masts of the sharpie stood up plainly through the dim light, showing that apparently her anchorage had not been changed at all.

Signs of life were to be seen aboard, and smoke arising from the cabin gave evidence that the three rough spongers were getting their frugal breakfast. Doubtless this caused them to vent their anger anew, for it had been a part of the boy’s work to cook.

“The anticipated storm petered out, anyway,” remarked Jerry at his elbow.

“Which may be a good thing for us. Possibly we might want to get out of here in a hurry, although I’m averse to running away like a frightened duck,” remarked Frank.

“I say stick it out, and give them tit for tat. We’re armed, and can make a pretty good showing,” declared Bluff, also turning up after hearing voices.

So they began preparations for breakfast, Frank keeping an eye on the sharpie meanwhile. He expected that the trio of spongers would not be likely to pull out without some show of threatening the four who comprised the crew of the motor-boat.

Joe proved to be a bright-faced lad, once the grime was removed, under the influence of salt-water soap and a rough towel. All of the outdoor chums were glad that they had found a chance to be of service to one in distress, for Joe insisted that he never could have stood the vile treatment he was receiving, and meant to run away at the very first opportunity.

They were just sitting down to breakfast when Will gave the alarm.

“They’re pulling up anchor, fellows, and hoisting sail. From the appearance of things, we’d better look out for squalls,” he announced.

Each of the other three quietly reached around and seized a gun. Will, not to be outdone, picked up the instrument with which he did most of his shooting, his beloved camera, and waited for a chance to snap off the ugly faces of the spongers.

