


The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen



Chapter XVII: Stuck on an Oyster Bar

“Do you think they’ll attack us, Joe?” asked Jerry as the sharpie began to head straight for the anchored motor-boat.

“No, I don’t. Them fellers is big cowards, and when they see the guns they’ll take it out in talking,” came the prompt answer.

“I believe Joe is right. They must be cowards, or they’d never have abused a boy as they did him. He showed me a lot of bruises from kicks he’s had,” observed Frank, with a gleam in his eye and a look on his face that told of his detestation for the brute who could, in a temper, knock a child down.

“Say! Perhaps it might be just as well to get the anchor up, and start the motor, in case we wanted to move, anyway,” remarked Bluff.

“A hunky idea!” echoed Jerry.

Frank himself agreed to it. So while Jerry hastened to get the mudhook aboard, Frank bent down over the motor. They heard him crank it, and then came the merry and suggestive hum that bespoke business.

“Now, if we wanted, we could go spinning away, and laugh at them,” observed Will.

“But we don’t intend to, all the same,” said Frank quietly, making his appearance again, gun in hand. The boat had moved a length or so, and then floated on the smooth water of the lagoon.

A shout from the sharpie had told that the spongers believed they meant to run off, and at the same time one of them was seen flourishing a gun.

“Hold up, there, you rascals, you!” came across the water, and a shot followed, the bullet splashing close to the motor-boat.

“Don’t you try that again, there, or we’ll give you a broadside! Do you hear?” shouted Frank, as he and his chums lifted their array of weapons so that the men could easily see what they were up against.



The sharpie kept pushing on until close by. Then a sudden shifting of the rudder caused the boat with the tall masts to “come to” in the wind, with her dingy sails shivering as they hung there lifeless.

“We want that kid!” called a tall, gaunt man with a red beard.

“That’s Uncle Ben!” exclaimed Joe, who was peeping over the gunwale.

“Well, you’ll have to take it out in wanting, then, because you’re not going to get him. Joe says you beat him. He prefers to stay with us, and we’re going to take him home to his mother in Cedar Keys. Get that?” called Frank.

The three men conferred together for a minute or two.

“Say! my breakfast’s getting cold! I wish they’d hurry,” remarked Bluff.

Will was getting busy himself. The old familiar click announced that he had secured a picture of the three spongers at a time when they stood out plainly.

“Hey, you fellers! What yuh mean a-comin’ an’ stealin’ my nephew out o’ my boat? He signed for the cruise, he did. It’s ag’in the law, what yuh did, an’ yer liable ter git yerselves in trouble,” the red-bearded man now called.

“We can stand it if you can. The marks on this boy will settle your case for you. Better go on about your business. We don’t want any fight, but just make up your minds that if you start it we’re going to shoot holes through every one of your crowd. That’s enough talk. Now, twenty-three for yours!”

It was seldom that Frank used slang, but just then he was in want of a better expression by means of which to give vent to his feelings.

Bluff was already sitting down and eating, though he kept hold of his gun at the same time, like a true soldier on duty. The trio of spongers talked among themselves for a short time, then, with many harsh words, they pushed their boat around with a pole until the dingy canvas took the breeze again, after which they sailed away.

“A good riddance of bad rubbish,” declared Bluff, with his mouth full of bacon; and the others voiced his sentiments exactly.

As for the boy, he was smiling as if tickled over the wonderful change that had come about in his fortunes. Frank, remembering the limp form squatting in the stern of the sharpie, so given up to despair and bodily anguish, could hardly believe that this bright-faced lad was the same.

They did not linger long after finishing breakfast.

While the weather remained favorable Frank thought they ought to be making further progress along their way. True, Cedar Keys was not so very far distant, but who could say what difficulties they might encounter from time to time?

“It will do to loiter when we’ve arrived within a dozen or two miles of the city,” he remarked, and they all admitted the wisdom of his decision.

They went out the same way they had come in. Joe said it was safer, since the lagoon was exceedingly shallow at the east end of the island, and they stood to get aground if the tide was falling, as seemed to be the case.

As they came out from behind the key they discovered the sharpie far away to the west, careening over under a brisk morning breeze, and looking like a dun-colored frightened bird.

“We’re not apt to see anything of that tough lot again, I guess,” quoth Jerry.

“They’re heading for a favorite ground. I didn’t know they hunted sponges so far north, Joe. Key West seems to be the head center for the business.”

“Get a few, but not many. Mostly fishing and turtling. Some look for coral on the bottom. Lots of ways to earn a living around the water in the gulf,” replied the boy, in answer to Frank’s inquiry.

“I should say there were. A man need never go hungry in this region if he knows enough to let strong drink alone,” said Will.

“That’s the trouble with Uncle Ben; he’s drunk half the time. And when he is he wants to fight everybody. We all tried to keep away from him,” observed Joe.

They were now out upon the gulf again. Will was a little dubious, remembering his bitter experience of the preceding day, but to his surprise and delight, he did not seem to feel the least bit sick. Perhaps the motion was entirely different, for they were now running almost directly into the light breeze.

Frank had turned the wheel over to Bluff, and was conning his charts, with Jerry bending over his shoulder.

“There’s where we are right now. Looking along the shore, you can see where a key offers the same sort of refuge we enjoyed last night. In cruising along this coast, it’s the only thing to do—run behind one of those islands each night. Only big boats anchor off shore. It’s too dangerous for little craft, for a storm is liable to spring up during the night.”

In this way Frank went on. They decided that since there seemed to be several possible havens ahead, they had better keep right on until the day waned, or they found themselves forced by a change in the weather to seek shelter.

Jerry had a line trailing astern, with a hook at the end, to which he had attached a bit of white rag. In less than ten minutes after he threw it out he pulled in a gamy fish that might have weighed a couple of pounds.



“A cavalli,” said Joe; and they were glad indeed to have a native along who could post them on such things as might have puzzled them.

“Good to eat, is it?” asked Jerry, eyeing the forked tail, which, in this fish, resembles that of the Spanish mackerel.

“Fine. Not so good as pompano, but better than bonita,” was Joe’s verdict.

“All right. He looks good to me,” said Bluff. “Do it some more, Jerry. We need a couple more to make good all around.”

“Now, talk to me about that, will you! Listen to how the greedy fellow gauges everybody’s appetite by his own voracious longings.”

But in spite of his talk, Jerry, being a sportsman to his finger-tips, as he was fond of saying, was only too glad to make a second trial.

This time he had hardly half of his line out when there was a sudden vicious jerk.

“Wow! Nearly took a finger off then! Look at the line whizz, will you? Must have struck a whale!” he cried. But, after all, it was another cavalli (sometimes called crevalle), and not much larger than the first.

So the sport went on until he had brought five to the boat, when he gave up.

“Too hard on the fingers, boys. You see, we’re spinning along at a lively clip, and a two-pound fish feels like a ton. I’m all in,” he explained.

“Well, we want to keep the fish until evening. Will, here, is dying to clean them for us,” said Frank.

“No! no! That is my part of the work!” exclaimed Joe, nor would he hear of anything else.

Noon came and went. Their progress was altogether satisfactory. All of them admitted that outside of that one puzzling breakdown, the motor was working like a charm. It was indeed a pleasure to lie around and see the green waves flashing past, with the picturesque shore only a mile or so away.

Finally Frank announced that he had discovered the island for which he was aiming. They had made a splendid day’s showing, and logged more than thirty miles, against a head wind and sea.

Frank tried to follow the chart, but he knew he would have more or less difficulty, for back of the key it was exceedingly shallow, and the channel narrow.

Speed was reduced as they started to enter the open bayou. Jerry, up in the bow, was using the pole as a sounding line, and calling out:

“Two feet! One and three-quarters! One and a half! Hey! Hold up, there! We’re on an oyster bar, for sure!” And the grating noise that immediately followed told that they had lost the narrow channel again.