The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf

or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists

by Captain Quincy Allen

Chapter XXIV: The 'Norther'

"Is it back to the shore now, Frank?"

"If we are wise we'll lose no time in heading that way," was the quick response.

"What's the matter? Is there anything wrong?" demanded Jerry, taking the alarm immediately from his chum's manner.

"I think we are in for another little experience. If you notice, there are clouds along the horizon. I imagine our long-delayed norther is about to swoop down on us before long."

"Talk to me about the tough luck of that, will you! Of all times, that it should pick out this to tackle us!" exclaimed Jerry.

He had seen the dark clouds Frank mentioned, and noted that the wind was no longer in the east, but had swung around to the southwest almost magically.

Of course, they were making as fast time as the motor-boat could boast toward the dim shore line. How very far away it seemed to be! Will turned a little white as he contemplated the coming storm catching the small boat out upon the broad bosom of the great gulf.

In doing an errand of mercy they had unconsciously put their heads in the lion's mouth.

Those were very anxious minutes for the chums. Each throb of the motor was taking them closer to the land, but the clouds were rising, and the wind increasing, all too fast to please Frank.

When they were about two miles off shore he commenced to scan the scene before them with renewed eagerness. Much depended upon whether they would have the good luck to strike in at a place where shelter might be found against the fury of the storm when the waves assumed giant proportions.

The gallant little boat behaved splendidly, although there were times when it seemed to Will that his heart jumped into his throat with agony as he imagined that the whirling propeller, exposed to view by the rapid sweep of a billow, might be twisted from its shaft, and ruin come upon them.

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And the little dinghy floated astern like a duck, riding the rollers with ease. Again was that valuable glass brought into use, this time searching for a haven, rather than to discover lost balloonists.

"Frank," said Jerry presently, "let me take the wheel while you look through the glasses here. I believe I sighted a key just over yonder, where you see that high palmetto. It seems closer than others just behind."

One look Frank gave.

"Boys, there's a chance for us!" he cried, "for that is certainly an island, and if there only happens to be deep water back of it we can make a harbor."

"Then you're going to risk it?" demanded Bluff.

"There's nothing else to be done. If we head straight on we must go ashore perhaps half a mile from the land itself. If we try to run down the coast we will be capsized, because we present our broadside to the seas, and they're getting worse and worse every minute," declared Frank firmly.

"Frank is right. It is our only hope," said Jerry.

There were some white faces in the little anxious group as the motor-boat swept resistlessly onward. If all went well, they would find shelter behind the friendly key before many minutes. Should it shoal up rapidly, they must be hopelessly wrecked, and perhaps drowned, in the whirl of foamy water.

The sky was by this time covered with black clouds, and the wind increasing to almost hurricane force. Frank knew that they were sweeping onward at more than twenty miles an hour. Once they struck a reef, while going at this pace, and it meant an end to Cousin Archie's pretty boat, and imminent peril concerning themselves.

Now he could see that he had made no mistake about the key. They swept around the northern end of the jutting land, and Jerry, who was clinging in the bow, trying to gain new confidence by thrusting the pole downward from time to time, kept on announcing that he could not strike bottom.

Gradually Frank steered in such fashion that they gained the protection of a point. Then the boys broke out into a shout that voiced their sentiments of thanksgiving at an almost miraculous escape.

It was not difficult to find a snug harbor after that. Of course, the norther was soon in full swing, it being really the first genuine experience our cruisers had met with in that line.

The air grew very cold, and they were glad to get ashore and build a roaring fire in a sheltered spot. Indeed, it was speedily determined that they would hug that same cheery blaze as long as the visitor from the frigid North remained.

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Heavy rain had accompanied the first of the storm, but this soon ceased, and a steady roar of wind through the palmettos sounded like a railroad train passing over a long trestle. The waves breaking on the north end of the sand key also added to the wild clamor.

All that day and the next they were stormbound. Of course, Jerry could not be kept idle. Fishing was out of the question during such a blow, but he discovered that there was plenty of game to be had with Frank's shotgun. Ducks could be obtained in any number, such as they were. Frank tried skinning them to get rid of the fishy flavor, and found it answered splendidly. Coots, treated in the same way, afforded a very palatable stew.

Then on the mainland, where Jerry managed to go by aid of the dinghy, he was lucky enough to stir up several bevy of quail, from which he took fair toll.

Meanwhile Bluff, seized with a sudden sense of his duties as the owner of a repeating shotgun, hid him away along the protected inner shore of the key, and managed to gather in a full dozen snipe and shore birds of various species, some of which proved to be very delicious.

So they passed the time away, making merry, as care-free lads will. Often Frank and Jerry talked mysteriously together, while little Joe was busily engaged about the fire. Undoubtedly the two good-hearted boys were trying to hatch up some sort of scheme whereby the youngster might be benefited.

On the third day they determined to start out. The sea had gone down to decent proportions, with a promise of several fair days ahead, as is always the case after a norther has cleared the atmosphere. Besides, their time was nearing an end, and they must get closer to Cedar Keys.

A long day's run was taken, and as they sought a snug harbor that afternoon the solemn face of Frank assured his chums that they were near the end of their delightful winter vacation.

"If you look over yonder, fellows," said Frank as they drifted slowly toward the harbor that had been selected for the night's anchorage, "you'll see something that will tell you the city on the key is close at hand. To-morrow we will wind up our little cruise, I'm sorry to say."

A groan greeted this announcement, although they had suspected that such an ending to their happy time was imminent.

Jerry reluctantly raised the marine glasses.

"Yes, it's a fact, fellows," he said slowly. "I can see the wharves and some of the boats, as well as church steeples. That's Cedar Keys, all right."

"Then this is our last night in camp. Well, boys, don't let's get the blues. We've had a bully good time, and will never forget what has come our way. Why, the rescuing of the wrecked balloonists alone paid us for coming," said Will.

They found plenty of water, and anchored in the mouth of the famous Suwanee River, with the busy city something like twelve miles away.

Once more they went ashore, and on the bank of the stream of which they had so many times sung they built their last campfire and put up their tent.

"Lucky we bundled those things in before leaving that camp, when searching for the lost balloonists," said Will, who was figuring on getting a picture of the scene in the morning, to finish up his series.

"Yes, for otherwise we'd have had to sleep on board to-night," laughed Frank.

Supper over, they sat around, talking and laughing, in the endeavor to forget the sorrow that gnawed at their boyish hearts. They had enjoyed this trip so much that it would be with the keenest regret that they turned their backs on the Sunny South, and once more struck out for the snow-clad hills of their native land.

Jerry sang, and Bluff orated to his heart's content. Finally they noticed that Frank was looking at something he held in his hand.

"It's the sealed document his father gave him before starting," said Bluff.

"Tell me about that, will you! Frank, didn't he give you permission to open it when you came in sight of Cedar Keys?" cried Jerry eagerly.

Frank, in reply, was tearing off the end of the envelope, a smile of expectation on his face.

"I guess it's going to turn out a joke," hazarded Bluff.

"Now, I've been thinking that perhaps they settled it we should come up by way of the ocean from Jacksonville," declared Will, "and that's the surprise."

"How is it, Frank? Tell us about it!" cried Jerry as he saw the face of the other light up when his eyes took in the import of the communication he found inside the envelope his father had given him.

Frank turned around. His gaze did not rest immediately on his chums, but was given entirely to little Joe, which fact amazed the others still more.

"It's the greatest thing ever, fellows! It makes me so happy I hardly know whether I'm dreaming or not! And the best of it is, the whole business is about our little campmate here, Joe Abercrombie!" was what he said, seizing the lad's hand warmly.

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