

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 2: THE SCHOONER “NANCY BELL”

It lacked a few minutes of nine o'clock when the stage in which the Elmers had left Norton drew up beside the platform of the railway station in Skowhegan. There was only time to purchase tickets and check the baggage, and then Mark and Ruth stepped, for the first time in their lives, on board a train of cars, and were soon enjoying the novel sensation of being whirled along at what seemed to them a tremendous rate of speed. To them the train-boy, who came through the car with books, papers, apples, and oranges, and wore a cap with a gilt band around it, seemed so much superior to ordinary boys, that, had they not been going on such a wonderful journey, they themselves would have envied him his life of constant travel and excitement.

At Waterville they admired the great mills, which they fancied must be among the largest in the world; and when, shortly after noon, they reached Bangor, and saw real ships, looking very like the pictures in their geographies, only many times more interesting, their cup of happiness was full.

Mark and Ruth called all the vessels they saw “ships;” but their father, who had made several sea-voyages as a young man, said that most of them were schooners, and that he would explain the difference to them when they got to sea and he had plenty of time.

The children were bewildered by the noise of the railroad station and the cries of the drivers and hotel runners—all of whom made violent efforts to attract the attention of the Elmer party. At length they got themselves and their bags safely into one of the big yellow omnibuses, and were driven to a hotel, where they had dinner. Mark and Ruth did not enjoy this dinner much, on account of its many courses and the constant attentions of the waiters.

It had stopped snowing, and after dinner the party set forth in search of the Nancy Bell. By making a few inquiries they soon found her, and were welcomed on board by her young, pleasant-faced captain, whose name was Eli Drew, but whom all his friends called “Captain Li.”

The Nancy Bell was a large three-masted schooner, almost new, and as she was the first vessel “Captain Li” had ever commanded, he was very proud of her. He took them at once into his own cabin, which was roomy and comfortable, and from which opened four state-rooms—two on each side. Of these the captain and his mate, John Somers, occupied those on the starboard, or right-hand side, and those on the other, or port side, had been

fitted up, by the thoughtful kindness of Uncle Christopher, for the Elmers—one for Mrs. Elmer and Ruth, and the other for Mark and his father.

“Ain’t they perfectly lovely?” exclaimed Ruth. “Did you ever see such cunning little beds? They wouldn’t be much too big for Edna May’s largest doll.”

“You mustn’t call them ‘beds,’ Ruth; the right name is berths,” said Mark, with the air of a boy to whom sea terms were familiar.

“I don’t care,” answered his sister; “they are beds for all that, and have got pillows and sheets and counterpanes, just like the beds at home.”

Mr. Elmer found that his furniture, and the various packages of tools intended for their Southern home, were all safe on board the schooner and stowed down in the hold, and he soon had the trunks from the station and the bags from the hotel brought down in a wagon.

The captain said they had better spend the night on board, as he wanted to be off by daylight, and they might as well get to feeling at home before they started. They thought so too; and so, after a walk through the city, where, among other curious sights, they saw a post-office built on a bridge, they returned to the *Nancy Bell* for supper.

Poor Mr. Elmer, exhausted by the unusual exertions of the day, lay awake and coughed most of the night, but the children slept like tops. When Mark did wake he forgot where he was, and in trying to sit up and look around, bumped his head against the low ceiling of his berth.

Daylight was streaming in at the round glass dead-eye that served as a window, and to Mark’s great surprise he felt that the schooner was moving. Slipping down from his berth, and quietly dressing himself, so as not to disturb his father, he hurried on deck, where he was greeted by “Captain Li,” who told him he had come just in time to see something interesting.

The *Nancy Bell* was in tow of a little puffing steam-tug, and was already some miles from Bangor down the Penobscot River. The clouds of steam rising into the cold air from the surface of the warmer water were tinged with gold by the newly-risen sun. A heavy frost rested on the spruces and balsams that fringed the banks of the river, and as the sunlight struck one twig after another, it covered them with millions of points like diamonds. Many cakes of ice were floating in the river, showing that its navigation would soon be closed for the winter.

To one of these cakes of ice, towards which a boat from the schooner was making its way, the captain directed Mark’s attention. On this cake, which was about as large as a dinner-table, stood a man anxiously watching the approach of the boat.

“What I can’t understand,” said the captain, “is where he ever found a cake of ice at

this time of year strong enough to bear him up.”

“Who is he? How did he get there, and what is he doing?” asked Mark, greatly excited.

“Who he is, and how he got there, are more than I know,” answered “Captain Li.”

“What he is doing, is waiting to be taken off. The men on the tug sighted him just before you came on deck, and sung out to me to send a boat for him. It’s a mercy we didn’t come along an hour sooner, or we never would have seen him through the mist.”

“You mean we would have missed him,” said Mark, who, even upon so serious an occasion, could not resist the temptation to make a pun.

By this time the boat had rescued the man from his unpleasant position, and was returning with him on board. Before it reached the schooner Mark rushed down into the cabin and called to his parents and Ruth to hurry on deck. As they were already up and nearly dressed, they did so, and reached it in time to see the stranger helped from the boat and up the side of the vessel.

He was so exhausted that he was taken into the cabin, rolled in warm blankets, and given restoratives and hot drinks before he was questioned in regard to his adventure.

Meantime the schooner was again slipping rapidly down the broad river, and Mark, who remained on deck with his father, questioned him about the “river’s breath,” as he called the clouds of steam that arose from it.

“That’s exactly what it is, the ‘river’s breath,’” said Mr. Elmer. “Warm air is lighter than cold, and consequently always rises; and the warm, damp air rising from the surface of the river into the cold air above is condensed into vapor, just as your warm, damp breath is at this very moment.”

“But I should think the water would be cold with all that ice floating in it,” said Mark.

“It would seem cold if we were surrounded by the air of a hot summer day,” answered his father; “but being of a much higher temperature than the air above it, it would seem quite warm to you now if you should put your bare hand into it. We can only say that a thing is warm by comparing it with something that is colder, or cold by comparison with that which is warmer.”

When Mark and his father went down to breakfast they found the rescued man still wrapped in blankets, but talking in a faint voice to the captain; and at the table the latter told the Elmers what he had learned from him.

His name was Jan Jansen, and he was a Swede, but had served for several years in the United States Navy. On being discharged from it he had made his way to New Sweden, in the northern part of Maine; but, a week before, he had come to Bangor, hoping to obtain employment for the winter in one of the saw-mills. In this he has been unsuccessful; and the previous night, while returning from the city to the house on its outskirts in which he

was staying, he undertook to cross a small creek, in the mouth of which were a number of logs; these were so cemented together by recently formed ice that he fancied they would form a safe bridge, and tried to cross on it. When near the middle of the creek, to his horror the ice gave way with a crash, and in another moment he was floating away in the darkness on the cake from which he had been so recently rescued. That it had supported him was owing to the fact that it still held together two of the logs. He had not dared attempt to swim ashore in the dark, and so had drifted on during the night, keeping his feet from freezing by holding them most of the time in the water.

After breakfast Mr. Elmer and the captain held a consultation, the result of which was that the former offered Jan Jansen work in Florida, if he chose to go to the St. Mark's with them; and Captain Drew offered to let him work his passage to that place as one of the crew of the *Nancy Bell*. Without much hesitation the poor Swede accepted both these offers, and as soon as he had recovered from the effects of his experience on the ice raft was provided with a bunk in the fore-castle.