

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 3: "CAPTAIN LI'S" STORY

All day the Nancy Bell was towed down the broad river, the glorious scenery along its banks arousing the constant enthusiasm of our travelers. Late in the afternoon they passed the gray walls of Fort Knox on the right, and the pretty little town of Bucksport on the left. They could just see the great hotel at Fort Point through the gathering dusk, and soon afterwards were tossing on the wild, windswept waters of Penobscot Bay.

As they cleared the land, so as to sight Castine Light over the port quarter, the tug cast loose from them and sail was made on the schooner. The last thing Mark Elmer saw as he left the deck, driven below by the bitter cold, was the gleam of the light on Owl's Head, outside which Captain Drew said they should find the sea pretty rough.

The rest of the family had gone below some time before, and Mark found that his mother was already very seasick. He felt rather uncomfortable himself, and did not care much for the supper, of which his father and Ruth eat so heartily. He said he thought he would go to bed, before supper was half over, and did so, although it was only six o'clock. Poor Mark! It was a week before he again sat at table or went on deck.

During this week the Nancy Bell sailed along the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. She went inside of Martha's Vineyard, through Vineyard Sound, in company with a great fleet of coasters; but when they passed Gay Head, and turned to the westward into Long Island Sound, the Nancy was headed towards the lonely light-house on Montauk Point, the extreme end of Long Island. From here her course was for the Cape May lightship on the New Jersey coast, and for some time she was out of sight of land.

So they sailed, day after day, ever southward, and towards the warmth which was to make Mr. Elmer well again.

Although Mark was very ill all this time, Ruth was as bright and well as though she were on land. This was very mortifying to her brother; but "Captain Li," who went in to see him every day, comforted him by telling him of old sailors he had known who were always sea-sick for the first few days of every voyage they undertook.

The schooner was off Cape Hatteras before Mark felt able to leave his berth. At last, one evening when the sea was very quiet, "Captain Li" said, "Come, Mark, I want you to turn out and go on deck to see the last of Hatteras Light. You know Cape Hatteras is one of the worst capes along our entire Atlantic coast, and is probably the one most dreaded

by sailors. When coming home from the West Indies, they sing an old song which begins:

*“Now if the Bermudas let you pass,
Then look for Cape Hatteras.”*

Slowly dressing, with the captain's aid, Mark, feeling very weak, but free from the horrible sickness from which he had suffered so long, managed to get out on deck. He was astonished at the change that one week's sailing southward had made in the general appearance of things. When he was last on deck, it and the rigging were covered with snow and ice. Now not a particle of either was to be seen, and the air was mild and pleasant. A new moon hung low in the western sky, and over the smooth sea the schooner was rippling along merrily, under every stitch of canvas that she could spread.

Mark received a warm welcome from his father, mother, and Ruth, who were all on deck, but had not expected to see him there that evening.

“Quick, Mark! Look! Hatteras is ‘most gone,” said Ruth, pointing, as she spoke, to a little twinkle of light so far astern that it seemed to rest on the very waters.

Half an hour later the captain said, “Now let's go below, where it is warmer; and if you care to hear it, I will spin you a yarn of Hatteras Light.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Ruth and Mark together.

“By all means; a story is just the thing,” said Mr. and Mrs. Elmer, also together, at which they all laughed, hooked little fingers, and wished.

When they had made themselves comfortable in the cabin, Mark being allowed to occupy the lounge on account of his recent illness, the captain began as follows:

“Ten years ago this winter I made my first voyage of any length, though before that I had made some short runs on a little coaster between New York and down-East ports. Getting tired of this, and wanting to see something more of the world, I shipped in New York, early in December, on board the very prettiest craft I ever set eyes on, for a voyage to the West Indies. She was the hundred-ton schooner-yacht *Mirage*, and her owner had determined to try and make her pay him something during the winter by running her as a fruiter. She carried a crew of five men, besides the captain, mate, and steward—all young and able seamen. I was the youngest and least experienced, but was large for my age, and passed muster with the rest.

“We had a pleasant run down to Havana, passing Moro Castle and dropping anchor on the seventh day out from New York, but found some trouble there in getting a cargo for the home voyage. The delay worried our skipper considerably, for he had calculated on being home with his wife and baby at Christmas; but we of the crew enjoyed the city, and

I for one got leave to go ashore whenever I could, and made the most of my opportunity to see the sights.

“We had laid there about ten days, when one morning, as the old man came up the after companion-way from the cabin, a big gray rat rushed out on deck ahead of him, scampered to the side, and plumped overboard. We all saw it in the water, swimming for the quay, which was but a short distance from us, and, quick as a thought, the skipper had jumped back into the cabin for his pistol, and before the beast had got more than half-way he had fired several shots at it. The bullets struck all around the rat, but didn’t hit it, and we saw him disappear through a crevice between the stones of the quay.

“Our captain was a very superstitious man, and this incident troubled him, for I heard him say to the mate that he never knew any ship to have good luck when once the rats began to leave her.

“Soon after this we took in our cargo of pineapples and bananas and started for home. Our first three days’ run was as pretty as ever was made, and with the Gulf Stream to help us, it seemed as though we might make New York in time for Christmas, after all. Then there came a change—first a gale that drove us to the westward, and then light head-winds, or no winds at all; and so we knocked round for three days more, and on the day before Christmas we hadn’t rounded Hatteras, let alone made Sandy Hook, as we had hoped to do.

“It was a curious sort of a day, mild and hazy, with the sun showing round and yellow as an orange. The skipper was uneasy, and kept squinting at the weather, first on one side and then the other. We heard him say to the mate that something was coming, for the mercury was falling faster than he had ever seen it. Things stood so until sunset, when the haze settled down thicker than ever. I was at the wheel, when the skipper came on deck and ordered all canvas to be stripped from her except the double-reefed main-sail and a corner of the jib. He sung out to me to keep a sharp lookout for Hatteras Light, and then went below again.

“When I caught sight of the light, about an hour later, and reported it, it wasn’t any brighter than it looked when you came on deck, a while ago, Mark, and we were heading directly for it. When the skipper came up and looked at it he told me to ‘keep her so’ while he took a squint at the chart.

“He hadn’t more than gone below again when there came such a gust of wind and rain, with thunder and lightning close after, as to hide the light and keep me busy for a few minutes holding the schooner up to it.

“The squall passed as suddenly as it came, and there was the light, right over the end of the flying-jib-boom, burning as steady as ever, but looking mighty blue, somehow. I thought it was the effect of the mist, and tried to keep her headed for it. As I was getting terribly puzzled and fussed up by what I thought was the strange action of the compass, and by the way the little spiteful gusts of wind seemed to come from every quarter at

once, the skipper came on deck. Before he had cleared the companion-way he asked,

“How does Hatteras Light bear?”

“Dead ahead, sir,” said I.

“As he stepped on deck he turned to look at it, and I saw him start as though he saw something awful. He looked for half a minute, and then in a half-choked sort of voice he gasped out, ‘The Death-Light!’

“At the same moment the light, that I had took to be Hatteras, rolled slowly, like a ball of fire, along the jib-top-sail stay to the top-mast head, and then I knew it was a St. Elmo’s fire, a thing I’d heard of but never seen before.

“As we all looked at it, afraid almost to say a word, there came a sound like a moan over the sea, and in another minute a cyclone, such as I hope never to see again, laid us, first on our beam ends, and then drove us at a fearful rate directly towards the coast.

“We drove this way for an hour or more, unable to do a thing to help ourselves, and then she struck on Hatteras sands. Her masts went as she struck, and as they fell a huge sea, rushing over the poor craft, swept overboard the captain and two men. It was some time before we knew they were gone, for we could see nothing nor hear anything but the howl of the tempest.

“At last we got rid of the floating wreck of spars by clearing the tangled rigging with our knives, and, thus relieved, the schooner was driven a good bit farther over the sands. Finally she struck solid, and began to break up. One of her boats was stove and worthless, and in trying to clear away the other, a metallic life-boat, another man was swept overboard and lost.

“The mate and two of the crew besides myself finally got away from the wreck in this boat, and were driven in to the beach, on which we were at last flung more dead than alive.

“The next morning we made our way to the light-house, where we were kindly cared for, but where our Christmas dinner was a pretty sad affair.

“The captain’s body was washed up on the beach, and a week from that day we took it and the news of his death together to his wife in New York.

“Since then I have always felt easier when I have left Hatteras Light well astern, as we have for this time, at any rate. Well, there’s eight bells, and I must be on deck, so good-night to you all, and pleasant dreams.”

“Is there any such thing as a ‘death-light’ that warns people of coming disaster?” asked Ruth of her father, when the captain had left them.

“No, my dear,” he answered, “there is not. The St. Elmo’s light, or St. Elmo’s fire, is frequently seen in tropical seas, though rarely as far north as Cape Hatteras; and as it is generally accompanied by cyclones or hurricanes, sailors have come to regard it as an omen of evil. It is not always followed by evil consequences, however, and to believe that it foretells death is as idle and foolish as superstitions of all kinds always are.”