Wakulla, A Story of Adventure in Florida

Chapter 8: The Sunday-School, and More Mysteries

It must be confessed that, before getting to sleep again, Mark thought of what Aunt Chloe had said about the "ghoses"; but having been taught to disbelieve in such things, and always to seek for some natural explanation of whatever appeared supernatural or unreal, he made up his mind to wait and make the attempt to unravel this mystery by himself before saying anything about it.

The four days that remained of the week were very busy days for the Elmers and those whom they had employed to help them. During this time the interior of the old house was thoroughly cleansed and sweetened by the energetic use of soap and water, and straw matting was laid on the floors of the rooms down-stairs. The broken windows were all repaired by Mark, who found several boxes of glass and a bladder of putty among the building material they had brought from Bangor, and who, after a few trials, became quite a skillful glazier. The cistern was emptied of its stagnant water and thoroughly cleansed, and the gutters were repaired as well as they could be before the arrival of Captain Johnson and the lumber.

It was not until the windows and gutters were repaired that Mrs. Elmer would allow any of the furniture, not absolutely needed, to be unpacked, for fear it might be injured by the dampness. Among the packages that thus remained boxed up, or wrapped in burlaps, was one which none of them could remember having seen before. It was large and square, and different in shape from anything that had stood in their house in Norton. What could it be? Mark and Ruth asked each other this question a dozen times a day, and, but for their mother's refusal to allow them to do so, would have long since solved the riddle by opening the package.

On Friday night the house was pronounced to be practically water- tight, and at breakfast-time the following morning Mrs. Elmer said they would unpack and arrange the furniture that day.

"And the mystery?" cried Mark. "May we open that first?"

"Certainly," replied his mother; "you may, if you wish, open that the moment you have finished breakfast."

"That's this very minute, ain't it, Ruth? Come along. We'll soon find out what's inside those burlaps," exclaimed the boy, pushing back his chair, and rising from the table as he spoke.

He brought a hammer with which to knock off the rough frame of boards that almost formed a box around the package, and Ruth ran for the shears to cut the stitches of the burlaps.

The frame quickly fell to pieces under Mark's vigorous blows, and then his penknife assisted Ruth's shears. Beneath the burlaps was a thick layer of straw; then came heavy wrapping-paper, and, under this, layers and wads of news-paper, until the children began to think the whole package was nothing but wrappings.

At last the papers were all pulled away, and there stood revealed, in all its beauty of structure and finish, a little gem of a cabinet organ. To one of its handles was tied a card, on which was printed in big letters:

"A Christmas Present, with wishes for a very merry Christmas, from Uncle 'Christmas' to his grandniece Ruth Elmer."

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Ain't it lovely?" cried Ruth. "Dear old 'Uncle Christmas!' And I thought he had forgotten me, and only remembered Mark, too."

The organ was placed in the parlor, and from that day forth was a source of great pleasure, not only to Ruth and the Elmer family, but to their neighbors across the river, who frequently came over in the evening to hear Ruth play.

Among the events of that week were two that impressed Mark deeply, as they seemed to be connected in some way with the face he had seen at the window. One of these was the mysterious disappearance, on that same night, of a loaf of bread and a cold roast duck from the kitchen. The other was the appearance, two days later, at the kitchen door, of a poor wounded dog, who dragged himself out from the woods back of the house, and lay down on the step, evidently in great pain.

Ruth saw him as he lay there, panting and moaning, and ran to tell Mark, and her father and mother, of their visitor and his wretched plight. They all went to see him, and after a careful examination of the suffering animal, Mr. Elmer said he had been cruelly treated and badly wounded; but that, with proper treatment and care, he could be cured. "He is a cross between a pointer and a hound," continued Mr. Elmer, "and looks like a valuable dog. The wounds from which he is suffering are those caused by a charge of small shot, that must have been fired into him quite recently. I will do what I can for him, and then I shall turn him over to you and Ruth, Mark, and if he recovers he shall belong to you both. His present owner has forfeited all claim to him by cruel treatment, for without our care now the poor beast would certainly die. The first thing to do is to give him water, for he is very feverish."

The dog seemed to know, as well as his human friends, that the pain he suffered, while most of the shot were extracted on the point of a pen-knife, was for his good; for

while he moaned and whined during the operation, he lay perfectly still, and did not offer the slightest resistance. After his wounds had been dressed, he was carefully removed to a bed of soft moss on the back porch, and here he lay quietly, only feebly wagging his tail whenever any of his new friends came to see him.

"Who could have shot this dog?" and "Why did the animal drag himself to our kitchen door?" were questions that puzzled Mark considerably during the rest of that day and for some days afterwards.

During that week Jan Jansen and the two negroes had worked hard at cutting away the undergrowth immediately around the house, and by Saturday night they had wonderfully improved the general appearance of things. The garden in front of the house had been cleared of everything except the ornamental shrubs properly belonging there. The fence had been freed from its crushing weight of vines, and its broken panels repaired, so that it now only needed a coat of paint to make it look as good as new. Back of the house they had cleared an acre of what had formerly been the kitchen-garden, and had opened a broad avenue down to the river, so that the back windows of the house now looked out upon it and the village beyond.

Late on Saturday evening Captain Johnson returned to Wakulla with a lighter-load of shingles, window-blinds, fence-pickets, and assorted lumber. He also brought the skiff that Mr. Elmer had commissioned him to buy.

The next day being Sunday, every member of the little community was prepared to enjoy a well-earned rest. During the morning they all crossed the river to the village, leaving "Go Bang" closed, and unprotected save by "Bruce," as the children had named the wounded dog.

In the village they found the little church closed and empty; so they went to the house of Mr. Bevil, whom they found at home, and who introduced them to his family. Mrs. Bevil expressed great pleasure at meeting Mrs. Elmer, and apologized for not having called; and Ruth was delighted to find that the eldest of the three Bevil children was a girl of about her own age, named Grace.

In reply to Mr. Elmer's inquiries, the Bevils said that no regular services were held in the church, and that it was only opened when some preacher happened to visit them.

Mr. Elmer proposed that they should organize a Sunday-school, to be held in the church every Sunday, and that they should make a beginning that very day.

To this the Bevils gladly consented, and two servants were immediately sent out—one to open the church and ring the bell, and the other to invite all the colored people of the place to meet there in an hour.

Then the Elmers and Bevils went together to the house of Mr. Carter, the other white

man of the village. Here were two children, a girl and a boy, both younger than Ruth; and Mr. and Mrs. Carter readily agreed to help establish the Sunday-school, and promised to be at the church at the appointed time.

When the Elmers entered the church they found nearly fifty men, women, and children assembled, and waiting with eager curiosity to see what was going to be done. The church was as dilapidated as most of the buildings in the village, and many of its windows were broken. In that climate, where snow is unknown and frost comes but seldom, this made little difference, and this Sunday was so warm and bright that the breeze coming in through the broken windows was very refreshing.

Mr. Elmer made a short address to the people, telling them that he and his family had come to live among them, and that he thought it would be very pleasant for them all to meet in that house every Sunday, for the purpose of studying the Bible and mutually helping one another. Then he asked all who were willing to help him establish a Sunday-school to hold up their hands, and every hand was immediately raised.

Mr. Bevil moved that Mr. Elmer be made superintendent of the Sunday-school, Mr. Carter seconded the motion, and it was unanimously carried.

The rest of the hour was occupied in forming classes and giving out lessons to be learned for the next Sunday. As most of the colored people could not read, it seemed important that they should be taught this first, and both Mark and Ruth were made teachers of ABC classes composed of the younger children.

Before the meeting closed Mr. Bevil made some remarks, in which he thanked the Elmers for what they had undertaken, reminded the school that the next day was the first of a new year, and said that, as he had already told Mr. Elmer, the coming and settling of these strangers among them marked the dawn of a new era of prosperity for Wakulla.

As the Elmers neared their home after Sunday-school they heard Bruce bark loudly; but when they reached it they found him cowed and whimpering. His eyes were fixed upon the point of woods nearest the house, and he exhibited signs of great fear. They also found the kitchen door standing wide open, though Mrs. Elmer was certain she had fastened it before leaving.

Again Mark thought of the "ghoses," but still he said nothing, and the opening of the door was finally credited to the wind.

That afternoon Mr. Bevil came over to make a call, and was much interested in the improvements already made and proposed. He declared that it reminded him of old times, when that side of the river was inhabited by a dozen or more families, and when Wakulla was one of the most prosperous towns in the State. He showed Mr. Elmer the sites of the old foundry and mills that once stood on that side of the river, and told him of the

wharves that had lined both banks, the great cotton-presses, and the many vessels that used to fill it from bank to bank as they lay awaiting their loads of cotton. In those days a line of steam-ships plied regularly between Wakulla and New Orleans, and a steam-tug was kept constantly busy towing vessels between the town and the mouth of the river. Then a fine plank-road reached back from Wakulla a hundred miles into the country, and the two hotels of the place were constantly crowded with invalids, who came to receive the benefits of its famous sulphur and mineral springs. In those days six large stores were hardly sufficient for the business of the place, and then the land on both sides of the river for miles was cultivated, and produced heavy crops of cotton.

Now all that remained to tell of this former prosperity were a few rotten piles in the river where the wharves had stood, the bridge abutments, a handful of tumble-down houses, and here and there in the dense woods traces of cultivated fields, and an occasional brick chimney or pile of stone to mark the site of some old plantation house.

Mr. Elmer was much interested in all this, and mentally resolved that he would do all that lay in his power to revive the old-time prosperity of the place in which he had established his home.

"What we most need here now," concluded Mr. Bevil, "is a bridge over the river and a mill. It ought to be a saw-mill, grist-mill, and cotton-gin all in one."

The next morning Mr. Elmer said that he must go to Tallahassee, the nearest city, on business, and that he might be absent several days. Before going he laid out the work that he wanted each one to do while he was away. Mark was to take him down the river to the railroad station at St. Mark's, in his canoe, and on his return he and Jan were to go into the woods after as many cedar fence-posts as they could cut. The colored men were to prepare the large cleared field in front of the house, in which were about ten acres, for ploughing, and to dig post-holes around it on lines that he had marked. Captain Johnson and his crew were to unload the lighter and haul all the lumber and shingles up to the house.

When he and Mark went down to the canoe, it seemed to the latter that she was not just where he had left her the day before, and he thought she looked as though she had been recently used; but as he could not be certain, he said nothing about it to his father.

Mr. Elmer took a light rifle with him in the canoe, saying that there was no knowing but what they might find a chance to use it going down the river, and that Mark could bring it back. Mark was glad of this, for he inherited a love for shooting from his father, and having been carefully instructed, was a capital shot.

The day was unusually warm and bright for that season of the year, and as they floated quietly down-stream they surprised a number of alligators lying on the banks sunning themselves. As they were the first of these great reptiles that either Mr. Elmer

or Mark had ever seen, they watched them with curiosity not unmixed with fear lest they should attack and upset the light canoe. They afterwards learned that their fears were groundless, and that cases of this kind are almost unknown.

They reached St. Mark's in time for Mr. Elmer to catch the train, and after he had gone Mark got the mail, of which quite a quantity had collected here for them, there being no post-office in Wakulla, and started for home.

On the way up the river the boy was strangely oppressed by the solitude and almost unbroken silence about him, and was very glad when he found himself within a mile of home.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a cry so terrible and agonized that he was for a moment nearly petrified with fright. He quickly recovered his presence of mind, and the first cry being followed by screams for help and a crashing of the bushes on a small wooded point that jutted into the river just ahead of him, he hastily ran the canoe up to the bank, seized his rifle, and sprang ashore.