

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

It was late in April before Mark rose from the bed on which for weeks he had tossed and raved in the delirium of fever. He had raved of the horrible darkness and the cold water, and begged that the star should not be taken away. One evening he woke from a heavy, death-like sleep in which he had lain for hours, and in a voice so weak that it was almost a whisper, called "Mother."

"Here I am, dear"; and the figure which had been almost constantly beside him during the long struggle, bent over and kissed him gently.

"I ain't dead, am I, mother?" he whispered.

"No, dear, you are alive, and with God's help are going to get well and strong again. But don't try to talk now; wait until you are stronger."

For several days the boy lay sleeping, or with eyes wide open watching those about him, but feeling so weak and tired that even to think was an effort. Still, the fever had left him, and from the day he called "Mother" he gradually grew stronger, until finally he could sit up in bed. Next he was moved to a rocking-chair by the window, and at last he was carried into the sitting-room and laid on the lounge—the same lounge on which Frank had lain, months before, when he told them what a wicked boy he had been.

Now the same Frank, but yet an entirely different Frank, sat beside him, and held his hand, and looked lovingly down into his face. Each of them had saved the other's life, and their love for each other was greater than that of brothers. Mark had been told of how Frank had gone down into the "sink hole" after him, and stayed there in the cold, rushing water while he was drawn to the top, but he could remember nothing of it. He only remembered the star, and of praying that he might live to see the sunlight.

How happy they all were when the invalid took his first walk out-of-doors, leaning on Frank, and stopping many times to rest. The air was heavy with the scent of myriads of flowers, and the very birds seemed glad to see him, and sang their loudest and sweetest to welcome him.

After this he improved in strength rapidly, and was soon able to ride as far as the

Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

mill, and to float on the river in the canoe, with Frank to paddle it; but still his parents were very anxious about him. He was not their merry, light-hearted Mark of old. He never laughed now, but seemed always to be oppressed with some great dread. His white face wore a frightened look, and he would sit for hours with his mother as she sewed, saying little, but gazing wistfully at her, as though fearful that in some way he might lose her or be taken from her.

All this troubled his parents greatly, and many a consultation did they have as to what they should do for their boy. They decided that he needed an entire change of scene and occupation, but just how to obtain these for him they could not plan.

One day Mrs. Elmer sat down and wrote a long letter to her uncle, Christopher Bangs, telling him of their trouble, and asking him what they should do. To this letter came the following answer:

“BANGOR, MAINE, May 5, 188-.

“DEAR NIECE ELLEN,—You did exactly the right thing, as you always do, in writing to me about Grandneph. Mark. Of course he needs a change of scene after spending a whole night hundreds of feet underground, fighting alligators, and naturally having a fever afterwards. Who wouldn’t? I would myself. A good thing’s good for a while, but there is such a thing as having too much of a good thing, no matter how good it is, and I rather guess Grandneph. Mark has had too much of Floridy, and it’ll do him good to leave it for a while. So just you bundle him up and send him along to me for a change. Tell him his old Grandunk Christmas has got some important business for him to look after, and can’t possibly get on without him more than a week or two longer. I shall expect a letter by return mail saying he has started.

“Give Grandunk Christmas’s love to Grandniece Ruth, and with respects to your husband, believe me to be, most truly, as ever,

Your affectionate uncle,

“CHRISTOPHER BANGS.”

“P.S.—Don’t mind the expense. Send the boy C.O.D. I’ll settle all bills. C.B.”

In the same mail with this letter came another from Maine, directed to “Miss Ruth Elmer.” It was from her dearest friend, Edna May; and as Ruth handed it to her mother, who read it aloud to the whole family, we will read it too:

Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

“NORTON, MAINE, May 5, 188-.

“MY OWN DARLING RUTH,—What is the matter? I haven’t heard from you in more than a week. Oh, I’ve got SUCH a plan, or rather father made it up, that I am just wild thinking of it. It is this: father’s ship, Wildfire, has sailed from New York for Savannah, and before he left, father said for me to write and tell you that he couldn’t think of letting me go to Florida next winter unless you came here and spent this summer with me.

“The Wildfire will leave Savannah for New York again about the 15th of May, and father wants you to meet him there and come home with him. His sister, Aunt Emily Courn, has gone with him for the sake of the voyage, and she will take care of you.

“Oh, do come! Won’t it be splendid? Father is coming home from New York, so he can bring you all the way. I am sure your mother will let you come when she knows how nicely everything is planned.

“I have got lots and lots to tell you, but can’t think of anything else now but your coming.

“What an awful time poor Mark has had. I don’t see how he ever lived through it. I think Frank March must be splendid. Write just as quick as you can, and tell me if you are coming.

“Good-bye. With kisses and hugs, I am your dearest, loveliest friend,

“EDNA MAY.”

These two letters from the far North created quite a ripple of excitement in that Southern household, and furnished ample subject for discussion when the family was gathered on the front porch in the evening of the day they were received.

Mr. Elmer said, “I think it would be a good thing for Mark to go, and I should like to have Ruth go too; but I don’t see how you can spare her, wife.”

“I shall miss her dreadfully, but I should feel much easier to think that she was with Mark on this long journey. Poor boy, he is far from strong yet. Yes, I think Ruth ought to go. It seems providential that these two letters should have come together, and as if it were a sign that the children ought to go together,” answered Mrs. Elmer.

Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

Mark, who had listened quietly to the whole discussion, now spoke up and said, "I should like to go, father. As long as I stay here I shall keep thinking of that terrible underground river over there. I think of it and dream of it all the time, and sometimes it seems as if it were only waiting and watching for a chance to swallow me again. I should love dearly to have Ruth go with me too, though I am quite sure I am strong enough to take care of myself"; and he turned towards his mother with a smile.

Ruth said, "Oh, mother, I should love to go, but I can't bear to leave you! so, whichever way you decide, I shall be perfectly satisfied and contented."

It was finally decided that they should both go. Mark was to accompany Ruth as far as Savannah, and see her safely on board the ship; then, unless he received a pressing invitation from Captain May to go with him to New York, he was to go by steamer to Boston, and there take another steamer for Bangor.

This was the both of May, and as the Wildfire was to sail on or about the 15th, they must be in Savannah on that day; therefore no time was to be lost in making preparations for the journey.

Such busy days as the next three were! such making of new clothes and mending of old, to be worn on the journey! so many things to be thought of and done! Even Aunt Chloe became excited, and prepared so many nice things for "Misto Mark an' Missy Rufe to eat when dey's a-trabblin'" that Mark actually laughed when he saw them.

"Why, Aunt Clo," he explained, "you have got enough there to last us all the time we're gone. Do you think they don't have anything to eat up North?"

"Dunno, honey," answered the old woman, gazing with an air of great satisfaction at the array of goodies. "Allus hearn tell as it's a powerful pore, cole kentry up dar whar you's a-gwine. 'Specs dey hab somfin to eat, ob co'se, but reckon dar ain't none too much, sich as hit is."

The good soul was much distressed at the small quantity of what she had provided, for which room was found in the lunch-basket, and said she "lowed dem ar chillun's gwine hungry heap o' times befo' dey sets eyes on ole Clo agin."

It had been arranged that Mr. and Mrs. Elmer and Frank March should go with the travelers as far as Tallahassee, and see them fairly off from there. Bright and early on the morning of the 13th the mule wagon, in which comfortable seats were fixed, was driven up to the front door, the trunks, bags, and lunch-basket were put in, and everything was in readiness for the start.

Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

Mr. March, Jan, Aunt Chloe, and several of the neighbors from across the river had assembled to see them off, and many and hearty were the good wishes offered for a pleasant journey and a safe return in the fall.

“Good-bye, Misto Mark an’ Missy Rufe,” said Aunt Chloe; “trus’ in de Lo’d while you’s young, an’ he ain’t gwine fo’git yo’ in yo’ ole age.”

“Good-bye, Aunt Clo! good-bye, everybody!” shouted Mark, as the wagon rattled away. “Don’t forget us!” And in another minute “dear old Go Bang,” as the children already called it, was hidden from view behind the trees around the sulphur spring.

They stopped for a minute at the mill to get a sack of corn for the mules, and as they drove from it its busy machinery seemed to say,

“Good-bye, Mr. President, good-bye, Mr. President, good-bye, Mr. President of the Elmer Mills.”

They reached Tallahassee early in the afternoon, and went to a hotel for the night. From the many cows on the street Mark tried to point out to Ruth and Frank the one he had seen climb into a cart on his previous visit, but none of those they saw looked able to distinguish herself in that way. They concluded that she had become disgusted at being called “a ole good-fo’-nuffin,” and had carried her talents elsewhere.

The train left so early the next morning that the sadness of parting was almost forgotten in the hurry of eating breakfast and getting down to the station. In the train Mark charged Frank to take good care of his canoe and rifle, Ruth begged him to be very kind to poor Bruce, who would be so lonely, and they both promised to write from Savannah. Then the conductor shouted, “All aboard!” hurried kisses and last good-byes were exchanged, and the train moved off.

Ruth cried a little at first, and Mark looked pretty sober, but they soon cheered up, and became interested in the scenery through which they were passing. For an hour or two they rode through a beautiful hill country, in which was here and there a lake covered with great pond-lilies. Then the hills and lakes disappeared, and they hurried through mile after mile of pine forests, where they saw men gathering turpentine from which to make resin. It was scooped into buckets from cuts made in the bark of the trees, and the whole operation “looked for all the world,” as Mark said, “like a sugar-bush in Maine.”

At Ellaville, sixty-five miles from Tallahassee, they saw great saw-mills, and directly they crossed one of the most famous rivers in the country, the Suwannee, and Ruth hummed softly,

Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

“Way down upon de Swanee Ribber,
Far, far away.”

Soon afterwards they reached Live Oak, where they were to change cars for Savannah. They made the change easily, for their trunks had been checked through, and they had little baggage to trouble them. A few miles farther took them across the State line and into Georgia, which Ruth said, with a somewhat disappointed air, looked to her very much the same as Florida.

Now that they were in Georgia they felt that they must be quite near Savannah, and began to talk of Captain May, and wonder if he would be at the depot to meet them. Letters had been sent to Uncle Christopher Bangs, to Edna, and to Captain May, as soon as it was decided that they should take this journey, and Mr. Elmer had telegraphed to the captain from Tallahassee that morning, so they felt pretty sure he would know of their coming.

At a junction with the funny name of “Waycross” their car was attached to an express train from Jacksonville, on which were numbers of Northern tourists who had been spending the winter in Florida and were now on their way home. These people interested the children so much that they forgot to be tired, though it was now late in the afternoon. At last, as it was beginning to grow dark, the train rolled into the depot at Savannah. Taking their bags and holding each other’s hands tight, for fear of being separated in the crowd, the children stepped out on the platform, where they were at once completely bewildered by the throng of hurrying people, the confusion, and the noise.

As they stood irresolute, not knowing which way to turn nor what to do, a cheery voice called out,

“Halloo! here we are. Why, Mark, my hearty, this is indeed a pleasure—and little Ruth, too! Won’t my Edna be delighted!” And Captain May stooped down and kissed her, right there before all the people, as though he were her own father.

“Oh, Captain Bill!” said Mark, greatly relieved at seeing the familiar face, “we are so glad to see you. We were just beginning to feel lost.”

“Lost, eh?” laughed the captain; “well, that’s a good one. The idea of a boy who’s been through what you have feeling lost—right here among folks too. But then, to one used to the water, this here dry land is a mighty bewildering place, that’s a fact. Well, come, let’s get under way. I’ve got a carriage moored alongside the station here, and we’ll clap sail on to it and lay a course for the Wildfire. Steward’s got supper ready by this time, and

Chapter 17: Two Letters and a Journey

Sister Emily's impatient to see you. Checks? Oh yes. Here, driver, take these brasses, and roust out that dunnage; lively, now!"

When they were in the carriage, and rolling quietly along through the sandy streets, Captain May said they were just in time, for he was ready to drop down the river that night.

"Then I'd better go to a hotel," said Mark.

"What for?" asked Captain May.

"Because I'm to go to Boston by steamer from here, and Ruth is to go with you."

"Steamer nothing;" shouted Captain Bill. "You're coming along with us on the Wild-fire. Steamer, indeed!"

This seemed to settle it, and Mark wrote home that evening that, having received a "pressing invitation," he was going to sail to New York with Captain Bill May in the Wild-fire.