

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 18: The Burning of the "Wildfire"

"Aunt Emily," as the children called her at once, because she was Edna May's aunt, welcomed them as warmly as Captain May had done, and everything in the cabin of the Wildfire was so comfortable that they felt at home at once. Supper was ready as soon as they were, and as they sat down to it Mark said he wished "Aunt Clo" could see it, for he thought it would give her some new ideas of what Yankees had to eat.

After supper each of the children wrote a letter home, and Mark and Captain May walked up to the post-office to mail them.

About nine o'clock a tug came for the ship, and very soon they had bid good-bye to Savannah, and were dropping down the muddy river towards the sea. As it was a fine moonlit night, the children stayed on deck with Mrs. Coburn to see what they could of the river, which here forms the boundary line between the States of Georgia and South Carolina. On both sides, as far as they could see, the marshes were covered with fields of growing rice, and every now and then they heard the sound of music coming from the funny little negro cabins which were scattered here and there along the banks.

They passed the old forts Jackson and Pulaski, both on the south side of the river, and both deserted and falling to ruin, and very soon had left behind Tybee Island, with its flashing light, at the mouth of the river. The tug left them when they reached the siren buoy that keeps up a constant moaning on the outer bar; one after another of the ship's sails were loosed and "sheeted home," and then Captain May said it was "high time for the watch below to turn in."

The sea was so calm and beautiful the next day that even Mark did not feel ill, nor was he during the voyage. As for Ruth, she knew, from her experience on the last voyage they had taken, that she should not be seasick, and so everybody was as happy and jolly as possible.

During the afternoon, after they had all been sitting on deck for some time, talking of the dear ones left at home, and of the many friends whom they hoped soon to meet, Ruth said she was going down to open her trunk and get out the album containing the pictures of her girl friends in Norton, and see if they looked as she remembered them. It was so long since she had opened this album that she had almost forgotten whose pic-

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tures were in it. She soon returned with it in her hand, and with a very puzzled expression on her face.

“Mark,” she said, “did you ever think that Frank March looked like anybody else whom we know?”

“I don’t know,” answered Mark. “Yes, come to think of it, I have thought two or three times that his face had a familiar look, but I never could think who it was he resembled. Why?”

Placing the album in his hand, and opening it to the first page, on which was the photograph of Edna May, Ruth said, “Do you think he looks anything like that?”

“Why, yes! of course he does,” exclaimed Mark, startled at the resemblance he saw. “He looks enough like the picture to be Edna’s brother.”

“Aunt Emily,” said Ruth, turning to Mrs. Coburn, who sat near them, “do you know in what Southern city Captain May found Edna?”

“Yes, it was in the one we have just left—Savannah.”

“And Frank came from Savannah, and he lost his mother and little sister there, and Edna’s own mother was drowned there. Oh, Mark, if it should be!” cried Ruth, much excited.

“Wouldn’t it be just too jolly?” said Mark.

Mrs. Coburn became almost as interested as the children when the matter was explained to her; but Captain May was quite provoked when he heard of it. He said it was only a chance resemblance, and there couldn’t be anything in it. He had made inquiries in Savannah at the time, and never heard anything of any father or brother either, and at any rate he was not going to lose his Edna now for all the brothers and fathers in the world. He finally said that unless they gave him a solemn promise not to mention a word of all this to Edna, he should not let her visit them next winter. So the children promised, and the captain was satisfied; but they talked the matter over between themselves, and became more and more convinced that Frank March and Edna May were brother and sister.

After this the voyage proceeded without incident until the evening of the third day, when they were sitting at supper in the cabin. The skylights and portholes were all wide open, for in spite of the fresh breeze that was blowing, the cabin was uncomfortably close

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and hot. Mark said the further north they went the hotter it seemed to get, and the others agreed with him. Captain May said that if the breeze held, and they were lucky in meeting a pilot, they would be at anchor in New York Harbor before another supper-time, and he hoped the hot spell would be over before they were obliged to go ashore. While he was speaking the mate put his head down the companion-way and said,

“Captain May, will you be good enough to step on deck a moment, sir?”

As the captain went on deck he noticed that all the crew were gathered about the forecandle, and were talking earnestly.

“What’s in the wind now, Mr. Gibbs?” he asked of the mate, who at that moment stepped up to him.

“Why, sir, only this, that I believe the ship’s on fire. A few minutes ago the whole watch below came on deck vowing there was no sleeping in the fo’k’sle; that it was a regular furnace. I went to see what they was growling at, and ‘twas so hot down there it made my head swim. There wasn’t any flame nor any smoke, but there was a powerful smell of burning, and I’m afraid there’s fire in the cargo.”

Without a word Captain May went forward and down into the forecandle, the men respectfully making way for him to pass. In less than a minute he came up, bathed in perspiration, and turning to the crew, said, “My men, there’s no doubt but that this ship is on fire. It’s in among the cotton; but if we can keep it smothered a while longer, I think, with this breeze, we can make our port before it breaks out. I want you to keep cool and steady, and remember there’s no danger, for we can make land any time in the boats if worse comes to worse. Mr. Gibbs, have the men get their dunnage up out of the forecandle, and then close the hatch and batten it.”

Going aft, the captain found his passengers on deck waiting anxiously to learn the cause of the commotion they had already noticed. He told them the worst at once, and advised them to go below and pack up their things ready for instant removal in case it became necessary.

“Oh, William,” exclaimed his sister, “can’t we take to the boats now while there is time? It seems like tempting Providence to stay on the ship and wait for the fire to break out. What if she should blow up?”

“Now, don’t be foolish, Emily,” answered the captain. “There’s nothing on board that can blow up, and it would be worse than cowardly to leave the ship while there’s a chance

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of saving her. The boats are all ready to be lowered instantly, and at present there is no more danger here than there would be in them."

Not a soul on board the Wildfire went to bed or undressed that night, and Mark and Ruth were the only ones who closed their eyes. They stayed on deck until midnight, but then, in spite of the excitement, they became too sleepy to hold their eyes open any longer, and Mrs. Coburn persuaded them to take a nap on the cabin sofas.

All night the ship flew like a frightened bird towards her port, under such a press of canvas as Captain May would not have dared carry had not the necessity for speed been so great. As the night wore on the decks grew hotter and hotter, until the pitch fairly bubbled from the seams, and a strong smell of burning pervaded the ship. At daylight the American flag was run half-way up to the mizzen peak, union down, as a signal of distress. By sunrise the Highlands of Navesink were in sight, and they also saw a pilot-boat bearing rapidly down upon them from the northward.

As soon as he saw this boat Captain May told his passengers that he was going to send them on board of it, as he feared the fire might now break out at any minute, and he was going to ask its captain to run in to Sandy Hook, and send dispatches to the revenue-cutter and to the New York fire-boat Havemeyer, begging them to come to his assistance.

Mrs. Coburn and Ruth readily agreed to this plan, but Mark begged so hard to be allowed to stay, and said he should feel so much like a coward to leave the ship before any of the other men, that the captain finally consented to allow him to remain.

The ship's headway was checked as the pilot-boat drew near, in order that her yawl, bringing the pilot, might run alongside.

"Halloo, Cap'n Bill," sang out the pilot, who happened to be an old acquaintance of Captain May's. "What's the meaning of all that?" and he pointed to the signal of distress. "Got Yellow Jack aboard, or a mutiny?"

"Neither," answered Captain May, "but I've got a volcano stowed under the hatches, and I'm expecting an eruption every minute."

"You don't tell me?" said the pilot, as he clambered up over the side. "Ship's afire, is she?"

The state of affairs was quickly explained to him, and he readily consented that his swift little schooner should run in to the Hook and send dispatches for help. He also said they should be only too proud to have the ladies come aboard.

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Without further delay Mrs. Coburn and Ruth, with their baggage, were placed in the ship's long-boat, lowered over the side, and in a few minutes were safe on the deck of the pilot-boat, which seemed to Ruth almost as small as Mark's canoe in comparison with the big ship they had just left.

As soon as they were on board, the schooner spread her white wings and stood in for Sandy Hook, while the ship was headed towards the "Swash Channel."

As she passed the Romer Beacon Captain May saw the pilot-boat coming out from behind the Hook, and knew the dispatches had been sent. When his ship was off the Hospital Islands he saw the revenue-cutter steaming down through the Narrows towards them, trailing a black cloud behind her, and evidently making all possible speed.

By this time little eddies of smoke were curling up from around the closely battened hatches, and Captain May saw that the ship could not live to reach the upper bay, and feared she would be a mass of flames before the fire-boat could come to her relief. In this emergency he told the pilot that he thought they had better leave the channel and run over on the flats towards the Long Island shore, so as to be prepared to scuttle her.

"Ay, ay, Cap; I can put her just wherever you want her. Only give the word," answered the pilot.

"I do give it," said Captain May, as a cloud of smoke puffed out from the edge of one of the hatches. "Put her there, for she'll be ablaze now before many minutes."

As the ship's head was turned towards the flats the revenue-cutter ran alongside. Her captain, followed by a dozen bluejackets, boarded the ship, and the former, taking in her desperate situation at a glance, said to Captain May, "You must scuttle her at once, captain; it's your only chance to save her."

"Very well, sir," answered Captain May. "I think so myself, but am glad to have your authority for doing so."

As the ship's anchors were let go, her carpenter and a squad of men from the cutter, armed with axes and augurs, tumbled down into her cabin, and began what seemed like a most furious work of destruction. The axes crashed through the carved woodwork, furniture was hurled to one side, great holes were cut in the cabin floor, and the ship's planking was laid bare in a dozen places below the water-line. Then the augurs were set to work, and in a few minutes a dozen streams of water, spurting up like fountains, were rushing and gurgling into the ship.

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While this was going on in the cabin, the ship’s crew, assisted by others of the revenue men, were removing everything of value on which they could lay their hands to the deck of the cutter.

Suddenly those in the cabin heard a great cry and a roaring noise on deck and as they rushed up the companion-way they saw a column of flame shooting up from the fore-hatch, half-mast high.

Half the people had sprung on board the revenue-cutter as she sheered off, which she did at the first burst of flame, and now the others filled the boats, which were quickly lowered and shoved off. As the boats were being lowered a second burst of flame came from the main-hatch, and already tongues of fire were lapping the sails and lofty spars.

Mark had worked with the rest in saving whatever he could lift, and did not think of leaving the ship until Captain May said,

“Come, Mark, it’s time to go. Jump into this boat.”

Mark did as he was told, and as Captain May sprang in after him, and shouted “Lower away!” not a living soul was left on board the unfortunate vessel.

As the men in the boats rested on their oars, and lay at a safe distance from the ship, watching the grand spectacle of her destruction, they saw that she was settling rapidly by the stern. Lower and lower she sank, and higher and higher mounted the fierce flames, until, all at once, her bows lifted high out of the water, her stern seemed to shoot under it, then the great hull plunged out of sight, and a mighty cloud of smoke and steam rose to the sky. Through this cloud the flames along the upper masts and yards shone with a lurid red. At this point the fire-boat arrived; a couple of well-directed streams of water from her powerful engines soon extinguished these flames, and the three blackened masts, pointing vaguely upward, were all that remained to show where, so short a time before, the great ship had floated.

The pilot-boat had already transferred Mrs. Coburn and Ruth and their baggage to the cutter, and she now steamed up the bay, carrying the passengers, crew, and all that had been saved from the good ship Wildfire.

This disaster to his ship, which would have been so terrible had it happened out at sea instead of almost in port, as it did, obliged Captain May to remain in New York several days. Of this Mark and Ruth were very glad, for it gave them an opportunity to see some of the wonders of the great city of which they had read so much, and which they had longed so often to visit.

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Mrs. Coburn, who had at one time lived in New York, and so knew just what was best worth seeing, took them to some new place every day. They saw the great East River Bridge that connects New York and Brooklyn, they took the elevated railroad, and went the whole length of Manhattan Island to High Bridge, on which the Croton Aqueduct crosses the Harlem River, and on the way back stopped and walked through Central Park to the Menagerie, where they were more interested in the alligators than anything else, because they reminded them so of old friends, or rather enemies.

They visited museums and noted buildings and stores, until Ruth declared that she wanted to get away where it was quiet, and she didn't see how people who lived in New York found time to do anything but go round and see the sights.

They were all glad when Captain May was ready to leave, and after the noise and bustle of the great city they thoroughly enjoyed the quiet night's sail up Long Island Sound on the steamer Pilgrim.

At Fall River they took cars for Boston, where they stayed one day. From there they took the steamer Cambridge for Bangor, where they arrived in the morning, and where “Uncle Christmas,” as jolly and hearty as ever, met them at the wharf.

“Sakes alive, children, how you have growed!” he said, holding them off at arm's-length in front of him, and looking at them admiringly. “Why, Mark, you're pretty nigh as tall as a Floridy pine.”

He insisted on taking the whole party to dine with him at the hotel, and at dinner told Mark that that little business of theirs had got to wait a while, and meantime he wanted him to run over to Norton, and stay at Dr. Wing's until he came for him.

This was just what Mark had been wishing, above all things, that he could do, and he almost hugged “Uncle Christmas” for his thoughtful kindness.

After dinner the happy party bade the old gentleman good-bye, and took the train for Skowhegan, where they found the same old rattlety-bang stage waiting to carry them to Norton.

As with a flourish of the driver's horn and a cracking of his whip they rolled into the well-known Norton street, a crowd of boys and girls, who seemed to have been watching for them, gave three rousing cheers for Mark Elmer, and three more for Ruth Elmer, and then three times three for both of them.

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The stage stopped, and in another instant Ruth was hugging and kissing, and being hugged and kissed, by her “very dearest, darlinest friend” Edna May, and Mark was being slapped on the back and hauled this way and that, and was shaking hands with all the boys in Norton.