

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 20: Edna May March

Mark, Ruth, and Edna hurried on deck, and reached it in time to see Captain May load to its muzzle the small brass cannon that was carried on the schooner for firing signals.

How beautiful and peaceful everything looked! The tide, with which they had come up, filled the river to the brim, and it sparkled merrily in the light of the rising sun. The ferry-boat lay moored to the bank just in front of the schooner, and they could see the tin horn hanging to its post, and the very card on which were the ferry rates that Ruth had printed so many months before. The house was hidden from their view by a clump of trees, but over their tops rose a light column of smoke, and they knew Aunt Chloe was up and busy, at any rate.

Suddenly, flash! bang! the small cannon went off with a roar worthy of a larger piece, and one that woke the echoes for miles up and down the river, disturbed numerous wild water-fowl from their quiet feeding, and sent them screaming away through the air, and set all the dogs in Wakulla to barking furiously. In the midst of all the clamor the children heard the loud bark of their own dog, Bruce, and in another moment he came bounding down to the landing, and was the first to welcome them home.

At the same time a number of colored people, among whom the children recognized several familiar faces, came running down to the opposite bank of the river, where they stood rubbing their eyes and staring at the big schooner, the first that had been seen in their river in many years.

The children did not pay much attention to them, however, for a landing-plank was being run ashore, and they were eager to go to the house. As Mark reached the wharf, and was holding out his hand to Ruth, who followed, there was a loud hurrah behind him, and before he could turn around Frank March had thrown his arms round his neck, and was fairly hugging him in his joy.

“I knew you’d come when we weren’t expecting you! I knew you’d surprise us! and I told ‘em so last night when they were worrying about you,” shouted the boy, dancing about them, and almost inclined to hug Ruth as he had Mark. But he didn’t; he only grasped both her hands, and shook them until she begged for mercy. As soon as she

Chapter 20: Edna May March

regained possession of her hands, she said,

“And here’s Edna, Frank. Miss Edna May, Mr. Frank March.”

“I’m awfully glad to see you, Miss Edna,” said Frank; and “How do you do, Mr. March?” said Edna, as they shook hands and looked at each other curiously.

Then Frank was introduced to Uncle Christopher, who said, “My boy, I’m proud to make your acquaintance. So you didn’t expect us, eh?” and the old gentleman chuckled as he thought of the quality and size of the joke they had played on the inmates of “Go Bang” by surprising them.

Captain May and the gentlemen from Aroostook had not left the schooner when the others turned towards the house, talking so fast as they went that nobody understood, or even heard, what anybody else was saying.

As they came in sight of the house two well-known figures were leaving the front gate, and the next minute Mark and Ruth had rushed into the arms of their father and mother, and the latter was actually crying for joy.

“It is all your doing, Uncle Christopher,” she said to Mr. Bangs, as soon as she could speak. “I know it is; for you never in your life have neglected opportunities for giving people joyful surprises.”

“Well, Niece Ellen, I won’t say as I didn’t have a hand in it,” answered the old gentleman, his face beaming with delight. “But, sakes alive! Mark Elmer, is this the place that I let you have rent free for ten years?” and he pointed to the pretty house, and swept his hand over the broad fields surrounding it.

“Yes, Uncle Christopher, this is the place. This is ‘Go Bang,’ as the children have named it, and we welcome you very heartily to it.”

“Well, well,” said Uncle Christopher, mournfully, “what chances I have thrown away in this life! eh, Niece Ellen?”

“You never threw away a chance to do good or make others happy, uncle, I am sure of that. But now come into the house and get ready for breakfast, which will soon be ready for you.”

As the others went into the house, Ruth ran around to the kitchen to see Aunt Chloe,

Chapter 20: Edna May March

and so surprised that old woman that she just threw her floury arms about the girl's neck and kissed her, saying,

“Tank de Lo’d, honey! Tank de good Lo’d you’s come home ag’in! We’s all miss yo’ like de sunshine, but nobody hain’t miss yo’ like ole Clo done.”

Mr. March and Jan had gone to Tallahassee the day before, but were to be back that night.

Mrs. Elmer sent Mark down to the schooner to invite Captain May and the Aroos-took gentlemen to come to the house for breakfast, but, rather to her relief—for she was not prepared to entertain so many guests—they declined her invitation, saying they would breakfast on board, and come to the house to pay their respects later.

How jolly and happy they were at breakfast. How shy Frank was before Edna, and how many funny things Uncle Christopher did say to make them laugh! Little by little the “great scheme” was unfolded to the three members of the mill company present who had not heard of it, though Uncle Christopher and Mark had intended to keep it a secret until they could lay it before a regular meeting of the directors. But, beginning with hints, the whole story was finally told, and Mr. and Mrs. Elmer and Frank were only too glad to sustain President Mark in his promises. They said they should not only be proud and happy to have the “best uncle in the world” become a member of their company, but that new saw-mill machinery was just what they needed, for they found the present mill already unable to supply the demands upon it for lumber.

While the others were talking business, Ruth and Edna had gone out on the front porch to look at the garden, and now Ruth came back to ask whose house the pretty little new one was that stood just on the edge of the woods to the right.

“Why, that’s ours,” said Frank, jumping from the table. “Don’t you want to go and look at it?”

They said of course they did, and Mark said he would go too. They were perfectly delighted with the new house and everything in it, and praised it for being so tiny and cozy and comfortable, until Frank thought he had never felt so happy and proud before. It was no wonder, for this was the first time he had ever known the pleasure of extending, to those whom he loved, the hospitality of a pleasant home of his own.

When they returned to the big house they found the rest of their friends from the schooner there. Captain May started when he saw Frank March, and on being introduced

Chapter 20: Edna May March

to him held his hand so long, and stared at him so earnestly, as to greatly embarrass the boy.

As Uncle Christopher and the Aroostook gentlemen were anxious to visit the mill, Mr. Elmer invited them to walk up there through the woods. On their way they passed the sulphur spring, which had been cleaned out and walled in, and over which a neat bath-house had been built. Uncle Christopher was delighted with it, and declared that, to an old “rheumatizy” man like him, that spring was worth all the lumber in “Floridy.”

Mark had asked Edna and Ruth to go up to the mill by water with Frank and him in the canoe, and they accepted the invitation. At first Edna was very timid in the frail craft, but she soon gained confidence, and said “she thought it was the very nicest little boat, on one of the prettiest rivers she had ever seen.”

As they neared the mill its busy machinery seemed to Mark to say, “Welcome, Mr. President, welcome, Mr. President, welcome Mr. President of the Elmer Mills”; and when he drew the attention of the others to it, they declared that they, too, could distinguish the words quite plainly. The mill looked just as it had when they last saw it, but at one side were great piles of sawed lumber that Uncle Christopher and the Aroostook gentlemen were examining carefully.

That afternoon Mark handed Frank thirty dollars as his share of the money the former had received from their otter-skins, which he had carried North and sold. Frank had several more that he had caught during the summer, but their skins were of little value compared with those caught during the earlier months of the year.

Mr. Elmer had invited all the gentlemen to dine with him that evening, much to the consternation of Aunt Chloe, who said “she was sho’ she couldn’t see how she was gwine fin’ time to po’wide vittles fo’ so many gusses; an’ dem po’ hung’y Norfeners too. ‘Specs dey’ll be powerful tickled to git a squar’ meal.”

The “gusses” spent the afternoon in crossing the river to Wakulla, and in driving several miles into the great pine forests, which pleased them greatly.

The dinner turned out to be a most bountiful meal, in spite of Aunt Chloe’s fears; and at half-past six a very merry company gathered around the long table, which, for want of space elsewhere, had been set in the wide hall that ran through the house from front to rear. The evening was so warm that the front door stood wide open, and when dinner was nearly over, the whole party were laughing so heartily at one of Uncle Christopher’s funny stories, that no one heard the sound of wheels at the gate, nor noticed the figure that, with white face and wild eyes, stared at them from the open doorway.

Chapter 20: Edna May March

No, not at them; only at one of them—the fair-haired girl, almost a woman, who sat at the head of the table, on Mr. Elmer's right hand, and on whose face the light shone full and strong.

Then a cry rang through the hall, a cry almost of agony, and it was "Margaret! Margaret! my wife Margaret! Am I dreaming, or can the dead come to life?"

As the startled guests looked towards the door Mr. March entered the room, and without noticing any one else, walked straight to where Edna May was sitting. She, frightened at his appearance and fixed gaze, clung to Mr. Elmer's arm, and Captain May half rose from his chair with a confused idea that the girl, whom he loved as his own daughter, was in danger.

"Who is she, Elmer? where did she come from?" exclaimed Mr. March. "She is the living image of my dead wife; only younger, much younger, and more beautiful than she whom I drove from her home," he added, with a groan.

Mr. Elmer had noticed the strange resemblance between Frank March and Edna May, and had determined to speak to his wife about it that night. Now it all flashed across him as clear as sunlight; but before he could speak, Ruth sprang to his side, and taking her friend's hand in hers, cried,

"Don't you see, father, she is his own daughter, the baby he thought was drowned in the Savannah River so many years ago? Captain May saved her, and now he has brought her back to her father and brother. Frank, Edna is your own sister."

Mr. March tried to take Edna into his arms, but she slipped away from him and ran to Captain May, saying, "This is my father, the only one I have ever known. As he has loved and cared for me, so do I love him. I will never, never leave him!" and she burst into tears.

After soothing and quieting her, Captain May said, "Mr. March, I suspected this long ago. Mark and Ruth told me of the resemblance between Edna and your son on our way North together last spring, and I made them promise not to mention it to her. I hoped it would prove to be only a fancied resemblance; but, as a Christian man, I could not keep father and daughter separated, if indeed they were father and daughter. So I brought her here to meet you face to face; and from what I have just seen I am inclined to think you are her own father, but you must prove it to me. Prove the fact beyond a doubt, and I will yield to you an undivided half interest in this dear child. Only a half, though. I can't give up the love that has twined round my heart for nearly fifteen years."

Chapter 20: Edna May March

Then Mr. March sat down, and in faltering tones told to the listening company the sad story of his married life. He gave the date of the disappearance of his wife and her baby from home, and he described as well as he could the clothes that each wore at the time.

As he finished, Captain May went to him and gave him a warm, hearty hand-grasp. "That's enough," he said. "Gentlemen, I call you to witness that from this time forth I renounce all claims, except those of love, to her who has been known for the last fifteen years as my daughter Edna May. I am satisfied that this man is her father, and that whatever he has been in the past, he is now worthy to occupy that position towards her. Edna, my girl, you have only got two fathers instead of one, and a brother of whom I think you will live to be very proud besides; your heart holds enough love for all of us, doesn't it, dear?"

Edna's answer was to throw her arms around his neck, and kiss his weather-beaten cheeks again and again. Then, with a smile showing through the tears that still filled her eyes, she went over to Mr. March, whom she no longer doubted was her own father, but of whom she could not help feeling very shy, and half timidly held up her face for him to kiss. The happy father opened his arms and clasped her to his heart, exclaiming, in a broken voice, "God bless you, my daughter! That He has restored you to me is the surest sign of His forgiveness."

Then Frank came to them, saying, "Sister Edna, won't you kiss me too? The thing I have envied Mark most was his having a sister, and now that I have got one of my own, I do believe I am the very happiest boy in the world."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed good old Uncle Christopher, who had all this time been blowing his nose very loudly with a great red silk hand-kerchief, and occasionally wiping his eyes, "with all this kissing going on, where am I? Grandniece Ruth, come here and kiss your 'Uncle Christmas' directly." Ruth did as she was bid, and the old gentleman continued: "What a country this Floridy is, to be sure. They change March into May, or vicy versy, and each one is as beautiful as the other. Sakes alive! what an old April Fool I was not to think of all this myself when I first saw those two young people together."

Long before this, honest Jan Jansen, who had returned from Tallahassee with Mr. March, but waited to put up the mules, had come into the room, and he was now brought forward and introduced to everybody. Among the Aroostook gentlemen he found an old acquaintance who had met him in New Sweden, and who now told him that, owing to the death of a relative in the old country, a snug little property awaited him, and that a lawyer in Bangor was advertising and searching for him.

Chapter 20: Edna May March

Having now spent almost a year with our Wakulla friends, perhaps they are getting tired of us, and we had better leave them for a while, only waiting to draw together the threads of the story, and finish it off neatly.

Edna May March has been installed mistress of the pretty little house that Mr. March and Frank built while the young Elmers were in the North, and she and Ruth receive daily lessons in cooking, sewing, and all sorts of housekeeping from Mrs. Elmer and Aunt Chloe; and the latter says “she’s proud to ‘still Soufern precep’s into deir sweet Norfern heads, bress em!”

The Nancy Bell lay in the St. Mark’s River long enough to secure a load of lumber from the Elmer Mill, and then sailed for the North. But she will return, for Captain May has bought a half interest in her from Uncle Christopher, and will hereafter run her regularly between New York and Wakulla.

The new Elmer Mill is nearly finished, and four of the six gentlemen from Aroostook have gone home to get their families, and to buy more machinery with which to erect another saw-mill farther up the river, and they are expected back on the next trip of the Nancy Bell.

Jan has gone to Sweden; but they have had a letter from him saying that he should return soon, and invest his property in Wakulla.

Dear old “Uncle Christmas” is busy preparing for his expedition in search of the famous Wakulla volcano. He revels in the warmth of the climate, and in bathing in the sulphur spring, and he says that if a good thing’s good, a better may be better, and he may find more warmth and more sulphur if he can only find the volcano.

Edna has been taken on several picnics to Wakulla Spring, over the “humpety road,” and “de trabblin’ road,” past “Brer Steve’s” down to the light-house, and to other places of interest. The contrast between what is, and what the people of Wakulla hope will be when they get the great ship-canal across Florida built, and other schemes carried out, amuses her greatly. She smiles when they come to her and in strict confidence unfold their plans for future greatness; but is such a patient listener, and so ready a sympathizer, that she is rapidly winning their admiration and love.