

# WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



## CHAPTER 1: PREPARING TO LEAVE THE OLD HOME

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Over and over again had Mark and Ruth Elmer read this paragraph, which appeared among the “Norton Items” of the weekly paper published in a neighboring town:

“We are sorry to learn that our esteemed fellow-townsmen, Mark Elmer, Esq., owing to delicate health, feels compelled to remove to a warmer climate. Having disposed of his property in this place, Mr. Elmer has purchased a plantation in Florida, upon which he will settle immediately. As his family accompany him to this new home in the Land of Flowers, the many school-friends and young playmates of his interesting children will miss them sadly.”

“I tell you what, Ruth,” said Mark, after they had read this item for a dozen times or more, “we are somebodies after all, and don’t you forget it. We own a plantation, we do, and have disposed of our PROPERTY in this place.”

As Mark looked from the horse-block on which he was sitting at the little weather-beaten house, nestling in the shadow of its glorious trees, which, with its tiny grass-plot in front, was all the property Mr. Elmer had ever owned, he flung up his hat in ecstasy at the idea of their being property owners, and tumbled over backward in trying to catch it as it fell.

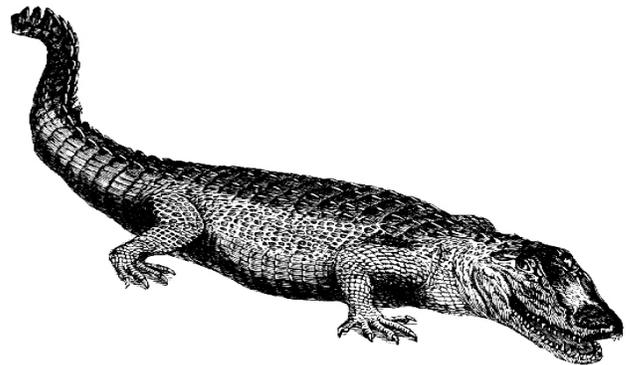
“What I like,” said Ruth, who stood quietly beside him, “is the part about us being interesting children, and to think that the girls and boys at school will miss us.”

“Yes, and won’t they open their eyes when we write them letters about the alligators, and the orange groves, and palm-trees, and bread-fruit, and monkeys, and Indians, and pirates? Whoop-e-e-e! What fun we are going to have!”

“Bread-fruit, and monkeys, and pirates, and Indians in Florida! What are you thinking of, Mark Elmer?”

“Well, I guess ‘Osceola the Seminole’ lived in Florida, and it’s tropical, and pirates and monkeys are tropical too, ain’t they?”

Just then the tea-bell rang, and the children ran in to take the paper which they had been reading to their father, and to eat their last supper in the little old house that had always been their home.



Mr. Elmer had, for fifteen years, been cashier of the Norton Bank; and though his salary was not large, he had, by practicing the little economies of a New England village, supported his family comfortably until this time, and laid by a sum of money for a rainy day. And now the "rainy day" had come. For two years past the steady confinement to his desk had told sadly upon the faithful bank cashier, and the stooping form, hollow cheeks, and hacking cough could no longer be disregarded. For a long time good old Dr. Wing had said,

"You must move South, Elmer; you can't stand it up here much longer."

Both Mr. Elmer and his wife knew that this was true; but how could they move South? Where was the money to come from? And how were they to live if they did? Long and anxious had been the consultations after the children were tucked into their beds, and many were the prayers for guidance they had offered up.

At last a way was opened, "and just in time, too," said the doctor, with a grave shake of his head. Mrs. Elmer's uncle, Christopher Bangs, whom the children called "Uncle Christmas," heard of their trouble, and left his saw-mills and lumber camps to come and see "where the jam was," as he expressed it. When it was all explained to him, his good-natured face, which had been in a wrinkle of perplexity, lit up, and with a resounding slap of his great, hard hand on his knee, he exclaimed,

"Sakes alive! Why didn't you send for me, Niece Ellen? Why didn't you tell me all this long ago, eh? I've got a place down in Florida, that I bought as a speculation just after the war. I hain't never seen it, and might have forgot it long ago but for the tax bills coming in reg'lar every year. It's down on the St. Mark's River, pretty nigh the Gulf coast, and ef you want to go there and farm it, I'll give you a ten years' lease for the taxes, with a chance to buy at your own rigger when the ten years is up."

"But won't it cost a great deal to get there, Uncle?" asked Mrs. Elmer, whose face had lighted up as this new hope entered her heart.

"Sakes alive! No; cost nothin'! Why, it's actually what you might call providential the way things turns out. You can go down, slick as a log through a chute, in the Nancy Bell, of Bangor, which is fitting out in that port this blessed minit. She's bound to Pensacola in ballast, or with just a few notions of hardware sent out as a venture, for a load of pine lumber to fill out a contract I've taken in New York. She can run into the St. Mark's and drop you jest as well as not. But you'll have to pick up and raft your fixin's down to Bangor in a terrible hurry, for she's going to sail next week, Wednesday, and it's Tuesday now."

So it was settled that they should go, and the following week was one of tremendous excitement to the children, who had never been from home in their lives, and were now to become such famous travelers.

Mark Elmer, Jr., as he wrote his name, was as merry, harum-scarum, mischief-loving a boy as ever lived. He was fifteen years old, the leader of the Norton boys in all their games, and the originator of most of their schemes for mischief. But Mark's mischief was never of a kind to injure anybody, and he was as honest as the day is long, as well as loving and loyal to his parents and sister Ruth.

Although a year younger than Mark, Ruth studied the same books that he did, and was a better scholar. In spite of this she looked up to him in everything, and regarded him with the greatest admiration. Although quiet and studious, she had crinkly brown hair, and a merry twinkle in her eyes that indicated a ready humor and a thorough appreciation of fun.

It was Monday when Mark and Ruth walked home from the post-office together, reading the paper, for which they had gone every Monday evening since they could remember, and they were to leave home and begin their journey on the following morning.

During the past week Mr. Elmer had resigned his position in the bank, sold the dear little house which had been a home to him and his wife ever since they were married, and in which their children had been born, and with a heavy heart made the preparations for departure.

With the willing aid of kind neighbors Mrs. Elmer had packed what furniture they were to take with them, and it had been sent to Bangor. Mark and Ruth had not left school until Friday, and had been made young lions of all the week by the other children. To all of her girl friends Ruth had promised to write every single thing that happened, and Mark had promised so many alligator teeth, and other trophies of the chase, that, if he kept all his promises, there would be a decided advance in the value of Florida curiosities that winter.

As the little house was stripped of all its furniture, except some few things that had been sold with it, they were all to go to Dr. Wing's to sleep that night, and Mrs. Wing had almost felt hurt that they would not take tea with her; but both Mr. and Mrs. Elmer wanted to take this last meal in their own home, and persuaded her to let them have their way. The good woman must have sent over most of the supper she had intended them to eat with her, and this, together with the good things sent in by other neighbors, so loaded the table that Mark declared it looked like a regular surprise-party supper.

A surprise-party it proved to be, sure enough, for early in the evening neighbors and friends began to drop in to say good-bye, until the lower rooms of the little house were filled. As the chairs were all gone, they sat on trunks, boxes, and on the kitchen table, or stood up.

Mark and Ruth had their own party, too, right in among the grown people; for most of the boys and girls of the village had come with their parents to say good-bye, and many

of them had brought little gifts that they urged the young Elmers to take with them as keepsakes. Of all these none pleased Ruth so much as the album, filled with the pictures of her school-girl friends, that Edna May brought her.

Edna was the adopted daughter of Captain Bill May, who had brought her home from one of his voyages when she was a little baby, and placed her in his wife's arms, saying that she was a bit of flotsam and jetsam that belonged to him by right of salvage. His ship had been in a Southern port when a woman, with this child in her arms, had fallen from a pier into the river. Springing into the water after them, Captain May had succeeded in saving the child, but the mother was drowned. As nothing could be learned of its history, and as nobody claimed it, Captain May brought the baby home, and she was baptized Edna May. She was now fourteen years old, and Ruth Elmer's most intimate friend, and the first picture in the album was a good photograph of herself, taken in Bangor. The others were only tintypes taken in the neighboring town of Skowhegan; but Ruth thought them all beautiful.

The next morning was gray and chill, for it was late in November. The first snow of the season was falling in a hesitating sort of a way, as though it hardly knew whether to come or not, and it was still quite dark when Mrs. Wing woke Mark and Ruth, and told them to hurry, for the stage would be along directly. They were soon dressed and downstairs, where they found breakfast smoking on the table. A moment later they were joined by their parents, neither of whom could eat, so full were they of the sorrow of departure. The children were also very quiet, even Mark's high spirits being dampened by thoughts of leaving old friends, and several tears found their way down Ruth's cheeks during the meal.

After breakfast they said good-bye to the Wings, and went over to their own house to pack a few remaining things into handbags, and wait for the Skowhegan stage.

At six o'clock sharp, with a "toot, toot, toot," of the driver's horn, it rattled up to the gate, followed by a wagon for the baggage. A few minutes later, with full hearts and tearful eyes, the Elmers had bidden farewell to the little old house and grand trees they might never see again, and were on their way down the village street, their long journey fairly begun.