

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 4: A WRECK ON THE FLORIDA REEF

After leaving Hatteras not another evidence of land was seen by the passengers of the Nancy Bell for three days. At last one afternoon “Captain Li” pointed out and called their attention to a slender shaft rising apparently from the sea itself, far to the westward. He told them that it was the lighthouse at Jupiter Inlet, well down on the coast of Florida, and they regarded it with great interest, as giving them their first glimpse of the land that was so soon to be their home.

The weather had by this time become very warm and instead of wearing the thick clothing with which they had started, the Elmers found the very thinnest of their last summer’s things all that they could bear.

Mark had almost forgotten his seasickness, and spent much of his time with Jan Jansen, who taught him to make knots and splices, to box the compass and to steer. Both Mark and Ruth were tanned brown by the hot sun, and Mr. Elmer said the warmth of the air had already made a new man of him.

Before the light but steady trade-wind that kept the air deliciously cool, the Nancy Bell ran rapidly down the coast and along the great Florida Reef, which for two hundred miles bounds that coast on the south.

Captain Drew stood far out from the reef, being well aware of the strong currents that set towards it from all directions, and which have enticed many a good ship to her destruction. Others, however, were not so wise as he, and at daylight one morning the watch on deck sang out,

“Wreck off the starboard bow!”

This brought all hands quickly on deck, and sure enough, about five miles from them they saw the wreck looming high out of the water, and evidently stranded. As her masts, with their crossed yards, were still standing, “Captain Li” said she must have struck very easily, and stood a good chance of being saved if she could only be lightened before a blow came that would roll a sea in on her.

“Are you going to her assistance?” asked Mr. Elmer.

“Certainly I am,” answered the captain. “I consider that one of the first duties of a sailor is to give aid to his fellows in distress. Besides, if we succeed in saving her and her cargo, we stand a chance of making several thousand dollars salvage money, which I for one do not care to throw away.”

“You are quite right,” said Mr. Elmer. “It is seldom that we are offered an opportunity of doing good and being well paid for it at the same time, and it would be foolish, as well as heartless, not to render what assistance lies in our power.”

The schooner was already headed towards the wreck, but approached it very slowly, owing to the light breeze that barely filled her sails. As the sun rose, and cast a broad flood of light over the tranquil scene, the captain anxiously scanned the line of the reef in both directions through his glass.

“Ah, I thought so!” he exclaimed; “there they come, and there, and there. I can count six already. Now we shall have a race for it.”

“Who? What?” asked Mark, not understanding the captain’s exclamations.

“Wreckers!” answered the captain. “Take the glass, and you can see their sails coming from every direction; and they have seen us long ago too. I actually believe those fellows can smell a wreck a hundred miles off. Halloo there, forward! Stand by to lower the gig.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Mr. Elmer.

“I am going to try and reach that wreck before any of the boats whose sails you can see slipping out from behind those low keys. The first man aboard that ship is ‘wreck-master,’ and gets the largest share of salvage money.”

So saying, “Captain Li” swung himself over the side and into the light gig, which, with its crew of four lusty young Maine sailors, had already been got overboard and now awaited him. As he seized the tiller ropes he shouted, “Now, then, give way! And a hundred dollars extra salvage to you four if this gig is the first boat to lay alongside of that wreck.”

At these words the long ash oars bent like willow wands in the grasp of the young Northern giants, and the gig sprang away like a startled bonito, leaving a long line of bubbles to mark her course.

The wreck was still three miles off; and, with the glass, small boats could be seen shooting away from several of the approaching wrecking vessels.

“It’s a race between Conchs and Yankees,” said Jan Jansen to Mark.

“What are Conchs?” asked the boy.

“Why, those fellows in the other boats. Most of them come from the Bahama Islands, and all Bahamians are called ‘Conchs,’ because they eat so many of the shell-fish of that name.”

“Well, I’ll bet on the Yankees!” cried Mark.

“So will I,” said the Swede. “Yankee baked beans and brown bread make better muscle than fish, which is about all the fellows down this way get to live on.”

As seen from the deck of the schooner, the race had by this time become very

exciting; for, as their boat approached the wreck on one side, another, manned by red-shirted wreckers, who were exhibiting a wonderful amount of pluck and endurance for "Conchs," as Jan called them, was rapidly coming up on the other. It was hard to tell which was the nearer; and while Mark shouted in his excitement, Mrs. Elmer and Ruth waved their handkerchiefs, though their friends were too far away to be encouraged by either the shouts or wavings.

At last "Captain Li's" boat dashed up alongside the wreck, and almost at the same instant the wrecker's boat disappeared from view on the opposite side.

With their glasses, those on the schooner saw their captain go up the side of the ship, hand over hand, along a rope that had been thrown him, and disappear over the bulwarks. They afterwards learned that he reached the deck of the ship, and thus made himself master of the wreck, just as the head of his rival appeared above the opposite side.

The wreck proved to be the ship *Goodspeed*, Captain Gillis, of and for Liverpool, with cotton from New Orleans. During the calm of the preceding night she had been caught by one of the powerful coast currents, and stealthily but surely drawn into the toils. Shortly before daylight she had struck on Pickle Reef, but so lightly and so unexpectedly that her crew could hardly believe the slight jar they felt was anything more than the shock of striking some large fish. They soon found, however, that they were hard and fast aground, and had struck on the very top of the flood tide, so that, as it ebbed, the ship became more and more firmly fixed in her position. As the ship settled with the ebbing tide she began to leak badly, and Captain Gillis was greatly relieved when daylight disclosed to him the presence of the *Nancy Bell*, and he greeted her captain most cordially as the latter gained the deck of his ship.

By the time the schooner had approached the wreck, as nearly as her own safety permitted, and dropped anchor for the first time since leaving Bangor, a dozen little wrecking craft, manned by crews of swarthy spongers and fishermen, had also reached the spot, and active preparations for lightening the stranded ship were being made. Her carefully battened hatches were uncovered, whips were rove to her lower yards, and soon the tightly pressed bales of cotton began to appear over her sides, and find their way into the light draught wrecking vessels waiting to receive them. As soon as one of these was loaded, she transferred her cargo to the *Nancy Bell* and returned for another.

While the wreckers were busily discharging the ship's cargo, her own crew were overhauling long lines of chain cable, and lowering two large anchors and two smaller ones into one of the wrecking boats that had remained empty on purpose to receive them. The cables were paid out over the stern of the ship, and made fast to the great anchors, which were carried far out into the deep water beyond the reef. Each big anchor was backed by

a smaller one, to which it was attached by a cable, and which was carried some distance beyond it before being dropped overboard.

When the anchors were thus placed in position, the ends of the cables still remaining on board the ship were passed around capstans, and by means of the donkey-engine drawn taut.

At high tide that night a heavy strain was brought to bear on the cables, in hopes that the ship might be pulled off the reef; but she did not move, and the work of lightening her and searching for the leak continued all the next day.

While all this work was going on the Elmers spent most of their time in exploring the reef in the captain's gig, which was so light that Mr. Elmer and Mark could easily row it.

As the clear water was without a ripple, they could look far down into its depths, and see the bottom of branching coral, as beautiful as frosted silver. From among its branches sprang great sea-fans, delicate as lace-work, and showing, in striking contrast to the pure white of the coral, the most vivid reds, greens, and royal purple. These, and masses of feathery seaweeds, waved to and fro in the water as though stirred by a light breeze, and among them darted and played fish as brilliant in coloring as tropical birds. The boat seemed suspended in midair above fairy-land, and even the children gazed down over its sides in silence, for fear lest by speaking they should break the charm, and cause the wonderful picture to vanish.

By noon the heat of the sun was so great that they sought shelter from it on a little island, or key, of about an acre in extent, that was covered with a luxuriant vegetation, and shaded by a group of stately cocoanut palms. Mr. Elmer showed Mark how to climb one of these by means of a bit of rope fastened loosely around his body and the smooth trunk of the tree, and the boy succeeded in cutting off several bunches of the great nuts that hung just below the wide-spreading crown of leaves. They came to the ground with a crash, but the thick husk in which each was enveloped saved them from breaking. The nuts were quite green, and Mr. Elmer with a hatchet cut several of them open and handed them to his wife and children. None of them contained any meat, for that had not yet formed, but they were filled with a white, milky fluid, which, as all of the party were very thirsty, proved a most acceptable beverage.

After eating the luncheon they had brought with them, and satisfying their thirst with the cocoanut milk, Mark and Ruth explored the beach of the little island in search of shells, which they found in countless numbers, of strange forms and most beautiful colors, while their parents remained seated in the shade of the palms.

“Wouldn't it be gay if we could stay here always?” said Mark.

“No,” answered the more practical Ruth; “I don't think it would be at all. I would

rather be where there are people and houses; besides, I heard father say that these little islands are often entirely covered with water during great storms, and I'm sure I wouldn't want to be here then."

It was nearly sunset when they returned to the schooner, with their boat well loaded with the shells and other curiosities that the children had gathered.

At high tide that night the strain on the cables proved sufficient to move the stranded ship, and, foot by foot, she was pulled off into deep water, much to the joy of Captain Gillis and those who had worked with him.

The next morning the entire fleet—ship, schooner, and wrecking boats—set sail for Key West, which port they reached during the afternoon, and where they found they would be obliged to spend a week or more while an Admiralty Court settled the claims for salvage.