

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 5: MARK AND RUTH ATTEND AN AUCTION

Although Mr. and Mrs. Elmer regretted the delay in Key West, being anxious to get settled in their new home as soon as possible, the children did not mind it a bit; indeed, they were rather glad of it. In the novelty of everything they saw in this queerest of American cities, they found plenty to occupy and amuse them.

The captain and their father were busy in the courtroom nearly every day, and Mrs. Elmer did not care to go ashore except for a walk in the afternoon with her husband. So the children went off on long exploring expeditions by themselves, and the following letter, written during this time by Ruth to her dearest friend, Edna May, will give an idea of some of the things they saw:

“KEY WEST, FLA., December 15, 188-.

“MY DEAREST EDNA,—It seems almost a year since I left you in dear old Norton, so much has happened since then. This is the very first chance I have had since I left to send you a letter, so I will make it a real long one, and try to tell you everything.

“I was not seasick a bit, but Mark was.

“In the Penobscot River we rescued a man from a floating cake of ice, and brought him with us. His name is Jan Jansen, but Mark calls him Jack Jackson. A few days before we got here we found a wreck, and helped get it off, and brought it here to Key West. Now we are waiting for a court to say how much it was worth to do it. I shouldn’t wonder if they allowed as much as a thousand dollars, for the wreck was a big ship, and it was real hard work.

“This is an awfully funny place, and I just wish you were here to walk round with Mark and me and see it. It is on an island, and that is the reason it is named ‘Key,’ because all the islands down here are called keys. The Spaniards call it ‘Cayo Hueso,’ which means bone key, or bone island; but I’m sure I don’t know why, for I haven’t seen any bones here. The island is all made of coral, and the streets are just hard white coral worn down. The island is almost flat, and ‘Captain Li’—he’s our captain—says that the highest part is only sixteen feet above the ocean.

“Oh, Edna! you ought to see the palm-trees. They grow everywhere, great cocoa-nut and date palms, and we drink the milk out of the cocoa-nuts when

we go on picnics and get thirsty. And the roses are perfectly lovely, and they have great oleanders and cactuses, and hundreds of flowers that I don't know the names of, and they are all in full bloom now, though it is nearly Christmas. I don't suppose I shall hang up my stocking this Christmas; they don't seem to do it down here.

"The other day we went out to the soldiers' barracks, and saw a banyan-tree that 'Captain Li' says is the only one in the United States, but we didn't see any monkeys or elephants. Mark says he don't think this is very tropical, because we haven't seen any bread-fruit-trees nor a single pirate; but they used to have them here—I mean pirates. Anyhow, we have custard apples, and they sound tropical, don't they? And we have sapadilloes that look like potatoes, and taste like—well, I think they taste horrid, but most people seem to like them.

"It is real hot here, and I am wearing my last summer's best straw hat and my thinnest linen dresses—you know, those I had last vacation. The thermometer got up to 85 degrees yesterday.

"Do write, and tell me all about yourself and the girls. Has Susie Rand got well enough to go to school yet? And who's head in the algebra class? Mark wants to know how's the skating, and if the boys have built a snow fort yet? Most all the people here are black, and everybody talks Spanish: it is SO funny to hear them.

"Now I must say good-bye, because Mark is calling me to go to the fruit auction. I will tell you about it some other time.

"With love to everybody, I am your own lovingest friend,

"RUTH ELMER.

"P.S.—Don't forget that you are coming down here to see me next winter."

Before Ruth finished this letter Mark began calling to her to hurry up, for the bell had stopped ringing, and the auction would be all over before they got there. She hurriedly directed it, and put it in her pocket to mail on the way to the auction, just as her brother called out that he "did think girls were the very slowest."

They had got nearly to the end of the wharf at which the schooner lay, when Ruth asked Mark if he had any money.

"No," said he, "not a cent. I forgot all about it. Just wait here a minute while I run back and get some from mother."

"Well," said Ruth, "if boys ain't the very carelessest!" But Mark was out of hearing before she finished.

While she waited for him, Ruth looked in at the open door of a very little house,

where several colored women were making beautiful flowers out of tiny shells and glistening fish-scales. She became so much interested in their work that she was almost sorry when Mark came running back, quite out of breath, and gasped, "I've got it! Now let's hurry up!"

Turning to the left from the head of the wharf, they walked quickly through the narrow streets until they came to a square, on one corner of which quite a crowd of people were collected. They were all listening attentively to a little man with a big voice, who stood on a box in front of them and who was saying as fast as he could,

"Forty, forty, forty. Shall I have the five? Yes, sir; thank you. Forty-five, five, five—who says fifty? Fifty, fifty, forty-five—going, going, gone! And sold at forty-five to Mr.—Beg pardon; the name, sir? Of course, certainly! And now comes the finest lot of oranges ever offered for sale in Key West. What am I bid per hundred for them? Who makes me an offer? I am a perfect Job for patience, gentlemen, and willing to wait all day, if necessary, to hear what you have to say."

Of course he was an auctioneer, and this was the regular fruit auction that is held on this same corner every morning of the year. Many other things besides fruit are sold at these auctions; in fact, almost everything in Key West is bought or sold at auction; certainly all fruit is. For an hour before the time set for the auction a man goes through the streets ringing a bell and announcing what is to be sold. This morning he had announced a fine lot of oranges, among other things, and as Mrs. Elmer was anxious to get some, she had sent Mark and Ruth to attend the auction, with a commission to buy a hundred if the bids did not run too high.

The children had already attended several auctions as spectators, and Mark knew enough not to bid on the first lot offered. He waited until somebody who knew more about the value of oranges than he should fix the price. He and Ruth pushed their way as close as possible to the auctioneer, and watched him attentively.

"Come, gentlemen," said the little man, "give me a starter. What am I to have for the first lot of these prime oranges?"

"Two dollars!" called a voice from the crowd.

"Two," cried the auctioneer. "Two, two, two and a half. Who says three? Shall I hear it? And three. Who bids three? That's right. Do I hear the quarter? They are well worth it, gentlemen. Will no one give me the quarter? Well, time is money, and *tempus fugit*. Going at three—at three; going, going, and sold at three dollars."

Several more lots sold so rapidly at three dollars that Mark had no opportunity of making himself heard or of catching the auctioneer's eye, until, finally, in a sort of despair he called out "Quarter," just as another lot was about to be knocked down to a dealer at three dollars.

“Ah!” said the auctioneer, “that is something like. It takes a gentleman from the North to appreciate oranges at their true value. A quarter is bid. Shall I have a half? Do I hear it? Half, half, half; and sold at three dollars and a quarter to Mr.—what name, please? Elder. Oh yes; good old name, and one you can live up to more and more every day of your life. John, pick out a hundred of the best for Mr. Elder.”

The oranges selected by John were such beauties that neither Mark nor his mother regretted the extra quarter paid for them. After that, during the rest of their stay in Key West, whenever Mark went near a fruit auction he was addressed politely by the auctioneer as “Mr. Elder,” and invited to examine the goods offered for sale that day.

One day Mark and Ruth rowed out among the vessels of the sponging fleet that had just come in from up the coast. Here they scraped acquaintance with a weather-beaten old sponger, who sat in the stern of one of the smallest of the boats, smoking a short pipe and overhauling some rigging; and from him they gained much new information concerning sponges.

“We gets them all along the reef as far as Key Biscayne,” said the old sponger; “but the best comes from Rock Island, up the coast nigh to St. Mark’s.”

“Why, that’s where we’re going!” interrupted Ruth.

“Be you, sissy? Wal, you’ll see a plenty raked up there, I reckon. Did you ever hear tell of a water-glass?”

“No,” said Ruth, “I never did.”

“Wal,” said the old man, “here’s one; maybe you’d like to look through it.” And he showed them what looked like a wooden bucket with a glass bottom. “Jest take an’ hold it a leetle ways down into the water and see what you can see.”

Taking the bucket which was held out to her, Ruth did as the old man directed, and uttered an exclamation of delight. “Why, I can see the bottom just as plain as looking through a window.”

“To be sure,” said the old sponger; “an’ that’s the way we sees the sponges lying on the bottom. An’ when we sees ‘em we takes those long-handled rakes there an’ hauls ‘em up to the top. When they fust comes up they’s plumb black, and about the nastiest things you ever did see, I reckon. We throws ‘em into crawls built in shallow water, an’ lets ‘em rot till all the animal matter is dead, an’ we stirs ‘em up an’ beats ‘em with sticks to get it out. Then they has to be washed an’ dried an’ trimmed, an’ handled consider’ble, afore they’s ready for market. Then they’s sold at auction.”

The sponge crawls of which the old man spoke are square pens make of stakes driven into the sand side by side, and as close as possible together. In some of them at Key West Mark and Ruth saw little negro boys diving to bring up stray sponges that the rakes had

missed. They did not seem to enjoy this half as much as Mark and his boy friends used to enjoy diving in the river at Norton, and they shivered as though they were cold, in spite of the heat of the day.

When the children told Mr. Elmer about these little, unhappy-looking divers that night, he said,

“That shows how what some persons regard as play, may become hard and unpleasant work to those who are compelled to do it.”

Several days after this Mr. Elmer engaged a carriage, and took his wife and the children on a long drive over the island. During this drive the most interesting things they saw were old Fort Taylor, which stands just outside the city, and commands the harbor, the abandoned salt-works, about five miles from the city, and the Martello towers, built along the southern coast of the island. These are small but very strong forts, built by the government, but as yet never occupied by soldiers.

In one of them the Elmers were shown a large, jagged hole, broken through the brick floor of one of the upper stories. This, the sergeant in charge told them, had been made by a party of sailors who deserted from a man-of-war lying in the harbor, and hid themselves in this Martello tower. They made it so that through it they could point their muskets and shoot anybody sent to capture them as soon as he entered the lower rooms. They did not have a chance to use it for this purpose, however, for the officer sent after them just camped outside the tower and waited patiently until hunger compelled the runaways to surrender, when he quietly marched them back to the ship.

In all of the forts, as well as in all the houses of Key West, are great cisterns for storing rain-water, for there are no wells on the island, and the only fresh-water to be had is what can be caught and stored during the rainy season.

It was a week after the orange auction that Mr. Elmer came into the cabin of the schooner one afternoon and announced that the court had given its decision, and that they would sail the next day.

This decision of the court gave to the schooner *Nancy Bell* five thousand dollars, and this, “Captain Li” said, must, according to wrecker’s law, be divided among all who were on board the schooner at the time of the wreck. Accordingly, he insisted upon giving Mr. and Mrs. Elmer each two hundred dollars, and Mark, Ruth, and Jan each one hundred dollars. As neither of the children had ever before owned more than five dollars at one time, they now felt wealthy enough to buy the State of Florida, and regarded each other with vastly increased respect. While their father took charge of this money for them, he told them they might invest it as they saw fit, provided he and their mother thought the investment a good one.

At daylight next morning the Nancy Bell again spread her sails, and soon Key West was but a low-lying cloud left far behind. For three days they sailed northward, with light winds, over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. On the evening of the third day a bright light flashed across the waters ahead of them, and "Captain Li" said it was at the mouth of the St. Mark's River. As the tide was low, and no pilot was to be had that night, they had to stand off and on, and wait for daylight before crossing the bar and sailing up the river beyond it.