

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 6: A QUEER CHRISTMAS-DAY

All night long the Nancy Bell sailed back and forth within sight of the light that marked the mouth of the river. Soon after daylight a pilot-boat was seen approaching her in answer to the signal which was flying from the main rigging. As the boat ran alongside, a colored pilot clambered to the deck and declared it did him good to see a big schooner waiting to come into the St. Mark's once more.

"Uster be a plenty of 'em," said he to "Captain Li," "but dey's scurcer'n gole dollars now-adays, an' I'se proud to see 'em comin' ag'in."

By the time breakfast was over and the Elmers came on deck, they found the schooner running rapidly up a broad river, between wide expanses of low salt-marshes, bounded by distant pine forests, and studded here and there with groups of cabbage palms. The channel was a regular zig-zag, and they ran now to one side and then far over to the other to escape the coral reefs and oyster bars with which it is filled. This occupied much time; but the breeze was fresh, and within an hour they had run eight miles up the river, and were passing the ruins of the old Spanish Fort of St. Mark's. A few minutes later sails were lowered, and the schooner was moored to one of the rotten old wharves that still remain to tell of St. Mark's former glory.

"And is this St. Mark's?" asked Mrs. Elmer, looking with a feeling of keen disappointment at the dozen or so tumble-down frame buildings that, perched on piles above the low, wet land, looked like dilapidated old men with shaky legs, and formed all that was to be seen of the town.

"Yes, miss," answered the colored pilot, who seemed to consider her question addressed to him. "Dis yere's St. Mark's, or what de gales has lef' of hit. 'Pears like dey's been mighty hard on de ole town, sence trade fell off, an' mos' of de folkses moved away. Uster be wharves all along yere, an' cotton-presses, an' big war'houses, an' plenty ships in de ribber; but now dey's all gone. Dem times we uster hab fo' trains of kyars a day; but now dere's only one train comes tree times in de week, an' hit's only got one kyar. Ole St. Mark's a-seein' bad times now, for sho."

As soon as he could get ashore, Mr. Elmer, accompanied by Mark and the captain, went up into the village to find out what he could regarding their destination and future movements. In about an hour he returned, bringing a package of letters from the post-office, and the information that Uncle Christopher Bangs's place was at Wakulla, some six

miles farther up the river. As the river above St. Mark's is quite crooked, and bordered on both sides by dense forests, and as no steam-tug could be had, the captain did not care to attempt to carry the schooner any farther up. Mr. Elmer had therefore chartered a large, flat-bottomed lighter, or scow, to carry to Wakulla the cargo of household goods, tools, building material, etc., that they had brought with them.

As "Captain Li" was anxious to proceed on his voyage to Pensacola as quickly as possible, the lighter was at once brought alongside the schooner, and the work of discharging the Elmers' goods into her was begun.

"By-the-way, Mark," said Mr. Elmer, as the schooner's hatches were removed, "I am just reminded that this is Christmas-day, and that there is a present down in the hold for you from your Uncle Christmas. It will be one of the first things taken out, so see if you can recognize it."

He had hardly spoken before the sailors, who had gone down into the hold, passed carefully up to those on deck a beautiful birch- bark canoe, with the name Ruth painted on its bows.

"That's it, Father! That's it! I'm sure it is. Oh! Isn't she a beauty?" shouted Mark, wild with delight. "Oh! Father, how did he know just exactly what I wanted most?" and the excited boy rushed down into the cabin to beg his mother and Ruth to come on deck and see his Christmas present.

The canoe was followed by two paddles painted a bright vermilion, and as they were placed in her, and she was laid to one side of the deck, she was indeed as pretty a little craft as can be imagined, and one that would delight any boy's heart.

"I knew we were going to live near a river, my dear," said Mr. Elmer, in answer to his wife's anxious expression as she looked at the canoe, "and as Mark is a good swimmer and very careful in boats, I thought a canoe would afford him great pleasure, and probably prove very useful to all of us. So when Uncle Christopher asked me what I thought the boy would like most for a Christmas present, I told him a canoe."

"Well, I hope it will prove safe," sighed Mrs. Elmer; "but I wish it were flat-bottomed, and built of thick boards instead of that thin bark."

"Oh, Mother!" said Mark, "you might as well wish it were a canal- boat at once."

"Yes, I believe canal-boats are generally considered safer than canoes," answered his mother with a smile. "By-the-way, Mark"—and she turned to her husband—"one of the letters you brought was from Uncle Christopher, and he says he thinks he forgot to tell us that there is a house on his place, which he hopes we will find in a fit condition to occupy."

Mr. Elmer had expected to have to build a house, and had accordingly brought with him sashes, doors, blinds, the necessary hardware, and in fact everything except lumber for

that purpose. This material was now being transferred from the schooner to the lighter, and now it seemed almost a pity to have brought it; still they were very glad to learn that they were likely to find a house all ready to move into.

It wanted but two hours of sundown when the last of the Elmers' goods were stowed in the lighter, and as there was nothing to detain him any longer, "Captain Li" said he should take advantage of the ebb tide that night to drop down the river and get started for Pensacola. As rowing and poling the heavy lighter up the river would at best prove but slow work, and as there was no hotel or place for them to stay in St. Mark's, Mr. Elmer thought they too had better make a start, and take advantage of the last of the flood tide and what daylight still remained.

So good-byes were exchanged, and feeling very much as though they were leaving home for the second time, the Elmers left the comfortable cabin that had sheltered them for nearly a month. Followed by Jan, they went on board their new craft, and the lines were cast off. The crew of four strong colored men bent over the long sweeps, and followed by a hearty cheer from the crew of the schooner, the scow moved slowly up the river. In a few minutes a bend hid St. Mark's and the tall masts of the Nancy Bell from sight, and on either side of them appeared nothing but unbroken forest.

The river seemed narrow and dark after the open sea to which the Elmers had been so long accustomed, and from its banks the dense growth of oak, cedar, magnolia, palm, bay, cypress, elm, and sweet gum trees, festooned with moss, and bound together with a net-work of vines, rose like walls, shutting out the sunlight. Strange water-fowl, long-legged and long-billed, flew screaming away as they advanced, and quick splashes in the water ahead of them told of the presence of other animal life.

At sunset they were nearly two miles from St. Mark's, and opposite a cleared spot on the bank, where was piled a quantity of light-wood or pitch-pine. Here the captain and owner of the lighter, who was a young white man named Oliver Johnson, proposed that they should tie up for the night.

To this Mr. Elmer consented, and as soon as the boat was made fast to the bank, active preparations were begun for cooking supper, and for making everything as snug and comfortable as possible.

A large sail was stretched across some poles, in the form of a tent, over the after-part of the lighter, and beneath this two comfortable beds were made up from the abundant supply of mattresses and blankets belonging to the Elmers. Jan Jansen and Captain Johnson, who, Mark said, must be related, as their names were the same, spread their blankets in the forward end of the boat. On shore the negro crew built for themselves a thatched lean-to of poles and palm-leaves beside the fire, that was already throwing its

cheerful light across the dark surface of the river.

While the men were busy arranging the shelters and bedding, Mrs. Elmer and Ruth, assisted by one of the negroes, were cooking supper over a bed of coals that had been raked from the fire. A huge pot of coffee sent forth clouds of fragrant steam, and in two frying-pans some freshly caught fish sizzled and browned in a most gratifying and appetizing manner. In a couple of kettles hung over the fire hominy and sweet potatoes bubbled, boiled, and tried to outdo each other in getting done. Fresh-made bread and a good supply of butter had been brought from the schooner. When the supper was all ready, and spread out on a green table-cloth of palm-leaves, Mark and Ruth declared that this picnic was even jollier than the one on the island of the Florida Reef, and that this was after all one of the very best Christmases they had ever known.

After supper, and when the dishes had all been washed and put away, the Elmers, Captain Johnson, and Jan sought the shelter of the canvas awning from the heavy night-dew which had begun to fall as soon as the sun went down. They lifted the sides, so that they could look out and see the fire around which the crew were gathered. After a while one of these started a plaintive negro melody, which sounded very sweetly through the still air. The others took it up, and they sang for an hour or more, greatly to the delight of the children, to whom such music was new. Many of the words were composed as they sang, and Mark and Ruth could not help laughing at some of them, which, though sung very soberly, sounded funny. One song which they afterwards remembered was:

“Oh, dey put John on de islan’
When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, dey put John on de islan’
When de Bridegroom come;
An’ de rabens come an’ fed him
When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, de rabens come an’ fed him
When de Bridegroom come.
An’ five of dem was wise
When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, five of dem was wise
When de Bridegroom come;
An’ five of dem was foolish
When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, five of dem was foolish

When de Bridegroom come.
Oh, gib us of yo' ile
When de Bridegroom come;
Oh, gib us of yo' ile
When de Bridegroom come;
Fo' you'll nebber get to heaben
When de Bridegroom come;
No, you'll nebber get to heaben
When de Bridegroom come;
Aless you's ile a-plenty
When de Bridegroom come;
Aless you's ile a-plenty
When de Bridegroom come."

In the midst of the singing a voice called out from the treetops,
"Who, who, who, who's there?" or at least so it sounded.
Immediately the singing stopped, and one of the negroes answered,
"Some folkses from de Norf, Marse Owl, an' Cap'n Johnsin, an' me, an' Homer, an' Virgil, an' Pete."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Mr. Elmer of the captain.

"Oh," answered he, "it's one of their superstitions that they'll have bad luck if they don't answer an owl politely when he asks 'Who's there?' and give the names of all the party, if they know them."

Soon after this all hands sought their blankets, good-nights were said, the fire died down, and all was quiet in the camp, though several times some sleepy negro roused himself sufficiently to answer the owl's repeated question of "Who's there?"

It must have been nearly midnight when the camp was startled by a crash, a series of smothered cries, and a loud splashing in the water. It was evident that something serious had happened, but what it was no one could make out in the darkness.