

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 7: ARRIVAL AT THE NEW HOME

Some light-wood splinters were quickly thrown upon the smouldering remains of the fire, and as it blazed up brightly, the lighter, in which the whites had been sleeping, was seen to be on its beam ends. One side rested high up on the bank and the other down in the mud at the bottom of the river, just on the edge of the channel. Some little distance down stream a sorry-looking figure, which was hardly recognizable as that of Jan, was floundering through the mud and water towards the bank. On the lower side of the lighter the canvas, that had been spread like a tent over the afterpart, had broken from its fastenings, and was now tossing and heaving in a most remarkable manner. From beneath it came the smothered cries of the Elmers, who had been suddenly wakened to find themselves mixed together in the most perplexing way, and entangled in their blankets and the loose folds of the canvas.

Captain Johnson seemed to be the only person who had his wits about him, and who was in a condition to render any assistance. As soon as he could pick himself up he made his way to the other end of the boat and dragged the canvas from off the struggling family. First Mr. Elmer emerged from the confusion, then Mrs. Elmer and Ruth were helped out, and last of all poor Mark, who had been buried beneath the entire family, was dragged forth, nearly smothered and highly indignant.

“It’s a mean trick, and I didn’t think—” he began, as soon as he got his breath; but just then his eye fell upon the comical figure of Jan. He was walking towards the fire, dripping mud and water from every point, and Mark’s wrath was turned into hearty laughter at this sight. In it he was joined by all the others as soon as they saw the cause of his mirth.

After the Elmers had been helped up the steep incline of the boat, and were comfortably fixed near the fire, Captain Johnson and Jan, who said he didn’t mind mud now any more than an alligator, took light-wood torches and set out to discover what had happened. As Jan climbed down the bank into the mud, and held his torch beneath the boat, he saw in a moment the cause of the accident, and knew just how it had occurred.

As the tide ebbed the lighter had been gradually lowered, until it rested on the upright branches of an old water-logged tree-top that was sunk in the mud at this place. The water falling lower and lower, the weight upon these branches became greater and greater, until they could support it no longer, and one side of the lighter went down with a crash, while

the other rested against the bank. Jan, who had been sleeping on the upper side of the boat, was thrown out into the water when it fell, as some of the Elmers doubtless would have been had not their canvas shelter prevented such a catastrophe.

The rest of the night was spent around the fire, which was kept up to enable Jan to dry his clothes. By daylight the tide had risen, so that the lighter again floated on an even keel. By sunrise a simple breakfast of bread-and-butter and coffee had been eaten, and our emigrants were once more afloat and moving slowly up the tropical-looking river.

About ten o'clock Captain Johnson pointed to a huge dead cypress- tree standing on the bank of the river some distance ahead, and told the Elmers that it marked one of the boundary-lines of Wakulla. They gazed at it eagerly, as though expecting it to turn into something different from an ordinary cypress, and all felt more or less disappointed at not seeing any clearings or signs of human habitations. It was not until they were directly opposite the village that they saw its score or so of houses through the trees and undergrowth that fringed the bank.

As the Bangs place, to which the children gave the name of "Go Bang"—a name that adhered to it ever afterwards—was across the river from the village, the lighter was poled over to that side. There was no wharf, so she was made fast to a little grassy promontory that Captain Johnson said was once one of the abutments of a bridge. There was no bridge now, however, and already Mark saw that his canoe was likely to prove very useful.

The first thing to do after getting ashore and seeing the precious canoe safely landed was to find the house. As yet they had seen no trace of it, so heavy was the growth of trees everywhere, except at the abutment, which was built of stone, covered with earth and a thick sod. From here an old road led away from the river through the woods, and up it Mr. and Mrs. Elmer and Captain Johnson now walked, Mark and Ruth having run on ahead. The elders had gone but a few steps when they heard a loud cry from Ruth, and hurried forward fearing that the children were in trouble. They met Ruth running back towards them, screaming, "A snake! A snake! A horrid big snake!"

"I've got him!" shouted Mark from behind some bushes, and sure enough there lay a black snake almost as long as Mark was tall, which he had just succeeded in killing with a stick.

Mrs. Elmer shuddered at the sight of the snake, though her husband assured her that it had been perfectly harmless even when alive.

Not far from where the snake had been killed they found a spring of water bubbling up, as clear as crystal, from a bed of white sand, but giving forth such a disagreeable odor that the children declared it was nasty. Mr. Elmer, however, regarded it with great satisfaction, and told them it was a sulphur spring, stronger than any he had ever seen, and

that they would find it very valuable. They all drank some of the water out of magnolia-leaf cups; but the children made faces at the taste, and Mark said it made him feel like a hard-boiled egg.

A path leading from the spring at right angles to the road from the river took them into a large clearing that had once been a cultivated field, and on the farther side of this field stood the house. As they approached it they saw that it was quite large, two stories in height, with dormer windows in the roof, but that it bore many signs of age and long neglect. Some of the windows were broken and others boarded up, while the front door hung disconsolately on one hinge.

The house stood in a grove of grand live-oaks, cedars, and magnolias, and had evidently been surrounded by a beautiful garden, enclosed by a neat picket-fence; but now the fence was broken down in many places, and almost hidden by a dense growth of vines and creepers. In the garden, rose-bushes, myrtles, oleanders, and camellias grew with a rank and untrained luxuriance, and all were matted together with vines of honeysuckle and clematis.

The front porch of the house was so rotten and broken that, after forcing their way through the wild growth of the garden, the party had to cross it very carefully in order to enter the open door. The interior proved to be in a much better condition than they had dared hope, judging from the outside appearance of the house. It was filled with the close, musty odor common to deserted buildings, and they quickly threw wide open all the windows and doors that were not nailed up. On the first floor were four large rooms, each containing a fireplace and several closets, and up-stairs were four more, lighted by the dormer windows in the roof. A broad hall ran through the house from front to rear, opening upon a wide back porch which was also much out of repair. Beneath this porch Mr. Elmer discovered a brick cistern half full of dirty water, which he knew must be very foul, as the gutters along the roof were so rotten and broken that they could not have furnished a fresh supply in a long time.

Behind the main house, and surrounded by large fig-trees, they found another building, in a fair state of preservation, containing two rooms, one of which had been the kitchen. In the huge fireplace of this kitchen they were surprised to see freshly burned sticks and a quantity of ashes, while about the floor were scattered feathers and bones, and in one corner was a pile of moss that looked as though it has been used for a bed. Beyond the kitchen were the ruins of several out-buildings that had fallen by reason of their age, or been blown down during a gale.

Having thus made a hasty exploration of their new home, the party returned to the landing, to which their goods were being unloaded from the lighter by Jan and the crew.

Leaving Mrs. Elmer and Ruth here, Mr. Elmer and Mark crossed the river to the village to see what they could procure in the way of teams and help.

Of the twenty houses in the village, many of which were in a most dilapidated condition, only two were occupied by white families, the rest of the population being colored. There were no stores nor shops of any kind, the only building not used as a dwelling-house being a small church very much out of repair. The white men living in the village were away from home, but from among the colored people, who were much excited at the arrival of strangers in their midst, Mr. Elmer engaged two men and their wives to cross the river and go to work at once. He also engaged a man who owned a team of mules and a wagon, and who would go over as soon as the lighter was unloaded and could be used to ferry him across.

On its return to the other side, the canoe was followed by a skiff containing the newly engaged colored help, whose amazement at everything they saw, and especially at the canoe, was unbounded. One of the men expressed his wonder at the little craft by saying, "Dat ar trick's so light, I reckon it's gwine leab de water some fine day, an' fly in de yair, like a duck."

Mrs. Elmer provided the women with brooms, mops, and pails, and took them up to the house, where they proceeded to put the lower story in order for immediate occupation. Mr. Elmer armed the men with axes, and soon had them engaged in a struggle with the tangled growth in the front yard, through which they cut a broad path to the house. While they were doing this, Mr. Elmer and Jan cut and placed in position some temporary supports under the rickety porches, and Mark was set work at the windows. From these he knocked away all the boards, letting in floods of blessed sunlight, that drove from their snug retreats numbers of bats and several comical little owls.

One of the colored women—"Aunt Chloe Cato," as she called herself, because she was Cato's wife—was sent into the kitchen to clean it and to make a fire in the great fireplace. She could not explain the traces of recent occupation, but "lowed 'twere de ghoses, kase dis yere ole Bang place done bin hanted."

"Well, it'll be 'hanted' now by the Elmer family," said Mark, who overheard her, "and they'll make it lively for any other 'ghoses' that come round."

"Don't ye, now, honey I don't ye go fo' to set up yo'sef agin de ghoses, kase dey's powerful pernicky when dey's crassed," said the old woman, whom Mark, with his love for nick-names, had already called "Ole Clo."

At noon all hands stopped work to eat a hasty lunch, and soon afterwards the lighter, being unloaded, was poled across the river for the team. With the help of Captain Johnson and his crew, who had agreed to remain over that night, most of the household goods

were moved up to the house during the afternoon and placed under shelter.

While this work was going on, one of the white men from the village came over to see his new neighbors. He brought with him a wild-turkey, half a dozen ducks, and a string of freshly caught fish, as cards of introduction. His name was Bevil, and he welcomed the Elmers most heartily, and said that he considered their coming a sign of better times for that section of the country. He told Mr. Elmer that the Bangs place used to be considered one of the finest plantations in the county, and that its lands were as rich now as ever.

Before night the lower story of the old house looked quite comfortable, and almost homelike; and when the family sat down to dinner, it was with the keen appetites resulting from hard work. The dinner was a bountiful meal, largely composed of Mr. Bevil's game and fish; and before they ate it Mr. Elmer offered up a heart-felt thanksgiving for the mercies that had been granted them thus far, and prayed for a blessing on their new home.

That evening he arranged with Captain Johnson to start at daylight and go with his lighter to the nearest saw-mill, sixty miles away, for a load of lumber and shingles. He also commissioned him to buy and bring back a large skiff, such as were used on the river.

The tired household went early to bed that first night in their new home, and though their beds were made down on the floor, they all slept soundly.

All but Mark, who, after sleeping for some hours, woke suddenly to find himself sitting bolt-upright in bed, and staring at the broken window in front of him, through which a flood of moonlight was pouring. He was as certain as he could be of anything that he had seen a face at that window as he started up—a wild, haggard face, framed by long unkempt hair. He sprang from his bed and looked out, but could see nobody, and heard no unusual sound except the distant “who-who-who” of an owl.