

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



CHAPTER 9: MARK DISCOVERS THE GHOST AND FINDS HIM IN A TRYING POSITION

Mark dashed through the bushes for a hundred yards, heedless of the clinging thorns of the rattan vine that tore his clothes, and scratched his face and hands until they bled, before reaching the scene of what sounded like a terrible struggle. The screams for help told him that at least one of the contestants was a human being in sore distress, and in thus rushing to his assistance Mark did not give a moment's thought to his own safety. As he burst from the bushes he found himself in a little open glade on the opposite side of the point from that on which he had landed. Here he came upon a struggle for life such as rarely takes place even in the wilder regions of the South, and such as but few persons have ever witnessed.

On the farther side of the glade, clinging with the strength of despair to the trunk of a young magnolia-tree, lay a boy of about Mark's own age. His arms were nearly torn from their sockets by some terrible strain, and his eyes seemed starting from his head with horror. As he saw Mark he screamed, "Fire! Fire quick! His eyes! I'm letting go."

Looking along the boy's body Mark saw a pair of great jaws closed firmly upon his right foot, though the rest of the animal, whatever it was, was hidden in a thicket of bushes which were violently agitated. He could see the protruding eyes; and, springing across the opening, he placed the muzzle of the rifle close against one of them, and fired.

The horrid head was lifted high in the air with a bellow of rage and pain. As it fell it disappeared in the bushes, which were beaten down by the animal's death struggle, and then all was still.

Upon firing, Mark had quickly thrown another cartridge from the magazine into the chamber of his rifle, and held it in readiness for another shot. He waited a moment after the struggles ceased, and finding that no further attack was made, turned his attention to the boy, who lay motionless and as though dead at his feet. His eyes were closed, and Mark knew that he had fainted, though he had never seen a person in that condition before.

His first impulse was to try and restore the boy to consciousness; but his second, and the one upon which he acted, was to assure himself that the animal he had shot was really dead, and incapable of making another attack. Holding his rifle in one hand, and cautiously parting the bushes with the other, he peered, with a loudly beating heart, into the thicket. There, stretched out stiff and motionless, he saw the body of a huge alligator. It was dead— dead as a mummy; there was no doubt of that; and without waiting to

examine it further, Mark laid down his rifle and went to the river for water.

He brought three hatfuls, and dashed them, one after another, in the boy's face before the latter showed any signs of consciousness. Then the closed eyes were slowly opened, and fixed for an instant upon Mark, with the same look of horror that he had first seen in them, and the boy tried to rise to his feet, but fell back with a moan of pain.

Mark had already seen that the boy's right foot was terribly mangled and covered with blood, and he went quickly for more water with which to bathe it. After he had washed off the blood, and bound the wounded foot as well as he could with his handkerchief and one of his shirt sleeves torn into strips, he found that the boy had again opened his eyes, and seemed to have fully recovered his consciousness.

"Do you feel better?" asked Mark.

"Yes," answered the boy. "I can sit up now if you will help me."

Mark helped him into a sitting position, with his back against the tree to which he had clung when the alligator tried to drag him into the water. Then he said,

"Now wait here a minute while I bring round the canoe. I'll get you into it, and take you home, for your foot must be properly attended to as soon as possible."

Hurrying back to where he had left the canoe, Mark brought it around the point, very close to where the boy was sitting, and pulled one end of it up on the bank. Then going to the boy, he said,

"If you can stand up, and will put both arms around my neck, I'll carry you to the canoe; it's only a few steps."

Although he almost cried out with the pain caused by the effort, the boy succeeded in doing as Mark directed, and in a few minutes more was seated in the bottom of the canoe, with his wounded foot resting on Mark's folded jacket.

Carefully shoving off, and stepping gently into the other end of the canoe, Mark began to paddle swiftly up the river. The boy sat with closed eyes, and though Mark wanted to ask him how it had all happened, he waited patiently, fearing that his companion was too weak to talk. He noticed that the boy was barefooted and bareheaded, that his clothes were very old and ragged, and that he had a bag and a powder-horn slung over his shoulders. He also noticed that his hair was long and matted, and that his face, in spite of its present paleness, was tanned, as though by long exposure to the weather. It had a strangely familiar look to him, and it seemed as though he must have seen that boy somewhere before, but where he could not think.

Just before they reached the "Go Bang" landing-place the boy opened his eyes, and Mark, no longer able to restrain his curiosity, asked,

"How did the alligator happen to catch you?"

“I was asleep,” answered the boy, “and woke up just in time to catch hold of that tree as he grabbed my foot and began pulling me to the water. He would have had me in another minute, for I was letting go when you came;” and the boy shuddered at the remembrance.

“Well,” said Mark, a little boastfully, “he won’t catch anybody else. He’s as dead as a door-nail now. Here we are.”

Jan and Captain Johnson were at the landing, and they listened with astonishment to Mark’s hurried explanation of what had happened. The captain said they would carry the boy to the house, while Mark ran on and told his mother who was coming, so that she could prepare to receive him.

Mrs. Elmer was much shocked at Mark’s story, and said she was very thankful that he had not only been the means of saving a human life, but had escaped unharmed himself. At the same time she made ready to receive the boy, and when the men brought him in she had a bed prepared for him, warm water and castile soap ready to bathe the wounds, and soft linen to bandage them.

Captain Johnson, who called himself “a rough and ready surgeon,” carefully felt of the wounded foot to ascertain whether or not any bones were broken. The boy bore this patiently and without a murmur, though one or two gasps of pain escaped him. When the captain said that, though he could not feel any fractured bones, the ankle-joint was dislocated, and must be pulled back into place at once, he clinched his teeth, drew in a long breath, and nodded his head. Taking a firm hold above and below the dislocated joint, the captain gave a quick twist with his powerful hands that drew from the boy a sharp cry of pain.

“There,” said the captain, soothingly, “it’s all over; now we will bathe it and bandage it, and in a few days you will be as good as you were before you met Mr. ‘Gator. If not better,” he added, as he took note of the boy’s wretched clothes and general appearance.

After seeing the patient made as comfortable as possible, Mark and the two men went out, leaving him to the gentle care of Mrs. Elmer and Ruth.

“Mark,” said Captain Johnson, “let’s take the skiff and go and get that alligator. I guess Miss Ruth would like to see him. One of my men can go along to help us, or Jan, if he will.”

“All right,” said Mark, and Jan said he would go if it wouldn’t take too long.

“We’ll be back in less than an hour,” said the captain, “if it’s only a mile away, as Mark says.”

So they went, and it took the united strength of the three to get the alligator into the skiff when they found him. He measured ten feet and four inches in length, and Captain

Johnson, who claimed to be an authority concerning alligators, said that was very large for fresh-water, though in tide-water they were sometimes found fifteen feet in length, and he had heard of several that were even longer.

While Mark was showing them just where the boy lay when he first saw him, Jan picked up an old muzzle-loading shot-gun and a pair of much-worn boots, that had heretofore escaped their notice. Both barrels of the gun were loaded, but one only contained a charge of powder, which surprised them.

“What do you suppose he was going to do with only a charge of powder?” asked Mark, when this discovery was made.

“I’ve no idea,” answered the captain; “perhaps he forgot the shot, or hadn’t any left.”

When they reached home with the big alligator, the whole household came out to look at it, and Mrs. Elmer and Ruth shuddered when they saw the monster that had so nearly dragged the boy into the river.

“Oh, Mark!” exclaimed Ruth, “just think if you hadn’t come along just then.”

“How merciful that your father thought of taking the rifle!” said Mrs. Elmer. “I don’t suppose we could keep it for Mr. Elmer to see, could we?” she asked of Captain Johnson.

“Oh no, ma’am, not in this warm weather,” answered the captain; “but we can cut off the head and bury it, and in two or three weeks you will have a nice skull to keep as a memento.”

“And what will you do with the body?”

“Why, throw it into the river, I suppose,” answered the captain.

“Wouldn’t it be better to bury it too?”

“Hi! Miss Elmer; yo’ sho’ly wouldn’t tink of doin’ dat ar?” exclaimed Aunt Chloe, who had by this time become a fixture in the Elmer household, and had come out with the rest to see the alligator.

“Why not, Chloe?” asked Mrs. Elmer, in surprise.

“Kase ef you’s putten um in de groun’, how’s Marse Tukky Buzzard gwine git um? Can’t nebber hab no luck ef you cheat Marse Tukky Buzzard dat ar way.”

“That’s another of the colored folks’ superstitions,” said Captain Johnson. “They believe that if you bury any dead animal so that the turkey buzzards can’t get at it, they’ll bring you bad luck.”

“‘Taint no ‘stition, nuther. Hit’s a pop sho’ fac’, dat’s what!” muttered Aunt Chloe, angrily, as she walked off towards the house.

So the head of the alligator was cut off and buried, and the body disappeared, though whether it was buried or served to make a meal for the buzzards no one seemed exactly to know.

That afternoon Captain Johnson went off down the river with his lighter, saying that he could always be found at St. Mark's when wanted, and Mark and Jan went into the woods to look for cedar fence-posts.

After the day's work was finished, and the family were gathered in the sitting-room for the evening, Mark had a long and earnest conversation with his mother and Ruth. At its close Mrs. Elmer said, "Well, my son, wait until we hear what your father thinks of it;" and Ruth said, "I think it's a perfectly splendid plan."

Mark slept in the room with the wounded boy, whose name they had learned to be Frank March, that night, and was roused several times before morning to give him water, for he was very feverish. He talked in his sleep too, as though he were having troubled dreams, and once Mark heard him say,

"Fire quick! No, it's only powder; it won't hurt him. I didn't kill the dog."