

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 10: A Runaway's Story and Its Happy Ending

During the three days that passed before Mr. Elmer's return, the large field was made ready for ploughing, most of the post-holes were dug, the soil being so light as to make that an easy matter, and Mark and Jan had cut a number of cedar posts, and got them ready to be rafted down the river.

During this time, also, Frank March had improved so rapidly that he was able to sit up and take an interest in what was going on. He had become much attached to Mrs. Elmer, and seemed very happy in her company. Neither she nor the children had asked him any questions concerning his past life, preferring to wait until he should tell the story of his own accord.

On the third evening of his being with them he was helped into the sitting-room, and lay on the sofa listening intently to Mrs. Elmer as she read to Mark and Ruth a chapter from a book of travels that they had begun on the schooner. As she finished and closed the book, the boy raised himself on his elbow, and said,

"Mrs. Elmer, I want to tell you something, and I want Mark and Ruth to hear too."

"Well, my boy," said Mrs. Elmer, kindly, "we shall be glad to hear whatever you have to tell, if it won't tire and excite you too much."

"No, I don't think it will," replied Frank. "I feel as if I must tell you what a bad boy I have been, and how sorry I am for it. More than a month ago I stole father's gun and dog, and twenty dollars that I found in his desk, and ran away from him. Ever since then I have been living in the woods around here, hunting and fishing. When the weather was bad I slept in the kitchen of this house, and when you folks moved in, it seemed almost as if you were taking possession of what belonged to me. The first night you were here I crept into the kitchen and stole a loaf of bread and a duck."

"There!" interrupted Mark, "now I know where I saw you before. It was you who looked into the window and frightened me that first night, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Frank; "and I meant to scare you worse than that, and should have if the alligator hadn't caught me. I saw you and your father go down the river that morning, and

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heard him say he was going to Tallahassee, and I waited then for you to come back alone. I drew out the shot from one barrel of my gun, and was going to fire a charge of powder at you when you got close to the point. I thought perhaps you would be so scared that you would upset your canoe and lose your rifle overboard. Then I thought I might get it after you had gone, for the water is shallow there, and I wanted a rifle awfully.”

“Oh! what a bad boy you are,” said Ruth, shaking her pretty head. “Yes, I know I am,” said Frank, “but I ain’t going to be any longer if I can help it.”

“How did that alligator get you, anyway?” asked Mark, who was very curious upon this point.

“Why, I pulled off my boots because they were wet and hurt my feet; then I lay down to wait for you, and went to sleep. I suppose the ‘gator found it warm enough that day to come out of the mud, where he had been asleep all winter. Of course he felt hungry after such a long nap, and when he saw my bare foot thought it would make him a nice meal. I was waked by feeling myself dragged along the ground, and finding my foot in what felt like a vise. I caught hold of a tree, and held on until it seemed as though my arms would be pulled out. I yelled as loud as I could all the time, while the ‘gator pulled. He twisted my foot until I thought the bones must be broken, and that I must let go. Then you came, Mark, and that’s all I remember until I was in the canoe, and you were paddling up the river.”

“Was that the first time you were ever in that canoe?” asked Mark, a new suspicion dawning in his mind.

“No; I had used her ‘most every night, and one night I went as far as St. Mark’s in her.”

“What made you bring the canoe back at all?” asked Mrs. Elmer.

“‘Cause everybody round here would have known her, and known that I had stole her if they’d seen me in her,” answered the boy.

“And did you shoot poor Bruce?” asked Ruth.

“Who’s Bruce?”

“Why, our dog. He came to us more than a week ago, shot so bad that he could hardly walk.”

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“Yes, I shot him because he wouldn't go into the water and fetch out a duck I had wounded; but his name is Jack. I didn't kill him though, for I saw him on your back porch last Sunday when you were all over the river, and he barked at me.”

“My poor boy,” said Mrs. Elmer, “you have certainly done very wrong; but you have been severely punished for it, and if you are truly sorry and mean to try and do right in the future, you will as certainly be forgiven.” So saying, the kind-hearted woman went over and sat down beside the boy, and took his hand in hers.

At this caress, the first he could ever remember to have received, the boy burst into tears, and sobbed out,

“I would have been good if I had a mother like you and a pleasant home like this.”

Mrs. Elmer soothed and quieted him, and gradually drew from him the rest of his story. His father had once been comfortably well off, and had owned a large mill in Savannah; but during the war the mill had been burned, and he had lost everything. For some years after that he was very poor, and when Frank was quite a small boy, and his sister a baby, his father used to drink, and when he came home drunk would beat him and his mother. One night, after a terrible scene of this kind, which Frank could just remember, his mother had snatched up the baby and run from the house. Afterwards he was told that they were dead; at any rate he never saw them again. Then his father left Savannah and came to Florida to live. He never drank any more, but was very cross, and hardly ever spoke to his son. He made a living by doing jobs of carpentering; and, ever since he had been old enough, Frank had worked on their little farm, about twenty miles from Wakulla. At last he became so tired of this sort of life, and his father's harshness, that he determined to run away and try to find a happier one.

Mark and Ruth listened in silence to this story of an unhappy childhood, and when it was ended, Ruth went over to the sofa where her mother still sat, and taking Frank's other hand in hers, said,

“I guess I would have run away too, if I'd had such an unpleasant home; but you'll stay with us now, and let mother teach you to be good, won't you?”

For answer the boy looked up shyly into Mrs. Elmer's face, and she said, “We'll see when father comes home.”

At this moment Bruce began to bark loudly, and directly a sound of wheels was

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heard. Then a voice called out,

“Halloo! Go Bang, ahoy! Bring out a lantern, somebody.”

“It’s father! it’s father!” exclaimed Mark and Ruth, rushing to the door with shouts of welcome. Mrs. Elmer followed them, leaving Frank alone in the sitting-room.

“How glad they are to see him,” thought the boy. “I wonder if I should be as glad to see my father if he was as good to me as theirs is to them?”

While Frank’s mind was full of such thoughts, he heard a quick step at the door, and looking up, saw the very person he had been thinking of—his own father!

“Frank, my boy!” exclaimed Mr. March, “can it be you? Oh, Frank, I didn’t know how much I loved you until I lost you, and I have tried in every way to find you and beg you to come home again.” With these words Mr. March stooped down and kissed his son’s forehead, saying, “I haven’t kissed you since you were a baby, Frank, and I do it now as a sign that from this time forward I will try to be a good and loving father to you.”

“Oh, father,” cried the happy boy, “do you really love me? Then if you will forgive me for running away and being such a wicked boy, I will never, never do so again.”

“Indeed I will,” answered his father. “But what is the matter, Frank? Have you been ill? How came you here?”

While Frank was giving his father a brief account of what had happened to him since he ran away from home, the Elmers were exchanging the most important bits of news outside the front gate. They waited there while Mr. Elmer and Jan unhitched from a new farm-wagon a pair of fine mules that the former had bought and driven down from Tallahassee that day.

When the children ran out to greet their father, one of the first things Ruth said was, “Oh, we’ve got a new boy, father, and he’s in the sitting-room, and his name’s Frank March, and an alligator almost dragged him into the river, and Mark shot it.”

Almost without waiting to hear the end of this long sentence, a stranger who had come with Mr. Elmer opened the front gate, and quickly walking to the house, disappeared within it.

“Who is that, husband, and what has he gone into the house for?” asked Mrs. Elmer, in surprise.

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"I don't know much about him," answered Mr. Elmer, "except that his name is March; and as he was recommended to me as being a good carpenter, I engaged him to come and do what work was necessary to repair this house."

"I wonder if he is Frank's wicked father?" said Ruth; and then the whole story had to be told to Mr. Elmer before they went into the house.

When he heard of Mark's bravery, he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "My son, I am proud of you."

As they went in and entered the sitting-room, they found Mr. March and Frank sitting together on the sofa, talking earnestly.

"I hope you will excuse my leaving you and entering your house so unceremoniously, Mr. Elmer," said Mr. March, rising and bowing to Mrs. Elmer; "but when your little girl said a boy named Frank March was in here I felt sure he was my son. It is he; and now that I have found him, I don't ever intend to lose him again."

"That's right," said Mr. Elmer, heartily. "In this country boys are too valuable to be lost, even if they do turn up again like bad pennies. Master Frank, you must hurry and get well, for in his work here your father will need just such a valuable assistant as I am sure you will make."

"Now, wife, how about something to eat? I am almost hungry enough to eat an alligator, and I expect our friend March would be willing to help me."

Aunt Chloe had been busy ever since the travelers arrived, and supper was as ready for them as they were for it. After supper, when they were once more gathered in the sitting-room, Mr. Elmer said, "I got a charter granted me while I was in Tallahassee—can any of you guess for what?"

None of them could guess, unless, as Mark suggested, it was for incorporating "Go Bang," and making a city of it in opposition to Wakulla.

"It is to establish and maintain a ferry between those portions of the town of Wakulla lying on opposite sides of the St. Mark's River," said Mr. Elmer.

"A FERRY?" said Mrs. Elmer.

"A FERRY?" said Ruth.

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“A ferry?” said Mark; “what sort of a ferry steam-power, horse-power, or boy-power?”

“I expect it will be mostly boy-power,” said Mr. Elmer, laughing. “You see I kept thinking of what Mr. Bevil told us last Sunday, that what Wakulla needed most was a bridge and a mill. I knew we couldn't build a bridge, at least not at present; but the idea of a ferry seemed practicable. We have got enough lumber to build a large flat-boat, there are enough of us to attend to a ferry, and so I thought I'd get a charter, anyhow.”

Mark could hardly wait for his father to finish before he broke in with,

“Speaking of mills, father, your ferry will be the very thing to bring people over to our mill.”

“Our mill!” repeated his father. “What do you mean?”

“Why, Jan and I discovered an old mill about half a mile up the river, while we were out looking for cedar. It's out of repair, and the dam is partly broken away; but the machinery in it seems to be pretty good, and the wheel's all right. I don't believe it would take very much money to fix the dam; and the stream that supplies the mill-pond is never-failing, because it comes from a big sulphur spring. We found the man who owns it, and had a long talk with him. He says that business fell off so after the bridge was carried away that when his dam broke he didn't think it would pay to rebuild it. He says he will take five hundred dollars cash for the whole concern; and I want to put in my hundred dollars salvage money, and Ruth'll put in hers, and Jan'll put in his, and mother says she'll put in hers if you think the scheme is a good one, and we'll buy the mill. Now, your ferry can bring the people over; and it's just the biggest investment in all Florida. Don't you think so, father?”

“I'll tell you what I think after I have examined into it,” said Mr. Elmer, smiling at Mark's enthusiasm. “Now it's very late, and time we all invested in bed.”

That night Mark dreamed of ferry-boats run by alligator-power, of mills that ground out gold dollars, and of “ghoses” that turned out to be boys.