

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 13: Fighting a Forest Fire

Although the day of the picnic was warm and pleasant, a strong breeze from the southward had been blowing since early morning, and during the afternoon it increased to a high wind. As the Elmers rode home after the last of the happy picnickers had departed, they noticed a heavy cloud of smoke in the southern sky, and Mr. Elmer asked Mr. March what he thought it was.

“It looks as though some of the settlers down there were burning grass, though they ought to know better than to start fires on a day like this,” answered Mr. March.

“But what do they do it for?” asked Mr. Elmer.

“So as to burn off the old dead grass, and give their cattle a chance to get at that which immediately springs up wherever the fire has passed. But the practice ought to be stopped by law, for more timber and fences, and sometimes houses, are destroyed every year than all the cattle in the country are worth.”

“Well, I hope it won’t come our way tonight,” said Mr. Elmer, “and first thing in the morning I will set the men to work clearing and ploughing a wide strip entirely around the place. Then we may have some chance of successfully fighting this new enemy.”

Instead of dying out at sunset, as it usually did, the wind increased to a gale as darkness set in, and Mr. Elmer cast many troubled glances at the dull red glow in the southern sky before he retired that night.

Mark and Frank occupied the same room, for Mr. March had not yet found time to build a house, and it seemed to them as though they had but just fallen asleep when they were aroused by Mr. Elmer’s voice calling through the house,

“Wake up! Everybody dress and come downstairs as quickly as you can. Mark! Frank! Hurry, boys!” “What is it, father?” asked Mark, as he tumbled down-stairs and burst into the sitting-room only about half dressed, but rapidly completing the operation as he ran. “What’s the matter? Is the house on fire?”

“No, my boy, not yet, but it’s likely to be very soon if we are not quick in trying to

Chapter 13: Fighting a Forest Fire

save it. The piney woods to the south of us are all in a blaze, and this gale's driving it towards us at a fearful rate. I want you and Frank to go as quickly as you can across the river and rouse up every soul in the village. Get every team and plough in Wakulla, and bring them over, together with every man and boy who can handle an axe."

Mr. Elmer had hardly finished before both boys were out of the house and running towards the river. Although it was still several miles off, they could already hear the roar of the flames rising above that of the wind, and could smell the smoke of the burning forest.

They were soon across the river, and while Mark ran to the houses of Mr. Bevil and Mr. Carter to waken those gentlemen, Frank bethought himself of the church-bell, which hung from a rude frame outside the building, and hurrying to it, seized the rope and began to pull it violently.

The effect of the loud clanging of the bell was almost instantaneous, and the colored people began pouring from their tumble-down old houses, and hurrying towards the church to see what was the matter. Many of them in their haste came just as they had jumped from their beds; but the darkness of the night and their own color combined to hide the fact that they were not fully dressed, until some light-wood torches were brought, when there was a sudden scattering among them.

Frank quickly explained the cause of the alarm, and the men hurried off to get their teams, ploughs, and axes; for Mr. Elmer had been so kind to them that all were anxious to do what they could to help him in this time of trouble.

Among the first boat-load that Frank ferried across the river was Black Joe, with his "ok" attached to a very small plough, with which he felt confident he could render most valuable assistance.

By the light of the approaching flames surrounding objects could already be distinguished, and as they hurried up to the house the first comers found Mr. Elmer, Mr. March, and Jan hard at work. They were clearing brush and hauling logs away from the immediate vicinity of the out-buildings, and had got quite a space ready in which the ploughs could be set to work.

In the house Mrs. Elmer, Ruth, and Aunt Chloe had collected all the carpets, blankets, and woollen goods they could lay their hands on, and piled them near the cistern, where they could be quickly soaked with water, and placed over exposed portions of the walls or roof. They were now busy packing up clothing and lighter articles of furniture, ready for instant removal.

Chapter 13: Fighting a Forest Fire

As fast as the teams and ploughs arrived, Mr. Elmer set them to work ploughing long furrows through the dry grass about a rod outside the line of fence nearest the approaching flames. Inside this line he and Mr. March set the grass on fire in many places. They could easily check these small fires as they reached the fence by beating them out with cedar boughs.

Meantime the flames came roaring and rushing on, leaping from tree to tree, and fanned into fury by the fierce wind. Above them hundreds of birds fluttered and circled with shrill cries of distress, until, bewildered by the smoke and glare, they fell, helpless victims, into the terrible furnace.

Wild animals of all kinds, among which were a small herd of deer, dashed out of the woods ahead of the fire, and fled across the open field unmolested by the men, who were too busy to give them a thought.

In his zeal to do his utmost, and to show what a splendid animal he had, Black Joe was ploughing far ahead of the others, when suddenly he saw rushing from the forest, and coming directly towards him, a bear. Terror-stricken at this sight, and without stopping to reflect that the bear was himself too frightened to harm anybody just then, Joe dropped the plough-handles and ran, leaving his beloved ox to its fate. The ox thus left to himself tried to run, too, but the plough became caught on a small tree and held it fast.

As the flames approached, the poor animal bellowed with fear and pain, and struggled wildly, but unsuccessfully, to get free. It would have certainly fallen a victim to the flames had not Mark, who had been busy lighting back-fires, seen its danger and ran to its rescue. Cutting the rope traces with his pocket-knife, he set the ox free; and following the example of its master, it galloped clumsily across the open field. The ox fled with such a bellowing and such a jangling of chains that poor Joe, who was hidden behind a great stump on the farther side of the field, was nearly frightened out of his few remaining senses when he saw this terrible monster charging out the fire and directly upon him. He threw himself flat on the ground, screaming “g’way fum yere! g’way fum yere! Luff dis po’ niggah be; he ain’t a-doin’ nuffin.”

Afterwards he was never known to speak of this adventure but once, when he said,

“I allus knowed dat ar ok was somfin better’n common; but when I see him come a-rarin’ an’ a-tarin’, an’ a-janglin’ right fo’ me, I ‘lowed ‘twas ole Nick hise’f come fo’ Black Joe, sho nuff.”

As the other ploughmen were driven from their work by the heat and the swirling

Chapter 13: Fighting a Forest Fire

smoke, they set back-fires all along the line, and retreated in good order to the house. Here, although the heat was intense and the smoke almost suffocating, they made a stand. Mrs. Elmer and Ruth had already taken refuge on the ferry-boat, from which they watched the progress of the flames with the most intense anxiety.

Under Mr. Elmer's direction the men covered the walls and roof of the house, which had already caught fire in several places, with wet blankets and carpets, and poured buckets of water over them. From these such volumes of steam arose that poor Ruth, seeing it from a distance, thought the house was surely on fire, and burst into tears.

So busy were all hands in saving the house that they paid no attention to the out-buildings, until Aunt Chloe, who had been working with the best of the men, screamed, "Oh, de chickuns! de chickuns!"

Looking towards the hen-house, they saw its roof in a bright blaze, and Aunt Chloe running in that direction with an axe in her hand. The old woman struck several powerful blows against the side of the slight building, and broke in two boards before the heat drove her away. Through this opening several of the poor fowls escaped; but most of them were miserably roasted, feathers and all.

This was the last effort of the fire in this direction, for the portion of it that met the cleared spaces, new furrows, and back-fires, soon subsided for want of fuel; while beyond the fields it swept away to the northward, bearing death and destruction in its course.

While most of the men had been engaged in saving the house and its adjoining fences, a small party, under the direction of Mr. March, had guarded the mill. They, however, had little to do save watch for flying embers, it was so well protected by its pond on one side and the river on the other.

By sunrise all danger had passed, and heartily thanking the kind friends who had come so readily to his assistance, Mr. Elmer dismissed them to their homes.

It took several days to recover from the effects of the great fire, and to restore things to their former neat condition; but Mr. Elmer said that, even if they had suffered more than they did, it would have been a valuable lesson to them, and one for which they could well afford to pay.

Soon after this Mr. Elmer decided to go to Tallahassee again to make a purchase of cattle; for, with thousands of acres of free pasturage all around them, it seemed a pity not to take advantage of it. Therefore he determined to experiment in a small way with stock-raising, and see if he could not make it pay. This time he took Mark with him, and instead

Chapter 13: Fighting a Forest Fire

of going down the river to St. Mark's to take the train, they crossed on the ferry, and had Jan drive them in the mule wagon four miles across country to the railroad. On their way they came to a fork in the road, and not knowing which branch to take, waited until they could ask a little colored girl whom they saw approaching. She said, "Dis yere humpety road'll take yo' to Misto Gilcriseses' plantation, an' den yo' turn to de right ober de trabblin' road twel yo' come to Brer Steve's farm, an' thar yo' be."

"Father, what is the difference between a plantation and a farm?" asked Mark, as they journeyed along over the "humpety" road.

"As near as I can find out," said Mr. Elmer, "the only difference is that one is owned by a white, and the other by a colored man."

They found "Brer Steve's" house without any difficulty, and, sure enough, there they were, as the little girl had said they would be; for "Brer Steve" lived close to the railroad, and the station was on his place.

Mark was delighted with Tallahassee, which he found to be a very pleasant though small city, built on a hill, and surrounded by other hills. Its streets were shaded by magnificent elms and oaks, and these and the hills were grateful to the eye of the Maine boy, who had not yet learned to love the flat country in which his present home stood.

They spent Sunday in Tallahassee, and on Monday started for home before daylight, on horseback and driving a small herd of cattle, which, with two horses, Mr. Elmer had bought on Saturday. As Saturday is the regular market-day, when all the country people from miles around flock into town to sell what they have for sale, and to purchase supplies for the following week, Mark was much amused and interested by what he saw. Although in Tallahassee there are no street auctions as in Key West, there was just as much business done on the sidewalks and in the streets here as there.

It seemed very strange to the Northern boy to see cattle and pigs roaming the streets at will, and he wondered that they were allowed to do so. When he saw one of these street cows place her fore-feet on the wheel of a wagon, and actually climb up until she could reach a bag of sweet-potatoes that lay under the seat, he laughed until he cried. Without knowing or caring how much amusement she was causing, the cow stole a potato from the bag, jumped down, and quietly munched it. This feat was repeated again and again, until finally an end was put to Mark's and the cow's enjoyment of the meal, by the arrival of the colored owner of both wagon and potatoes, who indignantly drove the cow away, calling her "a ole good-fo'-nuffin'."

Chapter 13: Fighting a Forest Fire

Mark said that after that he could never again give as an answer to the conundrum, “Why is a cow like an elephant?” “Because she can’t climb a tree;” for he thought this particular cow could climb a tree, and would, if a bag of sweet-potatoes were placed in the top of it where she could see it.

It was late Monday evening before they reached home with their new purchases, and both they and their horses and their cattle were pretty thoroughly tired with their long day’s journey. The next day, when Ruth saw the horses, one of which had but one white spot in his forehead, while the other had two, one over each eye, she immediately named them “Spot” and “Spotter.” Mark said that if there had been another without any spots on his forehead he supposed she would have named him “Spotless.”