

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 14: How the Boys Caught an Alligator

Hi! Mark,” shouted Frank from his ferry-boat one warm morning in March, “come here a minute. I’ve got something to tell you. Great scheme.”

“Can’t,” called Mark—”got to go to mill.”

“Well, come when you get back.”

“All right.”

Mark and Frank had by this time become the best of friends, for each had learned to appreciate the good points of the other, and to value his opinions. Their general information was as different as possible, and each thought that the other knew just the very things a boy ought to know. While Mark’s knowledge was of books, games, people, and places that seemed to Frank almost like foreign countries, he knew the names of every wild animal, bird, fish, tree, and flower to be found in the surrounding country, and was skilled in all tricks of woodcraft.

Since this boy had first entered the Elmer household, wounded, dirty, and unkempt as a young savage, he had changed so wonderfully for the better that his best friends of a few months back would not have recognized him. He was now clean, and neatly dressed in an old suit of Mark’s which just fitted him, and his hair, which had been long and tangled, was cut short and neatly brushed. Being naturally of a sunny and affectionate disposition, the cheerful home influences, the motherly care of Mrs. Elmer, whose heart was very tender towards the motherless boy, and, above all, the great alteration in his father’s manner, had changed the shy, sullen lad, such as he had been, into an honest, happy fellow, anxious to do right, and in every way to please the kind friends to whom his debt of gratitude was so great. His regular employment at the ferry, the feeling that he was useful, and, more than anything else, the knowledge that he was one of the proprietors of the Elmer Mill, gave him a sense of dignity and importance that went far towards making him contented with his new mode of life. Mark, Ruth, and he studied for two hours together every evening under Mrs. Elmer’s direction, and though Frank was far behind the others, he bade fair to become a first-class scholar.

Mr. Elmer was not a man who thought boys were only made to get as much work out of as possible. He believed in a liberal allowance to play, and said that when the work

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came it would be done all the better for it. So, every other day, Mark and Frank were sent down to St. Mark's in the canoe for the mail, allowed to take their guns and fishing-tackle with them, and given permission to stay out as long as they chose, provided they came home before dark. Sometimes Ruth was allowed to go with them, greatly to her delight, for she was very fond of fishing, and always succeeded in catching her full share. While the boys were thus absent, Mr. Elmer took charge of whatever work Mark might have been doing, and Jan always managed to be within sound of the ferry-horn.

On one of their first trips down the river Mark had called Frank's attention to the head of a small animal that was rapidly swimming in the water close under an overhanging bank, and asked him what it was.

For answer Frank said, "Sh!" carefully laid down his paddle, and taking up the rifle, fired a hasty and unsuccessful shot at the creature, which dived at the flash, and was seen no more.

"What was it?" asked Mark.

"An otter," answered Frank, "and his skin would be worth five dollars in Tallahassee."

"My!" exclaimed Mark, "is that so? Why can't we catch some, and sell the skins?"

"We could if we only had some traps."

"What kind of traps?"

"Double-spring steel are the best."

"I'm going to buy some, first chance I get," said Mark; "and if you'll show me how to set 'em, and how to skin the otters and dress the skins, and help do the work, we'll go halves on all we make."

Frank had agreed to this; and when Mark went to Tallahassee he bought six of the best steel traps he could find. These had been carefully set in likely places along the river, baited with fresh fish, and visited regularly by one or the other of the boys twice a day. At first they had been very successful, as was shown by the ten fine otter-skins carefully stretched over small boards cut for the purpose, and drying in the workshop; but then, their good fortune seemed to desert them.

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As the season advanced, and the weather grew warmer, they began frequently to find their traps sprung, but empty, or containing only the foot of an otter. At first they thought the captives had gnawed off their own feet in order to escape; but when, only the day before the one with which this chapter opens, they had found in one of the traps the head of an otter minus its body, this theory had to be abandoned.

“I never heard of an otter’s gnawing off his own head,” said Frank, as he examined the grinning trophy he had just taken from the trap, “and I don’t believe he could do it anyhow. I don’t think he could pull it off either; besides, it’s a clean cut; it doesn’t look as if it had been pulled off.”

“No,” said Mark, gravely; for both boys had visited the traps on this occasion. “I don’t suppose he could have gnawed off, or pulled off, his own head. He must have taken his jack-knife from his pocket, quietly opened it, deliberately cut off his head, and calmly walked away.”

“I have it!” exclaimed Frank, after a few minutes of profound thought, as the boys paddled homeward.

“What?” asked Mark—“the otter?”

“No, but I know who stole him. It’s one of the very fellows that tried to get me.”

“Alligators!” shouted Mark.

“Yes, alligators; I expect they’re the very thieves who have been robbing our traps.”

The next day at noon, when Mark finished his work at the mill, he hurried back to the ferry to see what Frank meant when he called him that morning, and said he had something to tell him.

Frank had gone to the other side of the river with a passenger, but he soon returned.

“Well, what is it?” asked Mark, as he helped make the boat fast.

“It’s this,” said Frank. “I’ve seen a good many alligators in the river lately, and I’ve had my eye on one big old fellow in particular. He spends most of his time in that little cove down there; but I’ve noticed that whenever a dog barks, close to the river or when he is crossing on the ferry, the old ‘gator paddles out a little way from the cove, and looks very wishfully in that direction. I know alligators are more fond of dog-meat than anything else, but they won’t refuse fish when nothing better offers. Now look here.”

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Going to the other end of the boat as he spoke, Frank produced a coil of light, but strong Manila line that he had obtained at the house. To one end of this rope were knotted a dozen strands of stout fish-line, and the ends of these were made fast to the middle of a round hickory stick, about six inches long, and sharply pointed at each end. These sharp ends had also been charred to harden them.

“There,” said Frank, as Mark gazed at this outfit with a perplexed look, “that’s my alligator line; and after dinner, if you’ll help me, we’ll fish for that old fellow in the cove.”

“All right,” said Mark; “I’m your man; but where’s your hook?”

“This,” answered Frank, holding up the bit of sharpened stick. “It’s all the hook I want, and I’ll show you how to use it when we get ready.”

After dinner the boys found several teams on both sides of the river waiting to be ferried across; then Mark had to go with Jan for a load of fence posts, so that it wanted only about an hour of sundown when they finally found themselves at liberty to carry out their designs against the alligator.

Frank said this was all the better, as alligators fed at night, and the nearer dark it was, the hungrier the old fellow would be.

Taking a large fish, one of a half a dozen he had caught during the day, Frank thrust the bit of stick, with the line attached, into its mouth and deep into its body. “There,” said he, “now you see that if the ‘gator swallows that fish he swallows the stick too. He swallows it lengthwise, but a strain on the line fixes it crosswise, and it won’t come out unless Mr. ‘Gator comes with it. Sabe?”

“I see,” answered Mark; “but what am I to do?”

“I want you to lie down flat in the boat, and hold on to the line about twenty feet from this end, which I am going to make fast to the ferry post. Keep it clear of the bank, and let the bait float well out in the stream. The minute the ‘gator swallows it, do you give the line a jerk as hard as you can, so as to fix the stick crosswise in his gullet.”

“All right,” said Mark; “I understand. And what are you going to do?”

“Oh, I’m going to play dog,” answered Frank, with a laugh, as he walked off down the riverbank, leaving Mark to wonder what he meant.

Frank crept softly along until he was very near the alligator cove, just above which he

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could see the fish, which Mark had let drop down-stream, floating on the surface of the water. Then he lay down, and began to whine like a puppy in distress. As soon as Mark heard this he knew what his friend meant by playing dog, and he smiled at the capital imitation, which would have certainly deceived even him if he had not known who the puppy really was.

Frank whined most industriously for five minutes or so, and even attempted two or three feeble barks, but they were not nearly so artistic as the whines. Then he stopped, for his quick eye detected three black objects moving on the water not far from the bank. These objects were the alligator's two eyes and the end of his snout, which were all of him that showed, the remainder of his body being completely submerged. He was looking for that puppy, and thinking how much he should enjoy it for his supper if he could only locate the whine, and be able to stop it forever.

Again it sounds, clear and distinct, and the sly old 'gator comes on a little farther, alert and watchful, but without making so much as a ripple to betray his presence.

Now the whine sounds fainter and fainter, as though the puppy were moving away, and finally it ceases altogether.

Mr. Alligator is very much disappointed; and now, noticing the fish for the first time, concludes that though not nearly so good as puppy, fish is much better than nothing, and he had better secure it before it swims away.

He does not use caution now; he has learned that fish must be caught quickly or not at all, and he goes for it with a rush. The great jaws open and close with a snap, the fish disappears, and the alligator thinks he will go back to his cove to listen again for that puppy whine. As he turns he opens his mouth to clear his teeth of something that has become entangled between them. Suddenly a tremendous jerk at his mouth is accompanied by a most disagreeable sensation in his stomach. He tries to pull away from both the entanglement and the sensation, but finds himself caught and held fast.

Mark gives a cheer as he jumps up from his uncomfortable position at the bottom of the ferry-boat, and Frank echoes it as he dashes out of the bushes and seizes hold of the line.

Now the alligator pulls and the boys pull, and if the line had not been made fast to the post, the former would certainly have pulled away from them or dragged them into the river. He lashes the water into foam, and bellows with rage, while they yell with delight and excitement. The stout post is shaken, and the Manila line hums like a harp-string.

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“It’ll hold him!” screams Frank. “He can’t get away now. See the reason for that last six feet of small lines, Mark? They’re so he can’t bite the rope; the little lines slip in between his teeth.”

The noise of the struggle and the shouts of the boys attracted the notice of the men on their way home from work at the mill, and they came running down to the ferry to see what was the matter.

“We were fishing for minnows,” explained Mark, “and we’ve caught a whale. Take hold here and help us haul him in.”

The men caught hold of the rope, and slowly but surely, in spite of his desperate struggles, the alligator was drawn towards them.

Suddenly he makes a rush at them, and, as the line slackens, the men fall over backward in a heap, and their enemy disappears in deep water. He has not got away, though—a pull on the line assures them of that; and again he is drawn up, foot by foot, until half his body is out on the bank. He is a monster, and Jan with an uplifted axe approaches him very carefully.

“Look out, Jan!” shouts Frank.

The warning comes too late; like lightning the great tail sweeps round, and man and axe are flung ten feet into the bushes.

Luckily no bones are broken, but poor Jan is badly bruised and decidedly shaken up. He does not care to renew the attack, and Frank runs to the house for a rifle. Taking steady aim, while standing at a respectful distance from that mighty tail, he sends a bullet crashing through the flat skull, and the struggle is ended.

That evening was spent in telling and in listening to alligator stories, and Frank was the hero of the hour for having so skillfully captured and killed the alligator that had been for a long time the dread of the community.