

# WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



## Chapter 15: A Fire Hunt and Mark's Disappearance

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Besides showing Mark how to catch otter and alligators, Frank taught him how to kill or capture various other wild animals. Among other things he made plain the mysteries of fire hunting for deer, and this proved a more fascinating sport to Mark than any other. As explained by Frank, fire hunting is hunting at night, either on foot or horseback, by means of a fire-pan. This is an iron cage attached to the end of a light pole. It is filled with blazing light-wood knots, and the pole is carried over the hunter's left shoulder, so that the blaze is directly behind and a little above his head. While he himself is shrouded in darkness, any object getting within the long lane of light cast in front of him is distinctly visible, and in this light the eyes of a wild animal shine like coals of fire. The animal, fascinated by the light, as all wild animals are, and being unable to see the hunter, stands perfectly still, watching the mysterious flames as they approach, until perhaps the first warning he has of danger is the bullet that, driven into his brain between the shining eyes, permanently satisfies his curiosity.

When he goes afoot, the hunter must take with him an assistant to carry a bag of pine knots to replenish the fire; but on horseback he can carry his own fuel in a sack behind the saddle.

Some fire hunters prefer to carry a powerful bull's-eye lantern strapped in front of their hats; but our boys did not possess any bull's-eyes, and were forced to be content with the more primitive fire-pans.

A method similar to this is practiced by the hunters of the North, who go at night in boats or canoes to the edges of ponds to which deer resort to feed upon lily-pads. There this method of hunting is called "jacking" for deer, and the fire-pan, or "jack," is fixed in the bow of the boat, while the hunter, rifle in hand, crouches and watches beneath it.

Their first attempt at fire hunting was made by the boys on foot in the woods near the mill; but here they made so much noise in the underbrush that, though they "shined" several pairs of eyes, these vanished before a shot could be fired at them. In consequence of this ill-luck they returned home tired and disgusted, and Mark said he didn't think fire hunting was very much fun after all.

Soon after this, however, Frank persuaded him to try it again, and this time they went

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on horseback. Both the Elmer horses were accustomed to the sound of fire-arms, and warranted, when purchased, to stand perfectly still, even though a gun should be rested between their ears and discharged.

This time, having gone into a more open country, the hunters were successful; and having shot his first deer, and being well smeared with its blood by Frank, Mark came home delighted with his success and anxious to go on another hunt as soon as possible.

The country to the east of Wakulla being very thinly settled, abounded with game of all descriptions, and especially deer. In it were vast tracts of open timber lands that were quite free from underbrush, and admirably fitted for hunting. This country was, however, much broken, and contained many dangerous "sink holes."

In speaking of this section, and in describing these "sink holes" to the Elmers one evening, Mr. March had said,

"Sinks, or sink holes, such as the country to the east of this abounds in, are common to all limestone formations. They are sudden and sometimes very deep depressions or breaks in the surface of the ground, caused by the wearing away of the limestone beneath it by underground currents of water or rivers. In most of these holes standing water of great depth is found, and sometimes swiftly running water. I know several men who have on their places what they call 'natural wells,' or small, deep holes in the ground, at the bottom of which flow streams of water. Many of these sinks are very dangerous, as they open so abruptly that a person might walk into one of them on a dark night before he was aware of its presence. Several people who have mysteriously disappeared in this country are supposed to have lost their lives in that way."

This conversation made a deep impression upon Mark, and when the boys started on horseback, one dark night towards the end of March, with the intention of going on a fire hunt in this very "sink hole" country, he said to Frank, as they rode along,

"How about those holes in the ground that your father told us about the other night. Isn't it dangerous for us to go among them?"

"Not a bit of danger," answered Frank, "as long as you're on horseback. A horse'll always steer clear of 'em."

When they reached the hunting-ground, and had lighted the pine-knots in their fire-pans, Frank said,

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"There's no use our keeping together; we'll never get anything if we do. I'll follow that star over this way"—and he pointed as he spoke to a bright one in the north-east—"and you go towards that one"—pointing to one a little south of east. "We'll ride for an hour, and then if we haven't had any luck we'll make the best of our way home. Remember that to get home you must keep the North- star exactly on your right hand, and by going due west you'll be sure to strike the road that runs up and down the river. If either of us fires, the other is to go to him at once, firing signal guns as he goes, and these the other must answer so as to show where he is."

Mark promised to follow these instructions, and as the two boys separated, little did either of them imagine the terrible circumstances under which their next meeting was to take place.

Mark had ridden slowly along for some time, carefully scanning the lane of light ahead of him, without shining a single pair of eyes, and was beginning to feel oppressed by the death-like stillness and solitude surrounding him. Suddenly his light disappeared, his horse reared into the air, almost unseating him, and then dashed madly forward through the darkness.

The fire-pan, carelessly made, had given way, its blazing contents had fallen on the horse's back, and, wild with pain, he was running away. All this darted through Mark's mind in an instant; but before he had time to think what he should do, the horse, with a snort of terror, stopped as suddenly as he had started—so suddenly as to throw himself back on his haunches, and to send Mark flying through the air over his head.

Thus relieved of his rider, the horse wheeled and bounded away. At the same instant Mark's rifle, which he had held in his hand, fell to the ground, and was discharged with a report that rang loudly through the still night air.

The sound was distinctly heard by Frank, who was less than a mile away; and thinking it a signal from his companion, he rode rapidly in the direction from which it had come. He had not gone far before he heard the rapid galloping of a horse, apparently going in the direction of Wakulla. Although he fired his own rifle repeatedly, he got no response, and he finally concluded that Mark was playing a practical joke, and had ridden home after firing his gun without waiting for him. Thus thinking, he turned his own horse's head towards home, and an hour later reached the house.

He found Mark's horse standing at the stable door in a lather of foam, and still saddled and bridled. Then it flashed across him that something had happened to Mark, and, filled with a sickening dread, he hurried into the house and aroused Mr. Elmer.

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"Hasn't Mark come home?" he inquired, in a husky voice.

"No, not yet. Isn't he with you?" asked Mr. Elmer, in surprise.

"No; and if he isn't here something dreadful has happened to him, I'm afraid"; and then Frank hurriedly told Mr. Elmer what he knew of the events of the hunt.

"We must go in search of him at once," said Mr. Elmer, in a trembling voice, "and you must guide us as nearly as possible to the point from which you heard the shot."

Hastily arousing Mr. March and Jan, and telling them to saddle the mules, Mr. Elmer went to his wife, who was inquiring anxiously what had happened, and told her that Mark was lost, and that they were going to find him. The poor mother begged to be allowed to go too; but assuring her that this was impossible, and telling Ruth to comfort her mother as well as she could, Mr. Elmer hurried away, mounted Mark's horse, and the party rode off.

Frank knew the country so well that he had no difficulty in guiding them to the spot where he and Mark had separated. From here they followed the star that Frank had pointed out to Mark, and riding abreast, but about a hundred feet apart, they kept up a continual shouting, and occasionally fired a gun, but got no answer.

At length Mr. March detected a glimmer of light on the ground, and dismounting, found a few charred sticks, one of which still glowed with a coal of fire.

"Halloo!" he shouted; "here's where Mark emptied his fire-pan."

They all gathered around, and having brought a supply of light- wood splinters with which to make torches, they each lighted one of these, and began a careful search for further evidences of the missing boy.

A shout from Jan brought them to him, and he showed the broken fire-pan which he had just picked up.

A little farther search revealed the deep imprints of the horse's hoofs when he had plunged and reared as the burning brands fell on his back; and then, step by step, often losing it, but recovering it again, they followed the trail until they came upon the rifle lying on the ground, cold and wet with the night dew.

Mr. March, holding his torch high above his head, took a step in advance of the others as they were examining the rifle, and uttered a cry of horror.

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"A sink-hole! Good heavens! the boy is down there!"

A cold chill went through his hearers at these words, and they gathered close to the edge of the opening and peered into its black depths.

"We must know beyond a doubt whether or not he is down there before we leave this place," said Mr. Elmer, with forced composure, "and we must have a rope. Frank, you know the way better than any of us, and can go quickest. Ride for your life back to the house, and bring that Manila line you used to catch the alligator with. Don't let his mother hear you—a greater suspense would kill her."

While Frank was gone the others carefully examined the "sink hole," and cut away the bushes and vines from around its edges. It was an irregular opening, about twenty feet across, and a short distance below the surface had limestone sides.

Begging the others to be perfectly quiet, Mr. Elmer lay down on the ground, and reaching as far over the edge as he dared, called,

"Mark! my boy! Mark!" but there was no answer. Still Mr. Elmer listened, and when he rose to his feet he said,

"March, it seems as though I heard the sound of running water down there. Listen, and tell me if you hear it. If it is so, my boy is dead!"

Mr. March lay down and listened, and the others held their breath. "Yes," he said, "I hear it. Oh, my poor friend, I fear there is no hope."

The first faint streaks of day were showing in the east when Frank returned with the rope and an additional supply of torches.

"Now let me down there," said Mr. Elmer, preparing to fasten the rope around him, "and God help me if I find the dead body of my boy."

"No," said Frank, "let me go. He saved my life, and I am the lightest. Please let me go!"

"Yes," said Mr. March, "let Frank go. It is much better that he should."

Mr. Elmer reluctantly consented that Frank should take his place, and the rope was fastened around the boy's body, under his arms, having first been wound with saddle

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blankets so that it should not cut him. Taking a lighted torch in one hand and some fresh splinters in the other, he slipped over the log which they had placed along the edge, so that the rope should not be cut by the rocks, and was gently lowered by the three anxious men into the awful blackness.

Thirty feet of the rope had disappeared, when it suddenly sagged to the opposite side of the hole, and at the same instant came the signal for them to pull up.

As Frank came again to the surface the lower half of his body was dripping wet, and his face was ghastly pale.

"He isn't there," he said; "but there is a stream of running water so strong that, when you let me into it, I was nearly swept away under the arch. It flows in that direction," he added, pointing to the south.