

# WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA

## Chapter 16: Buried in an Underground River



When Mark felt himself flying from his horse's back through the air, he of course expected to strike heavily on the ground, and nerved himself for the shock. To his amazement, instead of striking on solid earth he fell into a mass of shrubbery that supported him for a moment, and then gave way. He grasped wildly at the bushes; but they were torn from his hands, and he felt himself going down, down, down, and in another instant was plunged deep into water that closed over his head. He came to the surface, stunned and gasping, only to find himself borne rapidly along by a swift current. He did not for a moment realize the full horror of his situation, and with the natural instinct of a swimmer struck out vigorously.

He had taken but a few strokes when his hand hit a projecting rock, to which he instinctively clung, arresting his further progress. To his surprise, on letting his body sink, his feet touched bottom, and he stood in water not much more than waist deep, but which swept against him with almost irresistible force.

His first impulse was to scream, "Frank! oh, Frank!" but only a dull echo mocked him, and he received no reply but the rush and gurgle of the water as it hurried past.

Then in an instant he comprehended what had happened. He had been flung into a "sink hole," and was now buried in the channel of one of those mysterious underground rivers of which Mr. March had told them a few nights before. That was at home, where he was surrounded by his own loving parents and friends. Should he ever see them again? No; he was buried alive.

Buried alive! he, Mark Elmer? No—it couldn't be. It must be a dreadful dream, a nightmare; and he laughed hysterically to think how improbable it would all seem when he awoke.

But he felt the cold water sweeping by him and knew it was no dream. The reality stunned him, and he became incapable of thinking; he only moaned and called out, incoherently, "Mother! father! Ruth!"

After a while he began to think again. He had got to die. Yes, there was no escape for him. Here he must die a miserable death, and his body would be swept on and on until it

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reached the Gulf and drifted out to sea; for this running water must find its way to the sea somehow.

If he could only reach that sea alive! but of course that was impossible. Was it? How far is the Gulf? And the poor boy tried to collect his thoughts.

It couldn't be more than five miles in a straight line, nor, at the most, more than three times as far by water. Perhaps there might be more "sink holes" opening into this buried river. Oh, if he could only reach one of them! He would then die in sight of the blessed stars, and perhaps even live to see the dear sunlight once more.

These thoughts passed through his mind slowly, but they gave him a ray of hope. He determined that he would make a brave fight with death, and not give up, like a coward, without making even an effort to save himself.

Thus thinking, he let go his hold of the projection to which he had clung all this time, and allowed himself to be carried along with the current. He found that he could touch bottom most of the time, though every now and then he had to swim for greater or less distances, but he was always carried swiftly onward. He tried to keep his hands extended in front of him as much as possible, to protect himself from projecting rocks, but several times his head and shoulders struck heavily against them.

Once, for quite a distance, the roof was so low that there was barely room for his head between it and the water. A few inches lower would have drowned him, but it got higher again, and he went on.

Suddenly the air seemed purer and cooler, and the current was not so strong. Mark looked up and saw a star—yes, actually a star—twinkling down at him like a beacon light. He was in water up to his shoulders, but the current was not strong; he could maintain his footing and hold himself where he was.

He could only see one star, so he knew the opening through which he looked must be very small; but upon that one star he feasted his eyes, and thought it the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

How numb and cold he was! Could he hold out until daylight? Yes, he would. He would see the sunlight once more. He dared not move, nor even change his position, for fear lest he should lose sight of the star and not be able to find it again.

So he stood there, it seemed to him, for hours, until his star began to fade, and then,

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though he could not yet see it, he knew that daylight was coming.

At last the friendly star disappeared entirely, but in its place came a faint light—such a very faint suspicion of light that he was not sure it was light. Slowly, very slowly, it grew brighter, until he could see the outline of the opening far above him, and he knew that he had lived to see the light of another day. Then Mark prayed, prayed as he had never dreamed of praying before. He thanked God for once more letting him see the blessed daylight, and prayed that he might be shown some means of escape. He prayed for strength to hold out just a little while longer, and it was given him.

When Frank March was drawn to the surface, and said he had been let down into a swift current of water, Mr. Elmer buried his face in his hands, and groaned aloud in the agony of his grief.

“Why did I bring him to this place?” sobbed the stricken man. “To think that his life should be given for mine. If we had only stayed in the North my life might have been taken, but his would have been spared. O, Heavenly Father! what have I done to deserve this blow?”

For some time the others respected his grief, and stood by in silence. Then Mr. March laid his hand gently on the shoulder of his friend, and said,

“You are indeed afflicted, but there are others of whom you must think besides yourself. His mother and sister need you now as they never needed you before. You must go to them.” Turning to Frank, he said, “I will go home with Mr. Elmer, but I want you to ride with Jan in the direction you think this stream takes, and see if you can find its outlet or any other traces of it. There is a bare possibility that we may recover the body.”

So they separated, the two gentlemen riding slowly and sadly homeward, and Frank and Jan riding southward with heavy hearts.

They had not gone more than half a mile when they came to a little log-house in the woods, and as the sun had risen, and they and their horses were worn out with their night’s work, they decided to stop and ask to be allowed to rest a while, and for something to eat for themselves and their animals.

The owner of the house was a genuine “cracker,” or poor white—lean, sallow, and awkward in his movements, but hospitable, as men of his class always are. In answer to their request he replied,

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“Sartin, sartin; to be sho’. Light down, gentleMEN, and come inside. We ‘uns is plain folks, and hain’t got much, but sich as we has yo’ ‘uns is welkim to. Sal, run fo’ a bucket of water.”

As Frank and Jan entered the house, a little-barefooted, tow-headed girl started off with a bucket. They were hardly seated, and their host had just begun to tell them about his wonderful “nateral well,” when a loud scream was heard outside. The next instant the little girl came flying into the house, with a terror-stricken face, and flung herself into her father’s arms.

“Why! what is it, gal? So, honey, so! Tell yer daddy what’s a-skeering of ye”; and the man tried to soothe the child, and learn the cause of her sudden fright.

At length she managed to sob out, “It’s the devvil, pa; the devvil’s in our well, an’ he hollered at me, an’ I drapped the bucket an’ run.”

At these words Frank sprang to his feet, exclaiming, “What! a voice in the well? And you said it was a natural well, mister? Oh, Jan, can it be?” And then turning fiercely to the man, “Show us to the well, man, quick! What do you sit there staring for?”

Without waiting for a reply he rushed from the door, and running along a little pathway leading from it, was in another minute lying flat on the ground, looking down a hole of about six feet in diameter, and shouting, “Halloo! down there.”

Yes, there was an answer, and it was, “Help! he-l-p!”

The two men had followed Frank from the house, and Jan had been thoughtful enough to bring with him the Manila rope that had hung at the pommel of Frank’s saddle.

There was no need for words now. Frank hastily knotted the rope under his arms, handed it to Jan, and saying, “Haul up gently when I call,” slipped over the curb and disappeared.

One, two, three minutes passed after the rope slackened in their hands, showing that Frank had reached the bottom, and then those at the top heard, clear and loud from the depths, “Haul away gently.”

Very carefully they pulled on that rope, and up, up, up towards the sunlight that his strained eyes had never thought to see again, came Mark Elmer.

When Jan, strong as an ox, but tender as a woman, leaned over the curb and lifted

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the limp, dripping figure, as it were from the grave, he burst into tears, for he thought the boy was dead. He was still and white, the merry brown eyes were closed, and he did not seem to breathe.

But another was down there, so they laid Mark gently on the grass, and again lowered the rope into the well.

The figure that appeared as they pulled up this time was just as wet as the other, but full of life and energy.

“Carry him into the house, Jan. He isn’t dead. He was alive when I got to him. Put him in a bed, and wrap him up in hot blankets. Rub him with whiskey! slap his feet!—anything!—only fetch him to, while I go for help.”

With these words Frank March, wet as a water-spout, and more excited than he had ever been in his life, sprang on his horse and was off like a whirlwind.

That that ride did not kill the horse was no fault of Frank’s; for when he was reined sharply up in the “Go Bang” yard, and his rider sprang from his back and into the house at one leap, he staggered and fell, white with foam, and with his breath coming in gasps.

In the sitting-room Mr. Elmer was just trying to break the news of Mark’s death to his wife as gently as possible, when the door was flung open, and Frank, breathless, hatless, dripping with water, and pale with excitement, burst into the room shouting,

“He’s alive!—he’s alive and safe!”

Over and over again did he have to tell the marvelous story of how he had found Mark standing up to his neck in water, at the bottom of a natural well, nearly dead, but still alive; how he had knotted the rope around him and sent him to the top, while he himself stayed down there until the rope could again be lowered; how Mark had fainted, and now lay like dead in a farm-house— before the parents could realize that their son, whom they were a moment before mourning as dead, was still alive.

Then the mules were hitched to the farm-wagon, a feather-bed and many blankets were thrown in, Mr. and Mrs. Elmer, Ruth, and Frank climbed in, and away they went. John Gilpin’s ride was tame as compared to the way that wagon flew over the eight miles of rough country between Wakulla and the house in which Mark lay, slowly regaining consciousness.

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The meeting between the parents and the son whom they had deemed lost to them was not demonstrative; but none of them, nor of those who saw it, will ever forget the scene.

A solemn “Thank God!” and “My boy! my darling boy!” were all that was heard; and then Mark was lifted gently into the wagon, and it was driven slowly and carefully home.

An hour after he was tucked into his own bed Mark was in a raging fever, and screaming, “The star! the star! Please let me see it a little longer.” And it was many a day before he again left the house, and again breathed the fresh air out-of-doors.