

WAKULLA, A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA



Chapter 19: Uncle Christopher's "Great Scheme"

How pleasant it was to be in dear old Norton again! and how glad everybody was to see them! Good old Mrs. Wing said it made her feel young again to have boys in the house. She certainly had enough of them now; for the Norton boys could not keep away from Mark. From early morning until evening boys walked back and forth in front of the house waiting for him to appear, or sat on the fence-posts and whistled for him. Some walked boldly up to the front door, rang the bell, and asked if he were in; while others, more shy, but braver than those who whistled so alluringly from the fence-posts, stole around through the garden at the side of the house, and tried to catch a glimpse of him through the windows.

All this was not because Mark kept himself shut up in the house. Oh no! he was not that kind of a boy. He only stayed in long enough to sleep, to eat three meals a day, and to write letters to his father, mother, and Frank March, telling them of everything that was taking place. The rest of the time he devoted to the boys—and the girls; for he was over at Captain May's house almost as much as he was at the Wings'. He was enjoying himself immensely, though it didn't seem as though he was doing much except to talk.

If he went fishing with the boys, they would make him tell how he and Frank caught the alligator, or how the alligator caught Frank, and how he killed it; and when he finished it was time to go home, and none of them had even thought of fishing since Mark began to talk.

There was nothing the boys enjoyed more than going out into the woods, making believe that some of the great spreading oaks were palm-trees, and lying down under them and listening, while Mark, at their earnest request, told over and over again the stories of the wreck on the Florida reef, and the picnic his father and mother and Ruth and he had under the palm-trees, or of hunting deer at night through the solemn, moss-hung, Southern forests, or of the burning of the Wildfire.

"I say, Mark," exclaimed Tom Ellis, after listening with breathless interest to one of these stories, "you're a regular book, you are, and I'd rather hear you tell stories than to read Captain Marryat or Paul du Chaillu."

But there was one story Mark never would tell. It was that of his terrible experience

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in the buried river. Of this he tried to think as little as possible, and when the boys saw that it really distressed him to talk of it they forbore to urge him to do so.

Of course Ruth did not feel as Mark did about it, and she told the story many times, and everybody who heard it declared it was a most wonderful experience. They also seemed to think that in some way the mere fact that the hero of such an adventure was a Norton boy reflected great credit on the village.

Both Mark and Ruth saw a greater resemblance in the real Edna May to Frank March than had been shown by her photograph; but they remembered their promise to Captain Bill, and did not speak of it except to each other. It was very hard for Ruth to keep this promise, for Edna had become much interested in Frank through her letters, and now asked many questions about him. Ruth told her all she knew, except the one great secret that was on the end of her tongue a dozen times, but was never allowed to get any further.

Two weeks had been spent very happily by the children in Norton, when, one beautiful evening in June, the old stage rattled up to the Wings' front gate, and from it alighted Uncle Christopher Bangs.

"Halloo, Mark!" sung out the old gentleman, catching sight of his grandnephew almost the first thing. "How are you, my boy? Sakes alive, but you're looking well! Seems as if Maine air was the correct thing for Floridy boys, eh?"

"Yes, indeed, 'Uncle Christmas,'" replied Mark, as he ran out to meet the dear old man, "Maine air is the very thing for this Florida boy, at any rate."

"So it is, so it is," chuckled Uncle Christopher. "Wal, I suppose you're all ready to go to work now, eh?"

"To be sure I am, uncle; ready to begin right off."

"That's right, that's right; but s'posing we just look in on Mrs. Wing first, and see what she's got for supper, and then, after sleeping a bit, and eating again, and sort o' shaking ourselves together, we'll begin to consider. There ain't nothing to be gained by hurrying and worrying through the only lifetime we've got in this world, eh?"

The Doctor and Mrs. Wing welcomed Uncle Christopher most warmly, for he was a very dear friend of theirs, and they never allowed him to stay anywhere in Norton but at their house, now that the Elmers had moved away. After supper Ruth and the Mays came over to see him, and he entertained them the whole evening with his funny stories and quaint sayings.

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In the morning, after breakfast, they began to "consider," as Uncle Christopher called it. First he made Mark stand in front of him, looked him all over from head to foot with a quizzical expression, and finally said, "Yes, you look strong and hearty, and I guess you'll do."

"Fact is, Mark, I've got to take a trip down into Aroostook, and as I'm getting pretty old and feeble—Oh, you needn't smile, youngster, I am old and I've made so many bad jokes lately that I must be getting feeble. As I was saying, having reached an advanced state of infirmity, it has occurred to me that I need a traveling companion, a young, able-bodied fellow like you, for instance, to protect me against the dangers of the journey. Who knows but what we may meet with an alligator, eh? and so I want you to go along with me."

Of course Mark agreed readily to this proposition, though he had expected one far different, and the next morning he and Uncle Christopher took leave of their Norton friends and started for Bangor. From there another train carried them for miles along the upper Penobscot River, past the Indian settlement at Old Town, past the great saw-mills and millions of logs at Mattawaumkeag, and finally to McAdam Junction in "Europe," as Uncle Christopher called New Brunswick. Here they took another road, and were carried back into Maine to Houlton, the county seat of Aroostook County. After staying overnight here they took a stage, and for a whole day traveled over pleasant roads, through sweet-scented forests of spruce and balsam, broken here by clearings and thrifty farms, until at last the journey ended in the pretty little backwoods settlement of Presque Isle.

Here Uncle Christopher's lumber business detained him for a week, and here he introduced Mark to all his friends as "My grandnephew, Mr. Mark Elmer, Jun., President of the Elmer Mills down in Floridy," covering Mark with much confusion thereby, and enjoying the joke immensely himself. Now the real object of bringing the boy on this trip was disclosed. Mr. Bangs not only wanted Mark to meet with these practical men, and become familiar with their ways of conducting a business which was very similar to that which the Elmers had undertaken in Florida, but he knew that pine lumber was becoming scarce in that Northern country, and thought perhaps some of these men could be persuaded to emigrate to another land of pines if the idea was presented to them properly. So he encouraged Mark to talk of Florida, and to give them all the information he possessed regarding its forests of pine and its other resources. As a result, before they again turned their faces homeward, half a dozen of these clear-headed Maine men had promised them to visit Florida in the fall, take a look at the Wakulla country, and see for themselves what it offered in their line of business.

When Uncle Christopher and Mark returned to Bangor, the latter began to attend

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school regularly; not a grammar-school, nor a high-school, nor a school of any kind where books are studied, but a mill-school, where machinery took the place of books, where the teachers were rough workmen, and where each lecture was illustrated by practical examples. Nor did Mark merely go and listen to these lectures: he took an active part in illustrating them himself; for Uncle Christopher had explained so clearly to him that in order to be a truly successful mill president he must thoroughly understand the uses of every bit of mill machinery, that the boy was now as eager to do this as he had been in Wakulla to learn how to fish for alligators, or fire-hunt for deer.

All that summer he worked hard—two months in a saw-mill, and two more in a grist-mill—and though he did not receive a cent of money for all this labor, he felt amply repaid for what he had been through, by a satisfied sense of having, at least, mastered the rudiments of what he knew was to be an important part of his work in life for some years to come.

About the end of September his Uncle Christopher called Mark into his study one evening, and telling him to sit down, said, "Well, Mark, my boy, I suppose you're beginning to think of going home again to Floridy, eh?"

"Yes, uncle; father writes that both Ruth and I ought to come home very soon now, and I, for one, am quite ready to go."

"So you ought, so you ought. When boys and girls can help their fathers and mothers, and be helping themselves at the same time, they ought to be doing it," assented Uncle Christopher, cheerfully. "Well, Mark, I've got a scheme, a great scheme in my head, and I want you to tell me what you think of it. In the first place, I want you and the other directors to increase the capital stock of the Elmer Mill and Ferry Company, and let me take the extra shares."

"Oh, Uncle Christopher!"

"Wait, my boy, I haven't begun yet. You see, as I've told you before, I'm getting old and fee—not a word, sir!—feeble, and my old bones begin to complain a good deal at the cold of these Maine winters. Besides, all the folks that I think most of in this world have gone to Floridy to live, and it isn't according to nater that a man's body should be in one place while his heart's in another. Consequently it looks as if I had a special call to have a business that'll take my body where my heart is once in a while. Now my business is the lumber business, and always will be; and from what I know and what you tell me, it looks as if there was enough of that sort of business to be done in Floridy to amuse my declining years."

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"Yes, indeed there is, uncle."

"Well, that p'int being settled, and you, as President of the Elmer Mills, being willing to use your influence to have me made a partner in that concern—"

"Why, of course, uncle—"

"No 'of course' about it, young man; remember there's a Board of Directors to be consulted. Friendship is friendship, and business is business, and sometimes when one says 'Gee' t'other says 'Haw.' Having secured the influence of the president of the company, however, I'm willing to risk the rest. And now for my scheme.

"Supposing, for the sake of argument, that I am made one of the proprietors of the Elmer Mills. In that case I want them to be big mills. I'm too old a man to be fooling my limited time away on little mills; consequently, I propose to buy a first-class outfit of machinery for a big saw-mill, ship it to Wakulla, Floridy, and let it represent my shares of Elmer Mill Company stock. Moreover, as the schooner Nancy Bell, owned by the subscriber, is just now waiting for a charter, I propose to load her with the said mill machinery, and whatever articles you may think the Wakulla colony to be most in need of, and dispatch her to the St. Mark's River, Floridy.

"Moreover, yet again, as she is now without a captain, Eli Drew having gone into deep-water navigation, I propose to offer the command of the Nancy Bell to Captain Bill May, as his ship won't be ready for some months yet.

"And, moreover, for the third time, I further propose to invite Mr. Mark Elmer, Jun., President of the Elmer Mill and Ferry Company of Floridy, Miss Ruth Elmer, Secretary of the same, Miss Edna May, daughter of the captain, that is to be, of the schooner Nancy Bell, and the several gentlemen whom we met down in Aroostook last June, to take this Floridy trip on board the schooner Nancy Bell with me."

"With YOU, Uncle Christopher!" exclaimed Mark. "Are you going too?"

"Why, to be sure I am," answered Uncle Christopher. "Didn't I tell you it was my intention to reunite the scattered members of my being under more sunny skies than these? Now what do you say to my scheme, eh?"

"I say it's the most splendid scheme I ever heard of," cried Mark, jumping from his chair in his excitement, "and I wish we could start this very minute."

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"Well we can't; but we can start towards bed, and in the morning we'll look after that mill machinery."

The next two were indeed busy weeks for our friends. In Bangor Uncle Christopher and Mark were fully occupied in selecting mill machinery of the most improved patterns, and in purchasing a great variety of farm utensils, groceries, and other things that Mark knew would prove very welcome in Wakulla. Captain May, who had gladly accepted the command of the *Nancy Bell* for this voyage, was equally busy getting her ready for sea, and superintending the stowage of her precious but awkward cargo of machinery.

In Norton, Ruth and Edna had their hands full of dressmaking, packing, and paying farewell visits, and down in Aroostook the six families of the six gentlemen who had accepted Mr. Bangs's invitation to visit Florida with him were in a whirl of excitement, for to these untraveled people the journey from Maine to Florida seemed but little less of an undertaking than a journey around the world.

At length everything was ready, and the *Nancy Bell* only awaited her passengers. Captain May and Mark ran over to Norton one day to bid the friends there good-bye, and returned the next, bringing the girls with them. Both the girls were as excited as they could be; Edna at the prospect of this the first long journey that she could remember, and Ruth at the idea of soon being at home with her own dear parents again, and with anticipating all she should have to show and tell Edna.

A letter had been sent to Wakulla, saying that Mark and Ruth would take advantage of the first opportunity that offered to go home, and that Edna May would come with them; but nothing was said of Uncle Christopher and the rest of the party, nor of the schooner and her cargo. All this was reserved as a grand surprise.

How different were the feelings that filled the minds of Mark and Ruth now, from those with which they had sailed down the Penobscot in this same schooner *Nancy Bell* eleven months before. Then they were leaving the only home they had ever known, and going in search of a new one in which their father could recover his shattered health. Even they had realized that it was a desperate venture, and that its success was very doubtful. Now they were going to that home, already well established and prosperous. They knew that their father was again a strong and well man, and they were taking with them friends and material that were to insure increased happiness and prosperity to those whom they loved most.

The first of October was a charming season of the year for a Southern voyage, and with favoring winds the *Nancy Bell* made a quick run down the coast. In one week after leaving Bangor she had rounded the western end of the Florida Reef, and was headed

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northward across the green waters of the Gulf. Here she moved but slowly before the light winds that prevailed, but at last the distant lighthouse at the mouth of the St. Mark's River was sighted. Almost at the same time a slender column of smoke was seen rising to the east of the light, and apparently at some distance inland. As the lamp in the lighthouse shed forth its cheerful gleam at sunset the column of smoke changed to a deep red, as though it were a pillar of fire. While they were wondering what it could be, a pilot came on board, and in answer to their questions told them that it was the light from the Wakulla volcano. He said that no living soul had ever been nearer than five miles to it, on account of the horrible and impenetrable swamps surrounding it.

Hearing this, Uncle Christopher declared that, before leaving that country, he meant to go in there and see how nigh he could get to it, and Mark said he would go with him.

As the breeze and tide were both in their favor, it was decided to run up to St. Mark's that night. When, about nine o'clock, this point was reached, it was suggested that all hands should take to the boats, and tow the schooner the rest of the way up to Wakulla that same night, so as to surprise the folks in the morning. The children were wild to have this plan carried out, and finally Captain May and Uncle Christopher consented that it should be tried.

All night long the schooner moved slowly up the solemn river through the dense shadows of the overhanging forests. The boats' crews were relieved every hour, and shortly before sunrise the children, who had been forced by sleepiness to take naps in their state-rooms, were wakened by Uncle Christopher, who said,

"Come, children, hurry up on deck. The schooner has just been made fast to the 'Go Bang' pier, and we're going to fire a gun to wake up the folks—a sort of a 'Go Bang' good-morning, you know."