Wakulla

Kirk Munroe

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WAKULLA
A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN FLORIDA

CHAPTER I. PREPARING TO LEAVE THE OLD HOME.

Over and over again had Mark and Ruth Elmer read this paragraph, which appeared among the "Norton Items" of the weekly paper published in a neighboring town:

"We are sorry to learn that our esteemed fellow−townsman, Mark Elmer, Esq., owing to delicate health, feels compelled to remove to a warmer climate. Having disposed of his property in this place, Mr. Elmer has purchased a plantation in Florida, upon which he will settle immediately. As his family accompany him to this new home in the Land of Flowers, the many school−friends and young playmates of his interesting children will miss them sadly."

"I tell you what, Ruth," said Mark, after they had read this item for a dozen times or more, "we are somebodies after all, and don't you forget it. We own a plantation, we do, and have disposed of our PROPERTY in this place."

As Mark looked from the horse−block on which he was sitting at the little weather−beaten house, nestling in the shadow of its glorious trees, which, with its tiny grass−plot in front, was all the property Mr. Elmer had ever owned, he flung up his hat in ecstasy at the idea of their being property owners, and tumbled over backward in trying to catch it as it fell.

"What I like," said Ruth, who stood quietly beside him, "is the part about us being interesting children, and to think that the girls and boys at school will miss us."

"Yes, and won't they open their eyes when we write them letters about the alligators, and the orange groves, and palm−trees, and bread−fruit, and monkeys, and Indians, and pirates? Whoop−e−e−e! what fun we are going to have!"

"Bread−fruit, and monkeys, and pirates, and Indians in Florida! what are you thinking of, Mark Elmer?"

"Well, I guess 'Osceola the Seminole' lived in Florida, and it's tropical, and pirates and monkeys are tropical too, ain't they?"

Just then the tea−bell rang, and the children ran in to take the paper which they had been reading to their father, and to eat their last supper in the little old house that had always been their home.

Mr. Elmer had, for fifteen years, been cashier of the Norton Bank; and though his salary was not large, he had, by practising the little economies of a New England village, supported his family comfortably until this time, and laid by a sum of money for a rainy day. And now the "rainy day" had come. For two years past the steady confinement to his desk had told sadly upon the faithful bank cashier, and the stooping form, hollow cheeks, and hacking cough could no longer be disregarded. For a long time good old Dr. Wing had said,

"You must move South, Elmer; you can't stand it up here much longer."

Both Mr. Elmer and his wife knew that this was true; but how could they move South? where was the money to come from? and how were they to live if they did? Long and anxious had been the consultations after the children were tucked into their beds, and many were the prayers for guidance they had offered up.

At last a way was opened, "and just in time, too," said the doctor, with a grave shake of his head. Mrs. Elmer's uncle, Christopher Bangs, whom the children called "Uncle Christmas," heard of their trouble, and left his saw−mills and lumber camps to come and see "where the jam was," as he expressed it. When it was all explained to him, his good−natured face, which had been in a wrinkle of perplexity, lit up, and with a resounding slap of his great, hard hand on his knee, he exclaimed,

"Sakes alive! why didn't you send for me, Niece Ellen? why didn't you tell me all this long ago, eh? I've got a place down in Florida, that I bought as a speculation just after the war. I hain't never seen it, and might have forgot it long ago but for the tax bills coming in reg'lar every year. It's down on the St. Mark's River, pretty nigh the Gulf coast, and ef you want to go there and farm it, I'll give you a ten years' lease for the taxes, with a chance to buy at your own rigger when the ten years is up."

"But won't it cost a great deal to get there, uncle?" asked Mrs. Elmer, whose face had lighted up as this new hope entered her heart.

"Sakes alive! no; cost nothin'! Why, it's actually what you might call providential the way things turns out. You can go down, slick as a log through a chute, in the Nancy Bell, of Bangor, which is fitting out in that port this blessed minit. She's bound to Pensacola in ballast, or with just a few notions of hardware sent out as a venture, for a load of pine lumber to fill out a contract I've taken in New York. She can run into the St. Mark's and drop you jest as well as not. But you'll have to pick up and raft your fixin's down to Bangor in a terrible hurry, for she's going to sail next week, Wednesday, and it's Tuesday now."

So it was settled that they should go, and the following week was one of tremendous excitement to the children, who had never been from home in their lives, and were now to become such famous travellers.

Mark Elmer, Jr., as he wrote his name, was as merry, harum−scarum, mischief−loving a boy as ever lived. He was fifteen years old, the leader of the Norton boys in all their games, and the originator of most of their schemes for mischief. But Mark's mischief was never of a kind to injure anybody, and he was as honest as the day is long, as well as loving and loyal to his parents and sister Ruth.

Although a year younger than Mark, Ruth studied the same books that he did, and was a better scholar. In spite of this she looked up to him in everything, and regarded him with the greatest admiration. Although quiet and studious, she had crinkly brown hair, and a merry twinkle in her eyes that indicated a ready humor and a thorough appreciation of fun.

It was Monday when Mark and Ruth walked home from the post−office together, reading the paper, for which they had gone every Monday evening since they could remember, and they were to leave home and begin their journey on the following morning.

During the past week Mr. Elmer had resigned his position in the bank, sold the dear little house which had been a home to him and his wife ever since they were married, and in which their children had been born, and with a heavy heart made the preparations for departure.

With the willing aid of kind neighbors Mrs. Elmer had packed what furniture they were to take with them, and it had been sent to Bangor. Mark and Ruth had not left school until Friday, and had been made young lions of all the week by the other children. To all of her girl friends Ruth had promised to write every single thing that happened, and Mark had promised so many alligator teeth, and other trophies of the chase, that, if he kept all his promises, there would be a decided advance in the value of Florida curiosities that winter.

As the little house was stripped of all its furniture, except some few things that had been sold with it, they were all to go to Dr. Wing's to sleep that night, and Mrs. Wing had almost felt hurt that they would not take tea with her; but both Mr. and Mrs. Elmer wanted to take this last meal in their own home, and persuaded her to let them have their way. The good woman must have sent over most of the supper she had intended them to eat with her, and this, together with the good things sent in by other neighbors, so loaded the table that Mark declared it looked like a regular surprise−party supper.

A surprise−party it proved to be, sure enough, for early in the evening neighbors and friends began to drop in to say good−bye, until the lower rooms of the little house were filled. As the chairs were all gone, they sat on trunks, boxes, and on the kitchen table, or stood up.

Mark and Ruth had their own party, too, right in among the grown people; for most of the boys and girls of the village had come with their parents to say good−bye, and many of them had brought little gifts that they urged the young Elmers to take with them as keepsakes. Of all these none pleased Ruth so much as the album, filled with the pictures of her school−girl friends, that Edna May brought her.

Edna was the adopted daughter of Captain Bill May, who had brought her home from one of his voyages when she was a little baby, and placed her in his wife's arms, saying that she was a bit of flotsam and jetsam that belonged to him by right of salvage. His ship had been in a Southern port when a woman, with this child in her arms, had fallen from a pier into the river. Springing into the water after them, Captain May had succeeded in saving the child, but the mother was drowned. As nothing could be learned of its history, and as nobody claimed it, Captain May brought the baby home, and she was baptized Edna May. She was now fourteen years old, and Ruth Elmer's most intimate friend, and the first picture in the album was a good photograph of herself, taken in Bangor. The others were only tin−types taken in the neighboring town of Skowhegan; but Ruth thought them all beautiful.

The next morning was gray and chill, for it was late in November. The first snow of the season was falling in a hesitating sort of a way, as though it hardly knew whether to come or not, and it was still quite dark when Mrs. Wing woke Mark and Ruth, and told them to hurry, for the stage would be along directly. They were soon dressed and down−stairs, where they found breakfast smoking on the table. A moment later they were joined by their parents, neither of whom could eat, so full were they of the sorrow of departure. The children were also very quiet, even Mark's high spirits being dampened by thoughts of leaving old friends, and several tears found their way down Ruth's cheeks during the meal.

After breakfast they said good−bye to the Wings, and went over to their own house to pack a few remaining things into hand−bags, and wait for the Skowhegan stage.

At six o'clock sharp, with a "toot, toot, toot," of the driver's horn, it rattled up to the gate, followed by a wagon for the baggage. A few minutes later, with full hearts and tearful eyes, the Elmers had bidden farewell to the little old house and grand trees they might never see again, and were on their way down the village street, their long journey fairly begun.

CHAPTER II. THE SCHOONER "NANCY BELL."

It lacked a few minutes of nine o'clock when the stage in which the Elmers had left Norton drew up beside the platform of the railway station in Skowhegan. There was only time to purchase tickets and check the baggage, and then Mark and Ruth stepped, for the first time in their lives, on board a train of cars, and were soon enjoying the novel sensation of being whirled along at what seemed to them a tremendous rate of speed. To them the train−boy, who came through the car with books, papers, apples, and oranges, and wore a cap with a gilt band around it, seemed so much superior to ordinary boys, that, had they not been going on such a wonderful journey, they themselves would have envied him his life of constant travel and excitement.

At Waterville they admired the great mills, which they fancied must be among the largest in the world; and when, shortly after noon, they reached Bangor, and saw real ships, looking very like the pictures in their geographies, only many times more interesting, their cup of happiness was full.

Mark and Ruth called all the vessels they saw "ships;" but their father, who had made several sea−voyages as a young man, said that most of them were schooners, and that he would explain the difference to them when they got to sea and he had plenty of time.

The children were bewildered by the noise of the railroad station and the cries of the drivers and hotel runners all of whom made violent efforts to attract the attention of the Elmer party. At length they got themselves and their bags safely into one of the big yellow omnibuses, and were driven to a hotel, where they had dinner. Mark and Ruth did not enjoy this dinner much, on account of its many courses and the constant attentions of the waiters.

It had stopped snowing, and after dinner the party set forth in search of the Nancy Bell. By making a few inquiries

they soon found her, and were welcomed on board by her young, pleasant− faced captain, whose name was Eli Drew, but whom all his friends called "Captain Li."

The Nancy Bell was a large three−masted schooner, almost new, and as she was the first vessel "Captain Li" had ever commanded, he was very proud of her. He took them at once into his own cabin, which was roomy and comfortable, and from which opened four state− rooms two on each side. Of these the captain and his mate, John Somers, occupied those on the starboard, or right−hand side, and those on the other, or port side, had been fitted up, by the thoughtful kindness of Uncle Christopher, for the Elmers one for Mrs. Elmer and Ruth, and the other for Mark and his father.

"Ain't they perfectly lovely?" exclaimed Ruth. "Did you ever see such cunning little beds? They wouldn't be much too big for Edna May's largest doll."

"You mustn't call them 'beds,' Ruth; the right name is berths," said Mark, with the air of a boy to whom sea terms were familiar.

"I don't care," answered his sister; "they are beds for all that, and have got pillows and sheets and counterpanes, just like the beds at home."

Mr. Elmer found that his furniture, and the various packages of tools intended for their Southern home, were all safe on board the schooner and stowed down in the hold, and he soon had the trunks from the station and the bags from the hotel brought down in a wagon.

The captain said they had better spend the night on board, as he wanted to be off by daylight, and they might as well get to feeling at home before they started. They thought so too; and so, after a walk through the city, where, among other curious sights, they saw a post−office built on a bridge, they returned to the Nancy Bell for supper.

Poor Mr. Elmer, exhausted by the unusual exertions of the day, lay awake and coughed most of the night, but the children slept like tops. When Mark did wake he forgot where he was, and in trying to sit up and look around, bumped his head against the low ceiling of his berth.

Daylight was streaming in at the round glass dead−eye that served as a window, and to Mark's great surprise he felt that the schooner was moving. Slipping down from his berth, and quietly dressing himself, so as not to disturb his father, he hurried on deck, where he was greeted by "Captain Li," who told him he had come just in time to see something interesting.

The Nancy Bell was in tow of a little puffing steam−tug, and was already some miles from Bangor down the Penobscot River. The clouds of steam rising into the cold air from the surface of the warmer water were tinged with gold by the newly−risen sun. A heavy frost rested on the spruces and balsams that fringed the banks of the river, and as the sunlight struck one twig after another, it covered them with millions of points like diamonds. Many cakes of ice were floating in the river, showing that its navigation would soon be closed for the winter.

To one of these cakes of ice, towards which a boat from the schooner was making its way, the captain directed Mark's attention. On this cake, which was about as large as a dinner− table, stood a man anxiously watching the approach of the boat.

"What I can't understand," said the captain, "is where he ever found a cake of ice at this time of year strong enough to bear him up."

"Who is he? How did he get there, and what is he doing?" asked Mark, greatly excited.

"Who he is, and how he got there, are more than I know," answered "Captain Li." "What he is doing, is waiting to be taken off. The men on the tug sighted him just before you came on deck, and sung out to me to send a boat for him. It's a mercy we didn't come along an hour sooner, or we never would have seen him through the mist."

"You mean we would have missed him," said Mark, who, even upon so serious an occasion, could not resist the temptation to make a pun.

By this time the boat had rescued the man from his unpleasant position, and was returning with him on board. Before it reached the schooner Mark rushed down into the cabin and called to his parents and Ruth to hurry on deck. As they were already up and nearly dressed, they did so, and reached it in time to see the stranger helped from the boat and up the side of the vessel.

He was so exhausted that he was taken into the cabin, rolled in warm blankets, and given restoratives and hot drinks before he was questioned in regard to his adventure.

Meantime the schooner was again slipping rapidly down the broad river, and Mark, who remained on deck with his father, questioned him about the "river's breath," as he called the clouds of steam that arose from it.

"That's exactly what it is, the 'river's breath,'" said Mr. Elmer. "Warm air is lighter than cold, and consequently always rises; and the warm, damp air rising from the surface of the river into the cold air above is condensed into vapor, just as your warm, damp breath is at this very moment."

"But I should think the water would be cold with all that ice floating in it," said Mark.

"It would seem cold if we were surrounded by the air of a hot summer day," answered his father; "but being of a much higher temperature than the air above it, it would seem quite warm to you now if you should put your bare hand into it. We can only say that a thing is warm by comparing it with something that is colder, or cold by comparison with that which is warmer."

When Mark and his father went down to breakfast they found the rescued man still wrapped in blankets, but talking in a faint voice to the captain; and at the table the latter told the Elmers what he had learned from him.

His name was Jan Jansen, and he was a Swede, but had served for several years in the United States navy. On being discharged from it he had made his way to New Sweden, in the northern part of Maine; but, a week before, he had come to Bangor, hoping to obtain employment for the winter in one of the saw−mills. In this he has been unsuccessful; and the previous night, while returning from the city to the house on its outskirts in which he was staying, he undertook to cross a small creek, in the mouth of which were a number of logs; these were so cemented together by recently formed ice that he fancied they would form a safe bridge, and tried to cross on it. When near the middle of the creek, to his horror the ice gave way with a crash, and in another moment he was floating away in the darkness on the cake from which he had been so recently rescued. That it had supported him was owing to the fact that it still held together two of the logs. He had not dared attempt to swim ashore in the dark, and so had drifted on during the night, keeping his feet from freezing by holding them most of the time in the water.

After breakfast Mr. Elmer and the captain held a consultation, the result of which was that the former offered Jan Jansen work in Florida, if he chose to go to the St. Mark's with them; and Captain Drew offered to let him work his passage to that place as one of the crew of the Nancy Bell. Without much hesitation the poor Swede accepted both these offers, and as soon as he had recovered from the effects of his experience on the ice raft was provided with a bunk in the forecastle.

CHAPTER III. "CAPTAIN LI'S" STORY.

All day the Nancy Bell was towed down the broad river, the glorious scenery along its banks arousing the constant enthusiasm of our travellers. Late in the afternoon they passed the gray walls of Fort Knox on the right, and the pretty little town of Bucksport on the left. They could just see the great hotel at Fort Point through the gathering dusk, and soon afterwards were tossing on the wild, windswept waters of Penobscot Bay.

As they cleared the land, so as to sight Castine Light over the port quarter, the tug cast loose from them and sail was made on the schooner. The last thing Mark Elmer saw as he left the deck, driven below by the bitter cold, was the gleam of the light on Owl's Head, outside which Captain Drew said they should find the sea pretty rough.

The rest of the family had gone below some time before, and Mark found that his mother was already very sea−sick. He felt rather uncomfortable himself, and did not care much for the supper, of which his father and Ruth eat so heartily. He said he thought he would go to bed, before supper was half over, and did so, although it was only six o'clock. Poor Mark! it was a week before he again sat at table or went on deck.

During this week the Nancy Bell sailed along the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. She went inside of Martha's Vineyard, through Vineyard Sound, in company with a great fleet of coasters; but when they passed Gay Head, and turned to the westward into Long Island Sound, the Nancy was headed towards the lonely light−house on Montauk Point, the extreme end of Long Island. From here her course was for the Cape May lightship on the New Jersey coast, and for some time she was out of sight of land.

So they sailed, day after day, ever southward, and towards the warmth which was to make Mr. Elmer well again.

Although Mark was very ill all this time, Ruth was as bright and well as though she were on land. This was very mortifying to her brother; but "Captain Li," who went in to see him every day, comforted him by telling him of old sailors he had known who were always sea−sick for the first few days of every voyage they undertook.

The schooner was off Cape Hatteras before Mark felt able to leave his berth. At last, one evening when the sea was very quiet, "Captain Li" said, "Come, Mark, I want you to turn out and go on deck to see the last of Hatteras Light. You know Cape Hatteras is one of the worst capes along our entire Atlantic coast, and is probably the one most dreaded by sailors. When coming home from the West Indies, they sing an old song which begins:

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"'Now if the Bermudas let you pass,
Then look for Cape Hatteras.'"
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Slowly dressing, with the captain's aid, Mark, feeling very weak, but free from the horrible sickness from which he had suffered so long, managed to get out on deck. He was astonished at the change that one week's sailing southward had made in the general appearance of things. When he was last on deck, it and the rigging were covered with snow and ice. Now not a particle of either was to be seen, and the air was mild and pleasant. A new moon hung low in the western sky, and over the smooth sea the schooner was rippling along merrily, under every stitch of canvas that she could spread.

Mark received a warm welcome from his father, mother, and Ruth, who were all on deck, but had not expected to see him there that evening.

"Quick, Mark! Look! Hatteras is 'most gone," said Ruth, pointing, as she spoke, to a little twinkle of light so far astern that it seemed to rest on the very waters. Half an hour later the captain said, "Now let's go below, where it is warmer; and if you care to hear it, I will spin you a yarn of Hatteras Light."

"Yes, indeed," said Ruth and Mark together.

"By all means; a story is just the thing," said Mr. and Mrs. Elmer, also together, at which they all laughed, hooked little fingers, and wished.

When they had made themselves comfortable in the cabin, Mark being allowed to occupy the lounge on account of his recent illness, the captain began as follows:

"Ten years ago this winter I made my first voyage of any length, though before that I had made some short runs on a little coaster between New York and down−East ports. Getting tired of this, and wanting to see something more of the world, I shipped in New York, early in December, on board the very prettiest craft I ever set eyes on, for a voyage to the West Indies. She was the hundred−ton schooner−yacht Mirage, and her owner had determined to try and make her pay him something during the winter by running her as a fruiter. She carried a crew of five men, besides the captain, mate, and steward all young and able seamen. I was the youngest and least experienced, but was large for my age, and passed muster with the rest.

"We had a pleasant run down to Havana, passing Moro Castle and dropping anchor on the seventh day out from New York, but found some trouble there in getting a cargo for the home voyage. The delay worried our skipper considerably, for he had calculated on being home with his wife and baby at Christmas; but we of the crew enjoyed the city, and I for one got leave to go ashore whenever I could, and made the most of my opportunity to see the sights.

"We had laid there about ten days, when one morning, as the old man came up the after companion−way from the cabin, a big gray rat rushed out on deck ahead of him, scampered to the side, and plumped overboard. We all saw it in the water, swimming for the quay, which was but a short distance from us, and, quick as a thought, the skipper had jumped back into the cabin for his pistol, and before the beast had got more than half−way he had fired several shots at it. The bullets struck all around the rat, but didn't hit it, and we saw him disappear through a crevice between the stones of the quay.

"Our captain was a very superstitious man, and this incident troubled him, for I heard him say to the mate that he never knew any ship to have good luck when once the rats began to leave her.

"Soon after this we took in our cargo of pineapples and bananas and started for home. Our first three days' run was as pretty as ever was made, and with the Gulf Stream to help us, it seemed as though we might make New York in time for Christmas, after all. Then there came a change first a gale that drove us to the westward, and then light head−winds, or no winds at all; and so we knocked round for three days more, and on the day before Christmas we hadn't rounded Hatteras, let alone made Sandy Hook, as we had hoped to do.

"It was a curious sort of a day, mild and hazy, with the sun showing round and yellow as an orange. The skipper was uneasy, and kept squinting at the weather, first on one side and then the other. We heard him say to the mate that something was coming, for the mercury was falling faster than he had ever seen it. Things stood so until sunset, when the haze settled down thicker than ever. I was at the wheel, when the skipper came on deck and ordered all canvas to be stripped from her except the double− reefed main−sail and a corner of the jib. He sung out to me to keep a sharp lookout for Hatteras Light, and then went below again.

"When I caught sight of the light, about an hour later, and reported it, it wasn't any brighter than it looked when you came on deck, a while ago, Mark, and we were heading directly for it. When the skipper came up and looked at it he told me to 'keep her so' while he took a squint at the chart.

"He hadn't more than gone below again when there came such a gust of wind and rain, with thunder and lightning close after, as to hide the light and keep me busy for a few minutes holding the schooner up to it.

"The squall passed as suddenly as it came, and there was the light, right over the end of the flying−jib−boom, burning as steady as ever, but looking mighty blue, somehow. I thought it was the effect of the mist, and tried to keep her headed for it. As I was getting terribly puzzled and fussed up by what I thought was the strange action of the compass, and by the way the little spiteful gusts of wind seemed to come from every quarter at once, the skipper came on deck. Before he had cleared the companion−way he asked,

"'How does Hatteras Light bear?'

"'Dead ahead, sir,' said I.

"As he stepped on deck he turned to look at it, and I saw him start as though he saw something awful. He looked for half a minute, and then in a half−choked sort of voice he gasped out, 'The Death−Light!'

"At the same moment the light, that I had took to be Hatteras, rolled slowly, like a ball of fire, along the jib−top−sail stay to the top−mast head, and then I knew it was a St. Elmo's fire, a thing I'd heard of but never seen before.

"As we all looked at it, afraid almost to say a word, there came a sound like a moan over the sea, and in another minute a cyclone, such as I hope never to see again, laid us, first on our beam ends, and then drove us at a fearful rate directly towards the coast.

"We drove this way for an hour or more, unable to do a thing to help ourselves, and then she struck on Hatteras sands. Her masts went as she struck, and as they fell a huge sea, rushing over the poor craft, swept overboard the captain and two men. It was some time before we knew they were gone, for we could see nothing nor hear anything but the howl of the tempest.

"At last we got rid of the floating wreck of spars by clearing the tangled rigging with our knives, and, thus relieved, the schooner was driven a good bit farther over the sands. Finally she struck solid, and began to break up. One of her boats was stove and worthless, and in trying to clear away the other, a metallic life− boat, another man was swept overboard and lost.

"The mate and two of the crew besides myself finally got away from the wreck in this boat, and were driven in to the beach, on which we were at last flung more dead than alive.

"The next morning we made our way to the light−house, where we were kindly cared for, but where our Christmas dinner was a pretty sad affair.

"The captain's body was washed up on the beach, and a week from that day we took it and the news of his death together to his wife in New York.

"Since then I have always felt easier when I have left Hatteras Light well astern, as we have for this time, at any rate. Well, there's eight bells, and I must be on deck, so good−night to you all, and pleasant dreams."

"Is there any such thing as a 'death−light' that warns people of coming disaster?" asked Ruth of her father, when the captain had left them.

"No, my dear," he answered, "there is not. The St. Elmo's light, or St. Elmo's fire, is frequently seen in tropical seas, though rarely as far north as Cape Hatteras; and as it is generally accompanied by cyclones or hurricanes, sailors have come to regard it as an omen of evil. It is not always followed by evil consequences, however, and to believe that it foretells death is as idle and foolish as superstitions of all kinds always are."

CHAPTER IV. A WRECK ON THE FLORIDA REEF.

After leaving Hatteras not another evidence of land was seen by the passengers of the Nancy Bell for three days. At last one afternoon "Captain Li" pointed out and called their attention to a slender shaft rising apparently from the sea itself, far to the westward. He told them that it was the light−house at Jupiter Inlet, well down on the coast of Florida, and they regarded it with great interest, as giving them their first glimpse of the land that was so soon to be their home.

The weather had by this time become very warm and instead of wearing the thick clothing with which they had started, the Elmers found the very thinnest of their last summer's things all that they could bear.

Mark had almost forgotten his sea−sickness, and spent much of his time with Jan Jansen, who taught him to make knots and splices, to box the compass and to steer. Both Mark and Ruth were tanned brown by the hot sun, and Mr. Elmer said the warmth of the air had already made a new man of him.

Before the light but steady trade−wind, that kept the air deliciously cool, the Nancy Bell ran rapidly down the coast and along the great Florida Reef, which, for two hundred miles, bounds that coast on the south.

Captain Drew stood far out from the reef, being well aware of the strong currents that set towards it from all directions, and which have enticed many a good ship to her destruction. Others, however, were not so wise as he, and at daylight one morning the watch on deck sang out,

"Wreck off the starboard bow!"

This brought all hands quickly on deck, and, sure enough, about five miles from them they saw the wreck looming high out of the water, and evidently stranded. As her masts, with their crossed yards, were still standing, "Captain Li" said she must have struck very easily, and stood a good chance of being saved if she could only be lightened before a blow came that would roll a sea in on her.

"Are you going to her assistance?" asked Mr. Elmer.

"Certainly I am," answered the captain. "I consider that one of the first duties of a sailor is to give aid to his fellows in distress. Besides, if we succeed in saving her and her cargo, we stand a chance of making several thousand dollars salvage money, which I for one do not care to throw away."

"You are quite right," said Mr. Elmer. "It is seldom that we are offered an opportunity of doing good and being well paid for it at the same time, and it would be foolish, as well as heartless, not to render what assistance lies in our power."

The schooner was already headed towards the wreck, but approached it very slowly, owing to the light breeze that barely filled her sails. As the sun rose, and cast a broad flood of light over the tranquil scene, the captain anxiously scanned the line of the reef in both directions through his glass.

"Ah, I thought so!" he exclaimed; "there they come, and there, and there. I can count six already. Now we shall have a race for it."

"Who? what?" asked Mark, not understanding the captain's exclamations.

"Wreckers!" answered the captain. "Take the glass, and you can see their sails coming from every direction; and they have seen us long ago too. I actually believe those fellows can smell a wreck a hundred miles off. Halloo

there, forward! Stand by to lower the gig."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mr. Elmer.

"I am going to try and reach that wreck before any of the boats whose sails you can see slipping out from behind those low keys. The first man aboard that ship is 'wreck−master,' and gets the largest share of salvage money."

So saying, "Captain Li" swung himself over the side and into the light gig, which, with its crew of four lusty young Maine sailors, had already been got overboard and now awaited him. As he seized the tiller ropes he shouted, "Now, then, give way! and a hundred dollars extra salvage to you four if this gig is the first boat to lay alongside of that wreck."

At these words the long ash oars bent like willow wands in the grasp of the young Northern giants, and the gig sprang away like a startled bonito, leaving a long line of bubbles to mark her course.

The wreck was still three miles off; and, with the glass, small boats could be seen shooting away from several of the approaching wrecking vessels.

"It's a race between Conchs and Yankees," said Jan Jansen to Mark.

"What are Conchs?" asked the boy.

"Why, those fellows in the other boats. Most of them come from the Bahama Islands, and all Bahamians are called 'Conchs,' because they eat so many of the shell−fish of that name."

"Well, I'll bet on the Yankees!" cried Mark.

"So will I," said the Swede. "Yankee baked beans and brown bread make better muscle than fish, which is about all the fellows down this way get to live on."

As seen from the deck of the schooner, the race had by this time become very exciting; for, as their boat approached the wreck on one side, another, manned by red−shirted wreckers, who were exhibiting a wonderful amount of pluck and endurance for "Conchs," as Jan called them, was rapidly coming up on the other. It was hard to tell which was the nearer; and while Mark shouted in his excitement, Mrs. Elmer and Ruth waved their handkerchiefs, though their friends were too far away to be encouraged by either the shouts or wavings.

At last "Captain Li's" boat dashed up alongside the wreck, and almost at the same instant the wrecker's boat disappeared from view on the opposite side.

With their glasses, those on the schooner saw their captain go up the side of the ship, hand over hand, along a rope that had been thrown him, and disappear over the bulwarks. They afterwards learned that he reached the deck of the ship, and thus made himself master of the wreck, just as the head of his rival appeared above the opposite side.

The wreck proved to be the ship Goodspeed, Captain Gillis, of and for Liverpool, with cotton from New Orleans. During the calm of the preceding night she had been caught by one of the powerful coast currents, and stealthily but surely drawn into the toils. Shortly before daylight she had struck on Pickle Reef, but so lightly and so unexpectedly that her crew could hardly believe the slight jar they felt was anything more than the shock of striking some large fish. They soon found, however, that they were hard and fast aground, and had struck on the very top of the flood tide, so that, as it ebbed, the ship became more and more firmly fixed in her position. As the ship settled with the ebbing tide she began to leak badly, and Captain Gillis was greatly relieved when daylight disclosed to him the presence of the Nancy Bell, and he greeted her captain most cordially as the latter gained the

deck of his ship.

By the time the schooner had approached the wreck, as nearly as her own safety permitted, and dropped anchor for the first time since leaving Bangor, a dozen little wrecking craft, manned by crews of swarthy spongers and fishermen, had also reached the spot, and active preparations for lightening the stranded ship were being made. Her carefully battened hatches were uncovered, whips were rove to her lower yards, and soon the tightly pressed bales of cotton began to appear over her sides, and find their way into the light draught wrecking vessels waiting to receive them. As soon as one of these was loaded, she transferred her cargo to the Nancy Bell and returned for another.

While the wreckers were busily discharging the ship's cargo, her own crew were overhauling long lines of chain cable, and lowering two large anchors and two smaller ones into one of the wrecking boats that had remained empty on purpose to receive them. The cables were paid out over the stern of the ship, and made fast to the great anchors, which were carried far out into the deep water beyond the reef. Each big anchor was backed by a smaller one, to which it was attached by a cable, and which was carried some distance beyond it before being dropped overboard.

When the anchors were thus placed in position, the ends of the cables still remaining on board the ship were passed around capstans, and by means of the donkey−engine drawn taut.

At high tide that night a heavy strain was brought to bear on the cables, in hopes that the ship might be pulled off the reef; but she did not move, and the work of lightening her and searching for the leak continued all the next day.

While all this work was going on the Elmers spent most of their time in exploring the reef in the captain's gig, which was so light that Mr. Elmer and Mark could easily row it.

As the clear water was without a ripple, they could look far down into its depths, and see the bottom of branching coral, as beautiful as frosted silver. From among its branches sprang great sea−fans, delicate as lace−work, and showing, in striking contrast to the pure white of the coral, the most vivid reds, greens, and royal purple. These, and masses of feathery seaweeds, waved to and fro in the water as though stirred by a light breeze, and among them darted and played fish as brilliant in coloring as tropical birds. The boat seemed suspended in midair above fairy−land, and even the children gazed down over its sides in silence, for fear lest by speaking they should break the charm, and cause the wonderful picture to vanish.

By noon the heat of the sun was so great that they sought shelter from it on a little island, or key, of about an acre in extent, that was covered with a luxuriant vegetation, and shaded by a group of stately cocoa−nut palms. Mr. Elmer showed Mark how to climb one of these by means of a bit of rope fastened loosely around his body and the smooth trunk of the tree, and the boy succeeded in cutting off several bunches of the great nuts that hung just below the wide−spreading crown of leaves. They came to the ground with a crash, but the thick husk in which each was enveloped saved them from breaking. The nuts were quite green, and Mr. Elmer with a hatchet cut several of them open and handed them to his wife and children. None of them contained any meat, for that had not yet formed, but they were filled with a white, milky fluid, which, as all of the party were very thirsty, proved a most acceptable beverage.

After eating the luncheon they had brought with them, and satisfying their thirst with the cocoa−nut milk, Mark and Ruth explored the beach of the little island in search of shells, which they found in countless numbers, of strange forms and most beautiful colors, while their parents remained seated in the shade of the palms.

"Wouldn't it be gay if we could stay here always?" said Mark.

"No," answered the more practical Ruth; "I don't think it would be at all. I would rather be where there are people and houses; besides, I heard father say that these little islands are often entirely covered with water during great storms, and I'm sure I wouldn't want to be here then."

It was nearly sunset when they returned to the schooner, with their boat well loaded with the shells and other curiosities that the children had gathered.

At high tide that night the strain on the cables proved sufficient to move the stranded ship, and, foot by foot, she was pulled off into deep water, much to the joy of Captain Gillis and those who had worked with him.

The next morning the entire fleet ship, schooner, and wrecking boats set sail for Key West, which port they reached during the afternoon, and where they found they would be obliged to spend a week or more while an Admiralty Court settled the claims for salvage.

CHAPTER V. MARK AND RUTH ATTEND AN AUCTION.

Although Mr. and Mrs. Elmer regretted the delay in Key West, being anxious to get settled in their new home as soon as possible, the children did not mind it a bit; indeed, they were rather glad of it. In the novelty of everything they saw in this queerest of American cities, they found plenty to occupy and amuse them.

The captain and their father were busy in the court−room nearly every day, and Mrs. Elmer did not care to go ashore except for a walk in the afternoon with her husband. So the children went off on long exploring expeditions by themselves, and the following letter, written during this time by Ruth to her dearest friend, Edna May, will give an idea of some of the things they saw:

"KEY WEST, FLA., December 15, 188−.

"MY DEAREST EDNA, It seems almost a year since I left you in dear old Norton, so much has happened since then. This is the very first chance I have had since I left to send you a letter, so I will make it a real long one, and try to tell you everything.

"I was not sea−sick a bit, but Mark was.

"In the Penobscot River we rescued a man from a floating cake of ice, and brought him with us. His name is Jan Jansen, but Mark calls him Jack Jackson. A few days before we got here we found a wreck, and helped get it off, and brought it here to Key West. Now we are waiting for a court to say how much it was worth to do it. I shouldn't wonder if they allowed as much as a thousand dollars, for the wreck was a big ship, and it was real hard work.

"This is an awfully funny place, and I just wish you were here to walk round with Mark and me and see it. It is on an island, and that is the reason it is named 'Key,' because all the islands down here are called keys. The Spaniards call it 'Cayo Hueso,' which means bone key, or bone island; but I'm sure I don't know why, for I haven't seen any bones here. The island is all made of coral, and the streets are just hard white coral worn down. The island is almost flat, and 'Captain Li' he's our captain says that the highest part is only sixteen feet above the ocean.

"Oh, Edna! you ought to see the palm−trees. They grow everywhere, great cocoa−nut and date palms, and we drink the milk out of the cocoa−nuts when we go on picnics and get thirsty. And the roses are perfectly lovely, and they have great oleanders and cactuses, and hundreds of flowers that I don't know the names of, and they are all in full bloom now, though it is nearly Christmas. I don't suppose I shall hang up my stocking this Christmas; they don't seem to do it down here.

"The other day we went out to the soldiers' barracks, and saw a banyan−tree that 'Captain Li' says is the only one in the United States, but we didn't see any monkeys or elephants. Mark says he don't think this is very tropical, because we haven't seen any bread−fruit−trees nor a single pirate; but they used to have them here I mean pirates. Anyhow, we have custard apples, and they sound tropical, don't they? And we have sapadilloes that look like potatoes, and taste like well, I think they taste horrid, but most people seem to like them.

"It is real hot here, and I am wearing my last summer's best straw hat and my thinnest linen dresses you know, those I had last vacation. The thermometer got up to 85 degrees yesterday.

"Do write, and tell me all about yourself and the girls. Has Susie Rand got well enough to go to school yet? and who's head in the algebra class? Mark wants to know how's the skating, and if the boys have built a snow fort yet? Most all the people here are black, and everybody talks Spanish: it is SO funny to hear them.

"Now I must say good−bye, because Mark is calling me to go to the fruit auction. I will tell you about it some other time.

"With love to everybody, I am your own lovingest friend,

"RUTH ELMER.

"P.S. Don't forget that you are coming down here to see me next winter."

Before Ruth finished this letter Mark began calling to her to hurry up, for the bell had stopped ringing, and the auction would be all over before they got there. She hurriedly directed it, and put it in her pocket to mail on the way to the auction, just as her brother called out that he "did think girls were the very slowest."

They had got nearly to the end of the wharf at which the schooner lay, when Ruth asked Mark if he had any money.

"No," said he, "not a cent. I forgot all about it. Just wait here a minute while I run back and get some from mother."

"Well," said Ruth, "if boys ain't the very carelessest!" But Mark was out of hearing before she finished.

While she waited for him, Ruth looked in at the open door of a very little house, where several colored women were making beautiful flowers out of tiny shells and glistening fish−scales. She became so much interested in their work that she was almost sorry when Mark came running back, quite out of breath, and gasped, "I've got it! Now let's hurry up!"

Turning to the left from the head of the wharf, they walked quickly through the narrow streets until they came to a square, on one corner of which quite a crowd of people were collected. They were all listening attentively to a little man with a big voice, who stood on a box in front of them and who was saying as fast as he could,

"Forty, forty, forty. Shall I have the five? Yes, sir; thank you. Forty−five, five, five who says fifty? Fifty, fifty, forty−five going, going, gone! and sold at forty−five to Mr. Beg pardon; the name, sir? Of course, certainly! And now comes the finest lot of oranges ever offered for sale in Key West. What am I bid per hundred for them? Who makes me an offer? I am a perfect Job for patience, gentlemen, and willing to wait all day, if necessary, to hear what you have to say."

Of course he was an auctioneer, and this was the regular fruit auction that is held on this same corner every morning of the year. Many other things besides fruit are sold at these auctions; in fact, almost everything in Key

West is bought or sold at auction; certainly all fruit is. For an hour before the time set for the auction a man goes through the streets ringing a bell and announcing what is to be sold. This morning he had announced a fine lot of oranges, among other things, and as Mrs. Elmer was anxious to get some, she had sent Mark and Ruth to attend the auction, with a commission to buy a hundred if the bids did not run too high.

The children had already attended several auctions as spectators, and Mark knew enough not to bid on the first lot offered. He waited until somebody who knew more about the value of oranges than he should fix the price. He and Ruth pushed their way as close as possible to the auctioneer, and watched him attentively.

"Come, gentlemen," said the little man, "give me a starter. What am I to have for the first lot of these prime oranges?"

"Two dollars!" called a voice from the crowd.

"Two," cried the auctioneer. "Two, two, two and a half. Who says three? Shall I hear it? And three. Who bids three? That's right. Do I hear the quarter? They are well worth it, gentlemen. Will no one give me the quarter? Well, time is money, and tempus fugit. Going at three at three; going, going, and sold at three dollars."

Several more lots sold so rapidly at three dollars that Mark had no opportunity of making himself heard or of catching the auctioneer's eye, until, finally, in a sort of despair he called out "Quarter," just as another lot was about to be knocked down to a dealer at three dollars.

"Ah!" said the auctioneer, "that is something like. It takes a gentleman from the North to appreciate oranges at their true value. A quarter is bid. Shall I have a half? Do I hear it? Half, half, half; and sold at three dollars and a quarter to Mr. −what name, please? Elder. Oh yes; good old name, and one you can live up to more and more every day of your life. John, pick out a hundred of the best for Mr. Elder."

The oranges selected by John were such beauties that neither Mark nor his mother regretted the extra quarter paid for them. After that, during the rest of their stay in Key West, whenever Mark went near a fruit auction he was addressed politely by the auctioneer as "Mr. Elder," and invited to examine the goods offered for sale that day.

One day Mark and Ruth rowed out among the vessels of the sponging fleet that had just come in from up the coast. Here they scraped acquaintance with a weather−beaten old sponger, who sat in the stern of one of the smallest of the boats, smoking a short pipe and overhauling some rigging; and from him they gained much new information concerning sponges.

"We gets them all along the reef as far as Key Biscayne," said the old sponger; "but the best comes from Rock Island, up the coast nigh to St. Mark's."

"Why, that's where we're going!" interrupted Ruth.

"Be you, sissy? Wal, you'll see a plenty raked up there, I reckon. Did you ever hear tell of a water−glass?"

"No," said Ruth, "I never did."

"Wal," said the old man, "here's one; maybe you'd like to look through it." And he showed them what looked like a wooden bucket with a glass bottom. "Jest take an' hold it a leetle ways down into the water and see what you can see."

Taking the bucket which was held out to her, Ruth did as the old man directed, and uttered an exclamation of delight. "Why, I can see the bottom just as plain as looking through a window."

"To be sure," said the old sponger; "an' that's the way we sees the sponges lying on the bottom. An' when we sees 'em we takes those long−handled rakes there an' hauls 'em up to the top. When they fust comes up they's plumb black, and about the nastiest things you ever did see, I reckon. We throws 'em into crawls built in shallow water, an' lets 'em rot till all the animal matter is dead, an' we stirs 'em up an beats 'em with sticks to get it out. Then they has to be washed an' dried an' trimmed, an' handled consider'ble, afore they's ready for market. Then they's sold at auction."

The sponge crawls of which the old man spoke are square pens make of stakes driven into the sand side by side, and as close as possible together. In some of them at Key West Mark and Ruth saw little negro boys diving to bring up stray sponges that the rakes had missed. They did not seem to enjoy this half as much as Mark and his boy friends used to enjoy diving in the river at Norton, and they shivered as though they were cold, in spite of the heat of the day.

When the children told Mr. Elmer about these little, unhappy− looking divers that night, he said,

"That shows how what some persons regard as play, may become hard and unpleasant work to those who are compelled to do it."

Several days after this Mr. Elmer engaged a carriage, and took his wife and the children on a long drive over the island. During this drive the most interesting things they saw were old Fort Taylor, which stands just outside the city, and commands the harbor, the abandoned salt−works, about five miles from the city, and the Martello towers, built along the southern coast of the island. These are small but very strong forts, built by the government, but as yet never occupied by soldiers.

In one of them the Elmers were shown a large, jagged hole, broken through the brick floor of one of the upper stories. This, the sergeant in charge told them, had been made by a party of sailors who deserted from a man−of−war lying in the harbor, and hid themselves in this Martello tower. They made it so that through it they could point their muskets and shoot anybody sent to capture them as soon as he entered the lower rooms. They did not have a chance to use it for this purpose, however, for the officer sent after them just camped outside the tower and waited patiently until hunger compelled the runaways to surrender, when he quietly marched them back to the ship.

In all of the forts, as well as in all the houses of Key West, are great cisterns for storing rain−water, for there are no wells on the island, and the only fresh−water to be had is what can be caught and stored during the rainy season.

It was a week after the orange auction that Mr. Elmer came into the cabin of the schooner one afternoon and announced that the court had given its decision, and that they would sail the next day.

This decision of the court gave to the schooner Nancy Bell five thousand dollars, and this, "Captain Li" said, must, according to wrecker's law, be divided among all who were on board the schooner at the time of the wreck. Accordingly, he insisted upon giving Mr. and Mrs. Elmer each two hundred dollars, and Mark, Ruth, and Jan each one hundred dollars. As neither of the children had ever before owned more than five dollars at one time, they now felt wealthy enough to buy the State of Florida, and regarded each other with vastly increased respect. While their father took charge of this money for them, he told them they might invest it as they saw fit, provided he and their mother thought the investment a good one.

At daylight next morning the Nancy Bell again spread her sails, and soon Key West was but a low−lying cloud left far behind. For three days they sailed northward, with light winds, over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. On the evening of the third day a bright light flashed across the waters ahead of them, and "Captain Li" said it was at the mouth of the St. Mark's River. As the tide was low, and no pilot was to be had that night, they

had to stand off and on, and wait for daylight before crossing the bar and sailing up the river beyond it.

CHAPTER VI. A QUEER CHRISTMAS−DAY.

All night long the Nancy Bell sailed back and forth within sight of the light that marked the mouth of the river. Soon after day− light a pilot−boat was seen approaching her in answer to the signal which was flying from the main rigging. As the boat ran alongside, a colored pilot clambered to the deck and declared it did him good to see a big schooner waiting to come into the St. Mark's once more.

"Uster be a plenty of 'em," said he to "Captain Li," "but dey's scurcer'n gole dollars now−adays, an' I'se proud to see 'em comin' ag'in."

By the time breakfast was over and the Elmers came on deck, they found the schooner running rapidly up a broad river, between wide expanses of low salt−marshes, bounded by distant pine forests, and studded here and there with groups of cabbage palms. The channel was a regular zig−zag, and they ran now to one side and then far over to the other to escape the coral reefs and oyster bars with which it is filled. This occupied much time; but the breeze was fresh, and within an hour they had run eight miles up the river, and were passing the ruins of the old Spanish Fort of St. Mark's. A few minutes later sails were lowered, and the schooner was moored to one of the rotten old wharves that still remain to tell of St. Mark's former glory.

"And is this St. Mark's?" asked Mrs. Elmer, looking with a feeling of keen disappointment at the dozen or so tumble−down frame buildings that, perched on piles above the low, wet land, looked like dilapidated old men with shaky legs, and formed all that was to be seen of the town.

"Yes, miss," answered the colored pilot, who seemed to consider her question addressed to him. "Dis yere's St. Mark's, or what de gales has lef' of hit. 'Pears like dey's been mighty hard on de ole town, sence trade fell off, an' mos' of de folkses moved away. Uster be wharves all along yere, an' cotton−presses, an' big war'houses, an' plenty ships in de ribber; but now dey's all gone. Dem times we uster hab fo' trains of kyars a day; but now dere's only one train comes tree times in de week, an' hit's only got one kyar. Ole St. Mark's a−seein' bad times now, for sho."

As soon as he could get ashore, Mr. Elmer, accompanied by Mark and the captain, went up into the village to find out what he could regarding their destination and future movements. In about an hour he returned, bringing a package of letters from the post−office, and the information that Uncle Christopher Bangs's place was at Wakulla, some six miles farther up the river. As the river above St. Mark's is quite crooked, and bordered on both sides by dense forests, and as no steam−tug could be had, the captain did not care to attempt to carry the schooner any farther up. Mr. Elmer had therefore chartered a large, flat−bottomed lighter, or scow, to carry to Wakulla the cargo of household goods, tools, building material, etc., that they had brought with them.

As "Captain Li" was anxious to proceed on his voyage to Pensacola as quickly as possible, the lighter was at once brought alongside the schooner, and the work of discharging the Elmers' goods into her was begun.

"By−the−way, Mark," said Mr. Elmer, as the schooner's hatches were removed, "I am just reminded that this is Christmas−day, and that there is a present down in the hold for you from your Uncle Christmas. It will be one of the first things taken out, so see if you can recognize it."

He had hardly spoken before the sailors, who had gone down into the hold, passed carefully up to those on deck a beautiful birch− bark canoe, with the name Ruth painted on its bows.

"That's it, father! that's it! I'm sure it is. Oh! isn't she a beauty?" shouted Mark, wild with delight. "Oh! father, how did he know just exactly what I wanted most?" and the excited boy rushed down into the cabin to beg his mother

and Ruth to come on deck and see his Christmas present.

The canoe was followed by two paddles painted a bright vermilion, and as they were placed in her, and she was laid to one side of the deck, she was indeed as pretty a little craft as can be imagined, and one that would delight any boy's heart.

"I knew we were going to live near a river, my dear," said Mr. Elmer, in answer to his wife's anxious expression as she looked at the canoe, "and as Mark is a good swimmer and very careful in boats, I thought a canoe would afford him great pleasure, and probably prove very useful to all of us. So when Uncle Christopher asked me what I thought the boy would like most for a Christmas present, I told him a canoe."

"Well, I hope it will prove safe," sighed Mrs. Elmer; "but I wish it were flat−bottomed, and built of thick boards instead of that thin bark."

"Oh, mother!" said Mark, "you might as well wish it were a canal− boat at once."

"Yes, I believe canal−boats are generally considered safer than canoes," answered his mother with a smile. "By−the−way, Mark" and she turned to her husband "one of the letters you brought was from Uncle Christopher, and he says he thinks he forgot to tell us that there is a house on his place, which he hopes we will find in a fit condition to occupy."

Mr. Elmer had expected to have to build a house, and had accordingly brought with him sashes, doors, blinds, the necessary hardware, and in fact everything except lumber for that purpose. This material was now being transferred from the schooner to the lighter, and now it seemed almost a pity to have brought it; still they were very glad to learn that they were likely to find a house all ready to move into.

It wanted but two hours of sundown when the last of the Elmers' goods were stowed in the lighter, and as there was nothing to detain him any longer, "Captain Li" said he should take advantage of the ebb tide that night to drop down the river and get started for Pensacola. As rowing and poling the heavy lighter up the river would at best prove but slow work, and as there was no hotel or place for them to stay in St. Mark's, Mr. Elmer thought they too had better make a start, and take advantage of the last of the flood tide and what daylight still remained.

So good−byes were exchanged, and feeling very much as though they were leaving home for the second time, the Elmers left the comfortable cabin that had sheltered them for nearly a month. Followed by Jan, they went on board their new craft, and the lines were cast off. The crew of four strong colored men bent over the long sweeps, and followed by a hearty cheer from the crew of the schooner, the scow moved slowly up the river. In a few minutes a bend hid St. Mark's and the tall masts of the Nancy Bell from sight, and on either side of them appeared nothing but unbroken forest.

The river seemed narrow and dark after the open sea to which the Elmers had been so long accustomed, and from its banks the dense growth of oak, cedar, magnolia, palm, bay, cypress, elm, and sweet gum trees, festooned with moss, and bound together with a net−work of vines, rose like walls, shutting out the sunlight. Strange water−fowl, long−legged and long−billed, flew screaming away as they advanced, and quick splashes in the water ahead of them told of the presence of other animal life.

At sunset they were nearly two miles from St. Mark's, and opposite a cleared spot on the bank, where was piled a quantity of light− wood or pitch−pine. Here the captain and owner of the lighter, who was a young white man named Oliver Johnson, proposed that they should tie up for the night.

To this Mr. Elmer consented, and as soon as the boat was made fast to the bank, active preparations were begun for cooking supper, and for making everything as snug and comfortable as possible.

A large sail was stretched across some poles, in the form of a tent, over the after−part of the lighter, and beneath this two comfortable beds were made up from the abundant supply of mattresses and blankets belonging to the Elmers. Jan Jansen and Captain Johnson, who, Mark said, must be related, as their names were the same, spread their blankets in the forward end of the boat. On shore the negro crew built for themselves a thatched lean−to of poles and palm−leaves beside the fire, that was already throwing its cheerful light across the dark surface of the river.

While the men were busy arranging the shelters and bedding, Mrs. Elmer and Ruth, assisted by one of the negroes, were cooking supper over a bed of coals that had been raked from the fire. A huge pot of coffee sent forth clouds of fragrant steam, and in two frying−pans some freshly caught fish sizzled and browned in a most gratifying and appetizing manner. In a couple of kettles hung over the fire hominy and sweet potatoes bubbled, boiled, and tried to outdo each other in getting done. Fresh−made bread and a good supply of butter had been brought from the schooner. When the supper was all ready, and spread out on a green table−cloth of palm−leaves, Mark and Ruth declared that this picnic was even jollier than the one on the island of the Florida Reef, and that this was after all one of the very best Christmases they had ever known.

After supper, and when the dishes had all been washed and put away, the Elmers, Captain Johnson, and Jan sought the shelter of the canvas awning from the heavy night−dew which had begun to fall as soon as the sun went down. They lifted the sides, so that they could look out and see the fire around which the crew were gathered. After a while one of these started a plaintive negro melody, which sounded very sweetly through the still air. The others took it up, and they sang for an hour or more, greatly to the delight of the children, to whom such music was new. Many of the words were composed as they sang, and Mark and Ruth could not help laughing at some of them, which, though sung very soberly, sounded funny. One song which they afterwards remembered was:

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"Oh, dey put John on de islan'
  When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, dey put John on de islan'
   When de Bridegroom come;
An' de rabens come an' fed him
   When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, de rabens come an' fed him
   When de Bridegroom come.
An' five of dem was wise
   When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, five of dem was wise
   When de Bridegroom come;
An' five of dem was foolish
   When de Bridegroom come;
Yes, five of dem was foolish
   When de Bridegroom come.
Oh, gib us of yo' ile
   When de Bridegroom come;
Oh, gib us of yo' ile
   When de Bridegroom come;
Fo' you'll nebber get to heaben
   When de Bridegroom come;
No, you'll nebber get to heaben
   When de Bridegroom come;
Aless you's ile a−plenty
   When de Bridegroom come;
Aless you's ile a−plenty
   When de Bridegroom come."
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In the midst of the singing a voice called out from the tree−tops,

"Who, who, who, who's there?" or at least so it sounded.

Immediately the singing stopped, and one of the negroes answered,

"Some folkses from de Norf, Marse Owl, an' Cap'n Johnsin, an' me, an' Homer, an' Virgil, an' Pete."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Mr. Elmer of the captain.

"Oh," answered he, "it's one of their superstitions that they'll have bad luck if they don't answer an owl politely when he asks 'Who's there?' and give the names of all the party, if they know them."

Soon after this all hands sought their blankets, good−nights were said, the fire died down, and all was quiet in the camp, though several times some sleepy negro roused himself sufficiently to answer the owl's repeated question of "Who's there?"

It must have been nearly midnight when the camp was startled by a crash, a series of smothered cries, and a loud splashing in the water. It was evident that something serious had happened, but what it was no one could make out in the darkness.

CHAPTER VII. ARRIVAL AT THE NEW HOME.

Some light−wood splinters were quickly thrown upon the smouldering remains of the fire, and as it blazed up brightly, the lighter, in which the whites had been sleeping, was seen to be on its beam ends. One side rested high up on the bank and the other down in the mud at the bottom of the river, just on the edge of the channel. Some little distance down stream a sorry−looking figure, which was hardly recognizable as that of Jan, was floundering through the mud and water towards the bank. On the lower side of the lighter the canvas, that had been spread like a tent over the afterpart, had broken from its fastenings, and was now tossing and heaving in a most remarkable manner. From beneath it came the smothered cries of the Elmers, who had been suddenly wakened to find themselves mixed together in the most perplexing way, and entangled in their blankets and the loose folds of the canvas.

Captain Johnson seemed to be the only person who had his wits about him, and who was in a condition to render any assistance. As soon as he could pick himself up he made his way to the other end of the boat and dragged the canvas from off the struggling family. First Mr. Elmer emerged from the confusion, then Mrs. Elmer and Ruth were helped out, and last of all poor Mark, who had been buried beneath the entire family, was dragged forth, nearly smothered and highly indignant.

"It's a mean trick, and I didn't think " he began, as soon as he got his breath; but just then his eye fell upon the comical figure of Jan. He was walking towards the fire, dripping mud and water from every point, and Mark's wrath was turned into hearty laughter at this sight. In it he was joined by all the others as soon as they saw the cause of his mirth.

After the Elmers had been helped up the steep incline of the boat, and were comfortably fixed near the fire, Captain Johnson and Jan, who said he didn't mind mud now any more than an alligator, took light−wood torches and set out to discover what had happened. As Jan climbed down the bank into the mud, and held his torch beneath the boat, he saw in a moment the cause of the accident, and knew just how it had occurred.

As the tide ebbed the lighter had been gradually lowered, until it rested on the upright branches of an old water−logged tree−top that was sunk in the mud at this place. The water falling lower and lower, the weight upon these branches became greater and greater, until they could support it no longer, and one side of the lighter went

down with a crash, while the other rested against the bank. Jan, who had been sleeping on the upper side of the boat, was thrown out into the water when it fell, as some of the Elmers doubtless would have been had not their canvas shelter prevented such a catastrophe.

The rest of the night was spent around the fire, which was kept up to enable Jan to dry his clothes. By daylight the tide had risen, so that the lighter again floated on an even keel. By sunrise a simple breakfast of bread−and−butter and coffee had been eaten, and our emigrants were once more afloat and moving slowly up the tropical−looking river.

About ten o'clock Captain Johnson pointed to a huge dead cypress− tree standing on the bank of the river some distance ahead, and told the Elmers that it marked one of the boundary−lines of Wakulla. They gazed at it eagerly, as though expecting it to turn into something different from an ordinary cypress, and all felt more or less disappointed at not seeing any clearings or signs of human habitations. It was not until they were directly opposite the village that they saw its score or so of houses through the trees and undergrowth that fringed the bank.

As the Bangs place, to which the children gave the name of "Go Bang" a name that adhered to it ever afterwards was across the river from the village, the lighter was poled over to that side. There was no wharf, so she was made fast to a little grassy promontory that Captain Johnson said was once one of the abutments of a bridge. There was no bridge now, however, and already Mark saw that his canoe was likely to prove very useful.

The first thing to do after getting ashore and seeing the precious canoe safely landed was to find the house. As yet they had seen no trace of it, so heavy was the growth of trees every−where, except at the abutment, which was built of stone, covered with earth and a thick sod. From here an old road led away from the river through the woods, and up it Mr. and Mrs. Elmer and Captain Johnson now walked, Mark and Ruth having run on ahead. The elders had gone but a few steps when they heard a loud cry from Ruth, and hurried forward fearing that the children were in trouble. They met Ruth running back towards them, screaming, "A snake! a snake! a horrid big snake!"

"I've got him!" shouted Mark from behind some bushes, and sure enough there lay a black snake almost as long as Mark was tall, which he had just succeeded in killing with a stick.

Mrs. Elmer shuddered at the sight of the snake, though her husband assured her that it had been perfectly harmless even when alive.

Not far from where the snake had been killed they found a spring of water bubbling up, as clear as crystal, from a bed of white sand, but giving forth such a disagreeable odor that the children declared it was nasty. Mr. Elmer, however, regarded it with great satisfaction, and told them it was a sulphur spring, stronger than any he had ever seen, and that they would find it very valuable. They all drank some of the water out of magnolia−leaf cups; but the children made faces at the taste, and Mark said it made him feel like a hard−boiled egg.

A path leading from the spring at right angles to the road from the river took them into a large clearing that had once been a cultivated field, and on the farther side of this field stood the house. As they approached it they saw that it was quite large, two stories in height, with dormer windows in the roof, but that it bore many signs of age and long neglect. Some of the windows were broken and others boarded up, while the front door hung disconsolately on one hinge.

The house stood in a grove of grand live−oaks, cedars, and magnolias, and had evidently been surrounded by a beautiful garden, enclosed by a neat picket−fence; but now the fence was broken down in many places, and almost hidden by a dense growth of vines and creepers. In the garden, rose−bushes, myrtles, oleanders, and camellias grew with a rank and untrained luxuriance, and all were matted together with vines of honeysuckle and clematis.

The front porch of the house was so rotten and broken that, after forcing their way through the wild growth of the garden, the party had to cross it very carefully in order to enter the open door. The interior proved to be in a much better condition than they had dared hope, judging from the outside appearance of the house. It was filled with the close, musty odor common to deserted buildings, and they quickly threw wide open all the windows and doors that were not nailed up. On the first floor were four large rooms, each containing a fireplace and several closets, and up− stairs were four more, lighted by the dormer windows in the roof. A broad hall ran through the house from front to rear, opening upon a wide back porch which was also much out of repair. Beneath this porch Mr. Elmer discovered a brick cistern half full of dirty water, which he knew must be very foul, as the gutters along the roof were so rotten and broken that they could not have furnished a fresh supply in a long time.

Behind the main house, and surrounded by large fig−trees, they found another building, in a fair state of preservation, containing two rooms, one of which had been the kitchen. In the huge fireplace of this kitchen they were surprised to see freshly burned sticks and a quantity of ashes, while about the floor were scattered feathers and bones, and in one corner was a pile of moss that looked as though it has been used for a bed. Beyond the kitchen were the ruins of several out−buildings that had fallen by reason of their age, or been blown down during a gale.

Having thus made a hasty exploration of their new home, the party returned to the landing, to which their goods were being unloaded from the lighter by Jan and the crew. Leaving Mrs. Elmer and Ruth here, Mr. Elmer and Mark crossed the river to the village to see what they could procure in the way of teams and help.

Of the twenty houses in the village, many of which were in a most dilapidated condition, only two were occupied by white families, the rest of the population being colored. There were no stores nor shops of any kind, the only building not used as a dwelling−house being a small church very much out of repair. The white men living in the village were away from home, but from among the colored people, who were much excited at the arrival of strangers in their midst, Mr. Elmer engaged two men and their wives to cross the river and go to work at once. He also engaged a man who owned a team of mules and a wagon, and who would go over as soon as the lighter was unloaded and could be used to ferry him across.

On its return to the other side, the canoe was followed by a skiff containing the newly engaged colored help, whose amazement at everything they saw, and especially at the canoe, was unbounded. One of the men expressed his wonder at the little craft by saying, "Dat ar trick's so light, I reckon it's gwine leab de water some fine day, an' fly in de yair, like a duck."

Mrs. Elmer provided the women with brooms, mops, and pails, and took them up to the house, where they proceeded to put the lower story in order for immediate occupation. Mr. Elmer armed the men with axes, and soon had them engaged in a struggle with the tangled growth in the front yard, through which they cut a broad path to the house. While they were doing this, Mr. Elmer and Jan cut and placed in position some temporary supports under the rickety porches, and Mark was set work at the windows. From these he knocked away all the boards, letting in floods of blessed sunlight, that drove from their snug retreats numbers of bats and several comical little owls.

One of the colored women "Aunt Chloe Cato," as she called herself, because she was Cato's wife was sent into the kitchen to clean it and to make a fire in the great fireplace. She could not explain the traces of recent occupation, but "'lowed 'twere de ghoses, kase dis yere ole Bang place done bin hanted."

"Well, it'll be 'hanted' now by the Elmer family," said Mark, who overheard her, "and they'll make it lively for any other 'ghoses' that come round."

"Don't ye, now, honey I don't ye go fo' to set up yo'sef agin de ghoses, kase dey's powerful pernickety when dey's crassed," said the old woman, whom Mark, with his love for nick−names, had already called "Ole Clo."

At noon all hands stopped work to eat a hasty lunch, and soon afterwards the lighter, being unloaded, was poled across the river for the team. With the help of Captain Johnson and his crew, who had agreed to remain over that night, most of the household goods were moved up to the house during the afternoon and placed under shelter.

While this work was going on, one of the white men from the village came over to see his new neighbors. He brought with him a wild−turkey, half a dozen ducks, and a string of freshly caught fish, as cards of introduction. His name was Bevil, and he welcomed the Elmers most heartily, and said that he considered their coming a sign of better times for that section of the country. He told Mr. Elmer that the Bangs place used to be considered one of the finest plantations in the county, and that its lands were as rich now as ever.

Before night the lower story of the old house looked quite comfortable, and almost homelike; and when the family sat down to dinner, it was with the keen appetites resulting from hard work. The dinner was a bountiful meal, largely composed of Mr. Bevil's game and fish; and before they ate it Mr. Elmer offered up a heart−felt thanksgiving for the mercies that had been granted them thus far, and prayed for a blessing on their new home.

That evening he arranged with Captain Johnson to start at daylight and go with his lighter to the nearest saw−mill, sixty miles away, for a load of lumber and shingles. He also commissioned him to buy and bring back a large skiff, such as were used on the river.

The tired household went early to bed that first night in their new home, and though their beds were made down on the floor, they all slept soundly.

All but Mark, who, after sleeping for some hours, woke suddenly to find himself sitting bolt−upright in bed, and staring at the broken window in front of him, through which a flood of moonlight was pouring. He was as certain as he could be of anything that he had seen a face at that window as he started up a wild, haggard face, framed by long unkempt hair. He sprang from his bed and looked out, but could see nobody, and heard no unusual sound except the distant "who−who−whoo" of an owl.

CHAPTER VIII. THE SUNDAY−SCHOOL, AND MORE MYSTERIES.

It must be confessed that, before getting to sleep again, Mark thought of what Aunt Chloe had said about the "ghoses"; but having been taught to disbelieve in such things, and always to seek for some natural explanation of whatever appeared supernatural or unreal, he made up his mind to wait and make the attempt to unravel this mystery by himself before saying anything about it.

The four days that remained of the week were very busy days for the Elmers and those whom they had employed to help them. During this time the interior of the old house was thoroughly cleansed and sweetened by the energetic use of soap and water, and straw matting was laid on the floors of the rooms down−stairs. The broken windows were all repaired by Mark, who found several boxes of glass and a bladder of putty among the building material they had brought from Bangor, and who, after a few trials, became quite a skilful glazier. The cistern was emptied of its stagnant water and thoroughly cleansed, and the gutters were repaired as well as they could be before the arrival of Captain Johnson and the lumber.

It was not until the windows and gutters were repaired that Mrs. Elmer would allow any of the furniture, not absolutely needed, to be unpacked, for fear it might be injured by the dampness. Among the packages that thus remained boxed up, or wrapped in burlaps, was one which none of them could remember having seen before. It was large and square, and different in shape from anything that had stood in their house in Norton. What could it be? Mark and Ruth asked each other this question a dozen times a day, and, but for their mother's refusal to allow them to do so, would have long since solved the riddle by opening the package.

On Friday night the house was pronounced to be practically water− tight, and at breakfast−time the following morning Mrs. Elmer said they would unpack and arrange the furniture that day.

"And the mystery?" cried Mark. "May we open that first?" "Certainly," replied his mother; "you may, if you wish, open that the moment you have finished breakfast."

"That's this very minute, ain't it, Ruth? Come along. We'll soon find out what's inside those burlaps," exclaimed the boy, pushing back his chair, and rising from the table as he spoke.

He brought a hammer with which to knock off the rough frame of boards that almost formed a box around the package, and Ruth ran for the shears to cut the stitches of the burlaps.

The frame quickly fell to pieces under Mark's vigorous blows, and then his penknife assisted Ruth's shears. Beneath the burlaps was a thick layer of straw; then came heavy wrapping−paper, and, under this, layers and wads of news−paper, until the children began to think the whole package was nothing but wrappings.

At last the papers were all pulled away, and there stood revealed, in all its beauty of structure and finish, a little gem of a cabinet organ. To one of its handles was tied a card, on which was printed in big letters:

"A Christmas Present, with wishes for a very merry Christmas, from Uncle 'Christmas' to his grandniece Ruth Elmer."

"Oh! oh! oh! ain't it lovely?" cried Ruth. "Dear old 'Uncle Christmas!' And I thought he had forgotten me, and only remembered Mark, too."

The organ was placed in the parlor, and from that day forth was a source of great pleasure, not only to Ruth and the Elmer family, but to their neighbors across the river, who frequently came over in the evening to hear Ruth play.

Among the events of that week were two that impressed Mark deeply, as they seemed to be connected in some way with the face he had seen at the window. One of these was the mysterious disappearance, on that same night, of a loaf of bread and a cold roast duck from the kitchen. The other was the appearance, two days later, at the kitchen door, of a poor wounded dog, who dragged himself out from the woods back of the house, and lay down on the step, evidently in great pain.

Ruth saw him as he lay there, panting and moaning, and ran to tell Mark, and her father and mother, of their visitor and his wretched plight. They all went to see him, and after a careful examination of the suffering animal, Mr. Elmer said he had been cruelly treated and badly wounded; but that, with proper treatment and care, he could be cured. "He is a cross between a pointer and a hound," continued Mr. Elmer, "and looks like a valuable dog. The wounds from which he is suffering are those caused by a charge of small shot, that must have been fired into him quite recently. I will do what I can for him, and then I shall turn him over to you and Ruth, Mark, and if he recovers he shall belong to you both. His present owner has forfeited all claim to him by cruel treatment, for without our care now the poor beast would certainly die. The first thing to do is to give him water, for he is very feverish."

The dog seemed to know, as well as his human friends, that the pain he suffered, while most of the shot were extracted on the point of a pen−knife, was for his good; for while he moaned and whined during the operation, he lay perfectly still, and did not offer the slightest resistance. After his wounds had been dressed, he was carefully removed to a bed of soft moss on the back porch, and here he lay quietly, only feebly wagging his tail whenever any of his new friends came to see him.

"Who could have shot this dog?" and "Why did the animal drag himself to our kitchen door?" were questions that puzzled Mark considerably during the rest of that day and for some days afterwards.

During that week Jan Jansen and the two negroes had worked hard at cutting away the undergrowth immediately around the house, and by Saturday night they had wonderfully improved the general appearance of things. The garden in front of the house had been cleared of everything except the ornamental shrubs properly belonging there. The fence had been freed from its crushing weight of vines, and its broken panels repaired, so that it now only needed a coat of paint to make it look as good as new. Back of the house they had cleared an acre of what had formerly been the kitchen−garden, and had opened a broad avenue down to the river, so that the back windows of the house now looked out upon it and the village beyond.

Late on Saturday evening Captain Johnson returned to Wakulla with a lighter−load of shingles, window−blinds, fence−pickets, and assorted lumber. He also brought the skiff that Mr. Elmer had commissioned him to buy.

The next day being Sunday, every member of the little community was prepared to enjoy a well−earned rest. During the morning they all crossed the river to the village, leaving "Go Bang" closed, and unprotected save by "Bruce," as the children had named the wounded dog.

In the village they found the little church closed and empty; so they went to the house of Mr. Bevil, whom they found at home, and who introduced them to his family. Mrs. Bevil expressed great pleasure at meeting Mrs. Elmer, and apologized for not having called; and Ruth was delighted to find that the eldest of the three Bevil children was a girl of about her own age, named Grace.

In reply to Mr. Elmer's inquiries, the Bevils said that no regular services were held in the church, and that it was only opened when some preacher happened to visit them.

Mr. Elmer proposed that they should organize a Sunday−school, to be held in the church every Sunday, and that they should make a beginning that very day.

To this the Bevils gladly consented, and two servants were immediately sent out one to open the church and ring the bell, and the other to invite all the colored people of the place to meet there in an hour.

Then the Elmers and Bevils went together to the house of Mr. Carter, the other white man of the village. Here were two children, a girl and a boy, both younger than Ruth; and Mr. and Mrs. Carter readily agreed to help establish the Sunday−school, and promised to be at the church at the appointed time.

When the Elmers entered the church they found nearly fifty men, women, and children assembled, and waiting with eager curiosity to see what was going to be done. The church was as dilapidated as most of the buildings in the village, and many of its windows were broken. In that climate, where snow is unknown and frost comes but seldom, this made little difference, and this Sunday was so warm and bright that the breeze coming in through the broken windows was very refreshing.

Mr. Elmer made a short address to the people, telling them that he and his family had come to live among them, and that he thought it would be very pleasant for them all to meet in that house every Sunday, for the purpose of studying the Bible and mutually helping one another. Then he asked all who were willing to help him establish a Sunday−school to hold up their hands, and every hand was immediately raised.

Mr. Bevil moved that Mr. Elmer be made superintendent of the Sunday−school, Mr. Carter seconded the motion, and it was unanimously carried.

The rest of the hour was occupied in forming classes and giving out lessons to be learned for the next Sunday. As most of the colored people could not read, it seemed important that they should be taught this first, and both Mark and Ruth were made teachers of ABC classes composed of the younger children.

Before the meeting closed Mr. Bevil made some remarks, in which he thanked the Elmers for what they had undertaken, reminded the school that the next day was the first of a new year, and said that, as he had already told Mr. Elmer, the coming and settling of these strangers among them marked the dawn of a new era of prosperity for Wakulla.

As the Elmers neared their home after Sunday−school they heard Bruce bark loudly; but when they reached it they found him cowed and whimpering. His eyes were fixed upon the point of woods nearest the house, and he exhibited signs of great fear. They also found the kitchen door standing wide open, though Mrs. Elmer was certain she had fastened it before leaving.

Again Mark thought of the "ghoses," but still he said nothing, and the opening of the door was finally credited to the wind.

That afternoon Mr. Bevil came over to make a call, and was much interested in the improvements already made and proposed. He declared that it reminded him of old times, when that side of the river was inhabited by a dozen or more families, and when Wakulla was one of the most prosperous towns in the State. He showed Mr. Elmer the sites of the old foundry and mills that once stood on that side of the river, and told him of the wharves that had lined both banks, the great cotton−presses, and the many vessels that used to fill it from bank to bank as they lay awaiting their loads of cotton. In those days a line of steam−ships plied regularly between Wakulla and New Orleans, and a steam−tug was kept constantly busy towing vessels between the town and the mouth of the river. Then a fine plank−road reached back from Wakulla a hundred miles into the country, and the two hotels of the place were constantly crowded with invalids, who came to receive the benefits of its famous sulphur and mineral springs. In those days six large stores were hardly sufficient for the business of the place, and then the land on both sides of the river for miles was cultivated, and produced heavy crops of cotton.

Now all that remained to tell of this former prosperity were a few rotten piles in the river where the wharves had stood, the bridge abutments, a handful of tumble−down houses, and here and there in the dense woods traces of cultivated fields, and an occasional brick chimney or pile of stone to mark the site of some old plantation house.

Mr. Elmer was much interested in all this, and mentally resolved that he would do all that lay in his power to revive the old−time prosperity of the place in which he had established his home.

"What we most need here now," concluded Mr. Bevil, "is a bridge over the river and a mill. It ought to be a saw−mill, grist−mill, and cotton−gin all in one."

The next morning Mr. Elmer said that he must go to Tallahassee, the nearest city, on business, and that he might be absent several days. Before going he laid out the work that he wanted each one to do while he was away. Mark was to take him down the river to the railroad station at St. Mark's, in his canoe, and on his return he and Jan were to go into the woods after as many cedar fence−posts as they could cut. The colored men were to prepare the large cleared field in front of the house, in which were about ten acres, for ploughing, and to dig post−holes around it on lines that he had marked. Captain Johnson and his crew were to unload the lighter and haul all the lumber and shingles up to the house.

When he and Mark went down to the canoe, it seemed to the latter that she was not just where he had left her the day before, and he thought she looked as though she had been recently used; but as he could not be certain, he said nothing about it to his father.

Mr. Elmer took a light rifle with him in the canoe, saying that there was no knowing but what they might find a chance to use it going down the river, and that Mark could bring it back. Mark was glad of this, for he inherited a love for shooting from his father, and having been carefully instructed, was a capital shot.

The day was unusually warm and bright for that season of the year, and as they floated quietly down−stream they surprised a number of alligators lying on the banks sunning themselves. As they were the first of these great reptiles that either Mr. Elmer or Mark had ever seen, they watched them with curiosity not unmixed with fear lest they should attack and upset the light canoe. They afterwards learned that their fears were groundless, and that cases of this kind are almost unknown.

They reached St. Mark's in time for Mr. Elmer to catch the train, and after he had gone Mark got the mail, of which quite a quantity had collected here for them, there being no post−office in Wakulla, and started for home.

On the way up the river the boy was strangely oppressed by the solitude and almost unbroken silence about him, and was very glad when he found himself within a mile of home.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a cry so terrible and agonized that he was for a moment nearly petrified with fright. He quickly recovered his presence of mind, and the first cry being followed by screams for help and a crashing of the bushes on a small wooded point that jutted into the river just ahead of him, he hastily ran the canoe up to the bank, seized his rifle, and sprang ashore.

CHAPTER IX. MARK DISCOVERS THE GHOST AND FINDS HIM IN A TRYING POSITION.

Mark dashed through the bushes for a hundred yards, heedless of the clinging thorns of the rattan vine that tore his clothes, and scratched his face and hands until they bled, before reaching the scene of what sounded like a terrible struggle. The screams for help told him that at least one of the contestants was a human being in sore distress, and in thus rushing to his assistance Mark did not give a moment's thought to his own safety. As he burst from the bushes he found himself in a little open glade on the opposite side of the point from that on which he had landed. Here he came upon a struggle for life such as rarely takes place even in the wilder regions of the South, and such as but few persons have ever witnessed.

On the farther side of the glade, clinging with the strength of despair to the trunk of a young magnolia−tree, lay a boy of about Mark's own age. His arms were nearly torn from their sockets by some terrible strain, and his eyes seemed starting from his head with horror. As he saw Mark he screamed, "Fire! Fire quick! His eyes! I'm letting go."

Looking along the boy's body Mark saw a pair of great jaws closed firmly upon his right foot, though the rest of the animal, whatever it was, was hidden in a thicket of bushes which were violently agitated. He could see the protruding eyes; and, springing across the opening, he placed the muzzle of the rifle close against one of them, and fired.

The horrid head was lifted high in the air with a bellow of rage and pain. As it fell it disappeared in the bushes, which were beaten down by the animal's death struggle, and then all was still.

Upon firing, Mark had quickly thrown another cartridge from the magazine into the chamber of his rifle, and held it in readiness for another shot. He waited a moment after the struggles ceased, and finding that no further attack was made, turned his attention to the boy, who lay motionless and as though dead at his feet. His eyes were closed, and Mark knew that he had fainted, though he had never seen a person in that condition before.

His first impulse was to try and restore the boy to consciousness; but his second, and the one upon which he acted, was to assure himself that the animal he had shot was really dead, and incapable of making another attack. Holding his rifle in one hand, and cautiously parting the bushes with the other, he peered, with a loudly beating heart, into the thicket. There, stretched out stiff and motionless, he saw the body of a huge alligator. It was dead dead as a mummy; there was no doubt of that; and without waiting to examine it further, Mark laid down his rifle and went to the river for water.

He brought three hatfuls, and dashed them, one after another, in the boy's face before the latter showed any signs of consciousness. Then the closed eyes were slowly opened, and fixed for an instant upon Mark, with the same look of horror that he had first seen in them, and the boy tried to rise to his feet, but fell back with a moan of pain.

Mark had already seen that the boy's right foot was terribly mangled and covered with blood, and he went quickly for more water with which to bathe it. After he had washed off the blood, and bound the wounded foot as well as he could with his handkerchief and one of his shirt sleeves torn into strips, he found that the boy had again opened his eyes, and seemed to have fully recovered his consciousness.

"Do you feel better?" asked Mark.

"Yes," answered the boy. "I can sit up now if you will help me."

Mark helped him into a sitting position, with his back against the tree to which he had clung when the alligator tried to drag him into the water. Then he said,

"Now wait here a minute while I bring round the canoe. I'll get you into it, and take you home, for your foot must be properly attended to as soon as possible."

Hurrying back to where he had left the canoe, Mark brought it around the point, very close to where the boy was sitting, and pulled one end of it up on the bank. Then going to the boy, he said,

"If you can stand up, and will put both arms around my neck, I'll carry you to the canoe; it's only a few steps."

Although he almost cried out with the pain caused by the effort, the boy succeeded in doing as Mark directed, and in a few minutes more was seated in the bottom of the canoe, with his wounded foot resting on Mark's folded jacket.

Carefully shoving off, and stepping gently into the other end of the canoe, Mark began to paddle swiftly up the river. The boy sat with closed eyes, and though Mark wanted to ask him how it had all happened, he waited patiently, fearing that his companion was too weak to talk. He noticed that the boy was barefooted and bareheaded, that his clothes were very old and ragged, and that he had a bag and a powder−horn slung over his shoulders. He also noticed that his hair was long and matted, and that his face, in spite of its present paleness, was tanned, as though by long exposure to the weather. It had a strangely familiar look to him, and it seemed as though he must have seen that boy somewhere before, but where he could not think.

Just before they reached the "Go Bang" landing−place the boy opened his eyes, and Mark, no longer able to restrain his curiosity, asked,

"How did the alligator happen to catch you?"

"I was asleep," answered the boy, "and woke up just in time to catch hold of that tree as he grabbed my foot and began pulling me to the water. He would have had me in another minute, for I was letting go when you came;" and the boy shuddered at the remembrance.

"Well," said Mark, a little boastfully, "he won't catch anybody else. He's as dead as a door−nail now. Here we are."

Jan and Captain Johnson were at the landing, and they listened with astonishment to Mark's hurried explanation of what had happened. The captain said they would carry the boy to the house, while Mark ran on and told his mother who was coming, so that she could prepare to receive him.

Mrs. Elmer was much shocked at Mark's story, and said she was very thankful that he had not only been the means of saving a human life, but had escaped unharmed himself. At the same time she made ready to receive the boy, and when the men brought him in she had a bed prepared for him, warm water and castile soap ready to bathe the wounds, and soft linen to bandage them.

Captain Johnson, who called himself "a rough and ready surgeon," carefully felt of the wounded foot to ascertain whether or not any bones were broken. The boy bore this patiently and without a murmur, though one or two gasps of pain escaped him. When the captain said that, though he could not feel any fractured bones, the ankle−joint was dislocated, and must be pulled back into place at once, he clinched his teeth, drew in a long breath, and nodded his head. Taking a firm hold above and below the dislocated joint, the captain gave a quick twist with his powerful hands that drew from the boy a sharp cry of pain.

"There," said the captain, soothingly, "it's all over; now we will bathe it and bandage it, and in a few days you will be as good as you were before you met Mr. 'Gator. If not better," he added, as he took note of the boy's wretched clothes and general appearance.

After seeing the patient made as comfortable as possible, Mark and the two men went out, leaving him to the gentle care of Mrs. Elmer and Ruth.

"Mark," said Captain Johnson, "let's take the skiff and go and get that alligator. I guess Miss Ruth would like to see him. One of my men can go along to help us, or Jan, if he will."

"All right," said Mark, and Jan said he would go if it wouldn't take too long.

"We'll be back in less than an hour," said the captain, "if it's only a mile away, as Mark says."

So they went, and it took the united strength of the three to get the alligator into the skiff when they found him. He measured ten feet and four inches in length, and Captain Johnson, who claimed to be an authority concerning alligators, said that was very large for fresh−water, though in tide−water they were sometimes found fifteen feet in length, and he had heard of several that were even longer.

While Mark was showing them just where the boy lay when he first saw him, Jan picked up an old muzzle−loading shot−gun and a pair of much−worn boots, that had heretofore escaped their notice. Both barrels of the gun were loaded, but one only contained a charge of powder, which surprised them.

"What do you suppose he was going to do with only a charge of powder?" asked Mark, when this discovery was made.

"I've no idea," answered the captain; "perhaps he forgot the shot, or hadn't any left."

When they reached home with the big alligator, the whole household came out to look at it, and Mrs. Elmer and Ruth shuddered when they saw the monster that had so nearly dragged the boy into the river.

"Oh, Mark!" exclaimed Ruth, "just think if you hadn't come along just then."

"How merciful that your father thought of taking the rifle!" said Mrs. Elmer. "I don't suppose we could keep it for Mr. Elmer to see, could we?" she asked of Captain Johnson.

"Oh no, ma'am, not in this warm weather," answered the captain; "but we can cut off the head and bury it, and in two or three weeks you will have a nice skull to keep as a memento."

"And what will you do with the body?"

"Why, throw it into the river, I suppose," answered the captain.

"Wouldn't it be better to bury it too?"

"Hi! Miss Elmer; yo' sho'ly wouldn't tink of doin' dat ar?" exclaimed Aunt Chloe, who had by this time become a fixture in the Elmer household, and had come out with the rest to see the alligator.

"Why not, Chloe?" asked Mrs. Elmer, in surprise.

"'Kase ef you's putten um in de groun', how's Marse Tukky Buzzard gwine git um? Can't nebber hab no luck ef you cheat Marse Tukky Buzzard dat ar way."

"That's another of the colored folks' superstitions," said Captain Johnson. "They believe that if you bury any dead animal so that the turkey buzzards can't get at it, they'll bring you bad luck."

"'Taint no 'stition, nuther. Hit's a pop sho' fac', dat's what!" muttered Aunt Chloe, angrily, as she walked off towards the house.

So the head of the alligator was cut off and buried, and the body disappeared, though whether it was buried or served to make a meal for the buzzards no one seemed exactly to know.

That afternoon Captain Johnson went off down the river with his lighter, saying that he could always be found at St. Mark's when wanted, and Mark and Jan went into the woods to look for cedar fence−posts.

After the day's work was finished, and the family were gathered in the sitting−room for the evening, Mark had a long and earnest conversation with his mother and Ruth. At its close Mrs. Elmer said, "Well, my son, wait until we hear what your father thinks of it;" and Ruth said, "I think it's a perfectly splendid plan."

Mark slept in the room with the wounded boy, whose name they had learned to be Frank March, that night, and was roused several times before morning to give him water, for he was very feverish. He talked in his sleep too, as though he were having troubled dreams, and once Mark heard him say,

"Fire quick! No, it's only powder; it won't hurt him. I didn't kill the dog."

CHAPTER X. A RUNAWAY'S STORY, AND ITS HAPPY ENDING.

During the three days that passed before Mr. Elmer's return, the large field was made ready for ploughing, most of the post−holes were dug, the soil being so light as to make that an easy matter, and Mark and Jan had cut a number of cedar posts, and got them ready to be rafted down the river.

During this time, also, Frank March had improved so rapidly that he was able to sit up and take an interest in what was going on. He had become much attached to Mrs. Elmer, and seemed very happy in her company. Neither she

nor the children had asked him any questions concerning his past life, preferring to wait until he should tell the story of his own accord.

On the third evening of his being with them he was helped into the sitting−room, and lay on the sofa listening intently to Mrs. Elmer as she read to Mark and Ruth a chapter from a book of travels that they had begun on the schooner. As she finished and closed the book, the boy raised himself on his elbow, and said,

"Mrs. Elmer, I want to tell you something, and I want Mark and Ruth to hear too."

"Well, my boy," said Mrs. Elmer, kindly, "we shall be glad to hear whatever you have to tell, if it won't tire and excite you too much."

"No, I don't think it will," replied Frank. "I feel as if I must tell you what a bad boy I have been, and how sorry I am for it. More than a month ago I stole father's gun and dog, and twenty dollars that I found in his desk, and ran away from him. Ever since then I have been living in the woods around here, hunting and fishing. When the weather was bad I slept in the kitchen of this house, and when you folks moved in, it seemed almost as if you were taking possession of what belonged to me. The first night you were here I crept into the kitchen and stole a loaf of bread and a duck."

"There!" interrupted Mark, "now I know where I saw you before. It was you who looked into the window and frightened me that first night, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Frank; "and I meant to scare you worse than that, and should have if the alligator hadn't caught me. I saw you and your father go down the river that morning, and heard him say he was going to Tallahassee, and I waited then for you to come back alone. I drew out the shot from one barrel of my gun, and was going to fire a charge of powder at you when you got close to the point. I thought perhaps you would be so scared that you would upset your canoe and lose your rifle overboard. Then I thought I might get it after you had gone, for the water is shallow there, and I wanted a rifle awfully."

"Oh! what a bad boy you are," said Ruth, shaking her pretty head. "Yes, I know I am," said Frank, "but I ain't going to be any longer if I can help it."

"How did that alligator get you, anyway?" asked Mark, who was very curious upon this point.

"Why, I pulled off my boots because they were wet and hurt my feet; then I lay down to wait for you, and went to sleep. I suppose the 'gator found it warm enough that day to come out of the mud, where he had been asleep all winter. Of course he felt hungry after such a long nap, and when he saw my bare foot thought it would make him a nice meal. I was waked by feeling myself dragged along the ground, and finding my foot in what felt like a vise. I caught hold of a tree, and held on until it seemed as though my arms would be pulled out. I yelled as loud as I could all the time, while the 'gator pulled. He twisted my foot until I thought the bones must be broken, and that I must let go. Then you came, Mark, and that's all I remember until I was in the canoe, and you were paddling up the river."

"Was that the first time you were ever in that canoe?" asked Mark, a new suspicion dawning in his mind.

"No; I had used her 'most every night, and one night I went as far as St. Mark's in her."

"What made you bring the canoe back at all?" asked Mrs. Elmer.

"'Cause everybody round here would have known her, and known that I had stole her if they'd seen me in her," answered the boy.

"And did you shoot poor Bruce?" asked Ruth.

"Who's Bruce?"

"Why, our dog. He came to us more than a week ago, shot so bad that he could hardly walk."

"Yes, I shot him because he wouldn't go into the water and fetch out a duck I had wounded; but his name is Jack. I didn't kill him though, for I saw him on your back porch last Sunday when you were all over the river, and he barked at me."

"My poor boy," said Mrs. Elmer, "you have certainly done very wrong; but you have been severely punished for it, and if you are truly sorry and mean to try and do right in the future, you will as certainly be forgiven." So saying, the kind−hearted woman went over and sat down beside the boy, and took his hand in hers.

At this caress, the first he could ever remember to have received, the boy burst into tears, and sobbed out,

"I would have been good if I had a mother like you and a pleasant home like this."

Mrs. Elmer soothed and quieted him, and gradually drew from him the rest of his story. His father had once been comfortably well off, and had owned a large mill in Savannah; but during the war the mill had been burned, and he had lost everything. For some years after that he was very poor, and when Frank was quite a small boy, and his sister a baby, his father used to drink, and when he came home drunk would beat him and his mother. One night, after a terrible scene of this kind, which Frank could just remember, his mother had snatched up the baby and run from the house. Afterwards he was told that they were dead; at any rate he never saw them again. Then his father left Savannah and came to Florida to live. He never drank any more, but was very cross, and hardly ever spoke to his son. He made a living by doing jobs of carpentering; and, ever since he had been old enough, Frank had worked on their little farm, about twenty miles from Wakulla. At last he became so tired of this sort of life, and his father's harshness, that he determined to run away and try to find a happier one.

Mark and Ruth listened in silence to this story of an unhappy childhood, and when it was ended, Ruth went over to the sofa where her mother still sat, and taking Frank's other hand in hers, said,

"I guess I would have run away too, if I'd had such an unpleasant home; but you'll stay with us now, and let mother teach you to be good, won't you?"

For answer the boy looked up shyly into Mrs. Elmer's face, and she said, "We'll see when father comes home."

At this moment Bruce began to bark loudly, and directly a sound of wheels was heard. Then a voice called out,

"Halloo! Go Bang, ahoy! Bring out a lantern, somebody."

"It's father! it's father!" exclaimed Mark and Ruth, rushing to the door with shouts of welcome. Mrs. Elmer followed them, leaving Frank alone in the sitting−room.

"How glad they are to see him," thought the boy. "I wonder if I should be as glad to see my father if he was as good to me as theirs is to them?"

While Frank's mind was full of such thoughts, he heard a quick step at the door, and looking up, saw the very person he had been thinking of his own father!

"Frank, my boy!" exclaimed Mr. March, "can it be you? Oh, Frank, I didn't know how much I loved you until I lost you, and I have tried in every way to find you and beg you to come home again." With these words Mr. March stooped down and kissed his son's forehead, saying, "I haven't kissed you since you were a baby, Frank, and I do it now as a sign that from this time forward I will try to be a good and loving father to you."

"Oh, father," cried the happy boy, "do you really love me? Then if you will forgive me for running away and being such a wicked boy, I will never, never do so again."

"Indeed I will," answered his father. "But what is the matter, Frank? Have you been ill? How came you here?"

While Frank was giving his father a brief account of what had happened to him since he ran away from home, the Elmers were exchanging the most important bits of news outside the front gate. They waited there while Mr. Elmer and Jan unhitched from a new farm−wagon a pair of fine mules that the former had bought and driven down from Tallahassee that day.

When the children ran out to greet their father, one of the first things Ruth said was, "Oh, we've got a new boy, father, and he's in the sitting−room, and his name's Frank March, and an alligator almost dragged him into the river, and Mark shot it."

Almost without waiting to hear the end of this long sentence, a stranger who had come with Mr. Elmer opened the front gate, and quickly walking to the house, disappeared within it.

"Who is that, husband, and what has he gone into the house for?" asked Mrs. Elmer, in surprise.

"I don't know much about him," answered Mr. Elmer, "except that his name is March; and as he was recommended to me as being a good carpenter, I engaged him to come and do what work was necessary to repair this house."

"I wonder if he is Frank's wicked father?" said Ruth; and then the whole story had to be told to Mr. Elmer before they went into the house.

When he heard of Mark's bravery, he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "My son, I am proud of you."

As they went in and entered the sitting−room, they found Mr. March and Frank sitting together on the sofa, talking earnestly.

"I hope you will excuse my leaving you and entering your house so unceremoniously, Mr. Elmer," said Mr. March, rising and bowing to Mrs. Elmer; "but when your little girl said a boy named Frank March was in here I felt sure he was my son. It is he; and now that I have found him, I don't ever intend to lose him again."

"That's right," said Mr. Elmer, heartily. "In this country boys are too valuable to be lost, even if they do turn up again like bad pennies. Master Frank, you must hurry and get well, for in his work here your father will need just such a valuable assistant as I am sure you will make."

"Now, wife, how about something to eat? I am almost hungry enough to eat an alligator, and I expect our friend March would be willing to help me."

Aunt Chloe had been busy ever since the travellers arrived, and supper was as ready for them as they were for it. After supper, when they were once more gathered in the sitting−room, Mr. Elmer said, "I got a charter granted me while I was in Tallahassee can any of you guess for what?"

None of them could guess, unless, as Mark suggested, it was for incorporating "Go Bang," and making a city of it in opposition to Wakulla.

"It is to establish and maintain a ferry between those portions of the town of Wakulla lying on opposite sides of the St. Mark's River," said Mr. Elmer.

"A FERRY?" said Mrs. Elmer.

"A FERRY?" said Ruth.

"A ferry?" said Mark; "what sort of a ferry steam−power, horse− power, or boy−power?"

"I expect it will be mostly boy−power," said Mr. Elmer, laughing. "You see I kept thinking of what Mr. Bevil told us last Sunday, that what Wakulla needed most was a bridge and a mill. I knew we couldn't build a bridge, at least not at present; but the idea of a ferry seemed practicable. We have got enough lumber to build a large flat−boat, there are enough of us to attend to a ferry, and so I thought I'd get a charter, anyhow."

Mark could hardly wait for his father to finish before he broke in with,

"Speaking of mills, father, your ferry will be the very thing to bring people over to our mill."

"Our mill!" repeated his father. "What do you mean?"

"Why, Jan and I discovered an old mill about half a mile up the river, while we were out looking for cedar. It's out of repair, and the dam is partly broken away; but the machinery in it seems to be pretty good, and the wheel's all right. I don't believe it would take very much money to fix the dam; and the stream that supplies the mill−pond is never−failing, because it comes from a big sulphur spring. We found the man who owns it, and had a long talk with him. He says that business fell off so after the bridge was carried away that when his dam broke he didn't think it would pay to rebuild it. He says he will take five hundred dollars cash for the whole concern; and I want to put in my hundred dollars salvage money, and Ruth'll put in hers, and Jan'll put in his, and mother says she'll put in hers if you think the scheme is a good one, and we'll buy the mill. Now, your ferry can bring the people over; and it's just the biggest investment in all Florida. Don't you think so, father?"

"I'll tell you what I think after I have examined into it," said Mr. Elmer, smiling at Mark's enthusiasm. "Now it's very late, and time we all invested in bed."

That night Mark dreamed of ferry−boats run by alligator−power, of mills that ground out gold dollars, and of "ghoses" that turned out to be boys.

CHAPTER XI. "THE ELMER MILL AND FERRY COMPANY."

Mr. Elmer made careful inquiries concerning the mill about which Mark had told him, and found that it was the only one within twenty miles of Wakulla. He was told that it used to do a very flourishing business before the bridge was carried away, and things in that part of the county went to ruin generally. Both Mr. Bevil and Mr. Carter thought that if there was any way of getting over to it, the mill could be made to pay, and were much pleased at the prospect of having it put in running order again.

Mr. March having been a mill−owner, and thoroughly understanding machinery, visited the one in question with Mr. Elmer, and together they inspected it carefully. They found that it contained old−fashioned but good machinery for grinding corn and ginning cotton, but none for sawing lumber. Only about thirty feet of the dam

had been carried away, and it could be repaired at a moderate expense. Mr. March said that by raising the whole dam a few feet the water−power would be greatly increased, and would be sufficient to run a saw in addition to the machinery already on hand. He also said that he knew of an abandoned saw−mill a few miles up the river, the machinery of which was still in a fair condition and could be bought for a trifle.

The result of what he saw and heard was that Mr. Elmer decided the investment to be a good one, and at once took the necessary steps towards purchasing the property. This decision pleased Mark and Jan greatly, and they began to think that they were men of fine business ability, or, as Mark said, were "possessed of long heads."

That same evening a meeting of the "dusty millers," as Ruth called them, was held in the "Go Bang" sitting−room. Mr. Elmer addressed the meeting and proposed that they form a mill company with a capital of one thousand dollars, and that the stock be valued at one hundred dollars a share.

This proposition met with general approval, though Mark whispered to Ruth that he didn't see how father was going to make a thousand dollars' worth of capital out of five hundred unless he watered the stock.

"Now," said Mr. Elmer, after it was agreed that they should form a company, "what shall the association be called?"

Many names were suggested, among them that of "The Great Southern Mill Company," by Mark, who also proposed "The Florida and Wakulla Milling Association." Finally Mr. March proposed "The Elmer Mill Company," and after some discussion this name was adopted.

Meantime Mr. Elmer had prepared a sheet of paper which he handed round for signatures, and when it was returned to him it read as follows:

THE ELMER MILL COMPANY.

WAKULLA, FLORIDA, January 10, 188−.

The undersigned do hereby promise to pay into the capital stock of The Elmer Mill Company, upon demand of its Treasurer, the sums placed opposite their respective names:

Mark Elmer	$200
Ellen R. Elmer	200
Mark Elmer, Jun	100
Ruth Elmer	100
Harold March	100
Jan Jansen	100

After these signatures had been obtained, Mr. March said that he had a proposition to lay before the company. It was that he should superintend the setting up of the mill machinery and its running for one year, for which service he should receive a salary of one hundred dollars. He also said that if the company saw fit to accept this offer he would at once subscribe the one hundred dollars salary to its capital stock in addition to the sum already set opposite his name.

This proposition, being put to vote by the chairman, was unanimously accepted, and the amount opposite Mr. March's name on the subscription list was changed from one hundred dollars to two hundred dollars.

Then Mr. Elmer said that he wished to lay some propositions before the company. One of them was that if they would accept the ferry franchise he had recently obtained, he would present it as a free gift. He also wished to propose to Mr. March and Master Frank March that they should build the ferry−boat, for which he would furnish

the material. To the company he further proposed that if Mr. Frank March would agree for the sum of one hundred dollars to run the ferry−boat for one year from the time it was launched, his name should at once be placed upon the subscription list, and he be credited with one share of stock.

All of these propositions having been accepted, the name of Frank March was added to the list, and the books were declared closed.

Mr. Elmer said that the next business in order was the election of officers, and he called for nominations.

Mrs. Elmer caused Mark to blush furiously by speaking of him in the most flattering terms as the originator of the scheme, and nominating him as president of the company.

The list of officers, as finally prepared and submitted to the meeting, was as follows:

President	Mark Elmer, Jun.
Vice−President and General Manager	Mark Elmer, Sen.
Treasurer	Ellen R. Elmer.
Secretary	Ruth Elmer.
Superintendent of Mills	Harold March.
Superintendent of Ferries	Frank March.

And a Board of Directors, to consist of Jan Jansen, Esq., and the officers of the company ex−officio.

This ticket being voted upon as a whole and unanimously elected, Mr. Elmer resigned his chair to the newly made President, who gravely asked if there was any further business before the meeting.

"Mr. President," said Mr. March, "I wish to move that the name 'Elmer Mill Company,' which we recently adopted, be changed so as to read 'Elmer Mill and Ferry Company.'"

"All right," said the President; "you may move it."

"I second the motion," said Mr. Elmer, laughing, "and call for the question." "Nobody's asked any," said Mark, looking rather bewildered.

"I mean, Mr. President, that I call upon you to lay the motion just made by our distinguished superintendent of mills, and seconded by myself, before the meeting, that they may take action upon it."

"Oh," said Mark; and remembering how his father had done it, he put the motion very properly, announced that the yeas had it, and that the name of the company was accordingly changed.

Then the President made an address, in which he said that, after a most careful examination into the affairs of the Elmer Mill and Ferry Company, he was able to report most favorably as to its present condition. He found that they owned valuable mill buildings and machinery, and had contracted for a first−class ferry−boat, which was to be built immediately, and which had been paid for in advance. He also found that the two salaried officers of the company, the superintendent of mills and the superintendent of ferries, had been paid one year's salary in advance.

In spite of these great outlays, he was informed by the treasurer that a cash balance of three hundred dollars remained in the treasury, and he congratulated the stockholders of the company upon its healthy and flourishing condition. This address was received with loud and prolonged applause.

Before the meeting adjourned it was decided that the election of officers should be held annually, and that the Board of Directors should meet once a month.

A meeting of this Board was held immediately upon the adjournment of the meeting of stockholders, and the general manager was instructed to purchase saw−mill machinery, and to begin the rebuilding of the dam at once.

"Well, Ruth," said Mark, after all this business had been transacted, "now we ARE property owners sure enough. That newspaper was about right after all."

After the others had gone to bed, Mr. Elmer and Mr. March talked for some time together, and this conversation resulted in the latter agreeing to move to Wakulla, and build a small house for himself and Frank on Mr. Elmer's land. He told Mr. Elmer that meeting him and his family had given him new ideas of life, and aroused a desire for better things both for himself and his son.

The Sunday−school was well attended the next Sunday; and as Mr. Elmer had brought a package of song−books with him from Tallahassee, the scholars learned to sing several of the songs, and seemed to enjoy them very much.

Monday was a rainy day, but as a rough shed had been built to serve as a temporary workshop, the ferry−boat was begun. On it Mr. March laid out enough work to keep all hands busy except Frank, who was still confined to the house.

The rain fell steadily all that week, until the Elmers no longer wondered that bridges and dams were swept away in that country, and Mark said that if it did not stop pretty soon they would have to build an ark instead of a ferry−boat.

As a result of the rainy week, the boat was finished, the seams were calked and pitched by Saturday night, and it was all ready to be launched on Monday. By that time the rain had ceased, and the weather was again warm and beautiful.

On Monday morning Frank March left the house for the first time since he had been carried into it, and was invited to take a seat in the new boat. The mules were then hitched to it, and it was dragged in triumph to the edge of the river. It was followed by the whole family, including Aunt Chloe and Bruce, who had shown great delight at meeting his old master, Mr. March, and appeared to be ready to make up and be friends again with Frank, who had treated him so cruelly.

At the water's edge the mules were unhitched, a long rope was attached to one end of the boat, stout shoulders were placed under the pry poles, and with a "Heave'o! and another! and still another!" it was finally slid into the water amid loud cheers from the assembled spectators. These cheers were answered from the other side of the river, where nearly the whole population of Wakulla had assembled to see the launch.

Mark and Frank begged so hard to be allowed to take the boat across the river on a trial trip that Mr. Elmer said they might. Armed with long poles, they pushed off, but in a moment were swept down stream by the strong current in spite of all their efforts, and much to the dismay of Mrs. Elmer, who feared they were in danger.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," said her husband; "they are not in any danger in that boat. It will teach them a good lesson on the strength of currents, and they'll soon fetch up on one bank or the other."

They did "fetch up" on the opposite side of the river after a while, but it was half a mile down stream. When they got the boat made fast to a tree, both boys were too thoroughly exhausted to attempt to force it back to Wakulla.

Just as they had decided to leave the boat where she was and walk back through the woods, they heard a shout out on the river, and saw Jan and a colored man coming towards them in the skiff.

The men took the poles and the boys, jumping into the skiff, made it fast to the bow of the boat with a tow−line; and, by keeping close to the bank, they finally succeeded, after two hours' hard work, in getting back to Wakulla. They left the boat on that side of the river for the time being, and all crossed in the skiff.

The rest of that day was spent in planting two stout posts, one on each side of the river, close to the old bridge abutments, and in stretching across the river, from one post to the other, a wire cable that Mr. Elmer had bought for this purpose. A couple of iron pulley−wheels, to which were attached small but strong ropes, were placed on the cable, its ends were drawn taut by teams of mules, and anchored firmly in the ground about twenty feet behind each post.

The ropes of the pulley−wheels were made fast to the bow and stern of the boat, and the forward one was drawn up short, while the other was left long enough to allow the boat to swing at an angle to the current. Then the boat was shoved off, and, without any poling, was carried by the force of the current quickly and steadily to the other side.

A tin horn was attached by a light chain to each post, the ferry was formally delivered to Master Frank March, and it was declared open and ready for business.

CHAPTER XII. THE GREAT MILL PICNIC.

The rates of ferriage were fixed at twenty−five cents for a team, fifteen cents for a man on horseback, ten cents for a single animal, and five cents for a foot−passenger. Two cards, with these rates neatly printed on them by Ruth in large letters, were tacked up on the anchorage posts, so that passengers might not have any chance to dispute with the ferryman, or "superintendent of ferries," as he liked to be called.

Leaving him in charge of the boat for he was not yet strong enough for more active work and leaving Mr. March at work upon the house, Mr. Elmer, Mark, Jan, and four colored men, taking the mules with them, set out bright and early on Tuesday morning for the mill, to begin work on the dam.

They found the pond empty, and exposing a large surface of black mud studded with the stumps of old trees, and the stream from the sulphur spring rippling along merrily in a channel it had cut for itself through the broken portion of the dam. While two men were set to digging a new channel for this stream, so as to lead it through the sluice−way, and leave the place where the work was to be done free from water, the others began to cut down half a dozen tall pines, and hew them into squared timbers.

A deep trench was dug along the whole length of the broken part of the dam for a foundation, and into this was lowered one of the great squared timbers, forty feet long, that had six mortice−holes cut in its upper side. Into these holes were set six uprights, each ten feet long, and on top of these was placed as a stringer, another forty−foot timber. To this framework was spiked, on the inside, a close sheathing of plank. Heavy timber braces, the outer ends of which were let into mud−sills set in trenches dug thirty feet outside the dam, were sunk into the stringer, and the work of filling in with earth on the inside was begun. In two weeks the work was finished; the whole dam had been raised and strengthened, the floodgates were closed, and the pond began slowly to fill up.

In the mean time the saw−mill machinery had been bought, the frame for the saw−mill had been cut and raised, and Mr. March, having finished the repairs on the house, was busy setting up the machinery and putting it in order.

By the middle of February, or six weeks after the Elmers had landed in Wakulla, their influence had become very decidedly felt in the community. With their building, fencing, ploughing, and clearing, they had given employment to most of the working population of the place, and had put more money into circulation than had

been seen there at any one time for years. Their house was now as neat and pretty as any in the county. The ten−acre field in front was ploughed, fenced, and planted, half in corn and half no, not with orange−trees, but half was set out with young cabbage−plants; a homely crop, but one which Mr. Elmer had been advised would bring in good returns. The ferry was running regularly and was already much used by travellers from considerable distances on both sides of the river. The mill was finished and ready for business, and the millpond, instead of a mud flat, was a pretty sheet of water, fringed with palms and other beautiful trees. Above all, Mr. Elmer's health had so improved that he said he felt like a young man again, and able to do any amount of outdoor work.

One Sunday morning after all this had been accomplished, Mr. Elmer announced to the Sunday−school that on the following Wednesday a grand picnic would be given in a pine grove midway between the Elmer Mill and the big sulphur spring, that the ferry would be run free all that day, and that all were cordially invited to come and enjoy themselves. He also said that the Elmer Mill would be opened for business on that day, and would grind, free of charge, one bushel of corn for every family in Wakulla who should bring it with them.

This announcement created such a buzz of excitement that it was well it had not been made until after the exercises of the morning were over, for there could certainly have been no more Sunday− school that day.

For the next two days the picnic was the all−absorbing topic of conversation, and wonderful stories were told and circulated of the quantities of goodies that were being made in the "Go Bang" kitchen. Aunt Chloe was frequently interviewed, and begged to tell exactly how much of these stories might be believed; but the old woman only shook her gayly turbaned head, and answered,

"You's gwine see, chillun! you's gwine see; only jes' hab pashuns, an' you's gwine be 'warded by sich a sight ob fixin's as make yo' tink ole times back come, sho nuff."

At last the eagerly expected morning dawned, and though a thick fog hid one bank of the river from the other, sounds of active stir and bustle announced to each community that the other was making ready for the great event.

By nine o'clock the fog had lifted, and the sun shone out bright and warm. Before this Jan and the mules had made several trips between the house and the mill, each time with a heavy wagon load of something. Mr. Elmer, Mr. March, and Mark had gone to the mill as soon as breakfast was over, and had not been seen since.

Aunt Chloe had been bustling about her kitchen "sence de risin' ob de mo'nin' star," and was, in her own estimation, the most important person on the place that day. As for Bruce he was wild with excitement, and dashed at full speed from the house to the mill, and back again, barking furiously, and trying to tell volumes of, what seemed to him, important news.

As soon as the fog lifted, the horn on the opposite side of the river began to blow impatient summonses for the "superintendent of ferries," and busy times immediately began for Frank.

What funny loads of black people he brought over! Old gray−headed uncles, leaning on canes, who told stories of "de good ole times long befo' de wah"; middle−aged men and women who rejoiced in the present good times of freedom, and comical little pickaninnies, who looked forward with eagerness to the good times to come to them within an hour or so.

And then the teams, the queer home−made carts, most of them drawn by a single steer or cow hitched into shafts, in which the bushels of corn were brought; for everybody who could obtain a bushel of corn had taken Mr. Elmer at his word, and brought it along to be ground free of charge.

One of the men, after seeing his wife and numerous family of children safely on board the boat, went up to Frank with a beaming face, and said,

"Misto Frank, I'se bought a ok. Dar he is hitched into dat ar kyart, an' oh! he do plough splendid!"

The "ok," which poor Joe thought was the proper singular of "oxes," as he would have called a pair of them, was a meek−looking little creature, harnessed to an old two−wheeled cart by a perfect tangle of ropes and chains. He was so small that even Frank, accustomed as he was to the ways of the country, almost smiled at the idea of its "ploughing splendid."

He didn't, though; for honest Joe was waiting to hear his purchase praised, and Frank praised it by saying it was one of the handsomest oxen of its size he had ever seen. Joe was fully satisfied with this, and when the boat reached the other side, hurried off to find new admirers for this first piece of actual property he had ever owned, and to tell them that "Misto Frank March, who know all about oxes, say dis yere ok de han'somes' he ebber seed."

Of course the Bevils and Carters came over to the picnic. Grace Bevil, of whom Ruth had already made a great friend, waited with her at the house until the last boat−load of people had been ferried across. Then Frank called them, and after helping them into the canoe and telling them to sit quiet as 'possums, paddled it up the wild, beautiful river to the mill.

This was a novel experience to the little Wakulla girl, who had never in her life before travelled so easily and swiftly. She afterwards told her mother that, as she looked far down into the clear depths of the water above which they glided, she thought she knew how angels felt flying through the air.

By the time they reached the mill more than a hundred persons were assembled near it, and Mr. Elmer was talking to them from the steps. They were in time to hear him say,

"The Elmer Mill is now about to be opened for business and set to work. A bushel of corn belonging to Uncle Silas Brim, the oldest man present, has been placed in the hopper, and will be the first ground."

Then Mark, who, as president of the Elmer Mill and Ferry Company, was allowed the honor of so doing, pressed a lever that opened the floodgates. A stream of water dashed through the race, the great wheel began to turn, and, as they heard the whir of the machinery, the crowd cheered again and again. In a little while Uncle Silas Brim's corn was returned to him in the form of a sack of fine yellow meal. After that the bushels of corn poured in thick and fast, and for the rest of the day the Elmer Mill continued its pleasant work of charity.

As the novelty of watching the mill at work wore off, the people began to stroll towards the grove near the sulphur spring, in which an odd−looking structure had been erected the day before, and now attracted much attention. It was a long, low shed, or booth, built of poles thatched with palm−leaves woven so close that its interior was completely hidden. Mrs. Elmer, Mrs. Bevil, Mrs. Carter, Ruth, Grace, and Aunt Chloe were known to be inside, but what they were doing was a mystery that no one could solve.

"Reckon dey's a−fixin' up sandwitches," said one.

"Yo' g'way, chile! Who ebber heerd ob sich nonsens? 'Tain't no witches ob no kine; hits somefin' to eat, I tell yo'. I kin smell hit," said an old aunty, who sniffed the air vigorously as she spoke.

This opinion was strengthened when Aunt Chloe appeared at the entrance of the booth, before which hung a curtain of white muslin, and in a loud voice commanded all present to provide themselves "wif palmetter leafs fo' plateses, an' magnole leafs fo' cupses."

When all had so provided themselves, they were formed, two by two, into a long procession by several young colored men whom Mr. Elmer had appointed to act as marshals, the white curtain was drawn aside, and they were invited to march into the booth. As they did so, a sight greeted their eyes that caused them to give a sort of

suppressed cheer of delight. The interior was hung and trimmed with great bunches of sweet−scented swamp azalea, yellow jasmine, and other wild spring flowers, of which the woods were full. But it was not towards the flowers that all eyes were turned, nor they that drew forth the exclamations of delight; it was the table, and what it bore. It reached from one end of the booth to the other, and was loaded with such a variety and quantity of good things as none of them had ever seen before. On freshly−cut palm leaves were heaped huge piles of brown crullers, and these were flanked by pans of baked beans. Boiled hams appeared in such quantities that Uncle Silas Brim was heard to say, "Hit do my ole heart good to see sich a sight ob hog meat."

Every bit of space not otherwise occupied was filled with pies and cakes. Knives and forks had been provided for everybody, and there were a few tin cups which were reserved for coffee. As plates were very scarce, palmetto leaves had to be used instead; and for those who wished to drink water, the magnolia leaves, bent so that the ends lapped, made excellent cups.

How they did enjoy that dinner! How savagely the hams were attacked! How the beans and crullers were appreciated, and how rapidly the pies and cakes disappeared! How the coffee, with plenty of "sweet'nin'" in it, was relished. In other words, what a grand feast it was to them. How much and how quickly they ate on that occasion can still be learned from any resident of Wakulla; for they talk of "de feed at de openin' ob dat ar Elmer Mill" to this day.

Mark says it was the opening of about a hundred mills, all provided with excellent machinery for grinding.

After dinner they sang, and listened to the music of Ruth's organ, which had been brought from the house for the occasion, and placed at one end of the booth. Then some one produced a fiddle, and they danced. Not only a few danced, but all danced old and young; and those who stopped to rest patted time on their knees to encourage the others.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, or about "two hour by sun in the evening," as the Wakulla people say, the last bushel of corn was ground. What remained uneaten of the dinner was distributed among those who needed it most, and the picnic was ended. With many bows and courtesies to their hosts, the happy company began to troop, or squeak along in their little ungreased carts, towards the ferry, where Frank was already on hand waiting to set them across the river.

CHAPTER XIII. 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 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.

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 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 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'."

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."

CHAPTER XIV. 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 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.

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."

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 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.

"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 skilfully captured and killed the alligator that had been for a long time the dread of the community.

CHAPTER XV. A FIRE HUNT, AND MARK'S DISAPPEARANCE.

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 practised 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 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,

"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.

"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.

"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 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.

CHAPTER XVI. 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 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, 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,

"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 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 marvellous 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.

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.

CHAPTER XVII. TWO LETTERS AND A JOURNEY.

It was late in April before Mark rose from the bed on which for weeks he had tossed and raved in the delirium of fever. He had raved of the horrible darkness and the cold water, and begged that the star should not be taken away. One evening he woke from a heavy, death−like sleep in which he had lain for hours, and in a voice so weak that it was almost a whisper, called "Mother."

"Here I am, dear"; and the figure which had been almost constantly beside him during the long struggle, bent over and kissed him gently.

"I ain't dead, am I, mother?" he whispered.

"No, dear, you are alive, and with God's help are going to get well and strong again. But don't try to talk now; wait until you are stronger."

For several days the boy lay sleeping, or with eyes wide open watching those about him, but feeling so weak and tired that even to think was an effort. Still, the fever had left him, and from the day he called "Mother" he gradually grew stronger, until finally he could sit up in bed. Next he was moved to a rocking− chair by the window, and at last he was carried into the sitting− room and laid on the lounge the same lounge on which Frank had lain, months before, when he told them what a wicked boy he had been.

Now the same Frank, but yet an entirely different Frank, sat beside him, and held his hand, and looked lovingly down into his face. Each of them had saved the other's life, and their love for each other was greater than that of brothers. Mark had been told of how Frank had gone down into the "sink hole" after him, and stayed there in the cold, rushing water while he was drawn to the top, but he could remember nothing of it. He only remembered the star, and of praying that he might live to see the sunlight.

How happy they all were when the invalid took his first walk out− of−doors, leaning on Frank, and stopping many times to rest. The air was heavy with the scent of myriads of flowers, and the very birds seemed glad to see him, and sang their loudest and sweetest to welcome him.

After this he improved in strength rapidly, and was soon able to ride as far as the mill, and to float on the river in the canoe, with Frank to paddle it; but still his parents were very anxious about him. He was not their merry, light−hearted Mark of old. He never laughed now, but seemed always to be oppressed with some great dread. His white face wore a frightened look, and he would sit for hours with his mother as she sewed, saying little, but

gazing wistfully at her, as though fearful that in some way he might lose her or be taken from her.

All this troubled his parents greatly, and many a consultation did they have as to what they should do for their boy. They decided that he needed an entire change of scene and occupation, but just how to obtain these for him they could not plan.

One day Mrs. Elmer sat down and wrote a long letter to her uncle, Christopher Bangs, telling him of their trouble, and asking him what they should do. To this letter came the following answer:

"BANGOR, MAINE, May 5, 188−.

"DEAR NIECE ELLEN, You did exactly the right thing, as you always do, in writing to me about Grandneph. Mark. Of course he needs a change of scene after spending a whole night hundreds of feet underground, fighting alligators, and naturally having a fever afterwards. Who wouldn't? I would myself. A good thing's good for a while, but there is such a thing as having too much of a good thing, no matter how good it is, and I rather guess Grandneph. Mark has had too much of Floridy, and it'll do him good to leave it for a while. So just you bundle him up and send him along to me for a change. Tell him his old Grandunk Christmas has got some important business for him to look after, and can't possibly get on without him more than a week or two longer. I shall expect a letter by return mail saying he has started.

"Give Grandunk Christmas's love to Grandniece Ruth, and with respects to your husband, believe me to be, most truly, as ever,

Your affectionate uncle,

"CHRISTOPHER BANGS."

"P.S. Don't mind the expense. Send the boy C.O.D. I'll settle all bills. C.B."

In the same mail with this letter came another from Maine, directed to "Miss Ruth Elmer." It was from her dearest friend, Edna May; and as Ruth handed it to her mother, who read it aloud to the whole family, we will read it too:

"NORTON, MAINE, May 5, 188−.

"MY OWN DARLING RUTH, What is the matter? I haven't heard from you in more than a week. Oh, I've got SUCH a plan, or rather father made it up, that I am just wild thinking of it. It is this: father's ship, Wildfire, has sailed from New York for Savannah, and before he left, father said for me to write and tell you that he couldn't think of letting me go to Florida next winter unless you came here and spent this summer with me.

"The Wildfire will leave Savannah for New York again about the 15th of May, and father wants you to meet him there and come home with him. His sister, Aunt Emily Coburn, has gone with him for the sake of the voyage, and she will take care of you.

"Oh, do come! Won't it be splendid? Father is coming home from New York, so he can bring you all the way. I am sure your mother will let you come when she knows how nicely everything is planned.

"I have got lots and lots to tell you, but can't think of anything else now but your coming.

"What an awful time poor Mark has had. I don't see how he ever lived through it. I think Frank March must be splendid. Write just as quick as you can, and tell me if you are coming.

"Good−bye. With kisses and hugs, I am your dearest, lovingest friend,

"EDNA MAY."

These two letters from the far North created quite a ripple of excitement in that Southern household, and furnished ample subject for discussion when the family was gathered on the front porch in the evening of the day they were received.

Mr. Elmer said, "I think it would be a good thing for Mark to go, and I should like to have Ruth go too; but I don't see how you can spare her, wife."

"I shall miss her dreadfully, but I should feel much easier to think that she was with Mark on this long journey. Poor boy, he is far from strong yet. Yes, I think Ruth ought to go. It seems providential that these two letters should have come together, and as if it were a sign that the children ought to go together," answered Mrs. Elmer.

Mark, who had listened quietly to the whole discussion, now spoke up and said, "I should like to go, father. As long as I stay here I shall keep thinking of that terrible underground river over there. I think of it and dream of it all the time, and sometimes it seems as if it were only waiting and watching for a chance to swallow me again. I should love dearly to have Ruth go with me too, though I am quite sure I am strong enough to take care of myself"; and he turned towards his mother with a smile.

Ruth said, "Oh, mother, I should love to go, but I can't bear to leave you! so, whichever way you decide, I shall be perfectly satisfied and contented."

It was finally decided that they should both go. Mark was to accompany Ruth as far as Savannah, and see her safely on board the ship; then, unless he received a pressing invitation from Captain May to go with him to New York, he was to go by steamer to Boston, and there take another steamer for Bangor.

This was the both of May, and as the Wildfire was to sail on or about the 15th, they must be in Savannah on that day; therefore no time was to be lost in making preparations for the journey.

Such busy days as the next three were! such making of new clothes and mending of old, to be worn on the journey! so many things to be thought of and done! Even Aunt Chloe became excited, and prepared so many nice things for "Misto Mark an' Missy Rufe to eat when dey's a−trabblin'" that Mark actually laughed when he saw them.

"Why, Aunt Clo," he explained, "you have got enough there to last us all the time we're gone. Do you think they don't have anything to eat up North?"

"Dunno, honey," answered the old woman, gazing with an air of great satisfaction at the array of goodies. "Allus hearn tell as it's a powerful pore, cole kentry up dar whar you's a−gwine. 'Specs dey hab somfin to eat, ob co'se, but reckon dar ain't none too much, sich as hit is."

The good soul was much distressed at the small quantity of what she had provided, for which room was found in the lunch−basket, and said she "'lowed dem ar chillun's gwine hungry heap o' times befo' dey sets eyes on ole Clo agin."

It had been arranged that Mr. and Mrs. Elmer and Frank March should go with the travellers as far as Tallahassee, and see them fairly off from there. Bright and early on the morning of the 13th the mule wagon, in which comfortable seats were fixed, was driven up to the front door, the trunks, bags, and lunch−basket were put in, and everything was in readiness for the start.

Mr. March, Jan, Aunt Chloe, and several of the neighbors from across the river had assembled to see them off, and many and hearty were the good wishes offered for a pleasant journey and a safe return in the fall.

"Good−bye, Misto Mark an' Missy Rufe," said Aunt Chloe; "trus' in de Lo'd while you's young, an' he ain't gwine fo'git yo' in yo' ole age."

"Good−bye, Aunt Clo! good−bye, everybody!" shouted Mark, as the wagon rattled away. "Don't forget us!" And in another minute "dear old Go Bang," as the children already called it, was hidden from view behind the trees around the sulphur spring.

They stopped for a minute at the mill to get a sack of corn for the mules, and as they drove from it its busy machinery seemed to say,

"Good−bye, Mr. President, good−bye, Mr. President, good−bye, Mr. President of the Elmer Mills."

They reached Tallahassee early in the afternoon, and went to a hotel for the night. From the many cows on the street Mark tried to point out to Ruth and Frank the one he had seen climb into a cart on his previous visit, but none of those they saw looked able to distinguish herself in that way. They concluded that she had become disgusted at being called "a ole good−fo'−nuffin," and had carried her talents elsewhere.

The train left so early the next morning that the sadness of parting was almost forgotten in the hurry of eating breakfast and getting down to the station. In the train Mark charged Frank to take good care of his canoe and rifle, Ruth begged him to be very kind to poor Bruce, who would be so lonely, and they both promised to write from Savannah. Then the conductor shouted, "All aboard!" hurried kisses and last good−byes were exchanged, and the train moved off.

Ruth cried a little at first, and Mark looked pretty sober, but they soon cheered up, and became interested in the scenery through which they were passing. For an hour or two they rode through a beautiful hill country, in which was here and there a lake covered with great pond−lilies. Then the hills and lakes disappeared, and they hurried through mile after mile of pine forests, where they saw men gathering turpentine from which to make resin. It was scooped into buckets from cuts made in the bark of the trees, and the whole operation "looked for all the world," as Mark said, "like a sugar−bush in Maine."

At Ellaville, sixty−five miles from Tallahassee, they saw great saw−mills, and directly they crossed one of the most famous rivers in the country, the Suwannee, and Ruth hummed softly,

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"'Way down upon de Swanee Ribber,
  Far, far away."
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Soon afterwards they reached Live Oak, where they were to change cars for Savannah. They made the change easily, for their trunks had been checked through, and they had little baggage to trouble them. A few miles farther took them across the State line and into Georgia, which Ruth said, with a somewhat disappointed air, looked to her very much the same as Florida.

Now that they were in Georgia they felt that they must be quite near Savannah, and began to talk of Captain May, and wonder if he would be at the depot to meet them. Letters had been sent to Uncle Christopher Bangs, to Edna, and to Captain May, as soon as it was decided that they should take this journey, and Mr. Elmer had telegraphed to the captain from Tallahassee that morning, so they felt pretty sure he would know of their coming.

At a junction with the funny name of "Waycross" their car was attached to an express train from Jacksonville, on which were numbers of Northern tourists who had been spending the winter in Florida and were now on their way

home. These people interested the children so much that they forgot to be tired, though it was now late in the afternoon. At last, as it was beginning to grow dark, the train rolled into the depot at Savannah. Taking their bags and holding each other's hands tight, for fear of being separated in the crowd, the children stepped out on the platform, where they were at once completely bewildered by the throng of hurrying people, the confusion, and the noise.

As they stood irresolute, not knowing which way to turn nor what to do, a cheery voice called out,

"Halloo! here we are. Why, Mark, my hearty, this is indeed a pleasure and little Ruth, too! Won't my Edna be delighted!" And Captain May stooped down and kissed her, right there before all the people, as though he were her own father.

"Oh, Captain Bill!" said Mark, greatly relieved at seeing the familiar face, "we are so glad to see you. We were just beginning to feel lost."

"Lost, eh?" laughed the captain; "well, that's a good one. The idea of a boy who's been through what you have feeling lost right here among folks too. But then, to one used to the water, this here dry land is a mighty bewildering place, that's a fact. Well, come, let's get under way. I've got a carriage moored alongside the station here, and we'll clap sail on to it and lay a course for the Wildfire. Steward's got supper ready by this time, and Sister Emily's impatient to see you. Checks? Oh yes. Here, driver, take these brasses, and roust out that dunnage; lively, now!"

When they were in the carriage, and rolling quietly along through the sandy streets, Captain May said they were just in time, for he was ready to drop down the river that night.

"Then I'd better go to a hotel," said Mark.

"What for?" asked Captain May.

"Because I'm to go to Boston by steamer from here, and Ruth is to go with you."

"Steamer nothing;" shouted Captain Bill. "You're coming along with us on the Wildfire. Steamer, indeed!"

This seemed to settle it, and Mark wrote home that evening that, having received a "pressing invitation," he was going to sail to New York with Captain Bill May in the Wildfire.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE BURNING OF THE "WILDFIRE."

"Aunt Emily," as the children called her at once, because she was Edna May's aunt, welcomed them as warmly as Captain May had done, and everything in the cabin of the Wildfire was so comfortable that they felt at home at once. Supper was ready as soon as they were, and as they sat down to it Mark said he wished "Aunt Clo" could see it, for he thought it would give her some new ideas of what Yankees had to eat.

After supper each of the children wrote a letter home, and Mark and Captain May walked up to the post−office to mail them.

About nine o'clock a tug came for the ship, and very soon they had bid good−bye to Savannah, and were dropping down the muddy river towards the sea. As it was a fine moonlit night, the children stayed on deck with Mrs. Coburn to see what they could of the river, which here forms the boundary line between the States of Georgia and South Carolina. On both sides, as far as they could see, the marshes were covered with fields of growing rice, and

every now and then they heard the sound of music coming from the funny little negro cabins which were scattered here and there along the banks.

They passed the old forts Jackson and Pulaski, both on the south side of the river, and both deserted and falling to ruin, and very soon had left behind Tybee Island, with its flashing light, at the mouth of the river. The tug left them when they reached the siren buoy that keeps up a constant moaning on the outer bar; one after another of the ship's sails were loosed and "sheeted home," and then Captain May said it was "high time for the watch below to turn in."

The sea was so calm and beautiful the next day that even Mark did not feel ill, nor was he during the voyage. As for Ruth, she knew, from her experience on the last voyage they had taken, that she should not be sea−sick, and so everybody was as happy and jolly as possible.

During the afternoon, after they had all been sitting on deck for some time, talking of the dear ones left at home, and of the many friends whom they hoped soon to meet, Ruth said she was going down to open her trunk and get out the album containing the pictures of her girl friends in Norton, and see if they looked as she remembered them. It was so long since she had opened this album that she had almost forgotten whose pictures were in it. She soon returned with it in her hand, and with a very puzzled expression on her face.

"Mark," she said, "did you ever think that Frank March looked like anybody else whom we know?"

"I don't know," answered Mark. "Yes, come to think of it, I have thought two or three times that his face had a familiar look, but I never could think who it was he resembled. Why?"

Placing the album in his hand, and opening it to the first page, on which was the photograph of Edna May, Ruth said, "Do you think he looks anything like that?"

"Why, yes! of course he does," exclaimed Mark, startled at the resemblance he saw. "He looks enough like the picture to be Edna's brother."

"Aunt Emily," said Ruth, turning to Mrs. Coburn, who sat near them, "do you know in what Southern city Captain May found Edna?"

"Yes, it was in the one we have just left Savannah."

"And Frank came from Savannah, and he lost his mother and little sister there, and Edna's own mother was drowned there. Oh, Mark, if it should be!" cried Ruth, much excited.

"Wouldn't it be just too jolly?" said Mark.

Mrs. Coburn became almost as interested as the children when the matter was explained to her; but Captain May was quite provoked when he heard of it. He said it was only a chance resemblance, and there couldn't be anything in it. He had made inquiries in Savannah at the time, and never heard anything of any father or brother either, and at any rate he was not going to lose his Edna now for all the brothers and fathers in the world. He finally said that unless they gave him a solemn promise not to mention a word of all this to Edna, he should not let her visit them next winter. So the children promised, and the captain was satisfied; but they talked the matter over between themselves, and became more and more convinced that Frank March and Edna May were brother and sister.

After this the voyage proceeded without incident until the evening of the third day, when they were sitting at supper in the cabin. The skylights and port−holes were all wide open, for in spite of the fresh breeze that was blowing, the cabin was uncomfortably close and hot. Mark said the further north they went the hotter it seemed to

get, and the others agreed with him. Captain May said that if the breeze held, and they were lucky in meeting a pilot, they would be at anchor in New York Harbor before another supper− time, and he hoped the hot spell would be over before they were obliged to go ashore. While he was speaking the mate put his head down the companion−way and said,

"Captain May, will you be good enough to step on deck a moment, sir?"

As the captain went on deck he noticed that all the crew were gathered about the forecastle, and were talking earnestly.

"What's in the wind now, Mr. Gibbs?" he asked of the mate, who at that moment stepped up to him.

"Why, sir, only this, that I believe the ship's on fire. A few minutes ago the whole watch below came on deck vowing there was no sleeping in the fo'k'sle; that it was a reg'lar furnace. I went to see what they was growling at, and 'twas so hot down there it made my head swim. There wasn't any flame nor any smoke, but there was a powerful smell of burning, and I'm afraid there's fire in the cargo."

Without a word Captain May went forward and down into the forecastle, the men respectfully making way for him to pass. In less than a minute he came up, bathed in perspiration, and turning to the crew, said, "My men, there's no doubt but that this ship is on fire. It's in among the cotton; but if we can keep it smothered a while longer, I think, with this breeze, we can make our port before it breaks out. I want you to keep cool and steady, and remember there's no danger, for we can make land any time in the boats if worse comes to worse. Mr. Gibbs, have the men get their dunnage up out of the forecastle, and then close the hatch and batten it."

Going aft, the captain found his passengers on deck waiting anxiously to learn the cause of the commotion they had already noticed. He told them the worst at once, and advised them to go below and pack up their things ready for instant removal in case it became necessary.

"Oh, William," exclaimed his sister, "can't we take to the boats now while there is time? It seems like tempting Providence to stay on the ship and wait for the fire to break out. What if she should blow up?"

"Now, don't be foolish, Emily," answered the captain. "There's nothing on board that can blow up, and it would be worse than cowardly to leave the ship while there's a chance of saving her. The boats are all ready to be lowered instantly, and at present there is no more danger here than there would be in them."

Not a soul on board the Wildfire went to bed or undressed that night, and Mark and Ruth were the only ones who closed their eyes. They stayed on deck until midnight, but then, in spite of the excitement, they became too sleepy to hold their eyes open any longer, and Mrs. Coburn persuaded them to take a nap on the cabin sofas.

All night the ship flew like a frightened bird towards her port, under such a press of canvas as Captain May would not have dared carry had not the necessity for speed been so great. As the night wore on the decks grew hotter and hotter, until the pitch fairly bubbled from the seams, and a strong smell of burning pervaded the ship. At daylight the American flag was run half−way up to the mizzen peak, union down, as a signal of distress. By sunrise the Highlands of Navesink were in sight, and they also saw a pilot− boat bearing rapidly down upon them from the northward.

As soon as he saw this boat Captain May told his passengers that he was going to send them on board of it, as he feared the fire might now break out at any minute, and he was going to ask its captain to run in to Sandy Hook, and send despatches to the revenue−cutter and to the New York fire−boat Havemeyer, begging them to come to his assistance.

Mrs. Coburn and Ruth readily agreed to this plan, but Mark begged so hard to be allowed to stay, and said he should feel so much like a coward to leave the ship before any of the other men, that the captain finally consented to allow him to remain.

The ship's headway was checked as the pilot−boat drew near, in order that her yawl, bringing the pilot, might run alongside.

"Halloo, Cap'n Bill," sang out the pilot, who happened to be an old acquaintance of Captain May's. "What's the meaning of all that?" and he pointed to the signal of distress. "Got Yellow Jack aboard, or a mutiny?"

"Neither," answered Captain May, "but I've got a volcano stowed under the hatches, and I'm expecting an eruption every minute."

"You don't tell me?" said the pilot, as he clambered up over the side. "Ship's afire, is she?"

The state of affairs was quickly explained to him, and he readily consented that his swift little schooner should run in to the Hook and send despatches for help. He also said they should be only too proud to have the ladies come aboard.

Without further delay Mrs. Coburn and Ruth, with their baggage, were placed in the ship's long−boat, lowered over the side, and in a few minutes were safe on the deck of the pilot−boat, which seemed to Ruth almost as small as Mark's canoe in comparison with the big ship they had just left.

As soon as they were on board, the schooner spread her white wings and stood in for Sandy Hook, while the ship was headed towards the "Swash Channel."

As she passed the Romer Beacon Captain May saw the pilot−boat coming out from behind the Hook, and knew the despatches had been sent. When his ship was off the Hospital Islands he saw the revenue−cutter steaming down through the Narrows towards them, trailing a black cloud behind her, and evidently making all possible speed.

By this time little eddies of smoke were curling up from around the closely battened hatches, and Captain May saw that the ship could not live to reach the upper bay, and feared she would be a mass of flames before the fire−boat could come to her relief. In this emergency he told the pilot that he thought they had better leave the channel and run over on the flats towards the Long Island shore, so as to be prepared to scuttle her.

"Ay, ay, Cap; I can put her just wherever you want her. Only give the word," answered the pilot.

"I do give it," said Captain May, as a cloud of smoke puffed out from the edge of one of the hatches. "Put her there, for she'll be ablaze now before many minutes."

As the ship's head was turned towards the flats the revenue−cutter ran alongside. Her captain, followed by a dozen bluejackets, boarded the ship, and the former, taking in her desperate situation at a glance, said to Captain May, "You must scuttle her at once, captain; it's your only chance to save her."

"Very well, sir," answered Captain May. "I think so myself, but am glad to have your authority for doing so."

As the ship's anchors were let go, her carpenter and a squad of men from the cutter, armed with axes and augurs, tumbled down into her cabin, and began what seemed like a most furious work of destruction. The axes crashed through the carved woodwork, furniture was hurled to one side, great holes were cut in the cabin floor, and the ship's planking was laid bare in a dozen places below the water−line. Then the augurs were set to work, and in a

few minutes a dozen streams of water, spurting up like fountains, were rushing and gurgling into the ship.

While this was going on in the cabin, the ship's crew, assisted by others of the revenue men, were removing everything of value on which they could lay their hands to the deck of the cutter.

Suddenly those in the cabin heard a great cry and a roaring noise on deck and as they rushed up the companion−way they saw a column of flame shooting up from the fore−hatch, half−mast high.

Half the people had sprung on board the revenue−cutter as she sheered off, which she did at the first burst of flame, and now the others filled the boats, which were quickly lowered and shoved off. As the boats were being lowered a second burst of flame came from the main−hatch, and already tongues of fire were lapping the sails and lofty spars.

Mark had worked with the rest in saving whatever he could lift, and did not think of leaving the ship until Captain May said,

"Come, Mark, it's time to go. Jump into this boat."

Mark did as he was told, and as Captain May sprang in after him, and shouted "Lower away!" not a living soul was left on board the unfortunate vessel.

As the men in the boats rested on their oars, and lay at a safe distance from the ship, watching the grand spectacle of her destruction, they saw that she was settling rapidly by the stern. Lower and lower she sank, and higher and higher mounted the fierce flames, until, all at once, her bows lifted high out of the water, her stern seemed to shoot under it, then the great hull plunged out of sight, and a mighty cloud of smoke and steam rose to the sky. Through this cloud the flames along the upper masts and yards shone with a lurid red. At this point the fire−boat arrived; a couple of well−directed streams of water from her powerful engines soon extinguished these flames, and the three blackened masts, pointing vaguely upward, were all that remained to show where, so short a time before, the great ship had floated.

The pilot−boat had already transferred Mrs. Coburn and Ruth and their baggage to the cutter, and she now steamed up the bay, carrying the passengers, crew, and all that had been saved from the good ship Wildfire.

This disaster to his ship, which would have been so terrible had it happened out at sea instead of almost in port, as it did, obliged Captain May to remain in New York several days. Of this Mark and Ruth were very glad, for it gave them an opportunity to see some of the wonders of the great city of which they had read so much, and which they had longed so often to visit.

Mrs. Coburn, who had at one time lived in New York, and so knew just what was best worth seeing, took them to some new place every day. They saw the great East River Bridge that connects New York and Brooklyn, they took the elevated railroad, and went the whole length of Manhattan Island to High Bridge, on which the Croton Aqueduct crosses the Harlem River, and on the way back stopped and walked through Central Park to the Menagerie, where they were more interested in the alligators than anything else, because they reminded them so of old friends, or rather enemies.

They visited museums and noted buildings and stores, until Ruth declared that she wanted to get away where it was quiet, and she didn't see how people who lived in New York found time to do anything but go round and see the sights.

They were all glad when Captain May was ready to leave, and after the noise and bustle of the great city they thoroughly enjoyed the quiet night's sail up Long Island Sound on the steamer Pilgrim.

At Fall River they took cars for Boston, where they stayed one day. From there they took the steamer Cambridge for Bangor, where they arrived in the morning, and where "Uncle Christmas," as jolly and hearty as ever, met them at the wharf.

"Sakes alive, children, how you have growed!" he said, holding them off at arm's−length in front of him, and looking at them admiringly. "Why, Mark, you're pretty nigh as tall as a Floridy pine."

He insisted on taking the whole party to dine with him at the hotel, and at dinner told Mark that that little business of theirs had got to wait a while, and meantime he wanted him to run over to Norton, and stay at Dr. Wing's until he came for him.

This was just what Mark had been wishing, above all things, that he could do, and he almost hugged "Uncle Christmas" for his thoughtful kindness.

After dinner the happy party bade the old gentleman good−bye, and took the train for Skowhegan, where they found the same old rattlety−bang stage waiting to carry them to Norton.

As with a flourish of the driver's horn and a cracking of his whip they rolled into the well−known Norton street, a crowd of boys and girls, who seemed to have been watching for them, gave three rousing cheers for Mark Elmer, and three more for Ruth Elmer, and then three times three for both of them.

The stage stopped, and in another instant Ruth was hugging and kissing, and being hugged and kissed, by her "very dearest, darlingest friend" Edna May, and Mark was being slapped on the back and hauled this way and that, and was shaking hands with all the boys in Norton.

CHAPTER XIX. 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 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.

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 travelling 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 travelled 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 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."

"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 despatch 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."

"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 untravelled 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 northward across the green waters of the Gulf. Here she moved but slowly before the light winds that prevailed, but at last the distant light−house 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 light−house 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."

CHAPTER XX. EDNA MAY MARCH.

Mark, Ruth, and Edna hurried on deck, and reached it in time to see Captain May load to its muzzle the small brass cannon that was carried on the schooner for firing signals.

How beautiful and peaceful everything looked! The tide, with which they had come up, filled the river to the brim, and it sparkled merrily in the light of the rising sun. The ferry−boat lay moored to the bank just in front of the schooner, and they could see the tin horn hanging to its post, and the very card on which were the ferry rates that Ruth had printed so many months before. The house was hidden from their view by a clump of trees, but over their tops rose a light column of smoke, and they knew Aunt Chloe was up and busy, at any rate.

Suddenly, flash! bang! the small cannon went off with a roar worthy of a larger piece, and one that woke the echoes for miles up and down the river, disturbed numerous wild water−fowl from their quiet feeding, and sent them screaming away through the air, and set all the dogs in Wakulla to barking furiously. In the midst of all the clamor the children heard the loud bark of their own dog, Bruce, and in another moment he came bounding down to the landing, and was the first to welcome them home.

At the same time a number of colored people, among whom the children recognized several familiar faces, came running down to the opposite bank of the river, where they stood rubbing their eyes and staring at the big schooner, the first that had been seen in their river in many years.

The children did not pay much attention to them, however, for a landing−plank was being run ashore, and they were eager to go to the house. As Mark reached the wharf, and was holding out his hand to Ruth, who followed, there was a loud hurrah behind him, and before he could turn around Frank March had thrown his arms round his neck, and was fairly hugging him in his joy.

"I knew you'd come when we weren't expecting you! I knew you'd surprise us! and I told 'em so last night when they were worrying about you," shouted the boy, dancing about them, and almost inclined to hug Ruth as he had Mark. But he didn't; he only grasped both her hands, and shook them until she begged for mercy. As soon as she regained possession of her hands, she said,

"And here's Edna, Frank. Miss Edna May, Mr. Frank March."

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Miss Edna," said Frank; and "How do you do, Mr. March?" said Edna, as they shook hands and looked at each other curiously.

Then Frank was introduced to Uncle Christopher, who said, "My boy, I'm proud to make your acquaintance. So you didn't expect us, eh?" and the old gentleman chuckled as he thought of the quality and size of the joke they had played on the inmates of "Go Bang" by surprising them.

Captain May and the gentlemen from Aroostook had not left the schooner when the others turned towards the house, talking so fast as they went that nobody understood, or even heard, what anybody else was saying.

As they came in sight of the house two well−known figures were leaving the front gate, and the next minute Mark and Ruth had rushed into the arms of their father and mother, and the latter was actually crying for joy.

"It is all your doing, Uncle Christopher," she said to Mr. Bangs, as soon as she could speak. "I know it is; for you never in your life have neglected opportunities for giving people joyful surprises."

"Well, Niece Ellen, I won't say as I didn't have a hand in it," answered the old gentleman, his face beaming with delight. "But, sakes alive! Mark Elmer, is this the place that I let you have rent free for ten years?" and he pointed to the pretty house, and swept his hand over the broad fields surrounding it.

"Yes, Uncle Christopher, this is the place. This is 'Go Bang,' as the children have named it, and we welcome you very heartily to it."

"Well, well," said Uncle Christopher, mournfully, "what chances I have thrown away in this life! eh, Niece Ellen?"

"You never threw away a chance to do good or make others happy, uncle, I am sure of that. But now come into the house and get ready for breakfast, which will soon be ready for you."

As the others went into the house, Ruth ran around to the kitchen to see Aunt Chloe, and so surprised that old woman that she just threw her floury arms about the girl's neck and kissed her, saying,

"Tank de Lo'd, honey! Tank de good Lo'd you's come home ag'in! We's all miss yo' like de sunshine, but nobody hain't miss yo' like ole Clo done."

Mr. March and Jan had gone to Tallahassee the day before, but were to be back that night.

Mrs. Elmer sent Mark down to the schooner to invite Captain May and the Aroostook gentlemen to come to the house for breakfast, but, rather to her relief for she was not prepared to entertain so many guests they declined her invitation, saying they would breakfast on board, and come to the house to pay their respects later.

How jolly and happy they were at breakfast. How shy Frank was before Edna, and how many funny things Uncle Christopher did say to make them laugh! Little by little the "great scheme" was unfolded to the three members of the mill company present who had not heard of it, though Uncle Christopher and Mark had intended to keep it a secret until they could lay it before a regular meeting of the directors. But, beginning with hints, the whole story was finally told, and Mr. and Mrs. Elmer and Frank were only too glad to sustain President Mark in his promises. They said they should not only be proud and happy to have the "best uncle in the world" become a member of their company, but that new saw−mill machinery was just what they needed, for they found the present mill already unable to supply the demands upon it for lumber.

While the others were talking business, Ruth and Edna had gone out on the front porch to look at the garden, and now Ruth came back to ask whose house the pretty little new one was that stood just on the edge of the woods to the right.

"Why, that's ours," said Frank, jumping from the table. "Don't you want to go and look at it?"

They said of course they did, and Mark said he would go too. They were perfectly delighted with the new house and everything in it, and praised it for being so tiny and cosey and comfortable, until Frank thought he had never felt so happy and proud before. It was no wonder, for this was the first time he had ever known the pleasure of extending, to those whom he loved, the hospitality of a pleasant home of his own.

When they returned to the big house they found the rest of their friends from the schooner there. Captain May started when he saw Frank March, and on being introduced to him held his hand so long, and stared at him so earnestly, as to greatly embarrass the boy.

As Uncle Christopher and the Aroostook gentlemen were anxious to visit the mill, Mr. Elmer invited them to walk up there through the woods. On their way they passed the sulphur spring, which had been cleaned out and walled in, and over which a neat bath−house had been built. Uncle Christopher was delighted with it, and declared that, to an old "rheumatizy" man like him, that spring was worth all the lumber in "Floridy."

Mark had asked Edna and Ruth to go up to the mill by water with Frank and him in the canoe, and they accepted the invitation. At first Edna was very timid in the frail craft, but she soon gained confidence, and said "she thought it was the very nicest little boat, on one of the prettiest rivers she had ever seen."

As they neared the mill its busy machinery seemed to Mark to say, "Welcome, Mr. President, welcome, Mr. President, welcome Mr. President of the Elmer Mills"; and when he drew the attention of the others to it, they declared that they, too, could distinguish the words quite plainly. The mill looked just as it had when they last saw it, but at one side were great piles of sawed lumber that Uncle Christopher and the Aroostook gentlemen were examining carefully.

That afternoon Mark handed Frank thirty dollars as his share of the money the former had received from their otter−skins, which he had carried North and sold. Frank had several more that he had caught during the summer, but their skins were of little value compared with those caught during the earlier months of the year.

Mr. Elmer had invited all the gentlemen to dine with him that evening, much to the consternation of Aunt Chloe, who said "she was sho' she couldn't see how she was gwine fin' time to po'wide vittles fo' so many guesses; an' dem po' hung'y Norfeners too. 'Specs dey'll be powerful tickled to git a squar' meal."

The "guesses" spent the afternoon in crossing the river to Wakulla, and in driving several miles into the great pine forests, which pleased them greatly.

The dinner turned out to be a most bountiful meal, in spite of Aunt Chloe's fears; and at half−past six a very merry company gathered around the long table, which, for want of space elsewhere, had been set in the wide hall that ran through the house from front to rear. The evening was so warm that the front door stood wide open, and when dinner was nearly over, the whole party were laughing so heartily at one of Uncle Christopher's funny stories, that no one heard the sound of wheels at the gate, nor noticed the figure that, with white face and wild eyes, stared at them from the open doorway.

No, not at them; only at one of them the fair−haired girl, almost a woman, who sat at the head of the table, on Mr. Elmer's right hand, and on whose face the light shone full and strong.

Then a cry rang through the hall, a cry almost of agony, and it was "Margaret! Margaret! my wife Margaret! Am I dreaming, or can the dead come to life?"

As the startled guests looked towards the door Mr. March entered the room, and without noticing any one else, walked straight to where Edna May was sitting. She, frightened at his appearance and fixed gaze, clung to Mr. Elmer's arm, and Captain May half rose from his chair with a confused idea that the girl, whom he loved as his own daughter, was in danger.

"Who is she, Elmer? where did she come from?" exclaimed Mr. March. "She is the living image of my dead wife; only younger, much younger, and more beautiful than she whom I drove from her home," he added, with a groan.

Mr. Elmer had noticed the strange resemblance between Frank March and Edna May, and had determined to speak to his wife about it that night. Now it all flashed across him as clear as sunlight; but before he could speak, Ruth sprang to his side, and taking her friend's hand in hers, cried,

"Don't you see, father, she is his own daughter, the baby he thought was drowned in the Savannah River so many years ago? Captain May saved her, and now he has brought her back to her father and brother. Frank, Edna is your own sister."

Mr. March tried to take Edna into his arms, but she slipped away from him and ran to Captain May, saying, "This is my father, the only one I have ever known. As he has loved and cared for me, so do I love him. I will never, never leave him!" and she burst into tears.

After soothing and quieting her, Captain May said, "Mr. March, I suspected this long ago. Mark and Ruth told me of the resemblance between Edna and your son on our way North together last spring, and I made them promise not to mention it to her. I hoped it would prove to be only a fancied resemblance; but, as a Christian man, I could not keep father and daughter separated, if indeed they were father and daughter. So I brought her here to meet you face to face; and from what I have just seen I am inclined to think you are her own father, but you must prove it to me. Prove the fact beyond a doubt, and I will yield to you an undivided half interest in this dear child. Only a half, though. I can't give up the love that has twined round my heart for nearly fifteen years."

Then Mr. March sat down, and in faltering tones told to the listening company the sad story of his married life. He gave the date of the disappearance of his wife and her baby from home, and he described as well as he could the clothes that each wore at the time.

As he finished, Captain May went to him and gave him a warm, hearty hand−grasp. "That's enough," he said. "Gentlemen, I call you to witness that from this time forth I renounce all claims, except those of love, to her who has been known for the last fifteen years as my daughter Edna May. I am satisfied that this man is her father, and that whatever he has been in the past, he is now worthy to occupy that position towards her. Edna, my girl, you have only got two fathers instead of one, and a brother of whom I think you will live to be very proud besides; your heart holds enough love for all of us, doesn't it, dear?"

Edna's answer was to throw her arms around his neck, and kiss his weather−beaten cheeks again and again. Then, with a smile showing through the tears that still filled her eyes, she went over to Mr. March, whom she no longer doubted was her own father, but of whom she could not help feeling very shy, and half timidly held up her face for him to kiss. The happy father opened his arms and clasped her to his heart, exclaiming, in a broken voice, "God bless you, my daughter! That He has restored you to me is the surest sign of His forgiveness."

Then Frank came to them, saying, "Sister Edna, won't you kiss me too? The thing I have envied Mark most was his having a sister, and now that I have got one of my own, I do believe I am the very happiest boy in the world."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed good old Uncle Christopher, who had all this time been blowing his nose very loudly with a great red silk hand−kerchief, and occasionally wiping his eyes, "with all this kissing going on, where am I? Grandniece Ruth, come here and kiss your 'Uncle Christmas' directly." Ruth did as she was bid, and the old gentleman continued: "What a country this Floridy is, to be sure. They change March into May, or vicy versy, and each one is as beautiful as the other. Sakes alive! what an old April Fool I was not to think of all this myself when I first saw those two young people together."

Long before this, honest Jan Jansen, who had returned from Tallahassee with Mr. March, but waited to put up the mules, had come into the room, and he was now brought forward and introduced to everybody. Among the Aroostook gentlemen he found an old acquaintance who had met him in New Sweden, and who now told him that, owing to the death of a relative in the old country, a snug little property awaited him, and that a lawyer in Bangor was advertising and searching for him.

Having now spent almost a year with our Wakulla friends, perhaps they are getting tired of us, and we had better leave them for a while, only waiting to draw together the threads of the story, and finish it off neatly.

Edna May March has been installed mistress of the pretty little house that Mr. March and Frank built while the young Elmers were in the North, and she and Ruth receive daily lessons in cooking, sewing, and all sorts of housekeeping from Mrs. Elmer and Aunt Chloe; and the latter says "she's proud to 'still Soufern precep's into deir sweet Norfern heads, bress em!"

The Nancy Bell lay in the St. Mark's River long enough to secure a load of lumber from the Elmer Mill, and then sailed for the North. But she will return, for Captain May has bought a half interest in her from Uncle Christopher,

and will hereafter run her regularly between New York and Wakulla.

The new Elmer Mill is nearly finished, and four of the six gentlemen from Aroostook have gone home to get their families, and to buy more machinery with which to erect another saw−mill farther up the river, and they are expected back on the next trip of the Nancy Bell.

Jan has gone to Sweden; but they have had a letter from him saying that he should return soon, and invest his property in Wakulla.

Dear old "Uncle Christmas" is busy preparing for his expedition in search of the famous Wakulla volcano. He revels in the warmth of the climate, and in bathing in the sulphur spring, and he says that if a good thing's good, a better may be better, and he may find more warmth and more sulphur if he can only find the volcano.

Edna has been taken on several picnics to Wakulla Spring, over the "humpety road," and "de trabblin' road," past "Brer Steve's" down to the light−house, and to other places of interest. The contrast between what is, and what the people of Wakulla hope will be when they get the great ship−canal across Florida built, and other schemes carried out, amuses her greatly. She smiles when they come to her and in strict confidence unfold their plans for future greatness; but is such a patient listener, and so ready a sympathizer, that she is rapidly winning their admiration and love.

THE END