KIRK MUNROE

WAKULLA

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A story of adventure in Florida

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CHAPTER I.

PREPARING TO LEAVE THE OLD HOME.

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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."

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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.

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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.