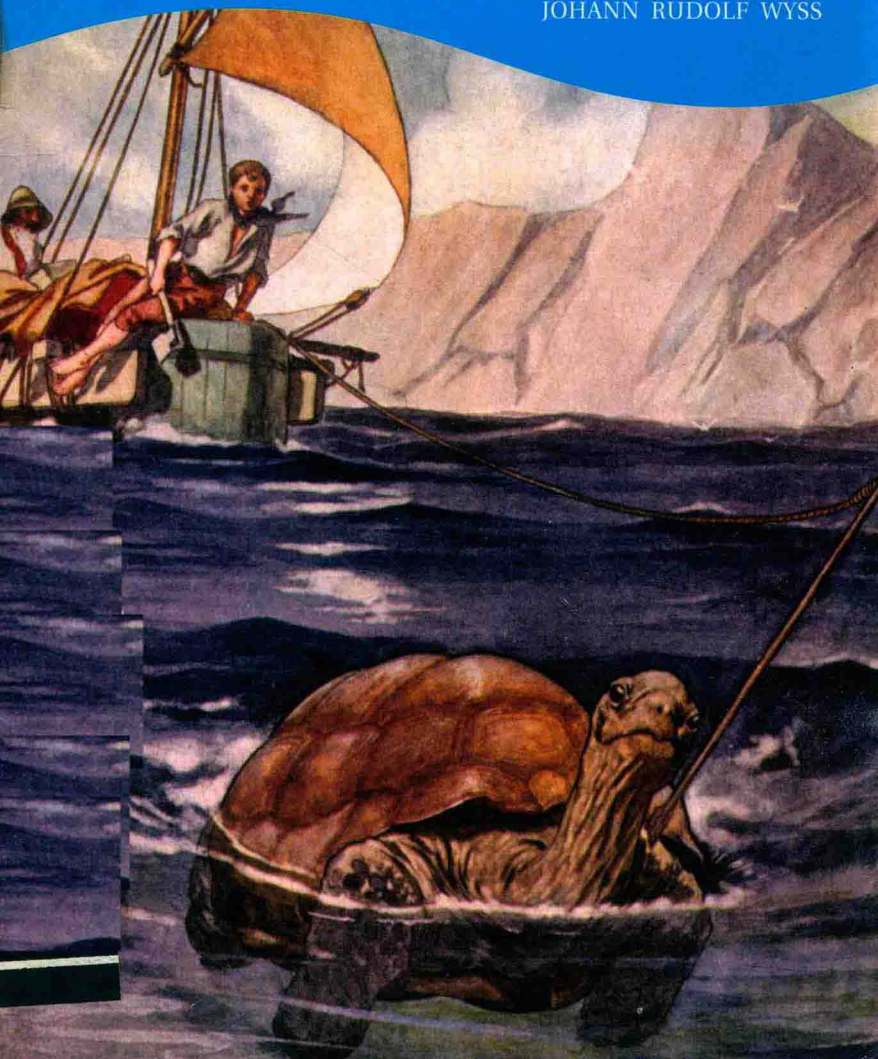


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THE SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON



Climbing the palm trees

*The Swiss Family
Robinson*

JOHANN RUDOLF WYSS



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CHAPTER I

The Shipwreck

[Among those who suffered from the effects of the French Revolution of 1789 was a pastor or clergyman living in the west of Switzerland. He had lost all his property, and therefore resolved to become a missionary. For this purpose he first came to England with his wife and four sons, and soon afterwards accepted an appointment in the mission to Otaheite (the largest of the Society Islands, situated in the North Pacific, and now belonging to France). With a number of other passengers he set sail, intending, after a time, to proceed to Port Jackson, in New South Wales, and settle there. He and his friends took care to provide themselves with such tools, seeds, plants, farm implements, and cattle as they could not purchase in the colony. All went well for a considerable time; but when near the Equator the vessel was assailed by a tempest of almost unexampled severity, and driven out of its course, and it is at the moment when its fierceness was at its height that the story begins.]

The tempest had lasted six long and terrible days. On the seventh, far from diminishing, it seemed to redouble its fury. We were driven far to the southeast, out of our course, and no one knew where we were.

Everyone was worn out and exhausted with fatigue and long watching; and all hope of saving the ship had disappeared. The masts were broken and the sails rent; the ship, full of water, threatened every moment to go down, and each one, commending his soul to God for mercy, strove to find some means of saving his life.

My boys clung to their mother, and trembled with fear in our little cabin. 'My dear children,' said I, 'God can save us if it is His will: if not, we must calmly yield our lives into His hand.'

My poor wife wiped her tears, and, to give courage to her boys, became calm. But while endeavouring to comfort my family, I could scarcely restrain my own grief.

We all knelt together, and offered prayers to the Almighty. Fritz, my eldest boy, prayed most earnestly that God would save his dear parents and brothers, seeming quite forgetful of his own safety. All at once, above the roar of the wind and waves, I heard the cry, 'Land, land!' whilst at the same instant so violent a shock was felt, that I believed the ship had struck on a rock, and would immediately go to pieces. The cracking timbers, and the sudden rush of water which poured in on all sides, proved that I was not mistaken. Then the voice of the captain was heard in terrible tones, above the tumult, shouting, 'Lower the boats! We are lost!'

'Lost!' I exclaimed, and the cry went like a dagger to my heart; but the piteous cries of my children told me that I must not allow them to despair at this awful moment. 'Keep up your courage!' I cried, cheerfully: 'we are all above water yet: I will go on deck at once, and see whether some way of deliverance may not be left for us.'

I went quickly above; but I was immediately thrown down, and wave after wave washed over me, dashing me to the deck. I struggled to withstand their force by clinging to the side of the ship, and then what a sight presented itself!

One boat was far out to sea, and the last of the sailors, as he leaped on board the other boat, cut the rope and it began to drift away. I cried, I begged, I entreated them to return and take my wife and children, but in vain. My voice was drowned in the howling of the blast; and, even had I been heard, the fury of the waves rendered the return of the boats an impossibility. Glancing around me in despair, I observed, with returning hope, the position of the vessel. The bow had sunk forward, leaving the stern, in which was our cabin, high above the water, and as the wreck was fixed between two rocks, there seemed to be no

immediate danger of its sinking, especially if the storm abated. Looking towards the shore, which a misty rain obscured from view, perhaps making it appear more barren and desolate than it was, I determined to make an effort to reach that place of safety; and returning to my dear ones below in the cabin, I addressed them hopefully.

'Take courage, my children,' I exclaimed on entering, 'all is not yet lost. The ship is fixed between the rocks, and our little cabin is high above the water. If tomorrow brings a calmer sea, we may be able to get on shore.'

My boys received this news with transports of joy; but my wife noticed my anxiety in spite of my calmness; though I knew that her confidence in God was unshaken, and this gave me new courage.

Searching in the steward's room for provisions, my wife soon had a plentiful supper prepared for us, 'For,' said she, 'nourishment for the body gives strength to the spirit, and we may have a very disturbed night.'

And so it proved. The three younger boys retired to rest, after enjoying a hearty meal, and were soon fast asleep, overcome with fatigue and excitement, but Fritz, the eldest, a youth of fourteen, preferred to watch with us.

During the night the storm continued, and the waves broke over the lower part of the ship with undiminished fury. From time to time a cracking noise told us that the timbers of the wreck were strained by their force, and a continual trembling caused a dread that the vessel might at any moment fall in pieces.

After one of these shocks Fritz exclaimed, 'Father, I have thought of a means of safety. Do you think we could find swimming belts on board for mother and the boys, or make something to support them in the water? You and I could swim on shore; but they cannot swim.'

'An excellent idea, my boy,' I replied. 'We will search at once.'

But no swimming belts could be found; so I determined on a plan which I hoped would prove successful. In the steward's cabin we found a number of empty barrels strong enough to keep a person afloat. These we fastened together in pairs, with

space enough between them to allow of their being tied under the armpits of the three boys and my wife. We also provided ourselves with knives, string, a tinder box and matches, and other useful and portable articles, which we could secure about our persons, hoping that, if the vessel went to pieces, we might be able to reach the shore, partly by swimming, and partly by being borne on the waves, and not quite destitute.

Fritz, being now worn out, fell fast asleep. My brave wife and I remained awake, trembling at each shock that threatened to engulf us. It was a trying night for us both; and we passed it in prayer and consultation about our future. With thankful hearts, we hailed with delight the first glimmer of dawn, and, as the wind was considerably abated, we felt somewhat reassured and more hopeful of safely reaching land.

CHAPTER II

Preparations for Escape

I quickly roused the boys. We all assembled on deck, and then, for the first time, they saw that we were alone on the ship.

'O, papa! where are the sailors and the other passengers? How are we to get to land? Are they gone? Why did they not take us?' exclaimed they.

'My children,' I said, 'though we seem deserted, we must not despair. Let us bestir ourselves and each cheerfully do his best.'

'The sea is quite calm enough for us to reach the land by swimming,' said Fritz.

'Swimming is right for you,' answered my second son, Ernest, 'but not for us who can't swim.'

'Suppose we search the ship, and see if anything can be found for a raft,' I replied, after several plans had been proposed.

All dispersed at once in different directions. I descended first to the provision-room, where, to my great satisfaction, I found a good supply of both food and water. My wife and her youngest boy went to visit the animals; Fritz ran to the armoury; whilst Ernest sought for the ship-carpenter's tools. As Jack opened the door of the captain's cabin two large dogs sprang out, and bounded upon him so roughly that they threw him down, and made such boisterous demonstrations that he thought they were about to devour him. He recovered himself quickly, and seizing the largest dog by the ears, jumped on his back and rode gravely to meet me, as I came up the hatchway.

One by one the various explorers returned with their prizes, each bringing what he considered most useful in our position.

Fritz brought with him two guns, some powder, shot, and bullets. Ernest held in his hand his hat full of nails and a hammer and hatchet, while from his pocket protruded a pair of pincers;

whilst little Frank, the youngest, carried a packet of fishing-hooks and lines, with which he seemed much pleased.

‘As to myself,’ said my dear wife, ‘I am the bearer of good news. There are still alive on the ship a cow, an ass, two goats, six sheep, a ram, and a sow.’

‘Well done,’ I said; ‘but I am afraid you have brought two tremendous eaters, Jack, instead of useful things.’

‘Not at all, papa!’ exclaimed Jack. ‘When we get to land the dogs will help us to hunt.’

‘No doubt,’ I replied; ‘but how are we to get there?’

‘Easy enough,’ said Jack. ‘Can we not sail in tubs, as I used to do on the pond at home?’

‘A capital idea!’ I exclaimed. ‘Come, and let us begin at once, and see what can be found in the hold.’

We soon found four large empty casks, exactly suited to my purpose, and I at once set to work to saw them apart through the middle. After great exertion we succeeded, and I contemplated with much satisfaction the eight half-casks ranged in a row on the deck.

‘I never dare venture on the open sea in one of these,’ said my wife, with a sigh.

‘Do not alarm yourself so soon, my dear wife,’ I replied. ‘My contrivance is not yet finished, and you will find that these tubs are much to be preferred to a shattered wreck which is a fixture on the rocks.’

After another search I got a long, flexible plank, and upon this nailed my eight tubs. Two other planks were nailed firmly on each side of the tubs, and brought together at the ends, forming a stem and stern. I thus made a narrow boat, divided into eight compartments, all strong and well fitted; but, to my dismay, it was so heavy that we were not able to move it an inch.

‘Run and bring me one of the capstan bars,’ I cried; ‘I must use it as a lever.’

Fritz went to find one, while I set to work to saw up a spar into short rollers, which Fritz placed underneath as I lifted the lower part of my boat with the iron bar.

I next fastened a rope to this tub-raft with a strong knot,