

J O H A N N W Y S S

THE SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON



YEARLING

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The Swiss Family Robinson

Johann Wyss

A YEARLING BOOK

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| 1. <i>Shipwrecked and Alone</i> | 1 |
| 2. <i>A Desolate Island</i> | 9 |
| 3. <i>We Explore Our Island</i> | 19 |
| 4. <i>The Homeward Journey</i> | 28 |
| 5. <i>We Revisit the Wreck</i> | 35 |
| 6. <i>Mother Makes a Suggestion</i> | 45 |
| 7. <i>We Build a Bridge</i> | 52 |
| 8. <i>The Journey to the Wonderful Trees</i> | 58 |
| 9. <i>The Tree-House</i> | 64 |
| 10. <i>A Visit to Tenthelm</i> | 71 |
| 11. <i>The Strange Animal</i> | 78 |
| 12. <i>Towed by a Turtle</i> | 85 |
| 13. <i>An Important Experiment</i> | 92 |
| 14. <i>The Pinnacle and the Petard</i> | 99 |
| 15. <i>The Calabash Wood</i> | 105 |
| 16. <i>Last Visit to the Wreck</i> | 115 |
| 17. <i>The Buffalo Hunt</i> | 122 |
| 18. <i>The Hollow Tree</i> | 131 |
| 19. <i>The Rainy Season</i> | 139 |

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| | |
|--|-----|
| 20. <i>The Salt Cavern</i> | 145 |
| 21. "Woodlands" | 155 |
| 22. <i>Thanksgiving Day</i> | 161 |
| 23. <i>The Island Sports Carnival</i> | 165 |
| 24. <i>A Midnight Raid</i> | 173 |
| 25. <i>The Stranded Whale</i> | 184 |
| 26. <i>Jack Discovers a Skeleton</i> | 193 |
| 27. <i>Death of a Monster</i> | 198 |
| 28. <i>An Inland Journey</i> | 208 |
| 29. <i>The Desert</i> | 214 |
| 30. <i>Ostriches and Bears</i> | 221 |
| 31. <i>The Captive Ostrich</i> | 230 |
| 32. <i>Home Again</i> | 238 |
| 33. <i>A Visit to Whale Island</i> | 244 |
| 34. <i>Our First Harvest</i> | 251 |
| 35. <i>The Trial of the "Sea Horse"</i> | 257 |
| 36. <i>News by Pigeon Post</i> | 263 |
| 37. <i>To the Rescue</i> | 268 |
| 38. <i>After Ten Years</i> | 274 |
| 39. <i>The Mysterious Message</i> | 281 |
| 40. <i>Fritz Says Good-bye</i> | 288 |
| 41. <i>The Stranger</i> | 293 |
| 42. <i>Jenny</i> | 302 |
| 43. <i>The Mysterious Guns</i> | 311 |
| 44. <i>Three Cheers for New Switzerland!</i> | 320 |

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Chapter 1

Shipwrecked and Alone

For many days we had been tempest-tossed. Six times had the darkness closed over a wild and terrific scene, and returning light as often brought but renewed distress, for the raging storm increased in fury until on the seventh day all hope was lost.

We were driven completely out of our course; no conjecture could be formed as to our whereabouts. The crew had lost heart and were utterly exhausted by incessant labor.

The riven masts had gone by the board, leaks had been sprung in every direction, and the water, which rushed in, gained upon us rapidly.

Instead of reckless oaths, the seamen now uttered frantic cries to God for mercy, mingled with strange and often ludicrous vows, to be performed should deliverance be granted.

Every man on board alternately commended his soul to his Creator, and strove to bethink himself of some means of saving his life.

My heart sank as I looked round upon my family in the midst of these horrors. Our four young sons were overpowered by terror. "Dear children," said I, "if the Lord will, He can save us

even from this fearful peril; if not, let us calmly yield our lives into His hand, and think of the joy and blessedness of finding ourselves forever and ever united in that happy home above."

At these words my weeping wife looked bravely up, and, as the boys clustered round her, she began to cheer and encourage them with calm and loving words. I rejoiced to see her fortitude, though my heart was ready to break as I gazed on my dear ones.

We knelt down together, one after another praying with deep earnestness and emotion. Fritz, in particular, besought help and deliverance for his dear parents and brothers, as though quite forgetting himself.

Our hearts were soothed by the never-failing comfort of childlike, confiding prayer, and the horror of our situation seemed less overwhelming. "Ah," thought I, "the Lord will hear our prayer! He will help us."

Amid the roar of the thundering waves I suddenly heard the cry of "Land, land!" while at the same instant the ship struck with a frightful shock, which threw everyone to the deck and seemed to threaten her immediate destruction.

Dreadful sounds betokened the breaking up of the ship, and the roaring waters poured in on all sides:

Then the voice of the captain was heard above the tumult shouting, "Lower away the boats! We are lost!"

"Lost!" I exclaimed, and the word went like a dagger to my heart; but seeing my children's terror renewed, I composed myself, calling out cheerfully, "Take courage, my boys! We are all abovewater yet. There is the land not far off; let us do our best to reach it. You know God helps those that help themselves!" With that, I left them and went on deck. What was my horror when through the foam and spray I beheld the only remaining boat leave the ship, the last of the seamen spring into her and push off, regardless of my cries and entreaties that we might be allowed to share their slender chance of preserving

their lives. My voice was drowned in the howling of the blast; and even had the crew wished it, the return of the boat was impossible.

Casting my eyes despairingly around, I became gradually aware that our position was by no means hopeless, inasmuch as the stern of the ship containing our cabin was jammed between two high rocks, and was partly raised from among the breakers which dashed the fore part to pieces. As the clouds of mist and rain drove past, I could make out, through rents in the vaporous curtain, a line of rocky coast, and rugged as it was, my heart bounded toward it as a sign of help in the hour of need. Yet the sense of our lonely and forsaken condition weighed heavily upon me as I returned to my family, constraining myself to say with a smile, "Courage, dear ones! Although our good ship will never sail more, she is so placed that our cabin will remain abovewater, and tomorrow, if the wind and waves abate, I see no reason why we should not be able to get ashore."

These few words had an immediate effect on the spirits of my children, who at once regarded our problematical chance of escaping as a happy certainty, and began to enjoy the relief from the violent pitching and rolling of the vessel.

My wife, however, perceived my distress and anxiety, in spite of my forced composure, and I made her comprehend our real situation, greatly fearing the effect of the intelligence on her nerves. Not for a moment did her courage and trust in Providence forsake her, and on seeing this my fortitude revived.

"We must find some food, and take a good supper," said she, "it will never do to grow faint by fasting too long. We shall require our utmost strength tomorrow."

Night drew on apace, the storm was as fierce as ever, and at intervals we were startled by crashes announcing further damage to our unfortunate ship.

"God will help us soon now, won't He, father?" said my youngest child.

"You silly little thing," said Fritz, my eldest son, sharply, "don't you know that we must not settle what God is to do for us? We must have patience and wait His time."

"Very well said, had it been said kindly, Fritz, my boy. You too often speak harshly to your brothers, although you may not mean to do so."

A good meal being now ready, my youngsters ate heartily, and retiring to rest were speedily fast asleep. Fritz, who was of an age to be aware of the real danger we were in, kept watch with us. After a long silence, "Father," said he, "don't you think we might contrive swimming belts for mother and the boys? With those we might all escape to land, for you and I can swim."

"Your idea is so good," answered I, "that I shall arrange something at once, in case of an accident during the night."

We immediately searched about for what would answer the purpose, and fortunately got hold of a number of empty flasks and tin canisters, which we connected two and two together so as to form floats sufficiently buoyant to support a person in the water, and my wife and young sons each willingly put one on. I then provided myself with matches, knives, cord, and other portable articles, trusting that, should the vessel go to pieces before daylight, we might gain the shore not wholly destitute.

Fritz, as well as his brothers, now slept soundly. Throughout the night my wife and I maintained our prayerful watch, dreading at every fresh sound some fatal change in the position of the wreck.

At length the faint dawn of day appeared, the long, weary night was over, and with thankful hearts we perceived that the gale had begun to moderate; blue sky was seen above us, and the lovely hues of sunrise adorned the eastern horizon.

I aroused the boys, and we assembled on the remaining

portion of the deck, when they, to their surprise, discovered that no one else was on board.

"Hullo, papa! What has become of everybody? Are the sailors gone? Have they taken away the boats? Oh, papa! Why did they leave us behind? What can we do by ourselves?"

"My good children," I replied, "we must not despair, although we seem deserted. See how those on whose skill and good faith we depended have left us cruelly to our fate in the hour of danger. God will never do so. He has not forsaken us, and we will trust Him still. Only let us bestir ourselves, and each cheerily do his best. Who has anything to propose?"

"The sea will soon be calm enough for swimming," said Fritz.

"And that would be all very fine for you," exclaimed Ernest, "but think of mother and the rest of us! Why not build a raft and all get on shore together?"

"We should find it difficult, I think, to make a raft that would carry us safe to shore. However, we must contrive something, and first let each try to procure what will be of most use to us."

Away we all went to see what was to be found, I myself proceeding to examine, as of great consequence, the supplies of provisions and fresh water within our reach.

My wife took her youngest son, Franz, to help her to feed the unfortunate animals on board, who were in a pitiful plight, having been neglected for several days.

Fritz hastened to the arms chest, Ernest to look for tools: and Jack went toward the captain's cabin, the door of which he no sooner opened than out sprang two splendid large dogs, who testified their extreme delight and gratitude by such tremendous bounds that they knocked their little deliverer completely head over heels, frightening him nearly out of his wits. Jack did not long yield to either fear or anger; he presently recovered himself. The dogs seemed to ask pardon by vehemently licking his face and hands, and so, seizing the larger by the ears, he

THE SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON

The enchanting story of a shipwrecked family—a minister, his wife, and four sons, Fritz, Ernest, Francis, and Jack—who are cast up on a desert island, build a wonderful house in a tree, and survive so cleverly and happily apart from the world that they never want to be rescued.

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