THE CASTAWAYS OF THE FLAG

JULES VERNE

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THE FINAL ADVENTURES OF THE SWISS

FAMILY ROBINSON

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Preface

This story is a sequel to “Their Island Home,” which takes up the adventures of the Swiss Family Robinson at the place where the author of the original narrative dropped them.

“The Swiss Family Robinson” seems to have affected Jules Verne’s literary bent as no other book ever did. It gave him that liking for the lonely island life as the basis of a yarn which is conspicuous in much of his work. In a preface to the story of which this is really a part he tells how firmly New Switzerland established itself in the fabric of his thoughts, till it became for him a real island inhabited by real people. At last he was compelled to write about it, and “Their Island Home” and “The Castaways of the Flag” are the result.

The youth of Europe—many generations of it—owes a big debt to the old romancer who worked for so many years in his turret room at Amiens to entertain it. From that room, with its many bookshelves, came volume after volume of adventure, mostly with a big admixture of the scientific. M. Verne was not one of those who pile hairbreadth escapes one upon another till they become incredible. There are plenty of things happening in his books, but they are the sort of things that would happen, given the circumstances, and he explains why and how they chanced in the most convincing manner possible. In these

days of submarines and aeroplanes it is interesting to read again the wonderful Frenchman's forecast of them in such books as "Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea" and "The Clipper of the Clouds." "Round the World in Eighty Days"—the task would be an easy one now, but at the time when he wrote it required great ingenuity to make it seem possible; and the end of that book is one of the most ingenious things in fiction, though it has for justification a simple geographical fact. Phineas Fogg was a day late, as he believed. He had apparently lost his wager. But, having gone round the world in the right direction, he had gained a day, and just won. If he had gone the other way he would have been two days late, for a day would have been lost to him—cut right out of the calendar!

The cryptogram which forms the main feature of "The Giant Raft"—the deflection of the compass in "Dick Sands," which causes the people on the ship of which Dick had to take command to reach the coast of Africa, while believing that they had landed on the American continent—the device of the millionaire in "Godfrey Morgan," which provided an island with beasts of prey not native to it—the gigantic projectile which carried those intrepid voyagers to the moon and round it—the reaching of the interior of the earth by a road down the crater of one volcano and the return to the surface up the crater of another—these are imaginations not readily forgotten. And the other stories—"Five Weeks in a Balloon," "The Adventures of Three Englishmen and Three Russians," "The Tribulations of a Chinaman," the yarns dealing with the Indian Mutiny, "Michael Strogoff the

Courier of the Czar," and the rest—how entrancing they were, and still are to a boy, or a man with something of the boy yet in him!

"THEIR ISLAND HOME."

Readers of the present book who have not read that named above—though all should read it as well as this—will have no difficulty in joining the story of the castaways to "The Swiss Family Robinson" with the help of the brief sketch of its contents which follows.

The story begins with the arrival of the Unicorn, a British corvette commanded by Lieutenant Littlestone, whose commission includes the exploration of the waters in which New Switzerland is situate. He has with him as passengers Mr. and Mrs. Wolston and their daughters Hannah and Dolly.

When the Unicorn weighs anchor again Mr. Wolston and his wife and their elder daughter, Hannah, remain on the island. But the corvette takes away Fritz and Frank Zermatt and Jenny Montrose, who are all bound for England, where Jenny hopes to find her father, Colonel Montrose, and the two young men have much business to transact, and Dolly Wolston, who is to join her brother James—a married man with one child—at Cape Town. Mr. Wolston hopes that James, with his wife and child, will agree to accompany Dolly and the Zermatts—by the time they return Jenny will have become Mrs. Fritz Zermatt—to the island and take up their abode there.

The Unicorn gone, those left behind settle themselves down to await her return, labouring meanwhile to make ready the island against the possibility of a number of immigrants. One of their first improvements is a canal for irrigation purposes. Mr. Wolston, a skilful engineer, and Ernest, clever and thoughtful, reader of many books and with a distinct scientific bent, are quite capable of planning such things as this.

There are seven people left on the island—M. and Mme. Zermatt, Mr. and Mrs. Wolston, Jack Zermatt, adventurous and keen on sport, Ernest, and the charming Hannah. Between these last two a strong affection develops. The brothers, very unlike in nature, have little in common, but are good friends in spite of that fact; and the whole seven form practically one united and very happy family.

Only a small part of the island has ever been really explored during the ten years the Zermatts have been there. They now determine to find out more about it. In their pinnace, the Elizabeth, they voyage to a hitherto unknown coast, and, after a very arid stretch, find the mouth of a river, capable of floating the pinnace. They christen this the Montrose, in compliment to Jenny.

To the south they see a great mountain range. In order to get as near this as possible Mr. Wolston and Ernest make a canoe trip up the Montrose, but are stopped at length by rapids and a great natural dam.

They all return to Rock Castle and face the dull days of the rainy season, which proves more stormy than usual, and does some damage

to their possessions elsewhere than at Rock Castle. That season over, they make preparations for another expedition—this time wholly by land, and made by Mr. Wolston, Jack, and Ernest only, M. Zermatt remaining with the three ladies.

The three are determined to reach the topmost peak of the mountain range, and after some considerable difficulty they achieve their object. They plant the British flag there, Lieut. Littlestone having provisionally taken possession of the island in Great Britain's name, and they christen the mountain crest Jean Zermatt Peak. From it they discern out at sea a ship flying the British colours. But she disappears, to their intense disappointment.

At Rock Castle those left behind grow anxious when the time the explorers had expected to be away lengthens itself by several days. Then Mr. Wolston and Ernest turn up—without Jack.

That adventurous young man has wandered off after three elephants, in the hope of capturing and taming the calf after killing the father and mother. They have searched in vain for him, and are almost forced to the conclusion that something tragic must have happened.

But Jack turns up, safe and sound. He has, however, an alarming tale to tell. It would seem that their days of peace on the island are numbered. He has been captured by savages, and, though he has escaped by adroit courage, all know that the chance of the savages finding the Promised Land is one with which they must reckon.

The Unicorn is now past the time appointed for her return, and the seven have thus a double reason for anxiety.

Here “Their Island Home” finishes, and in the present book may be read what came of it all, and in what way they emerged from heavy trouble into peace and prosperity even greater than of old.

CHAPTER I THE CASTAWAYS

Night—a pitch-dark night! It was almost impossible to distinguish sky from sea. From the sky, laden with clouds low and heavy, deformed and tattered, lightning flashed every now and then, followed by muffled rolls of thunder. At these flashes the horizon lit up for a moment and showed deserted and melancholy.

No wave broke in foam upon the surface of the sea. There was nothing but the regular and monotonous rolling of the swell and the gleam of ripples under the lightning flashes. Not a breath moved across the vast plain of ocean, not even the hot breath of the storm. But electricity so charged the atmosphere that it escaped in phosphorescent light, and ran up and down the rigging of the boat in tongues of Saint Elmo's fire. Although the sun had set four or five hours ago, the sweltering heat of the day had not passed.

Two men talked in low tones, in the stern of a big ship's boat that was decked in to the foot of the mast. Her foresail and jib were flapping as the monotonous rolling shook her.

One of these men, holding the tiller tucked under his arm, tried to dodge the cruel swell that rolled the boat from side to side. He was a sailor, about forty years of age, thick-set and sturdy, with a frame of iron on which fatigue, privation, even despair, had never taken effect. An Englishman by nationality, this boatswain was named John Block.

The other man was barely eighteen, and did not seem to belong to the sea-faring class.

In the bottom of the boat, under the poop and seats, with no strength left to pull the oars, a number of human beings were lying, among them a child of five years old—a poor little creature whose whimpering was audible, whom its mother tried to hush with idle talk and kisses.

Before the mast, upon the poop, and near the jib stays, two people sat motionless and silent, hand in hand, lost in the most gloomy thoughts. So intense was the darkness that it was only by the lightning flashes that they could see each other.

From the bottom of the boat a head was lifted sometimes, only to droop again at once.

The boatswain spoke to the young man lying by his side.

“No, no. I watched the horizon until the sun went down. No land in sight—not a sail! But what I didn’t see this evening will perhaps be visible at dawn.”

“But, bo’sun,” his companion answered, “we must get to land somewhere in the next forty-eight hours, or we shall have succumbed.”

“That’s true,” John Block agreed. “Land must appear—simply must. Why, continents and islands were made on purpose to give shelter to

brave men, and one always ends by getting to them!"

"If the wind helps one, bo'sun."

"That is the only reason wind was invented," John Block replied. "To-day, as bad luck would have it, it was busy somewhere else, in the middle of the Atlantic or the Pacific perhaps, for it didn't blow enough here to fill my cap. Yes, a jolly good gale would blow us merrily along."

"Or swallow us up, Block."

"Oh no, not that! No, no, not that! Of all ways to bring this job to a finish, that would be the worst."

"Who can tell, bo'sun?"

Then for some minutes the two men were silent. Nothing could be heard but the gentle rippling under the boat.

"How is the captain?" the young man went on.

"Captain Gould, good man, is in bad case," John Block replied. "How those blackguards knocked him about! The wound in his head makes him cry out with pain. And it was an officer in whom he had every confidence who stirred those wretches up! No, no! One fine morning, or one fine afternoon, or perhaps one fine evening, that rascal of a Borupt shall make his last ugly face at the yardarm or——"

"The brute! The brute!" the young man exclaimed, clenching his fists in wrath. "But poor Harry Gould! You dressed his wounds this

evening, Block——"

"Ay, ay; and when I put him back under the poop, after I had put compresses on his head, he was able to speak to me, though very feebly. 'Thanks, Block, thanks,' he said—as if I wanted thanks! 'And land? What about land?' he asked. 'You may be quite sure, captain,' I told him, 'that there is land somewhere, and perhaps not very far off.' He looked at me and closed his eyes."

And the boatswain murmured in an aside: "Land? Land? Ah, Borupt and his accomplices knew very well what they were about! While we were shut up in the bottom of the hold, they altered the course; they went some hundreds of miles away before they cast us adrift in this boat—in seas where a ship is hardly ever seen, I guess."

The young man had risen. He stooped, listening to port.

"Didn't you hear anything, Block?" he asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all," the boatswain answered; "this swell is as noiseless as if it were made of oil instead of water."

The young man said no more, but sat down again with his arms folded across his breast.

Just at this moment one of the passengers sat up, and exclaimed, with a gesture of despair:

"I wish a wave would smash this boat up, and swallow us all up with it, rather than that we should all be given over to the horrors of

starvation! To-morrow we shall have exhausted the last of our provisions. We shall have nothing left at all."

"To-morrow is to-morrow, Mr. Wolston," the boatswain replied. "If the boat were to capsize there wouldn't be any to-morrow for us; and while there is a to-morrow——"

"John Block is right," his young companion answered. "We must not give up hope, James! Whatever danger threatens us, we are in God's hands, to dispose of as He thinks fit. His hand is in all that comes to us, and it is not right to say that He has withdrawn it from us."

"I know," James whispered, drooping his head, "but one is not always master of one's self."

Another passenger, a man of about thirty, one of those who had been sitting in the bows, approached John Block and said:

"Bo'sun, since our unfortunate captain was thrown into this boat with us—and that is a week ago already—it is you who have taken his place. So our lives are in your hands. Have you any hope?"

"Have I any hope?" John Block replied. "Yes! I assure you I have. I hope these infernal calms will come to an end shortly and that the wind will take us safe to harbour."

"Safe to harbour?" the passenger answered, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness of the night.

“Well, what the deuce!” John Block exclaimed. “There is a harbour somewhere! All we have to do is to steer for it, with the wind whistling through the yards. Good Lord! If I were the Creator I would show you half a dozen islands lying all round us, waiting our convenience!”

“We won’t ask for as many as that, bo’sun,” the passenger replied, unable to refrain from smiling.

“Well,” John Block answered, “if He will drive our boat towards one of those which exist already, it will be enough, and He need not make any islands on purpose, although, I must say, He seems to have been a bit stingy with them hereabouts!”

“But where are we?”

“I can’t tell you, not even within a few hundred miles,” John Block replied. “You know that for a whole long week we were shut up in the hold, unable to see what course the ship was shaping, whether south or north. Anyhow, it must have been blowing steadily, and the sea did plenty of rolling and chopping.”

“That is true, John Block, and true, too, that we must have gone a long way; but in what direction?”

“About that I don’t know anything,” the boatswain declared. “Did the ship go off to the Pacific, instead of making for the Indian Ocean? On the day of the mutiny we were off Madagascar. But since then, as the wind has blown from the west all the time, we may have been

taken hundreds of miles from there, towards the islands of Saint Paul and Amsterdam."

"Where there are none but savages of the worst possible sort," James Wolston remarked. "But after all, the men who cast us away are not much better."

"One thing is certain," John Block declared; "that wretch Borupt must have altered the Flag's course and made for waters where he will be most likely to escape punishment, and where he and his gang will play pirates! So I think that we were a long way out of our proper course when this boat was cut adrift. But I wish we might strike some island in these seas—even a desert island would do! We could live all right by hunting and fishing; we should find shelter in some cave. Why shouldn't we make of our island what the survivors of the Landlord made of New Switzerland? With strong arms, brains, and pluck——"

"Very true," James Wolston answered, "but the Landlord did not fail her passengers. They were able to save her cargo, while we shall never have anything from the Flag's cargo."

The conversation was interrupted. A voice that rang with pain was heard:

"Drink! Give me something to drink!"

"It's Captain Gould," one of the passengers said. "He is eaten up with fever. Luckily there is plenty of water, and——"

“That’s my job,” said the boatswain. “Do one of you take the tiller. I know where the can is, and a few mouthfuls will give the captain ease.”

And John Block left his seat aft and went forward into the bows of the boat.

The three other passengers remained in silence, awaiting his return.

After being away for two or three minutes John Block came back to his post.

“Well?” someone enquired.

“Someone got there before me,” John Block answered. “One of our good angels was with the patient already, pouring a little fresh water between his lips, and bathing his forehead that was wet with sweat. I don’t know whether Captain Gould was conscious. He seemed to be delirious. He was talking about land. ‘The land ought to be over there,’ he kept saying, and his hand was wobbling about like the pennon on the mainmast when all winds are blowing at once. I answered: ‘Ay, ay, captain, quite so. The land is somewhere! We shall reach it soon. I can smell it, to northwards.’ And that is a sure thing. We old sailors can smell land like that. And I said too: ‘Don’t be uneasy, captain, everything is all right. We have a stout boat and I will keep her course steady. There must be more islands hereabouts than we could know what to do with. Too many to choose from! We shall find one to suit our convenience—an inhabited island where we shall find a welcome

and where we shall be sent home from.' The poor chap understood what I said, I am sure, and when I held the lantern near his face he smiled to me—such a sad smile!—and at the good angel too. Then he closed his eyes again, and fell asleep almost at once. Well! I may have lied pretty heavily when I talked about land to him as if it were only a few miles off, but was I far wrong?"

"No, Block," the youngest passenger replied; "that is the kind of lie that God allows."

The conversation ended, and the silence was only broken thereafter by the flapping of the sail against the mast as the boat rolled from one side to the other. Most of those who were aboard her, broken down by fatigue and weakened by long privation, forgot their terrors in heavy sleep.

Although these unhappy people still had something wherewith to quench their thirst, they would have nothing wherewith to appease their hunger in the coming days. Of the few pounds of salt meat that had been flung into the boat when she was pushed off, nothing now remained. They were reduced to one bag of sea-biscuits for eleven people. How could they manage, if the calm persisted? And for the last forty-eight hours not one breath of breeze had stolen through the stifling atmosphere, not even one of those intermittent gusts which are like the last sighs of a dying man. It meant death by starvation, and that within a short time.

There was no steam navigation in those days. So the probability was that, in the absence of wind, no ship would come into sight, and, in the absence of wind, the boat could not reach land, whether island or continent.

It was necessary to have perfect faith in God to combat utter despair, or else to possess the unshakeable philosophy of the boatswain, which consisted in refusing to see any but the bright side of things. Even now he muttered to himself:

"Ay, ay, I know; the time will come when the last biscuit will have been eaten; but as long as one can keep one's stomach one mustn't grumble, even if there is nothing to put in it! Now, if one hadn't got a stomach left, even if there were plenty to put in it—that would be really serious!"

Two hours passed. The boat had not moved a cable's length, for there was only the motion of the swell to affect her. Now the swell does not move forward; it merely makes the surface of the water undulate. A few chips of wood that had been thrown over the side the day before were still floating close by, and the sail had not filled once to move the boat away from them.

While merely afloat like this, it was little use to remain at the helm. But the boatswain declined to leave his post. With the tiller under his arm, he tried at least to avoid the lurching which tilted the boat to one side and another, and thus to spare his companions excessive shaking.

It was about three o'clock in the morning when John Block felt a light breath pass across his cheeks, roughened and hardened as they were by the salt sea air.

"Can the wind be getting up?" he murmured as he rose.

He turned towards the south, and wetting his finger in his mouth, held it up. There was a distinct sensation of coldness, caused by the evaporation, and now a distant rippling sound became audible.

He turned to the passenger sitting on the middle bench, near one of the women.

"Mr. Fritz!" he said.

Fritz Robinson raised his head and bent round.

"What do you want, bo'sun?" he asked.

"Look over there—towards the east."

"What do you think you see?"

"If I'm not mistaken, a kind of rift, like a belt, on the water-line."

Unmistakably there was a lighter line along the horizon in that direction. Sky and sea could be distinguished with more definiteness. It was as if a rent had just been made in the dome of mist and vapour.

"It's wind!" the boatswain declared.

“Isn’t it only the first beginning of daybreak?” the passenger asked.

“It might be daylight, though it’s very early for it,” John Block replied, “and again it might be a breeze! I felt something of it in my beard just now, and look!—it’s twitching still! I’m aware it’s not a breeze to fill the top-gallant sails, but anyhow it’s more than we’ve had for the last four and twenty hours. Put your hand to your ear, Mr. Fritz, and listen; you’ll hear what I heard.”

“You are right,” said the passenger, leaning over the gunwale; “it is the breeze.”

“And we’re ready for it,” the boatswain replied, “with the foresail block and tackle. We’ve only got to haul the sheet taut to save all the wind which is rising.”

“But where will it take us?”

“Wherever it likes,” the boatswain answered; “all I want it to do is to blow us out of these cursed waters!”

Twenty minutes went by. The breath of wind, which at first was almost imperceptible, grew stronger. The rippling aft became louder. The boat made a few rougher motions, not caused by the slow, nauseating swell. Folds of the sail spread out, fell flat, and opened again, and the sheet sagged against its cleats. The wind was not strong enough yet to fill the heavy canvas of the foresail and the jib. Patience was needed, while the boat’s head was kept to her course as well as might be by means of one of the sculls.

A quarter of an hour later, progress was marked by a light wake.

Just at this moment one of the passengers who had been lying in the bows got up and looked at the rift in the clouds to the eastward.

“Is it a breeze?” he asked.

“Yes,” John Block answered. “I think we have got it this time, like a bird in the hand—and we won’t let go of it!”

The wind was beginning to spread steadily now through the rift, through which, too, the first gleams of light must come. From south-east to south-west, the clouds still hung in heavy masses, over three-quarters of the circumference of the sky. It was still impossible to see more than a few cables’ lengths from the boat, and beyond that distance no ship could have been detected.

As the breeze had freshened, the sheet had to be hauled in, the foresail, whose gear was slackened, hoisted, and the course veered a point or two, so as to give the jib a hold on the wind.

“We’ve got it; we’ve got it!” the boatswain said cheerily, and the boat, heeling gently over to starboard, dipped her nose into the first waves.

Little by little the rent in the clouds grew bigger and spread overhead. The sky assumed a reddish hue. It seemed that the wind might hold to the present quarter for some little time, and that the period of calms had come to an end.

Hope of reaching land revived once more, or the alternative hope of falling in with a ship.

At five o'clock the rent in the clouds was ringed with a collar of vivid coloured clouds. It was the day, appearing with the suddenness peculiar to the low latitudes of the tropical regions. Soon purple rays of light arose above the horizon, like the sticks of a fan. The rim of the solar disc, heightened by the refraction, touched the horizon line, drawn clearly now at the end of sky and sea. At once the rays of light caught on the little clouds which hung in the high heaven, and dyed them every shade of crimson. But they were stubbornly arrested by the dense vapours accumulated in the north, and could not break through them. And so the range of vision, long behind, was still extremely limited in front. The boat was leaving a long wake behind her now, marked in creamy white upon the greenish water.

And now the whole sun emerged above the horizon, enormously magnified at its diameter. No haze dimmed its brilliance, which was insupportable to the eye. All aboard the boat looked away from it; they only scanned the north, whither the wind was carrying them. The main question was what the fog screened from them in that direction.

At length, just before half-past six, one of the passengers seized the halyards of the foresail and clambered nimbly up to the yardarm, just as the sun cleared the sky to the eastward with its early rays.

And in a ringing voice he shouted:

“Land!”