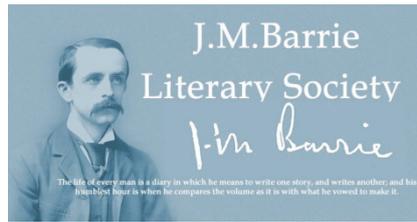


## BARRIE ON ISLANDS.



### 1. Wrecked on an Island J.M.Barrie –National Observer. (1894)

Literary men and that sort of people have many unknown correspondents who would keep them out of idleness by requesting an answer to the following questions: and often the writers are kind ladies and the questions in a Confession Book insufficiently stamped. Or it amounts to this, 'Dear Sir or Madam, I don't care a doit about your work, but, oh, I should love to know whether you are really humpbacked.' Or it is a clergyman who has conscientious scruples against buying books but will consent to accept gift of yours. Or the editor of a popular weekly, whose 650,000 readers will receive an intellectual stimulus if you tell them whether you work best on beef or bacon. Or a school-girl whose papa once saw you playing at chess, and so please send her by return your photograph. Or an interviewer, who is also to illustrate you with Kodak views of the door from the bow-window, corner of your study, another corner, the same corner from the middle of the room, almanac to the right on entering. And if the mere literary hand gets frequent appeals of this kind, conceive (by making a basket of your arms) how many more go to his more distinguished brother in the arts, the music-hall singer. Though it cannot be said that all this interest in illegible handwriting meets with no response, those who devote their manhood to it will probably admit that their overtures are received occasionally with aggravating silence, even when they have prepaid the answer with an American stamp. Would not the discovery of 'drawing' the dourest author supply a want? If you think so, read on.

There are some questions that no author seems able to resist. For instance, what is style? Why do you refuse to write a great drama? Which is your favourite word in English poetry? But these weaknesses have been discovered long ago, and played on ever since. I think I know a new irresistible. My theory is based on a profound conviction that all authors want to wreck themselves on a desert island. Corner them, and they will admit that they would rather be the author of even a second-rate tale of this kind than poet laureate or novelist laureate. And the less romantic are the works they produce the more do they thirst for that island. Approach the man who is at Book Two of his Metaphysics of Ethics for something about his island, and Book Two will progress no more that day. Ask the celebrated author of Another Glance at the Differential Calculus in four vols. 8vo, and you shall have a column in reply. This, of course, shows no peculiarity in the literary man; it rather proves him (after all) brother of the human race. Every man has had at some time of his life (and the lucky ones have it to the end) an island in his eye on which he is wrecked, hurrah!

Should you prefer to be wrecked alone? Would do for question one. By far the greatest book of the kind puts Crusoe down alone, yet most will hanker after company. On an island of the right sort you are constantly making the most delicious discoveries, as of eggs buried in the sand, and there is a joy, that even sucking them

cannot give, of running to your companions with the news. No doubt the greatest pleasure in life consists in telling your friends something they don't know. Picture also the charm of sitting round a watch-fire at night, which (delightful reflection) is kept blazing to keep away wild animals. You could sit at it alone, doubtless, and drink soup out of a shell, but you cannot sit round it all by yourself, and there is magic in that round. Then you cannot tell your adventures of the day to yourself, and adventures are always told at watch fires, while the flames leap up and the smoke curls and you make weird fantastic shadows on the sward. Worst of all you cannot smoke by yourself. Some men may say they have done it, but the boy in you knows that the pleasure comes in when there are other boys to see you do it.

Suppose you are to have company, then, whom of all your friends should you like to have? This question goes to the root of friendship. You look about you, and you are not in a hurry to give away this great gift. Conceive the excitement among your acquaintances if they knew that you were to be wrecked, and could take with you, say, any three of them. How they would lay themselves out to please. Many who are good for dining might be quite useless on an island. For my part, I am to some extent tied, for when I was twelve or thereabout I solemnly promised another boy that, if such luck were granted me, I should let him know before I started. He was to do as much for me. Well, he makes one. A second is at present in London, and has been on an island ere this, though only in a book. The third is the one man who could write a ripper (excuse me) about a desert island. He is far away, but would undoubtedly come home at once if we guaranteed the island. A fourth – but I was only to get three. I should have liked that fourth as I know a way of forcing him to vote for me as captain, and that would have given me two votes while the others could only have one apiece.

The sex question has to be faced if we are grown up. Before that, 'away with them,' answered it satisfactorily. Women, it is to be feared, are in the way on an island, though doubtless the best of them want to have one also. (There might be an island for women.) A master of narration who is only second to Scott cast away a man and a woman on an island and as soon as that other boy and I heard of it we got the book, but, well, it was better than any book without an island. Yet they never sat round the watch-fire, and he would rather have kissed her (on an island, too!) than found a grove of sugar-canes, and she showed an adaptability for island work that we grudged her sex. The mother in the Swiss Family Robinson was undoubtedly a woman, but she wore trousers, so that you could not help liking her. However, one may say this with confidence: If you know a girl whom you would like to be wrecked with, marry her at once if she will have you. It is one sure test. But for all that, stay at home.

Then at what age should you prefer to be wrecked? Any age will do, but for choice give me fourteen. Somewhere round that age are the three boys in Mr Ballantyne's book *The Coral Island*. For the authorship of that book I would joyously swap all mine. If there is a parent who has not given it to his son (or does not do so within eight days from now) he should at least be turned out from his club. Many men, no doubt, become parents in order to give *The Coral Island* to their son. Jack, Ralph and Peterkin, I salute you and hope you are all a fond memory recalls. Not since my schooldays have I met you, but I know what was in the pockets of the three of you the day you landed on that island better than I know the contents of my own today, and your wondrous cave is more to me than the Strand.

It was very little that was in those pockets, but the three started housekeeping and housemaking on it. This brings us to the question: Should you prefer to be left dependent on your own ingenuity, or with a wreck hard by from which you can get all

the necessaries, from new laid eggs to buttonholes? Most will vote for ingenuity, but there is a charm about that wreck which secretly takes us captive. As boys, the boy we envy most is the one whose father keeps a shop; the parts of the house we look at most wistfully are the cupboard in which the jam lurks, the storeroom where there are old boxes and nails and other marvels. Think of the rapture of being able to ransack all the shops and cupboards and storerooms, and having an island in addition! That is what it comes to if a wreck lies handy and a spice of danger is flung in when you have to swim for them or go on a raft. (Favourite word? Why raft certainly) The family Robinson were wrecked with a choice assortment of all the shops in Holborn, and though we may pretend to despise them for it (as castaways who did not play fair), turn to your library and see if your old copy of the book is not all loving finger-marks.

What sort of an island? A mysterious island like Jules Verne's is not easy to beat, but though we gaze entranced at the wonders worked by that magician's magicians, we feel sadly that such an island is not for us. We lack the science. At the best we should have been told off to cook the dinner or carry bricks. No, we want an easier island, one in which when Fritz says the butter is done, you go out and look up and behold this is the cow tree whose juice, when solidified in the shadow of a rock, is an excellent substitute for butter. (The Swiss Family were, perhaps, only wrecked in Whiteleys, but nobody need let on.)

Cave, tent, hut, tree? This is perhaps, the most distracting question of all. The cave is the most mysterious residence, and nature has beautified it in the anticipation of our coming. It can be high up among the rocks too, and you can reach it by a ladder made from the rope tree, which grows conveniently at hand. But a tent house has its advantages. On a windy night it is blown about, and you have the fun of stalking it. The hut, though, has been built by the sweat of your brow, and there are slits between the planks through which you shoot the savages. (The gunpowder tree grows first to the left, second on the right.) And you are as gay as a bird when living in a tree with the entrance to your chamber up a hollow trunk.

The Swiss Family had all the kinds. (They grew on that island.) There is probably no better plan.

Now the savages. Shall you have them fierce or tame? But, alackaday, these joys are only for the imagination. Put on your silk hat, and off you go for your two shilling lunch. I must return sorrowfully to my last. There is no island for you and me.

Jur. Barrie

## 2. J.M.Barrie's 'Preface' to R.M.Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1913)

To be born is to be wrecked on an island and this, no doubt, is why the male child's first instinct is to acquire a knife and secrete pieces of string. Put a bright little hatchet among his playthings and he will at once drop all else to test its sharpness. He knows how useful it will be in the building of a hut. His delight in watches is known to all uncles, but they quite misunderstand it. What he is after is not to hear the tick, nor to observe the wheels go round, but to make a lens of the glass whereby he may light a fire. And so on.

Never yet was any one wrecked on an island who looked up at the palms and down at the surf without wishing that he had been wrecked with more experience.

This is the position of the lately-born, and accounts for that yearning in his eyes which you, the proud possessor of him, explain in a thousand attractive ways – all wrong. He is not a poet already, he is merely an extremely practical person flung upon these shores and wondering how other flotsam and jetsam have made the best use of it in the same circumstances. He wants a guide; in short, *The Coral Island*.

It ought to be waiting for him when he comes; if it is not, run out and get it. You don't need to explain to him what it is; he knows already. 'So that is it,' he says, or words to this effect.

'Solomon Grundy,

Born on Monday,

Read *Coral Island* on Tuesday.'

That would be about right.

Of course 'there were others'; other books on the great subject. *Robinson Crusoe* itself; but he was a man, and our game at present is to note how boys behaved when cast up by the sea. *The Swiss Family* one remembers as almost too satisfactory. Their house in a tree was certainly delicious and not to be forgotten, but, on the whole, they found too much growing to their hand; if they tired of the dryness of bread-fruit, Ernest had but to look upward and exclaim (almost without surprise), 'If my eyes do not deceive me, dear father, we are sitting in the agreeable shade of the Butter-tree.' And he who called our author 'Ballantyne the Brave,' though he made an island immortal, never wrecked Jim Hawkins on it, and told him to build huts and canoes, and be an expert pig-slayer, and erect a bonfire, and make voyages round the island, and discover caves by diving, and prepare for the rainy season. Heavens, if he had! Then there might have been one better book of its kind than *The Coral Island*, though not even then a more romantic cavern than the diamond cave.

At all events, Ballantyne was for long my man, and I used to study a column in *The Spectator* about ‘forthcoming books,’ waiting for his next as for the pit door to open. He wrote many (I think I looked upon him as the author of the Hundred Best Books, and wondered why that list ever needed to be a subject of controversy), but they all lagged behind *The Coral Island*. It egged me on, not merely to being wrecked every Saturday for many months in a long-suffering garden, but to my first work of fiction, a record of our adventures, the ‘Log-Book.’

We had a sufficiently mysterious cave, that had not been a cave until we named it, and here we grimly ate cocoa-nuts, stoned from trees which not even Jack nor Ralph nor Peterkin would have recognised as likely to bear them. And more or less bravely we suffered for the same, the cocoa-nuts not being of the season that yielded Peterkin his lemonade. Here, too, we had a fire, lit as Jack contrived to light his, by rubbing two sticks together. So we said (even in the Log-Book, I daresay); but, of course, this fire came by more plebeian means, and never in our hearts did we believe in the efficacy of the sticks. No boy, so far as I knew, did believe in them. It seemed to beautiful a dream.

But the scene changes, and the time. It is a few years ago, and I am in a solemn London club, which I do not much frequent, because I have never been able to get the hang of clubs. I know you select a chair and cross your legs; but what do you do next? I was there to meet a learned American who had vowed that he would show me how to make a fire as Jack made it in *The Coral Island*. We adjourned to the library (where we knew we were not likely to be disturbed), and there, from concealed places about his person, he produced Jack’s implements; a rough bow, and a rougher arrow, pointed at both ends. Then he ordered a pat of butter (the waiter must be wondering still), and, like Jack, he twisted the arrow round the string of the bow, and began to saw, ‘placing one end of the arrow against his chest, which was protected from its point by a chip of wood; the other point he placed against a bit of tinder.’ Jack had no butter, but we had no tinder. The result, however, was the same. In half a minute my friend had made a fire, at which we lit our cigars and smoked to the memory of Ballantyne and *The Coral Island*.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J.M. Barrie". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page.

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