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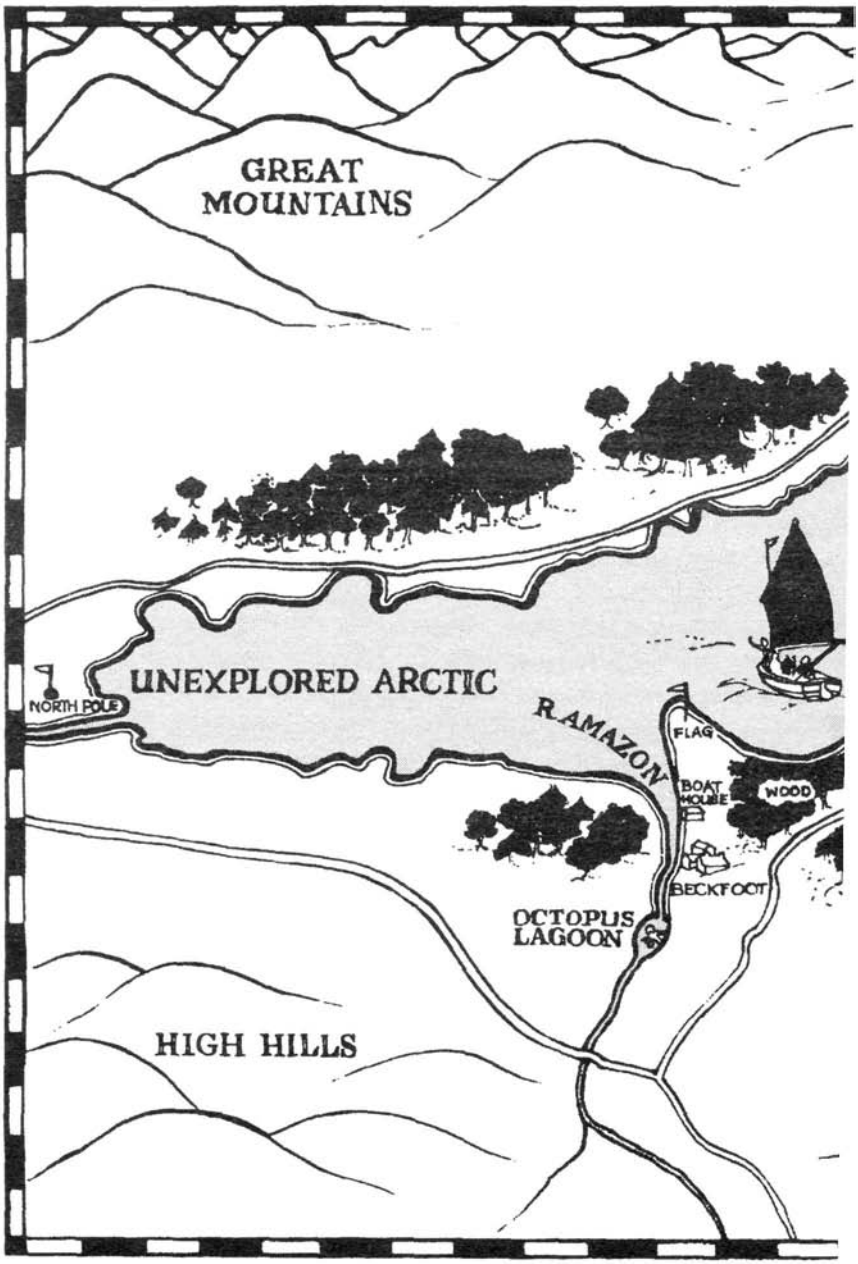
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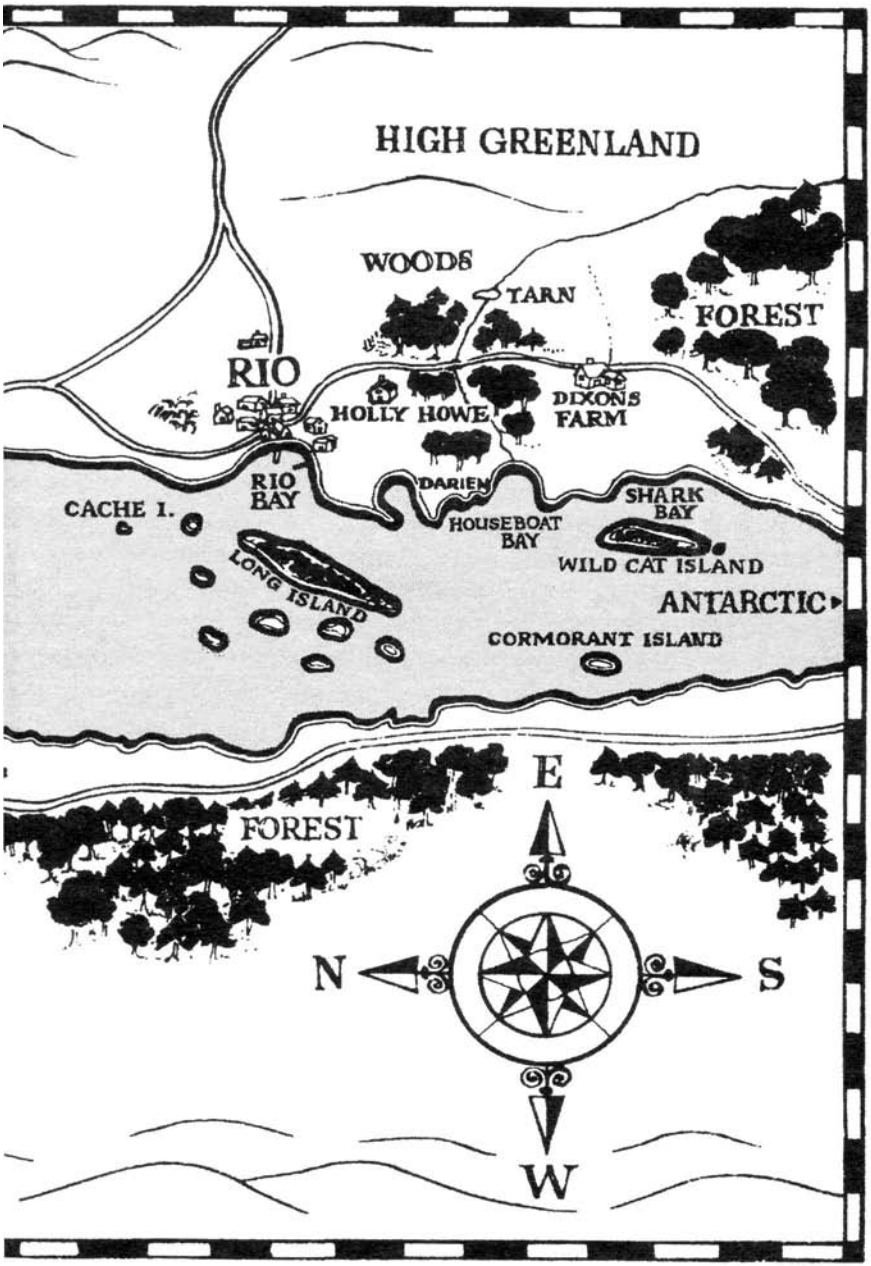
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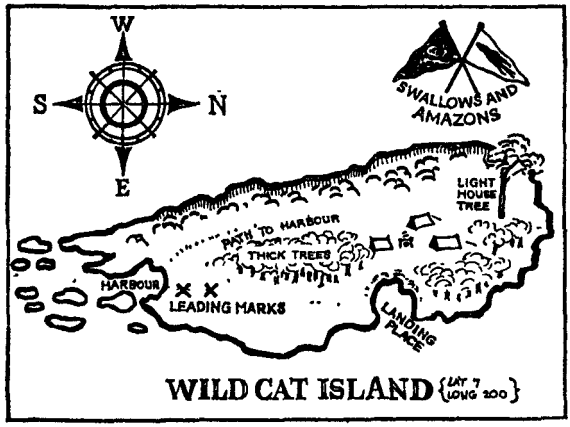
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CHAPTER I

THE PEAK IN DARIEN

"Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes,
He stared at the Pacific — and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

ROGER, aged seven, and no longer the youngest of the family, ran in wide zigzags, to and fro, across the steep field that sloped up from the lake to Holly Howe, the farm where they were staying for part of the summer holidays. He ran until he nearly reached the hedge by the footpath, then turned and ran until he nearly reached the hedge on the other side of the field. Then he turned and crossed the field again. Each crossing of the field brought him nearer to the farm. The wind was against him, and he was tacking up against it to the farm, where at the gate his patient mother was awaiting him. He could not run straight against the wind because he was a sailing vessel, a tea-clipper, the *Cutty Sark*. His elder brother John had said only that morning that steamships were just engines in tin boxes. Sail was the thing, and so, though it took rather longer, Roger made his way up the field in broad tacks.

When he came near his mother, he saw that she had in her hand a red envelope and a small piece of white paper, a telegram. He knew at once what it

was. For a moment he was tempted to run straight to her. He knew that telegrams came only from his father, and that this one must be the answer to a letter from his mother, and letters from John, Susan, Titty, and himself, all asking the same thing, but asking it in different ways. His own letter had been very short. "Please, daddy, may I, too? With love. Roger." Titty's had been much longer, longer even than John's. Susan, though she was older than Titty, had not written a letter of her own. She had put her name with John's at the end of his, so that these two had sent one letter between them. Mother's letter had been the longest of all, but Roger did not know what she had said in it. All the letters had gone together, a very long way, to his father, whose ship was at Malta but under orders for Hong-Kong. And there, in his mother's hand, was the red envelope that had brought the answer. For a moment Roger wanted to run straight to her. But sail was the thing, not steam, so he tacked on, heading, perhaps, a little closer to the wind. At last he headed straight into the wind, moved slower and slower, came to a stop at his mother's side, began to move backwards, and presently brought up with a little jerk, anchored, and in harbour.

"Is it the answer?" he panted, out of breath after all that beating up against the wind. "Does he say Yes?"

Mother smiled, and read the telegram aloud:

BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS IF NOT DUFFERS WONT DROWN.

"Does that mean Yes?" asked Roger.

"I think so."

"Does it mean me, too?"

"Yes, if John and Susan will take you, and if you promise to do whatever they tell you."

"Hurrah," shouted Roger, and capered about, forgetting for a moment that he was a ship, and anchored in a quiet harbour.

"Where are the others?" asked mother.

"In Darien," said Roger.

"Where?"

"On the peak, you know. Titty called it that. We can see the island from there."

Below the farm at Holly Howe the field sloped steeply to a little bay where there was a boathouse and a jetty. But there was little of the lake to be seen, because on each side of the bay there were high promontories. A path ran down the field from the farm to the boathouse. Half-way down the field there was a gate, and from that gate another path ran into the pinewoods that covered the southern and higher promontory. The path soon faded away into nothing, but on the very evening of their first coming, a fortnight before, the children had found their way through the trees to the far end of the promontory, where it dropped, like a cliff, into the lake. From the top of it they had looked out over the broad sheet of water winding away among the low hills to the south and winding away into the hills high to the north, where they could not see so much of it. And it was then, when they first stood on the cliff and looked out over mile upon mile of water, that Titty had given the place its name. She had heard the sonnet read aloud at school, and forgotten everything in it except the picture of

the explorers looking at the Pacific Ocean for the first time. She had called the promontory Darien. On the highest point of it they had made their camping place, and there Roger had left them when he had come through the trees to the field and, seeing his mother at the gate, had begun his voyage home.

"Would you like to take them the answer?"

"And tell them it's Yes for me too?"

"Yes. You must give the telegram to John. It's he who has to see that you are not duffers."

Mother put the telegram in its red envelope, and gave it to Roger. She kissed him, anchored as he was, and said, "Supper at half-past seven, and not a minute later, and mind you don't wake Vicky when you come in."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Roger, pulling in his anchor hand over hand. He turned round, and began tacking back down the field, thinking of how he should bring the news.

Mother laughed.

"Ship ahoy!" she said.

Roger stopped, and looked back.

"You had the wind against you coming up the field," she said. "It's a fair wind now. You needn't tack both ways."

"So it is," said Roger, "it's dead aft. I'm a schooner. I can sail goosewinged, with a sail on each side." He spread out his arms for sails, and ran straight down the field to the gate into the pinewood.

When he came out of the field into the wood he stopped being a sailing vessel. No one can sail through a pinewood. He became an explorer, left behind by the main body, following their trail

through the forest, and keeping a sharp look out lest he should be shot by a savage with a poisoned arrow from behind a tree. He climbed up through the trees to the top of the promontory. At last he came out of the trees on a small open space of bare rock and heather. This was the Peak of Darien. There were trees all round it, but through them could be seen the bright glimmer of the lake. In a hollow of rock a small fire was burning. John was stoking the fire. Susan was spreading bread and marmalade. Titty, with her chin on her hunched-up knees, was sitting between two trees on the edge of the cliff above the lake, keeping watch and looking at the island.

John looked up and saw the telegram. He jumped up from the fire.

"Despatches?" he said.

"It's the answer," said Roger. "It's Yes, and it's Yes for me too, if I obey orders, and you and Susan take me. And if it's Yes for me it must be Yes for Titty."

John took the telegram. Titty scrambled up and came, running. Susan held the knife with the marmalade on it over the bread so as not to lose any, but stopped spreading. John opened the envelope, and took out the white paper.

"Read it aloud," said Susan.

John read:

BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS IF NOT DUFFERS WONT DROWN

"Hurrah for daddy!" he shouted.

"What does it mean?" asked Susan.

"It means Yes," said Titty.

"It means that daddy thinks we shall none of us get drowned and that if any of us do get drowned it's a good riddance," said John.

"But what are duffers if not duffers?" asked Susan.

"It doesn't say that," said Titty. "It says that if we were duffers we might as well be drowned. Then it stops and starts again, and says that as we aren't duffers . . . "

"If," said John.

"If we aren't duffers we shan't be drowned."

"Daddy put that in to comfort mother," said Susan. She went on spreading the marmalade.

"Let's start at once," said Roger, but at that moment the kettle changed its tune. It had been bubbling for some time, but now it hissed quietly and steadily, and a long jet of steam poured from its spout. The water was boiling. Susan took the kettle from the fire, and emptied into it a small packet of tea.

"We can't start to-night anyhow," she said. "Let's have tea, and then we'll make a list of the things we shall want."

"Let's have tea where we can see the island," said Titty.

They carried their mugs and the kettle and the tin plate piled with thick slabs of brown bread and marmalade to the edge of the cliff. The island lay about a mile away towards the lower, southern end of the lake, its trees reflected in the glassy water. They had been looking at it for ten days, but the telegram had made it much more real than ever it had been before. Looking down from Titty's Peak in the evening of the day

on which they had come to the farmhouse where their mother had taken lodgings, they had seen the lake like an island sea. And on the lake they had seen the island. All four of them had been filled at once with the same idea. It was not just an island. It was *the* island, waiting for them. It was their island. With an island like that within sight, who could be content to live on the mainland and sleep in a bed at night? They had gone back and told their mother of their discovery, and begged that the whole family should leave the farmhouse the next day, and camp on the island for ever. But there was little Vicky, a fat baby, like the pictures of Queen Victoria in old age, full of all sorts of needs. Mother could not take Vicky and the nurse to camp even on the best of uninhabited islands. Nor, without leave from daddy, could she let them go alone. And though John and Susan were both well able to manage a sailing boat, Titty and Roger had only begun to learn how to sail when their father had been home on leave a year before. In the boathouse below the farm there was the *Swallow*, a sailing boat, a very little one, and there was also a big, heavy rowing boat. But no one wants to row who has ever sailed. If there had been no island, no sailing boat, and if the lake had not been so large, the children, no doubt, would have been happy enough to paddle about with oars in the bay by the boathouse. But with a lake as big as a small sea, a fourteen-foot dinghy with a brown sail waiting in the boathouse, and the little wooded island waiting for explorers, nothing but a sailing voyage of discovery seemed worth thinking about.

So the letters had been written and posted, and day after day the children had been camping on the Peak of Darien by day, and sleeping in the farmhouse by night. They had been out in the rowing boat with their mother, but they had always rowed the other way so as not to spoil the voyage of discovery by going to the island first. But with each day after the sending of the letters it had somehow seemed less and less likely that there would ever be an answer. The island had come to seem one of those places seen from the train that belong to a life in which we shall never take part. And now, suddenly, it was real. It was to be their island after all. They were to be allowed to use the sailing boat by themselves. They were to be allowed to sail out from the little sheltered bay, and round the point, and down the lake to the island. They were to be allowed to land on the island, and to live there until it was time to pack up again and go home to town and school and lessons. The news was so good that it made them solemn. They ate their bread and marmalade in silence. The prospect before them was too vast for chatter. John was thinking of the sailing, wondering whether he really remembered all that he had learnt last year. Susan was thinking of the stores and the cooking. Titty was thinking of the island itself, of coral, treasure and footprints in the sand. Roger was thinking of the fact that he was not to be left behind. He saw for the first time that it was a good thing to be no longer the baby of the family. Vicky was youngest now. Vicky would stay at home, and Roger, one of the crew of a ship, was to sail away into the unknown world.

At last John took a sheet of paper and a pencil from his pocket.

"Let's make the Ship's Articles," he said.

The bread and marmalade had all been eaten, so he turned the plate upside down, and put the paper on the back of it, and lay on his stomach on the rock. He wrote:

"Sailing Vessel *Swallow*. Port, Holly Howe. Owners . . . "

"Who are the owners?"

"She belongs to us for the rest of these holidays anyhow," said Susan.

"I shall put 'Walkers Limited' to do for all of us."

He wrote, "Owners, Walkers Limited." Underneath that he wrote:

"Master: John Walker.
Mate: Susan Walker.
Able-seaman: Titty Walker.
Ship's Boy: Roger."

"Now," he said, "you all have to sign opposite your names."

They all signed.

"Well, Mister Mate," said John.

"Sir," replied Susan smartly.

"How soon do you think we shall be ready to put to sea?"

"With the first breath of wind."

"What do you think of your crew?"

"The best I ever shipped."

"Can they swim?"

"Able-seaman Titty can. The Boy Roger still keeps one foot on the bottom."

"He must learn."

"I don't keep a foot on the bottom all the time," said Roger.

"You must learn as soon as possible not to keep it on the bottom at all."

"All right," said Roger.

"That's all wrong, Roger," said Titty. "You ought to have said, 'Aye, aye, sir!' "

"I nearly always do," said Roger. "I said it to mother."

"You must say it to the captain and to the mate. Perhaps you ought to say it even to me, but as there are only two in the crew it won't do for them to be saying sir to each other."

"Have you got any more paper?" said Susan.

"Only the back of the telegram," said John.

"Mother won't mind our using it," said Susan. "You know we can't really sail with the first breath of wind, not until everything is ready. Let's make a list of the things."

"Compass," said John.

"Kettle," said Susan.

"A flag," said Titty. "I'll make one with a swallow on it."

"Tents," said Roger.

"Telescope," said John.

"Saucepan, mugs, knives, forks, tea, sugar, milk," said Susan, writing as hard as she could go.

"Spoons," said Roger.

They kept remembering things and then getting stuck, and then remembering some more until there was no more room on the back of the telegram.

MAKING SHIP'S PAPERS

"I haven't got another scrap of paper," said John. "Even the Ship's Articles have got sums on the other side. Bother the list. Let's go and ask mother if we can have the key of the boat-house."

But when they came to Holly Howe Farm, mother met them in the doorway with her finger on her lips.

"Vicky's asleep," she said; "don't make a noise coming in. Supper's just ready."