

# The Swiss Family Robinson

## Study Guide by Rebecca Gilleland

For the novel by Johann David Wyss



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Progeny Press

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**The Swiss Family Robinson Study Guide**  
A Progeny Press Study Guide  
by Rebecca Gilleland  
edited by Andrew Clausen

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## Synopsis

A Swiss family is traveling to a new colony when their ship is blown off course in a six-day storm and runs aground near an uninhabited island. The father, mother, and their four sons escape the wrecked ship and make their way ashore to find that they are the only survivors of the wreck. Salvaging what resources they can from the wreck, the family begins carving out a solitary existence on the island, uncertain when or if a rescue ship will arrive.

Despite dangerous animals, torrential monsoons, and the loneliness of isolation, they face all their hardships with energy, ingenuity, and the knowledge that God is with them.

The years pass by without rescue. Then one day, Fritz, the oldest son, discovers a note from a young Englishwoman who has also been shipwrecked. Fritz sets out on his own hoping to rescue her, and he soon adds another citizen to their little Swiss colony.

A short time later, the family hears the boom of a ship's cannon echo across the sea. They respond by firing their own guns as a signal, unsure if their rescue is imminent, or if they will be attacked by Malay pirates. And even if they are rescued, the family is unsure whether they want to leave the island that has become their home.

### **A Special Note about this Study Guide:**

This study guide for *The Swiss Family Robinson* is based on the W. H. G. Kingston translation of the text. Although the Kingston translation has become the English-language standard, publishers of the Kingston translation still differ on chapter divisions. For this study guide we have relied on the chapter divisions found in the edition published by Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers (a division of Random House). For those using a different edition of the Kingston translation, we have provided the opening sentence of each lesson section to help you follow along.

## Chapters 1–6

*For many days we had been tempest-tossed.*

### Vocabulary:

For each vocabulary word below, write its definition, then write a sentence using that word.

1. **conjecture**

Definition:

Your sentence:

2. **riven**

Definition:

Your sentence:

3. **incessant**

Definition:

Your sentence:

4. **ludicrous**

Definition:

Your sentence:

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5. **exertions**

Definition:

Your sentence:

6. **tedious**

Definition:

Your sentence:

7. **vexed**

Definition:

Your sentence:

8. **vigilant**

Definition:

Your sentence:

9. **assail**

Definition:

Your sentence:

10. **cumbrous**

Definition:

Your sentence:

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11. **preliminary**

Definition:

Your sentence:

12. **derision**

Definition:

Your sentence:

**Character Study:**

The opening chapters of *The Swiss Family Robinson* introduce us to the six members of the Robinson family: **Father, Mother, Franz, Fritz, Ernest, and Jack**. We learn about these characters by what they say, what they do, and what other characters say about them. Careful study of these things will help you become familiar with the characters.

Each of the statements below describes one of the six characters. Fill in the blank with the name of the character that best fits the given description.

1. This character narrates the story. \_\_\_\_\_
2. This character comes up with the idea of making swimming belts to escape the ship. \_\_\_\_\_
3. This character is described as “indolent” by the narrator.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. This character is attacked by a lobster. \_\_\_\_\_
5. This character is reluctant to step into the water. \_\_\_\_\_

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6. This character is described as “thoughtless” and “heedless” by the narrator.

\_\_\_\_\_

7. These two characters first set out to explore the island.

\_\_\_\_\_

8. These two characters return to the ship to retrieve the animals left behind.

\_\_\_\_\_

9. These four characters, on a second expedition to explore the island, discover a peaceful grove of huge trees.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

10. This character suggests building a home up in one of the trees.

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Rank the four children from oldest to youngest.

(Oldest) •

•

•

(Youngest) •



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**Cause and Effect:**

Events in our lives are connected. One event causes the next event, which is called the effect. The cause occurs first, then the event (or effect) follows. Match the following causes and effects from the book. Remember, one cause may have multiple effects.

CAUSES

- A. The sailors abandon the ship and the Robinsons.
- B. Fritz gets angry with the dogs when they eat the agouti and he strikes them.
- C. The ship had sailed for the purpose of supplying a young colony.
- D. Jack finds two dogs and Father allows them to get to land by resting on the boat's outriggers.

EFFECTS

- 1. \_\_\_ Fritz ruins his gun.
- 2. \_\_\_ They find turtle eggs.
- 3. \_\_\_ Fritz hurts the dogs.
- 4. \_\_\_ They have every article they could want for settling.
- 5. \_\_\_ Fritz distresses and terrifies his mother.
- 6. \_\_\_ They are protected from a pack of jackals.

**Questions:**

- 1. In Chapters 1–6, the family finds many plants and animals on the island. List as many of these plants and animals as you can.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. When the ship runs aground on the rocks, what happens to all the ship's crewmen?

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3. As the ship founders on the rocks, each person is sent to find what he or she thinks would be of most use. With what does each person return?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What is the first thing the family does when they land?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Why does Father conclude that the island must be located near the equator?

**Thinking About the Story:**

6. Throughout these six chapters, Father offers many words of instruction to his children. List at least three examples of advice that Father gives to his sons regarding their behavior.

- 
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
-

**Dig Deeper:**

7. Fritz tells Franz, “[W]e must not settle what God should do for us. We must have patience and wait His time.” Read Psalm 37:7, Psalm 10:14, Isaiah 30:18, and Nahum 1:7. Is it easy for you to wait for God’s timing? Why or why not? What do these verses tell us?
  
8. On the first few pages of the story, we find the family in great peril on a sinking ship. Father tells the family, “[I]f 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.” What does this tell us about the spiritual beliefs of the family?
  
9. Read John 5:24, and 1 John 5:9. According to these passages, how can we be assured of going to heaven when we die?
  
10. In Chapter 3, after breakfast, Father halts everyone and calls them to morning prayer. “We are only too ready, amid the cares and pleasures of this life, to forget the God to whom we owe all things.” Read Philippians 4:6–7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18. According to these verses, when and how should we pray?

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11. Father says, “We certainly did not expect to be so entirely alone—but what matters a few people, more or less? With God’s help, let us endeavor to live here contentedly, thankful that we were not cast upon some bare and inhospitable island.”

Later, Mother says, “If it be the will of God . . . to leave us alone on this solitary place, let us be content; and rejoice that we are all together in safety.”

How do their statements compare to Paul’s statement in Philippians 4:12–13?

**Class Discussions:**

12. At the beginning of Chapter 1, as the storm threatened the ship, the sailors “uttered frantic cries to God for mercy, mingled with strange and often ludicrous vows, to be performed should deliverance be granted.”

Why do people try to bargain with God? Can God be bargained with? Read Deuteronomy 23:21–23, Judges 11:30–40, and Ecclesiastes 5:4–7. What are the dangers in making vows? Read Matthew 5:33–37. What does Jesus teach in these verses about making vows?

13. As they wait on the wrecked ship for the storm to abate, Father tells his children that there is land not far off, and that they should attempt to reach it. He continues, “You know God helps those that help themselves!”

Although this is a popular saying, it is not found explicitly in scripture. What is meant by this saying? Do you agree with the sentiment? Are there any verses that imply the same meaning?

### **Research Projects:**

14. Research the principle of the lever. Write a paper no greater than one page explaining how a lever helps people move heavy objects. What simple tools are based on the principle of the lever?

### **Class Activity:**

When Mother and the boys go looking for a better place to live, they find a woods made up of only about 12 huge trees. Each tree was 18 yards around the trunk. How many feet is that?

To get a feeling for the size of the trees, measure 18 yards in a circle in a large room, gym, or yard.

Continue your activity by researching mangrove trees. Where are they found? How many varieties are there? How tall do they get? Collect your findings in a two- to three-page research paper. Consider adding pictures or range maps to your paper.

*Optional:* Create a bulletin board about mangrove trees. Have students clip pictures, make posters, and write informative paragraphs. Label the pictures with scientific names.

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3. noun; a collection of wild or foreign animals
4. verb; to load or burden, especially for shipment
5. verb; yearned intensely and persistently
6. noun; skill or cleverness
7. adjective; playful, characterized by jesting
8. adjective; of or relating to the kitchen or cookery
9. noun; to lay waste, plunder
10. adjective; not clearly defined, grasped, or understood
11. verb; uttered or gave forth loudly
12. verb; to shrink away or crouch

### *Questions:*

1. Answers may include: cuckoo bird, cochineal, muskrats, hyena, oranges and citron, platypus, and baboons.
2. Jack assumes ownership of the ostrich. Though the other boys protest, Father says that since Jack managed to bring it to the ground, he has a right to it. Father also adds that it is Jack's responsibility to tame the ostrich and train it to take a saddle. The ostrich shall be his if he accomplishes this.
3. The "Sea Horse" was the name Fritz gave to his kayak. The trial of the "Sea Horse" was the storm through which Fritz safely paddled home. The "Sea Horse" remained sea-worthy in spite of the storm and therefore passed its "trial."
4. Fritz wanted to fasten the walrus's head to the prow of his kayak.
5. Jack used them to send messages back to Father, Mother, and Ernest.
6. They discovered that the barricade had been broken down, the hut had been knocked to pieces, and the fields trampled by huge footmarks. Using the "pigeon post," they send for their father at once.

### *Thinking About the Story:*

7. Answers may vary. Instead of plainly stating that the curiosity of the monkey and jackal might cause them to bite or eat the young chicks, Father says their "inquisitive dispositions" might induce them to make "anatomical experiments" on the chicks that might be "detrimental to their welfare." The understatement creates humor by making the reason for building of the chicken coops seem almost bureaucratic rather than a matter of simply keeping the chickens safe.
8. Answers may vary. Fritz, Jack, and Franz show bold independence in the way they meet challenges along their journey and demonstrate many of the qualities their father hoped they would achieve: knowing their capabilities, their limitations, and showing "presence of mind." When they arrive first at the Woodlands, they encounter a large hyena. Franz keeps his "presence of mind" and capably shoots it, and the dogs finish it off. They survey the shores of the lake, finding solid ground, and capture three black swans. At Prospect Hill they find the cottage overrun and ruined by apes just as the house at Woodlands had been. Fritz concocts a mixture with which to poison them. When finally they arrive at the Gap and discover the destruction there, they write home, assuring their father of their safety, but knowing their limitations in facing the unknown danger.

### *Dig Deeper:*

9. Answers will vary.
10. First, Father says that he doesn't believe he *must* do anything that Jack demands. Second, Father says that Jack is very capable of making the mask by himself.
11. These verses command us to honor our parents. The promise is that if we do, "it may go well with you and . . . you may enjoy long life on the earth."
12. Jack could have spoken more respectfully. He could have asked gently or ask for assistance instead of demanding.
13. Answers will vary.

### *Chapters 37–41*

#### *Vocabulary:*

1. disconsolate; 2. chronicled; 3. ratified; 4. pommeling; 5. swarthy; 6. ravages; 7. delusion; 8. abate; 9. tolerable;
10. precociously; 11. drollery; 12. lamentable

#### *Questions:*

1. a. 7; b. 5; c. 5; d. 6; e. 4; f. 2; g. 2; h. 3; i. 1
2. Cachalot whale, parrot, tigers, large wild boars, elephants, African bullfrogs, cranes, herons, seals, swallows, pearl oysters, albatross, and lions.