

Chapter I.

Bruce and Alice arrive in Ruritania.

Bruce and Alice were exhausted. A cruel hot tropical sun beat down on the little rubber canoe, tossed about in the midst of the ocean. Where oh where could land be? Neither of the children had any idea.

Everything had happened so suddenly. One minute they were sitting comfortably in a plane on their way to Hawaii where they were going to spend their holidays, when all of a sudden they heard the voice of their captain:

"This is your captain speaking. We have trouble with both our engines on the port side and there is no way I can reach the nearest airstrip. I have sent a MAYDAY and I shall now attempt a pancake landing in the water. There is nothing to be afraid of, the sea is calm and we have enough life rafts and rubber dinghies. Your hostess will explain to you what you should do. Please do exactly what she says."

Unfortunately the airline staff were not able to keep the passengers from panicking. The captain made a perfect pancake landing, but there was so much hustle and bustle that a number of passengers simply fell into the water, others crowded the dinghies and capsized them! Bruce and Alice were able to find an empty rubber dinghy, they clambered into it and started rowing. It had been announced that the nearest land was in a Northerly direction. Bruce was a scout and he had learned how to find directions by relating the positions of the hands on his watch to the position of the sun, which was still quite high up in the sky, so they decided to row in that direction, taking turns with the oars. But soon the sun went down and the stars appeared but there was no moon so they found themselves enveloped in darkness. Bruce soon found the Pole Star, as fortunately they were still in the Northern Hemisphere, so in spite of the dark, they continued to row towards the North.

Bruce and Alice were twins, so they were used to sharing things and taking things in turn. So they took turns to row and they were able to keep up each other's morale. The night was calm and indescribably beautiful. Since there was no moon, there were many more stars visible than they had ever seen before in a night sky! While one of them was rowing, the other one held the rudder and navigated by the stars, describing the various constellations. When they became sleepy, they pulled the oars in and lay down at the bottom of the dinghy and slept. They woke to the freshness of the dawn, and helped themselves to some of the provisions that thankfully had been stowed in the dinghy for just such an emergency! Then they started rowing again in a Northerly direction, which they found by the position of the rising sun. This was their great adventure! They enjoyed it very much at first, but after a night and a day of being out in the open ocean, the children began to feel more uncomfortable. Were they ever to see land again? And the sun! At first it seemed so wonderful, but after many hours of pitiless burning sunshine beating down upon them, the sun no longer seemed the old friend that they had known at home! They tried to cover themselves, but it was hard to move around without risking capsizing the little boat, and possibly losing the provisions, not to mention themselves!

"It's your turn to row", said Bruce to Alice, looking at his watch.

"Look here, Bruce, I can't row any more, I am finished!", said Alice "What about a swim in the sea?"

"Are you crazy?", retorted Bruce, "The water is probably full of sharks. If you can't row, I can't either, so we shall just have to drift!", and so saying, pulled the oars in.

Bruce seemed cross. It was not like him, he did not usually get cross with her. But she was sure he was getting more and more fed up with her! She let herself drop to the bottom of the dinghy and shut her eyes. She thought of their parents and wondered if she would ever see them again, and whether they had already learned about the accident with their plane. Poor Mum, she must be very worried! She bit her lips, but she could not stop the tears rolling down her face.

Then suddenly Bruce cried out:

"Alice! Look over there! It's land! I am sure it's land!

Alice opened her eyes, sat up and looked vaguely in the direction in which Bruce was pointing. There was no doubt, it was land. You could even make out the shapes of some of the trees.

"Quick, Bruce, give me an oar!", said Alice quite cheerfully.

"I thought you were finished!", teased Bruce, but passed her an oar.

"That's all over now that we can see land!" said Alice smiling, "Come on, let's hurry, let's see how quickly we can get to that shore!"

They started to row with all their might, each holding an oar with both hands and riding quickly over the small waves. They could make out the shore more distinctly with every hard pull on the oars! They decided to make for a sandy bay, and they were glad to see that there were some houses at the back of the bay amongst some trees. When they reached shallow water, they both jumped into the warm tropical water and pulled the dinghy up on to the sand.

"All change!", shouted Bruce in a mock stentorian voice, "Come on Alice, let's see where we are!"

"Oh Bruce, just hang on a moment ", sighed Alice, "I am so tired, couldn't we just sit under those coconut trees?"

"And have coconuts fall on our heads? Not me, anyway. And I don't advise you to do so either, don't you remember we learned about that in school the other day!"

Just as he was saying these words, as if to prove Bruce right, three coconuts dropped on the ground from a nearby coconut tree. As the children rushed to pick them up, three other coconuts fell from another tree, and soon after that another three fell from yet another tree close by.

"It looks like it's raining coconuts on this island", said Alice laughing.

But Bruce was not listening. He had stopped in his tracks and was gazing at the trees in some considerable puzzlement.

"Look", he asked Alice "Have you noticed something? There are just three coconut trees, and three coconuts fell from each of them practically at the same time!"

"Why is that so strange?", enquired Alice, "it just happened like that, that's all!" But she was not so sure about what they had witnessed, and she began to feel that there was something strange about this island!

She instinctively moved closer to her brother, as she was feeling uneasy. But before they could discuss the matter any further they saw some children coming towards them from the other end of the beach. There were three of them and they were holding each other by the hand as they ran across the white sands. There was a fourth child, who seemed to be keeping some distance behind the three. When the three children stopped in front of Bruce and Alice, the fourth one stopped also.

Of the three that were together one was a boy, and on either side of him were two girls. The fourth one who stopped a little distance away from them, was also a boy. They all appeared to be about the same age as Bruce and Alice.

"We had an idea that some people might be arriving here", said one of the girls, speaking in English with a strange but rather pleasant lilting accent, "We heard about the accident on the radio. We have been looking out for survivors. Were you in that plane?"

Bruce and Alice were surprised that the children spoke English, but they were very pleased and reassured. Alice was still feeling a little disturbed, and went to hold Bruce's hand for comfort.

"You mustn't do that!", whispered one of the girls to Alice, "anyway, not until Karo comes to join you! Two people are not allowed to hold each other's hands, except on the other side of the border!"

"What border?", asked Alice, getting very confused.

"Don't worry! We'll explain everything later on", said one of the children. In the meantime Karo, the fourth child, arrived and took Alice's hand.

"That's fine now. ", he said.

So they left the beach, walking in two groups of three. On the way towards the houses they introduced themselves. The two girls in the group of three were Ata and Unta, and the boy's name was Alo, the name of the fourth child was Karo. Ata, Alo and Unta led the way, while Bruce, Alice and Karo followed close behind. They did not go very far before they reached a village.

"What is this village?", asked Alice.

"It is called Nineville", replied Karo "because there are nine houses in it"

"So", thought Alice "Bruce was right! At first there were three coconut trees, three coconuts falling from each of them. Now we are in Nineville, with nine houses! Yes, and Karo stayed behind his three friends, but he came to join her and Bruce afterwards! It seemed that everything simply had to go in threes!

While walking through the village, she noticed that there were three trees next to each house and that the people in the road were going about in threes or by themselves or sometimes in even larger groups. She just had time to count how many people were in

one of the larger groups, yes of course, there were just nine people in each large group! This is what might have been expected, after all they were living in Nineville!

Alice noticed that Karo had a faint smile on his face.

"I bet I can guess what you are thinking!", said Karo, "You think all this is very strange. You are not the only one! But in Nineville everything has to go in threes, it's compulsory! If anyone does not obey the law, they can go to prison!"

"To prison?", asked Alice incredulously "even children?"

"Yes, even children", replied Karo quite calmly.

"Have you been to prison yet?", asked Alice.

"Yes, once", said Karo smiling, "but it really isn't as bad as you think. It's not like it is in your country. It's really like going to a boarding school. There are lessons practically all the time, and you can leave when you have learned all the lessons. "

"What sort of lessons?", asked Alice.

"Well, it's usually about things we have forgotten", said Karo with an air of slight impatience. "It is usually about the threes and the nines and the twenty-sevens. When it gets to the twenty-sevens and the eightyones, it gets a bit much for me. In school we are not allowed to use the word three, we have to say one zero, for nine we have to say one zero zero. For twenty-seven we have to say one zero zero zero. After that I tend to get muddled up. That's why I was sent to prison"

Alice was just going to ask how the twenty-sevens and the eightyones had anything to do with threes, when Bruce interrupted her thoughts, saying:

"Look, Alice, there is the border! Can you see the barrier across the road? The house next to the barrier is perhaps the Customs House"

"You are right", said Unta, "that's where we live. You must have guessed by now that Ata is my sister and Alo is my brother. We are triplets, we were all born on the same day! Our father is the border guard, he checks the people who pass across the border. Are you coming into our house? You must be very tired and hungry!"

Bruce and Alice accepted the invitation with alacrity.

"Then I can show you where we go to school", added Unta "Would you like to come to school with us?"

Bruce's smile suddenly disappeared as if by magic. If there was one place where he did not want to go by any manner of means, it was to a school! This was supposed to be their vacation! Fortunately Bruce and Alice did not have to reply to this embarrassing question, as at that very moment the parents of their newly found friends, Mr. and Mrs. Koto, came out of the house to meet them.

Alo explained briefly what had happened and within the twinkling of an eye, Bruce and Alice were sitting at a well laid table, having been offered hot drinks and a whole pile of mouth watering tropical fruit, the like of which they had never seen before!

Mrs. Koto prepared the guest room for them, which boasted two comfortable beds. No sooner had they placed their heads on their pillows, that they were fast asleep!

Karo said goodbye and went home to his own house. The Koto children stayed up for a little while with their parents, trying to make all sorts of detailed plans of what they were going to do the next day. After all, it was not every day that children from another country would arrive in a small dinghy on one of their beaches, and they were going to make sure they made the best of their opportunity.

SOME QUESTIONS.

On the island at which Bruce and Alice arrived after their accident, the number three seemed a very important number. Things appeared to happen in threes and you had to do things in threes!

- (1) Why did one of the island children tell Alice not to take Bruce's hand?
- (2) Why did Karo say to Alice, "That's fine now!"?
- (3) Why did Karo, Bruce and Alice walk some distance behind the other children?
- (4) How many trees are there in Nineville? How many windows are there on each house? How many windows in the whole village?
- (5) Could you have a village with eighteen houses in it? Try to design a village with eighteen houses that would be legal in the island.
- (6) Why is eighty one an interesting number for the Koto children?

The island where the children landed was called Ruritania. It was divided into separate States, and in each State there were laws to observe about particular numbers. Bruce and Alice landed in the part of Ruritania in which the number three was important. This part of Ruritania, this State, was called THREELAND.

(7) What would have happened if Bruce and Alice had landed in the TWOLAND part of Ruritania? Write down how things would have turned out, starting with the coconut trees, the children holding hands, the village, until they reached the border, but on the TWOLAND side!

(8) Draw a village in TWOLAND. Don't forget that in TWOLAND, the number two replaces the number three of THREELAND, so instead of threes, nines and twenty-sevens, you will have to draw twos, fours and eights!

(9) Write down the names of all the children in your class. Then group them in the way you think they would be grouped in THREELAND. Your groups will have to be groups of twenty-seven, of nine, or three and finally of single children, but never more than two of these, and they must never get together!

(10) Now arrange the children in your class, imagining you are in TWOLAND. Then try FOURLAND and FIVELAND as well!

(11) Do you know a country where they work with the number ten as they would in TENLAND?