

THE RAFT

It was Fred's idea to build a raft. He knew that it wasn't, by any stretch of the imagination, what Con would call a reasonable risk, but following the river was the only way he could think of to get home. The river moved fast, and the splash and spray of it sounded like a summons through the jungle.

'A raft?' said Lila. 'From what?'

They were sitting in the clearing in the morning sun, clammy with sleep and dew. They'd slept inside the den, taking shifts to watch the fire. It had not been a good night. It had grown cold, and Max's feet,

which had begun the night in their proper place, had ended up in Fred's left ear. Fred's brain had chewed up the fears he had pushed aside during the day and spat them back at him while he slept. He'd woken, screaming, at dawn.

'We'll make it from wood,' said Fred. He swept up some of the dew from the grass around him and rubbed his face with it. 'There's a lot of wood available.'

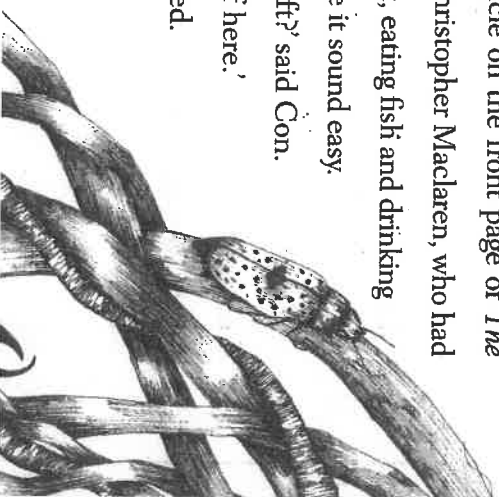
'Do you know how?'

'I've read a lot of books about it,' he said. In the books, explorers cascaded down rivers, shouting things like 'Tally-ho!', but he assumed that was not compulsory. And he'd read in an article on the front page of *The Times* about one man, Christopher Maclaren, who had lived for months on a raft, eating fish and drinking river water. He had made it sound easy.

'Why do we need a raft?' said Con.

'It would get us out of here.'

'To England?' she asked.



'To Manaus, and there would be people there who will get us home.'

'On a raft? To Manaus?' said Con. Her voice was thick with disbelief.

'People crossed the Atlantic Ocean on rafts,' said Fred.

'They were *adults*.'

'There's nothing that says only adults can make rafts,' said Fred, exasperated. 'You don't need a licence.'

'Fred's right: we should try,' said Lila. 'I think it's a good idea.'

'I knew you'd say that!' said Con. 'I knew you'd agree with him!'

'But,' Lila looked bewildered, 'don't you want to go home? Don't you want to see your mama?'

'Of course I do!' Con spat.

Fred looked down at the floor. He'd heard Con crying in the night, calling for help in her sleep.

'But if we just wait here,' said Lila, 'we'll wait until we die!'

'People will be looking for us! We should just stay here and they'll come,' said Con.

Lila shook her head. 'The jungle is very big, and we're small.'

'I'm not,' said Max promptly.

'You're small compared to a thousand miles of rain-forest, Max.'

'We can send up smoke signals,' said Con. 'We already have some fire – let's use it.'

'We'd have to burn down half the jungle to make one big enough to reach that high,' said Lila.

'And a fire that big would kill us instead of getting us rescued,' added Fred.

Con was going red. 'I don't want to, all right? I really, really don't want to get on a raft and risk my life because someone else thinks it's a good idea.'

'It might not be a good idea,' said Lila, 'but it's the only one we've got.'

Fred's skin was beginning to ache, and his stomach to clench. It always did when people argued. He stood up.

'I'm going to make a raft. You don't have to help if you don't want to.'

The raft took more time, and involved more blisters, than Fred had expected. But it quietened the roar of fear behind his ribs, to be doing something.

'It's not going to work,' said Con. Her arms were crossed so tightly across her chest that her fingers were almost touching at the back. The cut on her shoulder was still raw. 'And we shouldn't make ourselves hungry and tired when the only food we have is grubs.'

Fred said nothing, and went on pulling immense branches down from the trees. Most were too firmly attached to be any good, but he'd found that if he put his whole weight on them and swung his legs, every now and then one would break off with a satisfying crack. He worked faster and faster, brushing away leaves and insects as they fell in his eyes.

Once the wood was piled in a heap Lila heaved each piece to the fire. She laid each one across the

flames. When the middle burned away they were left with two pieces of roughly equal length, each as long as she was tall.

'I'll take off the burnt bits,' she said. 'It might as well look neat.' She hacked away the burnt edges with a flint, getting steadily more covered in soot.

'I want to help!' said Max. He strode around the clearing with his chest out, tugging liana vines down to the floor and piling them up. 'I'm actually the best at helping,' he said. He sat down and began to make the vines talk to one another.

After a few hours, Con unwound herself from her angry ball of limbs. Silently, she approached Max. She took up one of his vines, and a flint, and began to skin back the rough bark on the liana to expose the softer core, thick as a rope and almost as supple. She covered her face with her hair as she worked, and refused to meet anybody's gaze.

Fred watched her from the corner of his eye. Con was different when she worked. Before she had seemed all elbows and claws, touch-me-not and

defensive eyebrows. But now she seemed absorbed, barely breathing as she bent over the vines.

Fred had never been as proud of anything as he was of that raft. It distracted him from the pounding hunger in his stomach and head. He hauled the branches to the water's edge, dragging them one in each hand, back and forth, beating out a path between the river and their clearing.

Con held out a handful of liana vines. 'Here,' she said. 'For rope. Maybe. I don't know.'

'We could dip them in the water to soften them,' suggested Lila.

'Thank you,' said Fred. 'They'll be perfect for tying the corners.'

Con nodded, unsmiling.

Fred soaked the lianas, and wound them round and round his fist until they were supple. His hands prickled with splinters and he bit them out with his teeth. He sweated so much that his shirt turned into a sort of wearable pond.

For lunch they ate the cocoa beans, raw. They were not delicious.

'It feels like an insult to chocolate to eat them,' said Con.

To try to fill their stomachs they chewed on the white flesh that lined the pods, which tasted exactly like the rubber at the end of a pencil.

'This isn't food,' said Max. His chin and lip were quivering.

'You have to eat it, Max,' said Lila. 'There's nothing else.'

'It tastes mean.' Max dug his fist into his eye and tugged at his eyebrows. 'I want to go home!'

'I know,' said Fred. 'Me too.' He decided he couldn't face any more grubs that day and set aside the last of the cocoa-plant larvae. He turned back to the chunk of wood he was hacking in two with a jagged-edged stone. 'We're trying.'

As the sun set Lila and Fred and Con went foraging, dragging a wailing Max behind them. Con found purple berries growing in great cascades on a tree.

"They're acai berries!" said Lila. "People eat them at home. Or," she frowned, looking down at the pile, "maybe you're supposed to make them into tea?"

Fred tried one. "It tastes a bit like a blackberry," he said, "if the blackberry were angry with you." But it was a relief to have something to chew.

Con tried one and sighed. "I miss school dinners," she said.

"They might be better roasted?" said Lila.

They were not better roasted, but they ate them anyway. Fred crouched by the fire and crammed handfuls into his mouth, trying desperately to fill the churning hole where his stomach was usually located.

That night he woke in sudden and excruciating need of the lavo-tree. Minutes later, Lila woke with the same trouble, followed by Con and a hopping, wailing Max.

It was not, all in all, an easy night. Fred waded through his dreams to morning and woke feeling like he'd been kicked in the stomach. He turned on his

side, groaning, and glimpsed through a hole in the green wall of the den the pile of vines they had prepared the day before. He sat bolt upright. *The raft!* he thought. He should be able to finish it that day.

The others were asleep, sprawled on their stomachs in the warmth of the den. He scrambled out of the shelter and ran down to the river where he'd stacked the wood. The sun was hot and the air was clear; his skin had already burnt a furious red, but he barely felt it as he knelt by the pile of branches.

He looped each of the branches together with lianas, working a figure of eight, tying them so many times over that the raft was deep green, every inch embroidered with vines. Fred worked fast, biting down on his wrist and swearing as quietly as he could when he drove a thorn into his thumb.

He made four squares, each about six foot by six foot. Then he stacked them into two thicker squares, and tied the two squares together, tugging the knots tight with his teeth.

'Yuck.' He spat out a beetle. Then he stood back. The raft was rough-edged and stained with soot, but it was sturdy, a double-thick, twelve-by-six-foot slab of wood.

Fred dragged it to the very edge of the water, drops of sweat running down his nose and into his mouth. He wished, wildly, that he could take a photograph; he almost could see how his father would raise his eyebrows in surprise and pleasure. Reluctantly, he turned back to the clearing.

