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# *The Coral Island*

R.M. BALLANTYNE

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This edition published 1993 by Wordsworth Editions Limited  
8b East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ

ISBN 1 85326 170 X

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
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## CHAPTER I

*The beginning – My early life and character –  
I thirst for adventure in foreign lands, and go to sea*

Roving has always been, and still is, my ruling passion, the joy of my heart, the very sunshine of my existence. In childhood, in boyhood, and in man's estate, I have been a rover; not a mere Rambler among the woody glens and upon the hilltops of my own native land, but an enthusiastic rover throughout the length and breadth of the wide, wide world.

It was a wild, black night of howling storm, the night in which I was born, on the foaming bosom of the broad Atlantic Ocean. My father was a sea-captain; my grandfather was a sea-captain; my great-grandfather had been a marine. Nobody could tell positively what occupation *his* father had followed; but my dear mother used to assert that he had been a midshipman, whose grandfather on the mother's side, had been an admiral in the Royal Navy. At any rate, we knew that, as far back as our family could be traced, it had been intimately connected with the great watery waste. Indeed, this was the case on both sides of the house; for my mother always went to sea with my father on his long voyages, and so spent the greater part of her life upon the water.

Thus it was, I suppose, that I came to inherit a roving disposition. Soon after I was born, my father, being old, retired from a seafaring life, purchased a small cottage in a fishing village on the west coast of England, and settled down to spend the evening of his life on the shores of that sea which had for so many years been his home. It was not long after this that I began to show the roving spirit that dwelt within me. For some

time past my infant legs had been gaining strength, so that I came to be dissatisfied with rubbing the skin off my chubby knees by walking on them, and made many attempts to stand up and walk like a man, all of which attempts, however, resulted in my sitting down violently and in sudden surprise. One day I took advantage of my dear mother's absence to make another effort; and, to my joy, I actually succeeded in reaching the doorstep, over which I tumbled into a pool of muddy water that lay before my father's cottage door. Ah, how vividly I remember the horror of my poor mother when she found me sweltering in the mud amongst a group of cackling ducks, and the tenderness with which she stripped off my dripping clothes and washed my dirty little body! From this time forth my rambles became more frequent, and, as I grew older, more distant, until at last I had wandered far and near on the shore and in the woods around our humble dwelling, and did not rest content until my father bound me apprentice to a coasting vessel, and let me go to sea.

For some years I was happy in visiting the seaports, and in coasting along the shores of my native land. My Christian name was Ralph, and my comrades added to this the name of Rover, in consequence of the passion which I always evinced for travelling. Rover was not my real name, but, as I never received any other, I came at last to answer to it as naturally as to my proper name; and, as it is not a bad one, I see no good reason why I should not introduce myself to the reader as Ralph Rover. My shipmates were kind, good-natured fellows, and they and I got on very well together. They did, indeed, very frequently make game of and banter me, but not unkindly; and I overheard them sometimes saying that Ralph Rover was a 'queer, old-fashioned fellow'. This, I must confess, surprised me much, and I pondered the saying long, but could come at no satisfactory conclusion as to that wherein my old-fashionedness lay. It is true I was a quiet lad, and seldom spoke except when spoken to. Moreover, I never could understand the jokes of my companions even when they were explained to me: which dullness in apprehension occasioned me much grief;

however, I tried to make up for it by smiling and looking pleased when I observed that they were laughing at some witticism which I had failed to detect. I was also very fond of enquiring into the nature of things and their causes, and often fell into fits of abstraction while thus engaged in my mind. But in all this I saw nothing that did not seem to be exceedingly natural, and could by no means understand why my comrades should call me 'an old-fashioned fellow'.

Now, while engaged in the coasting trade, I fell in with many seamen who had travelled to almost every quarter of the globe; and I freely confessed that my heart glowed ardently within me as they recounted their wild adventures in foreign lands – the dreadful storms they had weathered, the appalling dangers they had escaped, the wonderful creatures they had seen both on the land and in the sea, and the interesting lands and strange people they had visited. But, of all the places which they told me, none captivated and charmed my imagination so much as the Coral Islands of the Southern Seas. They told me of thousands of beautiful fertile islands that had been formed by a small creature called the coral insect, where summer reigned nearly all the year round; where the trees were laden with a constant harvest of luxuriant fruit; where the climate was almost perpetually delightful; yet where, strange to say, men were wild, bloodthirsty savages, excepting in those favoured isles to which the gospel of our Saviour had been conveyed. These exciting accounts had so great an effect upon my mind, that, when I reached the age of fifteen, I resolved to make a voyage to the South Seas.

I had no little difficulty at first in prevailing on my dear parents to let me go; but when I urged on my father that he would never have become a great captain had he remained in the coasting trade, he saw the truth of what I said, and gave his consent. My dear mother, seeing that my father had made up his mind, no longer offered opposition to my wishes. 'But, oh, Ralph,' she said, on the day I bade her adieu, 'come back soon to us, my dear boy, for we are getting old now, Ralph, and may not have many years to live.'

I will not take up my reader's time with a minute account of all that occurred before I took my final leave of my dear parents. Suffice it to say that my father placed me under the charge of an old messmate of his own, a merchant captain, who was on the point of sailing to the South Seas in his own ship, the *Arrow*. My mother gave me her blessing and a small Bible; and her last request was, that I would never forget to read a chapter every day, and say my prayers, which I promised, with tears in my eyes, that I would certainly do.

Soon afterwards I went on board the *Arrow*, which was a fine large ship, and set sail for the islands of the Pacific Ocean.

## CHAPTER II

*The departure – The sea – My companions – Some account of the wonderful sights we saw on the great deep – A dreadful storm and a frightful wreck*

It was a bright, beautiful, warm day, when our ship spread her canvas to the breeze, and sailed for the regions of the south. Oh, how my heart bounded with delight as I listened to the merry chorus of the sailors, while they hauled at the ropes and got in the anchor! The captain shouted; the men ran to obey; the noble ship bent over to the breeze, and the shore gradually faded from my view, while I stood looking on with a kind of feeling that the whole was a delightful dream.

The first thing that struck me as being different from anything I had yet seen during my short career on the sea, was the hoisting of the anchor on deck, and lashing it firmly down with ropes, as if we had now bid adieu to the land for ever, and would require its services no more.

'There, lass,' cried a broad-shouldered jack-tar, giving the fluke of the anchor a hearty slap with his hand after the

housing was completed, 'there, lass, take a good nap now, for we shan't ask you to kiss the mud again for many a long day to come!'

And so it was. That anchor did not 'kiss the mud' for many long days afterwards; and when at last it did, it was for the last time!

There were a number of boys in the ship, but two of them were my special favourites. Jack Martin was a tall, strapping, broad-shouldered youth of eighteen, with a handsome, good-humoured, firm face. He had had a good education, was clever and hearty and lion-like in his actions, but mild and quiet in disposition. Jack was a general favourite, and had a peculiar fondness for me. My other companion was Peterkin Gay. He was little, quick, funny, decidedly mischievous, and about fourteen years old. But Peterkin's mischief was almost always harmless, else he could not have been so much beloved as he was.

'Hallo, youngster!' cried Jack Martin, giving me a slap on the shoulder, the day I joined the ship, 'come below, and I'll show you your berth. You and I are to be messmates, and I think we shall be good friends, for I like the look o' you.'

Jack was right. He and I and Peterkin afterwards became the best and staunchest friends that ever tossed together on the stormy waves.

I shall say little about the first part of our voyage. We had the usual amount of rough weather and calm; also we saw many strange fish rolling in the sea, and I was greatly delighted one day by seeing a shoal of flying-fish dart out of the water and skim through the air about a foot above the surface. They were pursued by dolphins, which feed on them, and one flying-fish in its terror flew over the ship, struck on the rigging, and fell upon the deck. Its wings were just fins elongated, and we found that they could never fly far at a time, and never mounted into the air like birds, but skimmed along the surface of the sea. Jack and I had it at dinner, and found it remarkably good.

When we approached Cape Horn, at the southern extremity of America, the weather became very cold and stormy, and the

sailors began to tell stories about the furious gales and the dangers of that terrible cape.

'Cape Horn,' said one, 'is the most horrible headland I ever doubled. I've sailed round it twice already, and both times the ship was a'most blow'd out o' the water.'

'An' I've been round it once,' said another, 'an' that time the sails were split, and the ropes frozen in the blocks, so that they wouldn't work, and we was all but lost.'

'An' I've been round it five times,' cried a third, 'an' every time was wuss than another, the gales was so treemendous!'

'And I've been round it no times at all,' cried Peterkin, with an impudent wink of his eye, 'an' *that* time I was blow'd inside out!'

Nevertheless, we passed the dreaded cape without much rough weather, and, in the course of a few weeks afterwards, were sailing gently, before a warm tropical breeze over the Pacific Ocean. Thus we proceeded on our voyage, sometimes bounding merrily before a fair breeze, at other times floating calmly on the glassy wave and fishing for the curious inhabitants of the deep – all of which, although the sailors thought little of them, were strange and interesting, and very wonderful to me.

At last we came among the Coral Islands of the Pacific, and I shall never forget the delight with which I gazed – when we chanced to pass one – at the pure, white, dazzling shores and the verdant palm trees, which looked bright and beautiful in the sunshine. And often did we three long to be landed on one, imagining that we should certainly find perfect happiness there! Our wish was granted sooner than we expected.

One night, soon after we entered the tropics, an awful storm burst upon our ship. The first squall of wind carried away two of our masts, and left only the foremast standing. Even this, however, was more than enough, for we did not dare to hoist a rag of sail on it. For five days the tempest raged in all its fury. Everything was swept off the decks except one small boat. The steersman was lashed to the wheel, lest he should be washed away, and we all gave ourselves up for lost. The captain said

that he had no idea where we were, as we had been blown far out of our course; and we feared much that we might get among the dangerous coral reefs which are so numerous in the Pacific. At daybreak on the sixth morning of the gale we saw land ahead. It was an island encircled by a reef of coral on which the waves broke in fury. There was calm water within this reef, but we could only see one narrow opening into it. For this opening we steered, but ere we reached it a tremendous wave broke on our stern, tore the rudder completely off, and left us at the mercy of the winds and waves.

'It's all over with us now, lads!' said the captain to the men. 'Get the boat ready to launch; we shall be on the rocks in less than half an hour.'

The men obeyed in gloomy silence, for they felt that there was little hope of their boat living in such a sea.

'Come, boys,' said Jack Martin, in a grave tone, to me and Peterkin, as we stood on the quarterdeck awaiting our fate, 'come, boys; we three shall stick together. You see it is impossible that the little boat can reach the shore, crowded with men. It will be sure to upset, so I mean rather to trust myself to a large oar. I see through the telescope that the ship will strike at the tail of the reef, where the waves break into the quiet water inside; so, if we manage to cling to the oar till it is driven over the breakers, we may perhaps gain the shore. What say you; will you join me?'

We gladly agreed to follow Jack, for he inspired us with confidence, although I could perceive, by the sad tone of his voice, that he had little hope; and, indeed, when I looked at the white waves that lashed the reef and boiled against the rocks as if in fury, I felt that there was but a step between us and death. My heart sank within me; but at that moment my thoughts turned to my beloved mother, and I remembered those words, which were among the last that she said to me: 'Ralph, my dearest child, always remember in the hour of danger to look to your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He alone is both able and willing to save your body and your soul.' So I felt much comforted when I thought thereon.

The ship was now very near the rocks. The men were ready with the boat, and the captain beside them giving orders, when a tremendous wave came towards us. We three ran towards the bow to lay hold of our oar, and had barely reached it when the wave fell on the deck with a crash like thunder. At the same moment the ship struck, the foremast broke off close to the deck and went over the side, carrying the boat and men along with it. Our oar got entangled with the wreck, and Jack seized an axe to cut it free, but, owing to the motion of the ship, he missed the cordage and struck the axe deep into the oar. Another wave, however, washed it clear of the wreck. We all seized hold of it, and the next instant we were struggling in the wild sea. The last thing I saw was the boat whirling in the surf, and all the sailors tossed into the foaming waves. Then I became insensible.

On recovering from my swoon, I found myself lying on a bank of soft grass, under the shelter of an overhanging rock, with Peterkin on his knees by my side, tenderly bathing my temples with water, and endeavouring to stop the blood that flowed from a wound in my forehead.

### CHAPTER III

*The Coral Island – Our first cogitations after landing, and the result of them – We conclude that the island is uninhabited*

There is a strange and peculiar sensation experienced in recovering from a state of insensibility, which is almost indescribable: a sort of dreamy, confused consciousness; a half-waking, half-sleeping condition, accompanied with a feeling of weariness, which, however, is by no means disagreeable. As I slowly recovered, and heard the voice of Peterkin enquiring whether I felt better, I thought that I must have overslept



myself, and should be sent to the masthead for being lazy; but, before I could leap up in haste, the thought seemed to vanish suddenly away, and I fancied that I must have been ill. Then a balmy breeze fanned my cheek, and I thought of home, and the garden at the back of my father's cottage, with its luxuriant flowers, and the sweet-scented honeysuckle that my dear mother trained so carefully upon the trellised porch. But the roaring of the surf put these delightful thoughts to flight, and I was back again at sea, watching the dolphins and the flying-fish, and reefing topsails off the wild and stormy Cape Horn. Gradually the roar of the surf became louder and more distinct. I thought of being wrecked far, far away from my native land, and slowly opened my eyes to meet those of my companion Jack, who, with a look of intense anxiety, was gazing into my face.

'Speak to us, my dear Ralph,' whispered Jack tenderly. 'Are you better now?'

I smiled and looked up, saying, 'Better! why, what do you mean, Jack? I'm quite well.'

'Then what are you shamming for, and frightening us in this way?' said Peterkin, smiling through his tears, for the poor boy had been really under the impression that I was dying.

I now raised myself on my elbow, and putting my hand to my forehead, found that it had been cut pretty severely, and that I had lost a good deal of blood,

'Come, come, Ralph,' said Jack, pressing me gently backward, 'lie down, my boy; you're not right yet. Wet your lips with this water; it's cool and clear as crystal. I got it from a spring close at hand. There now don't say a word, hold your tongue,' said he, seeing me about to speak. 'I'll tell you all about it, but you must not utter a syllable till you have rested well.'

'Oh, don't stop him from speaking, Jack,' said Peterkin, who, now that his fears for my safety were removed, busied himself in erecting a shelter of broken branches in order to protect me from the wind; which, however, was almost unnecessary, for the rock beside which I had been laid completely broke the