

THE
CORAL
ISLAND

by
R. M. Ballantyne

INTRODUCTION

The Coral Island is a fine example of a genre that has now almost entirely disappeared: adventure books for boys. For over a century, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1960s, these books stirred the imagination of generations of (mostly English) schoolboys with their tales of adventure set in far-off, exotic lands peopled by savage natives. One can see simply from that description why few such books are written nowadays: this was a time before any sense of political correctness impacted society, and the books simply assume that western civilization and mores (in particular: British, white, Christian culture and values) are naturally superior to anything else the world might have to offer.

This is not to denigrate the stories at all. All books are necessarily written within a certain culture, and books that sell well (as these certainly did) almost always reflect that culture and present it in a positive light. As such, we must simply accept the culture of the day, remember the target audience (boys between, say, ten and fifteen) and enjoy the books for what they are: pure escapism and adventure set in a milieu quite different from our own.

R. M. Ballantyne was a prolific author of such stories (he wrote nearly 90 books), the first that met with success being *The Coral Island*, which was published in 1857 when the author was 32. *The Coral Island* is a classic boys' adventure story: after a shipwreck, three young men must survive unaided on an island in the Pacific.

Even though to the eyes of a modern adult the story is improbable in the extreme, if one reads the story as it was meant to be read — by a boy who knows little of the world except that it is a big and very strange place in which the most unexpected adventures are to be had

— one is soon drawn into the adventures of Ralph, Jack and Peterkin, vicariously living with them the lives of marooned survivors learning about the alien world of a South Sea atoll.

For those who remain unconvinced that these books serve a worthwhile purpose, it is perhaps worth remembering that it was this genre that led the great British novelist Graham Greene, without whom the literary world would surely have been the poorer, to pursue the life of a writer.

It would be easy to over-analyze the genre of the boys' adventure story. Instead, we will get out of the way and let you, the reader, begin a book which an earlier publisher has called "some of the most exciting reading in the English language".

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE.....	1
<i>THE BEGINNING — MY EARLY LIFE AND CHARACTER — I THIRST FOR ADVENTURE IN FOREIGN LANDS, AND GO TO SEA</i>	
CHAPTER TWO.....	4
<i>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</i>	
CHAPTER THREE.....	8
<i>THE CORAL ISLAND — OUR FIRST COGITATIONS AFTER LANDING AND THE RESULT OF THEM — WE CONCLUDE THAT THE ISLAND IS UNINHABITED</i>	
CHAPTER FOUR.....	12
<i>WE EXAMINE OUR PERSONAL PROPERTY, AND MAKE A HAPPY DISCOVERY — OUR ISLAND DESCRIBED — JACK PROVES HIMSELF TO BE LEARNED AND SAGACIOUS ABOVE HIS FELLOWS — CURIOUS DISCOVERIES — NATURAL LEMONADE!</i>	
CHAPTER FIVE.....	22
<i>MORNING, AND COGITATIONS CONNECTED THEREWITH — WE LUXURIATE IN THE SEA, TRY OUR DIVING POWERS, AND MAKE ENCHANTING EXCURSIONS AMONG THE CORAL GROVES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN — THE WONDERS OF THE DEEP ENLARGED UPON</i>	
CHAPTER SIX.....	27
<i>AN EXCURSION INTO THE INTERIOR IN WHICH WE MAKE MANY VALUABLE AND INTERESTING DISCOVERIES — WE GET</i>	

<i>A DREADFUL FRIGHT — THE BREAD-FRUIT TREE — WONDERFUL PECULIARITY OF SOME OF THE FRUIT-TREES — SIGNS OF FORMER INHABITANTS</i>	
CHAPTER SEVEN	35
<i>JACK'S INGENUITY — WE GET INTO DIFFICULTIES ABOUT FISHING, AND GET OUT OF THEM BY A METHOD WHICH GIVES US A COLD BATH — HORRIBLE ENCOUNTER WITH A SHARK</i>	
CHAPTER EIGHT	40
<i>THE BEAUTIES OF THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA TEMPT PETERKIN TO DIVE — HOW HE DID IT — MORE DIFFICULTIES OVERCOME — THE WATER GARDEN — CURIOUS CREATURES OF THE SEA — THE TANK — CANDLES MISSED VERY MUCH, AND THE CANDLE-NUT TREE DISCOVERED — WONDERFUL ACCOUNT OF PETERKIN'S FIRST VOYAGE — CLOTH FOUND GROWING ON A TREE — A PLAN PROJECTED, AND ARMS PREPARED FOR OFFENCE AND DEFENCE — A DREADFUL CRY</i>	
CHAPTER NINE	53
<i>PREPARE FOR A JOURNEY ROUND THE ISLAND — SAGACIOUS REFLECTIONS — MYSTERIOUS APPEARANCES AND STARTLING OCCURRENCES</i>	
CHAPTER TEN	59
<i>MAKE DISCOVERY OF MANY EXCELLENT ROOTS AND FRUITS — THE RESOURCES OF THE CORAL ISLAND GRADUALLY UNFOLDED — THE BANYAN TREE — ANOTHER TREE WHICH IS SUPPORTED BY NATURAL PLANKS — WATER-FOWL FOUND — A VERY REMARKABLE DISCOVERY, AND A VERY PECULIAR MURDER — WE LUXURIATE ON THE FAT OF THE LAND</i>	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	66
<i>EFFECTS OF OVEREATING, AND REFLECTIONS THEREON — HUMBLE ADVICE REGARDING COLD WATER — THE "HORRIBLE CRY" ACCOUNTED FOR — THE CURIOUS BIRDS CALLED PENGUINS — PECULIARITY OF THE COCOA-NUT PALM — QUESTIONS ON THE FORMATION OF CORAL ISLANDS — MYSTERIOUS FOOTSTEPS — STRANGE DISCOVERIES AND SAD SIGHTS</i>	

CHAPTER TWELVE	75
<i>SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE TANK — JACK'S WISDOM AND PETERKIN'S IMPERTINENCE — WONDERFUL BEHAVIOUR OF A CRAB — GOOD WISHES FOR THOSE WHO DWELL FAR FROM THE SEA — JACK COMMENCES TO BUILD A LITTLE BOAT</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	81
<i>NOTABLE DISCOVERY AT THE SPOUTING CLIFFS — THE MYSTERIOUS GREEN MONSTER EXPLAINED — WE ARE THROWN INTO UNUTTERABLE TERROR BY THE IDEA THAT JACK IS DROWNED — THE DIAMOND CAVE</i>	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	89
<i>STRANGE PECULIARITY OF THE TIDES — ALSO OF THE TWILIGHT — PETERKIN'S REMARKABLE CONDUCT IN EMBRACING A LITTLE PIG AND KILLING A BIG SOW — SAGE REMARKS ON JESTING — ALSO ON LOVE</i>	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	94
<i>BOAT-BUILDING EXTRAORDINARY — PETERKIN TRIES HIS HAND AT COOKERY, AND FAILS MOST SIGNALLY — THE BOAT FINISHED — CURIOUS CONVERSATION WITH THE CAT, AND OTHER MATTERS</i>	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	101
<i>THE BOAT LAUNCHED — WE VISIT THE CORAL REEF — THE GREAT BREAKER THAT NEVER GOES DOWN — CORAL INSECTS — THE WAY IN WHICH CORAL ISLANDS ARE MADE — THE BOATS SAIL — WE TAX OUR INGENUITY TO FORM FISH-HOOKS — SOME OF THE FISH WE SAW — AND A MONSTROUS WHALE — WONDERFUL SHOWER OF LITTLE FISH — WATERSPOUTS</i>	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	107
<i>A MONSTER WAVE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES — THE BOAT LOST AND FOUND — PETERKIN'S TERRIBLE ACCIDENT — SUPPLIES OF FOOD FOR A VOYAGE IN THE BOAT — WE VISIT PENGUIN ISLAND, AND ARE AMAZED BEYOND MEASURE — ACCOUNT OF THE PENGUINS</i>	

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	117
<i>AN AWFUL STORM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES — NARROW ESCAPE — A ROCK PROVES A SURE FOUNDATION — A FEARFUL NIGHT AND A BRIGHT MORNING — DELIVERANCE FROM DANGER</i>	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	122
<i>SHOEMAKING — THE EVEN TENOR OF OUR WAY SUDDENLY INTERRUPTED — AN UNEXPECTED VISIT AND AN APPALLING BATTLE — WE ALL BECOME WARRIORS, AND JACK PROVES HIMSELF TO BE A HERO</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY	131
<i>INTERCOURSE WITH THE SAVAGES — CANNIBALISM PREVENTED — THE SLAIN ARE BURIED AND THE SURVIVORS DEPART, LEAVING US AGAIN ALONE ON OUR CORAL ISLAND</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE	136
<i>SAGACIOUS AND MORAL REMARKS IN REGARD TO LIFE — A SAIL! — AN UNEXPECTED SALUTE — THE END OF THE BLACK CAT — A TERRIBLE DIVE — AN INCAUTIOUS PROCEEDING AND A FRIGHTFUL CATASTROPHE</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO	142
<i>I FALL INTO THE HANDS OF PIRATES — HOW THEY TREATED ME, AND WHAT I SAID TO THEM — THE RESULT OF THE WHOLE ENDING IN A MELANCHOLY SEPARATION AND IN A MOST UNEXPECTED GIFT</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY THREE	150
<i>DARK SURMISES — A STRANGE SAIL, AND A STRANGE CREW, AND A STILL STRANGER CARGO — NEW REASONS FOR FAVOURING MISSIONARIES — A MURDEROUS MASSACRE, AND THOUGHTS THEREON</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR	158
<i>BILL IS COMMUNICATIVE AND SAGACIOUS — UNPLEASANT PROSPECTS — RETROSPECTIVE MEDITATIONS INTERRUPTED</i>	

<p><i>BY VOLCANIC AGENCY — THE PIRATES NEGOTIATE WITH A FEEJEE CHIEF — VARIOUS ETCETERAS THAT ARE CALCULATED TO SURPRISE AND HORRIFY</i></p>	
CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE	169
<p><i>THE SANDAL-WOOD PARTY — NATIVE CHILDREN'S GAMES SOMEWHAT SURPRISING — DESPERATE AMUSEMENTS SUDDENLY AND FATALLY BROUGHT TO A CLOSE — AN OLD FRIEND RECOGNISED — NEWS — ROMATA'S MAD CONDUCT</i></p>	
CHAPTER TWENTY SIX	177
<p><i>MISCHIEF BREWING — MY BLOOD IS MADE TO RUN COLD — EVIL CONSULTATIONS AND WICKED RESOLVES — BLOODY BILL ATTEMPTS TO DO GOOD, AND FAILS — THE ATTACK — WHOLESALE MURDER — THE FLIGHT — THE ESCAPE</i></p>	
CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN	185
<p><i>REFLECTIONS — THE WOUNDED MAN — THE SQUALL — TRUE CONSOLATION — DEATH</i></p>	
CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT	193
<p><i>ALONE ON THE DEEP — NECESSITY THE MOTHER OF INVENTION — A VALUABLE BOOK DISCOVERED — NATURAL PHENOMENON — A BRIGHT DAY IN MY HISTORY</i></p>	
CHAPTER TWENTY NINE	197
<p><i>THE EFFECT OF A CANNON-SHOT — A HAPPY REUNION OF A SOMEWHAT MOIST NATURE — RETROSPECT AND EXPLANATIONS — AN AWFUL DIVE — NEW PLANS — THE LAST OF THE CORAL ISLAND</i></p>	
CHAPTER THIRTY	206
<p><i>THE VOYAGE — THE ISLAND, AND A CONSULTATION IN WHICH DANGER IS SCOUTED AS A THING UNWORTHY OF CONSIDERATION — RATS AND CATS — THE NATIVE TEACHER — AWFUL REVELATIONS — WONDERFUL EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY</i></p>	

<i>CHAPTER THIRTY ONE</i>	219
<i>A STRANGE AND BLOODY BATTLE — THE LION BEARDED IN HIS DEN — FRIGHTFUL SCENES OF CRUELTY, AND FEARS FOR THE FUTURE</i>	
<i>CHAPTER THIRTY TWO</i>	225
<i>AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY, AND A BOLD, RECKLESS DEFIANCE, WITH ITS CONSEQUENCES — PLANS OF ESCAPE, AND HEROIC RESOLVES</i>	
<i>CHAPTER THIRTY THREE</i>	231
<i>THE FLIGHT — THE PURSUIT — DESPAIR AND ITS RESULTS — THE LION BEARDED IN HIS DEN AGAIN — AWFUL DANGER THREATENED AND WONDERFULLY AVERTED — A TERRIFIC STORM</i>	
<i>CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR</i>	240
<i>IMPRISONMENT — SINKING HOPES — UNEXPECTED FREEDOM TO MORE THAN ONE, AND IN MORE SENSES THAN ONE</i>	
<i>CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE</i>	245
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	

CHAPTER ONE

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 hill-tops 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 on 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

THE CORAL ISLAND

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 inquiring 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 confess 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 of 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 readers’ 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

THE CORAL ISLAND

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 TWO

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 sha’n’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 for 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."

"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."

THE CORAL ISLAND

“An’ I’ve been round it five times,” cried a third; “an’ every time wos wuss than another, the gales wos so tree-mendous!”

“And I’ve been round it, no times at all,” cried Peterkin with an impudent wink in his eye, “an’ that time I wos 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 see only 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 so small a boat living in such a sea.

“Come, boys,” said Jack Martin, in a grave tone, to me and Peterkin, as we stood on the quarter-deck 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

THE CORAL ISLAND

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 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 THREE

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 inquiring 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