



The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean

R. M. Ballantyne

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The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean (1858) is a novel written by Scottish author R. M. Ballantyne. One of the first works of juvenile fiction to feature exclusively juvenile heroes, the story relates the adventures of three boys marooned on a South Pacific island, the only survivors of a shipwreck.

The story is written as a first person narrative from the perspective of 15-year-old Ralph Rover, one of three boys shipwrecked on the coral reef of a large but uninhabited Polynesian island. Ralph tells the story retrospectively, looking back on his boyhood adventure: "I was a boy when I went through the wonderful adventures herein set down. With the memory of my boyish feelings strong upon me, I present my book specially to boys, in the earnest hope that they may derive valuable information, much pleasure, great profit, and unbounded amusement from its pages."

The account starts briskly; only four pages are devoted to Ralph's early life and a further fourteen to his voyage to the Pacific Ocean on board the Arrow. He and his two companions – 18-year-old Jack Martin and 13-year-old Peterkin Gay – are the sole survivors of the shipwreck. The narrative is in two parts. The first describes how the boys feed themselves, what they drink, the clothing and shelter they fashion, and how they cope with having to rely on their own resources. The second half of the novel is more action-packed, featuring conflicts with pirates, fighting between the native Polynesians, and the conversion efforts of Christian missionaries.

Fruit, fish and wild pigs provide plentiful food, and at first the boys' life on the island is idyllic. They build a shelter and construct a small boat using their only possessions: a broken telescope, an iron-bound oar, and a small axe. Their first contact with other humans comes after several months when they observe two large outrigger canoes in the distance, one pursued by the other. The two groups of Polynesians disembark on the beach and engage in battle; the victors take fifteen prisoners, and kill and eat one immediately. But when they threaten to kill one of the three women captured, along with two children, the boys intervene to defeat the pursuers, earning them the gratitude of the chief, Tararo. The next morning they prevent another act of cannibalism. The natives leave, and the boys are alone once more.

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