

ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

FORT DESOLATION: RED
INDIANS AND FUR
TRADERS OF RUPERT'S
LAND

Robert Michael Ballantyne

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R. M. Ballantyne

Fort Desolation: Red Indians and Fur Traders of Rupert's Land

Chapter One.

Or, Solitude in the Wilderness. The Outskirter

To some minds solitude is depressing, to others it is congenial. It was the *former* to our friend John Robinson; yet he had a large share of it in his chequered life. John—more familiarly known as Jack—was as romantic as his name was the reverse. To look at him you would have supposed that he was the most ordinary of common-place men, but if you had known him, as we did, you would have discovered that there was a deep, silent, but ever-flowing river of enthusiasm, energy, fervour—in a word, romance—in his soul, which seldom or never manifested itself in words, and only now and then, on rare occasions, flashed out in a lightning glance, or blazed up in a fiery countenance. For the most part Jack was calm as a mill-pond, deep as the Atlantic, straightforward and grave as an undertaker's clerk and good-humoured as an unspoilt and healthy child.

Jack never made a joke, but, certes, he could enjoy one; and he had a way of showing his enjoyment by a twinkle in his blue eye and a chuckle in his throat that was peculiarly impressive.

Jack was a type of a large class. He was what we may call an *outskirter* of the world. He was one of those who, from the force of necessity, or of self-will, or of circumstances, are driven to the outer circle of this world to do as Adam and Eve's family did, battle with Nature in her wildest scenes and moods; to earn his bread, literally, in the sweat of his brow.

Jack was a middle-sized man of strong make. He was not sufficiently large to overawe men by his size, neither was he so small as to invite impertinence from "big bullies," of whom there were plenty in his neighbourhood. In short, being an unpretending man and a plain man, with a good nose and large chin and sandy hair, he was not usually taken much notice of by strangers during his journeyings in the world; but when vigorous action in cases of emergency was required Jack Robinson was the man to make himself conspicuous.

It is not our intention to give an account of Jack's adventurous life from beginning to end, but to detail the incidents of a sojourn of two months at Fort Desolation, in almost utter solitude, in order to show one of the many phases of rough life to which outskirters are frequently subjected.

In regard to his early life it may be sufficient to say that Jack, after being born, created such perpetual disturbance and storm in the house that his worthy father came to look upon him as a perfect pest, and as soon as possible sent him to a public school, where he fought like a Mameluke Bey, learned his lessons with the zeal of a philosopher, and, at the end of ten years ran away to sea, where he became as sick as a dog and as miserable as a convicted felon.

Poor Jack was honest of heart and generous of spirit, but many a long hard year did he spend in the rugged parts of the earth ere he recovered, (if he ever did recover), from the evil effects of this first false step.

In course of time Jack was landed in Canada, with only a few shillings in his pocket; from that period he became an outskirter. The romance in his nature pointed to the backwoods; he went thither at once, and was not disappointed. At first the wild life surpassed his expectations, but as time wore on the tinsel began to wear off the face of things, and he came to see them as they actually were. Nevertheless, the romance of life did not wear out of his constitution. Enthusiasm, quiet but deep, stuck to him all through his career, and carried him on and over difficulties that would have disgusted and turned back many a colder spirit.

Jack's first success was the obtaining of a situation as clerk in the store of a general merchant in an outskirt settlement of Canada. Dire necessity drove him to this. He had been three weeks without money and nearly two days without food before he succumbed. Having given in, however, he worked like a Trojan, and would certainly have advanced himself in life if his employer had not failed and left him, minus a portion of his salary, to "try again."

Next, he became an engineer on board one of the Missouri steamers, in which capacity he burst his boiler, and threw himself and the passengers into the river—the captain having adopted the truly Yankee expedient of sitting down on the safety-valve while racing with another boat!

Afterwards, Jack Robinson became clerk in one of the Ontario steam-boats, but, growing tired of this life, he went up the Ottawa, and became overseer of a sawmill. Here, being on the frontier of civilisation, he saw the roughest of Canadian life. The lumbermen of that district are a mixed race—French-Canadians, Irishmen, Indians, half-castes, etcetera,—and whatever good qualities these men might possess in the way of hewing timber and bush-life, they were sadly deficient in the matters of morality and temperance. But Jack was a man of tact and good temper, and played his cards well. He jested with the jocular, sympathised with the homesick, doctored the ailing in a rough and ready fashion peculiarly his own, and avoided the quarrelsome. Thus he became a general favourite.

Of course it was not to be expected that he could escape an occasional broil, and it was herein that his early education did him good service. He had been trained in an English school where he became one of the best boxers. The lumberers on the Ottawa were not practised in this science; they indulged in that kicking, tearing, pommelling sort of mode which is so repugnant to the feelings of an Englishman. The consequence was that Jack had few fights, but these were invariably with the largest bullies of the district; and he, in each case, inflicted such tremendous facial punishment on his opponent that he became a noted man, against whom few cared to pit themselves.

There are none so likely to enjoy peace as those who are prepared for war. Jack used sometimes to say, with a smile, that his few battles were the price he had to pay for peace.

Our hero was unlucky. The saw-mill failed—its master being a drunkard. When that went down he entered the lumber trade, where he made the acquaintance of a young Scotchman, of congenial mind and temperament, who suggested the setting up of a store in a promising locality and proposed entering into partnership. "Murray and Robinson" was forthwith painted by the latter, (who was a bit of an artist), over the door of a small log-house, and the store soon became well known and much frequented by the sparse population as well as by those engaged in the timber trade.

But "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." There must have been a screw loose somewhere, for bad debts accumulated and losses were incurred which finally brought the firm to the ground, and left its dissevered partners to begin the world over again!

After this poor Jack Robinson fell into low spirits for a time, but he soon recovered, and bought a small piece of land at a nominal price in a region so wild that he had to cut his own road to it, fell the trees with his own hand, and, in short, reclaim it from the wilderness on the margin of which it lay. This was hard work, but Jack liked hard work, and whatever work he undertook he always did it well. Strange that such a man could not get on! yet so it was, that, in a couple of years, he found himself little better off than he had been when he entered on his new property. The region, too, was not a tempting one. No adventurous spirits had located themselves beside him, and only a few had come within several miles of his habitation.

This did not suit our hero's sociable temperament, and he began to despond very much. Still his sanguine spirit led him to persevere, and there is no saying how long he might have continued to spend his days and his energies in felling trees and sowing among the stumps and hoping for better days, had not his views been changed and his thoughts turned into another channel by a letter.

Chapter Two.

The Letter, and its Consequences

One fine spring morning Jack was sitting, smoking his pipe after breakfast, at the door of his log cabin, looking pensively out upon the tree-stump-encumbered field which constituted his farm. He had facetiously named his residence the Mountain House, in consequence of there being neither mountain nor hill larger than an inverted wash-hand basin, within ten miles of him! He was wont to defend the misnomer on the ground that it served to keep him in remembrance of the fact that hills really existed in other parts of the world.

Jack was in a desponding mood. His pipe would not “draw” that morning; and his mind had been more active than usual for a few days past, revolving the past, the present, and the future. In short, Jack was cross. There could be no doubt whatever about it; for he suddenly, and without warning, dashed his pipe to pieces against a log, went into the house for another, which he calmly filled, as he resumed his former seat, lit, and continued to smoke for some time in sulky silence. We record this fact because it was quite contrary to Jack’s amiable and patient character, and showed that some deep emotions were stirring within him.

The second pipe “drew” well. Probably it was this that induced him to give utterance to the expression—

“I wonder how long this sort of thing will last?”

“Just as long as you’ve a mind to let it, and no longer,” answered a man clad in the garb of a trapper, whose mocassin foot had given no indication of his approach until he was within a couple of paces of the door.

“Is that you, Joe?” said Jack, looking up, and pointing to a log which served as a seat on the other side of the doorway.

“It’s all that’s of me,” replied Joe.

“Sit down and fill your pipe out of my pouch, Joe. It’s good ’baccy, you’ll find. Any news? I suppose not. There never is; and if there was, what would be the odds to me?”

“In the blues?” remarked the hunter, regarding Jack with a peculiar smile through his first puff of smoke.

“Rather!” said Jack.

“Grog?” inquired Joe.

“Haven’t tasted a drop for months,” replied Jack.

“All square *here*?” inquired the hunter, tapping his stomach.

“Could digest gun-flints and screw nails!”

The two smoked in silence for some time; then Joe drew forth a soiled letter, which he handed to his companion, saying—

“It’s bin lying at the post-office for some weeks, and as the postmaster know’d I was comin’ here he asked me to take it. I’ve a notion it may be an offer to buy your clearin’, for I’ve heerd two or three fellows speakin’ about it. Now, as I want to buy it myself, if yer disposed to sell it, I hereby make you the first offer.”

Jack Robinson continued to smoke in silence, gazing abstractedly at the letter. Since his mother had died, a year before the date of which we write, he had not received a line from any one, insomuch that he had given up calling at the post-office on his occasional visits to the nearest settlement. This letter, therefore, took him by surprise, all the more that it was addressed in the handwriting of his former partner, Murray.

Breaking the seal, he read as follows:

“Fort Kamenistaquoia, April the somethingth:—

“Dear Jack,—You’ll be surprised to see my fist, but not more surprised than I was to hear from an old hunter just arrived, that you had taken to farming. It’s not your forte, Jack, my boy. Be advised. Sell off the farm for what it will fetch, and come and join me. My antecedents are not in my favour, I grant; but facts are stubborn things, and it is a fact that I am making dollars here like stones. I’m a fur-trader, my boy. Have joined a small company, and up to this time have made a good thing of it. You know something of the fur trade, if I mistake not. Do come and join us; we want such a man as you at a new post we have established on the coast of Labrador. Shooting, fishing, hunting, *ad libitum*. Eating, drinking, sleeping, *ad infinitum*. What would you more? Come, like a good fellow, and be happy!

“Ever thine, **J. Murray.**”

“I’ll sell the *farm*,” said Jack Robinson, folding the letter.

“You will?” exclaimed Joe. “What’s your price?”

“Come over it with me, and look at the fixings, before I tell you,” said Jack.

They went over it together, and looked at every fence and stump and implement. They visited the live stock, and estimated the value of the sprouting crop. Then they returned to the house, where they struck a bargain off-hand.

That evening Jack bade adieu to the Mountain House, mounted his horse, with his worldly goods at the pommel of the saddle, and rode away, leaving Joe, the trapper, in possession.

In process of time our hero rode through the settlements to Montreal, where he sold his horse, purchased a few necessities, and made his way down the Saint Lawrence to the frontier settlements of the bleak and almost uninhabited north shore of the gulf. Here he found some difficulty in engaging a man to go with him, in a canoe, towards the coast of Labrador.

An Irishman, in a fit of despondency, at length agreed; but on reaching a saw-mill that had been established by a couple of adventurous Yankees, in a region that seemed to be the out-skirts of creation, Paddy repented, and vowed he’d go no farther for love or money.

Jack Robinson earnestly advised the faithless man to go home, and help his grandmother, thenceforth, to plant murphies; after which he embarked in his canoe alone, and paddled away into the dreary north.

Camping out in the woods at night, paddling all day, and living on biscuit and salt pork, with an occasional duck or gull, by way of variety; never seeing a human face from morn till night, nor hearing the sound of any voice except his own, Jack pursued his voyage for fourteen days. At the end of that time he descried Fort Kamenistaquoia. It consisted of four small log-houses, perched on a conspicuous promontory, with a flag-staff in the midst of them.

Here he was welcomed warmly by his friend John Murray and his colleagues, and was entertained for three days sumptuously on fresh salmon, salt pork, pancakes, and tea. Intellectually, he was regaled with glowing accounts of the fur trade and the salmon fisheries of that region.

“Now, Jack,” said Murray, on the third day after his arrival, while they walked in front of the fort, smoking a morning pipe, “it is time that you were off to the new fort. One of our best men has built it, but he is not a suitable person to take charge, and as the salmon season has pretty well advanced we are anxious to have you there to look after the salting and sending of them to Quebec.”

“What do you call the new fort?” inquired Jack.

“Well, it has not yet got a name. We’ve been so much in the habit of styling it the New Fort that the necessity of another name has not occurred to us. Perhaps, as you are to be its first master, we may leave the naming of it to you.”

“Very good,” said Jack; “I am ready at a moment’s notice. Shall I set off this forenoon?”

“Not quite so sharp as that,” replied Murray, laughing. “To-morrow morning, at day-break, will do. There is a small sloop lying in a creek about twenty miles below this. We beached her there last autumn. You’ll go down in a boat with three men, and haul her into deep water. There will be spring

tides in two days, so, with the help of tackle, you'll easily manage it. Thence you will sail to the new fort, forty miles farther along the coast, and take charge."

"The three men you mean to give me know their work, I presume?" said Jack.

"Of course they do. None of them have been at the fort, however."

"Oh! How then shall we find it?" inquired Jack.

"By observation," replied the other. "Keep a sharp look out as you coast along, and you can't miss it."

The idea of mists and darkness and storms occurred to Jack Robinson, but he only answered, "Very good."

"Can any of the three men navigate the sloop?" he inquired.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Murray; "but you know something of navigation, yourself, don't you?"

"No! nothing!"

"Pooh! nonsense. Have you never sailed a boat?"

"Yes, occasionally."

"Well, it's the same thing. If a squall comes, keep a steady hand on the helm and a sharp eye to wind'ard, and you're safe as the Bank. If it's too strong for you, loose the halyards, let the sheets fly, and down with the helm; the easiest thing in the world if you only look alive and don't get flurried."

"Very good," said Jack, and as he said so his pipe went out; so he knocked out the ashes and refilled it.

Next morning our hero rowed away with his three men, and soon discovered the creek of which his friend had spoken. Here he found the sloop, a clumsy "tub" of about twenty tons burden, and here Jack's troubles began.

The *Fairy*, as the sloop was named, happened to have been beached during a very high tide. It now lay high and dry in what once had been mud, on the shore of a land-locked bay or pond, under the shadow of some towering pines. The spot looked like an inland lakelet, on the margin of which one might have expected to find a bear or a moose-deer, but certainly not a sloop.

"Oh! ye shall nevaire git him off," said François Xavier, one of the three men—a French-Canadian—on beholding the stranded vessel.

"We'll try," said Pierre, another of the three men, and a burly half-breed.

"Try!" exclaimed Rollo, the third of the three men—a tall, powerful, ill-favoured man, who was somewhat of a bully, who could not tell where he had been born, and did not know who his father and mother had been, having been forsaken by them in his infancy. "Try? you might as well try to lift a mountain! I've a mind to go straight back to Kamenistaquoia and tell Mr Murray that to his face!"

"Have you?" said Jack Robinson, in a quiet, peculiar tone, accompanied by a gaze that had the effect of causing Rollo to look a little confused. "Come along, lads, we'll begin at once," he continued, "it will be full tide in an hour or so. Get the tackle ready, François; the rest of you set to work, and clear away the stones and rubbish from under her sides."

Jack threw off his coat, and began to work like a hero—as he was. The others followed his example; and the result was that when the tide rose to its full height the sloop was freed of all the rubbish that had collected round the hull; the block tackle was affixed to the mast; the rope attached to a tree on the opposite side of the creek; and the party were ready to haul. But although they hauled until their sinews cracked, and the large veins of their necks and foreheads swelled almost to bursting, the sloop did not move an inch. The tide began to fall, and in a few minutes that opportunity was gone. There were not many such tides to count on, so Jack applied all his energies and ingenuity to the work. By the time the next tide rose they had felled two large pines, and applied them to the side of the vessel. Two of the party swung at the ends of these; the other two hauled on the block-tackle. This time the sloop moved a little at the full flood; but the moment of hope soon passed, and the end was not yet attained.

The next tide was the last high one. They worked like desperate men during the interval. The wedge was the mechanical power which prevailed at last. Several wedges were inserted under the vessel's side, and driven home. Thus the sloop was canted over a little towards the water. When the tide was at the full, one man hauled at the tackle, two men swung at the ends of the levers, and Jack hammered home the wedges at each heave and pull; thus securing every inch of movement. The result was that the sloop slid slowly down the bank into deep water.

It is wonderful how small a matter will arouse human enthusiasm! The cheer that was given on the successful floating of the *Fairy* was certainly as full of fervour, if not of volume, as that which followed the launching of the *Great Eastern*.

Setting sail down the gulf they ran before a fair breeze which speedily increased to a favouring gale. Before night a small bay was descried, with three log-huts on the shore. This was the new fort. They ran into the bay, grazing a smooth rock in their passage, which caused the *Fairy* to tremble from stem to stern, and cast anchor close to a wooden jetty. On the end of this a solitary individual, (apparently a maniac), was seen capering and yelling wildly.

“What fort is this?” shouted Jack.

“Sorrow wan o’ me knows,” cried the maniac; “it’s niver been christened yet. Faix, if it’s a fort at all, I’d call it Fort Disolation. Och! but it’s lonesome I’ve been these three days—niver a wan here but meself an’ the ghosts. Come ashore, darlints, and comfort me!”

“Fort Desolation, indeed!” muttered Jack Robinson, as he looked round him sadly; “not a bad name. I’ll adopt it. Lower the boat, lads.”

Thus Jack took possession of his new home.

Chapter Three.

Domestic and Personal Matters

Jack Robinson's first proceeding on entering the new fort and assuming the command, was to summon the man, (supposed to be a maniac), named Teddy O'Donel, to his presence in the "Hall."

"Your name is Teddy O'Donel?" said Jack.

"The same, sir, at your sarvice," said Teddy, with a respectful pull at his forelock. "They was used to call me *Mister* O'Donel when I was in the army, but I've guv that up long ago an' dropped the title wid the commission."

"Indeed: then you were a commissioned officer?" inquired Jack, with a smile.

"Be no manes. It was a slight longer title than that I had. They called me a non-commissioned officer. I niver could find in me heart to consociate wid them consaited commissioners—though there was wan or two of 'em as was desarvin' o' the three stripes. But I niver took kindly to sodgerin'. It was in the Howth militia I was. Good enough boys they was in their way, but I couldn't pull wid them no how. They made me a corp'ral for good conduct, but, faix, the great review finished me; for I got into that state of warlike feeling that I loaded me muskit five times widout firin', an' there was such a row round about that I didn't know the dirty thing had niver wint off till the fifth time, when she bursted into smithereens an' wint off intirely. No wan iver seed a scrag of her after that. An' the worst was, she carried away the small finger of Bob Riley's left hand. Bob threw down his muskit an' ran off the ground howlin', so I picked the wipon up an' blazed away at the inimy; but, bad luck to him, Bob had left his ramrod in, and I sint it right through the flank of an owld donkey as was pullin' an apple and orange cart. Oh! how that baste did kick up its heels, to be sure! and the apples and oranges they was flyin' like—Well, well—the long and the short was, that I wint an' towld the colonel I couldn't stop no longer in such a regiment. So I guv it up an' comed out here."

"And became a fur-trader," said Jack Robinson, with a smile.

"Just so, sur, an' fort-builder to boot; for, being a jiner to trade and handy wid the tools, Mr Murray sent me down here to build the place and take command, but I s'pose I'm suppersheeded now!"

"Well, I believe you are, Teddy; but I hope that you will yet do good service as my lieutenant."

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