ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

THE THOROGOOD FAMILY

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Ballantyne R.

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Содержание

R. M. Ballantyne
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Chapter One

This family was not only Thorogood but thorough-going. The father was a blacksmith, with five sons and one daughter, and he used to hammer truth into his children's heads with as much vigour as he was wont to hammer the tough iron on his anvil; but he did it kindly. He was not a growly-wowly, cross-grained man, like some fathers we know of—not he. His broad, hairy face was like a sun, and his eyes darted sunbeams wherever they turned. The faces of his five sons were just like his own, except in regard to roughness and hair. Tom, and Dick, and Harry, and Bob, and Jim, were their names. Jim was the baby. Their ages were equally separated. If you began with Jim, who was three, you had only to say—four, five, six, seven—Tom being seven.

These five boys were broad, and sturdy, like their father. Like him, also, they were fond of noise and hammering. They hammered the furniture of their father's cottage, until all of it that was weak was smashed, and all that was strong became dreadfully dinted. They also hammered each other's noses with their little fat fists, at times, but they soon grew too old and wise for that; they soon, also, left off hammering the heads of their sister's dolls, which was a favourite amusement in their earlier days.

The mention of dolls brings us to the sister. She was like her mother—little, soft, fair, and sweet-voiced; just as unlike her brothers in appearance as possible—except that she had their bright blue, blazing eyes. Her age was eight years.

It was, truly, a sight to behold this family sit down to supper of an evening. The blacksmith would come in and seize little Jim in his brawny arms, and toss him up to the very beams of the ceiling, after which he would take little Molly on his knee, and fondle her, while "Old Moll," as he sometimes called his wife, spread the cloth and loaded the table with good things.

A cat, a kitten, and a terrier, lived together in that smith's cottage on friendly terms. They romped with each other, and with the five boys, so that the noise used sometimes to be tremendous; but it was not an unpleasant noise, because there were no sounds of discontent or quarrelling in it. You see, the blacksmith and his wife trained that family well. It is wonderful what an amount of noise one can stand when it is good-humoured noise.

Well, this blacksmith had a favourite maxim, which he was fond of impressing on his children. It was this— "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, doing it as if to the Lord, and not to men." We need hardly say that he found something like this maxim in the Bible—a grand channel through which wisdom flows to man.

Of course he had some trouble in teaching his little ones, just as other fathers have. One evening, when speaking about this favourite maxim, he was interrupted by a most awful yell under the table.

"Why, what ever is the matter with the cat?" said the blacksmith in surprise.

"It's on'y me, fadder," said little Jim; "I found hims tail, and I pulled it *wid all my might*!"

"Ah, Jim!" said Mrs Thorogood, laughing, as she placed a huge plate of crumpets on the table, "it's only when a thing is *right* we are to do it with our *might*. Pulling the cat's tail is wrong.

"'When a thing's wrong,
Let it alone.
When a thing's right,
Do it with might.'

"Come now, supper's ready."

"Capital poetry, Old Moll," shouted the blacksmith, as he drew in his chair, "but not quite so good as the supper. Now, then—silence."

A blessing was asked with clasped hands and shut eyes. Then there was a sudden opening of the eyes and a tendency in little hands to grasp at the crumpets, buttered-toast, bacon, and beans, but good training told. Self-restraint was obvious in every trembling fist and glancing eye. Only curly-haired little Jim found the smell too much for him. He was about to risk reputation and everything, when a glance from his father quelled the rebellious spirit.

"Come, Jim, fair-play. Let it go right round, like the sun,—beginning wi' mother."

Then silence reigned for a time—a profound silence—while upwards of two hundred teeth went to work. Ere long most of the children were buttered to the eyes, and their rosy cheeks glistened like ripe apples. Soon the blacksmith drew a long breath and paused. Looking round with a benign smile he asked little Jim how he got along.

"Fust rate," said Jim.

"How I wish," said Dick, with a sad look at the toast, "that we might go on eatin' for ever."

"Is it right, daddy," asked Tom, during a pause, "to *eat* with all our might?"

"Certainly, my boy, till you've had enough. After that it's wrong to eat at all. 'Enough's as good as a feast,' you know. Now, Old Moll, one more cup to wash it all down, and then we'll go in for a confabulation round the fire."

Now, nothing rejoiced the hearts of that family so much as a confabulation round the fire on a winter night, or under the great elm in front of the forge on the village green in summer.

The table was cleared as if by magic, for every member of the family helped. Soon, little Jim was sleeping as sound as a top in his crib, and Mrs Thorogood, with her knitting, joined the others at the fire, by the light of which the blacksmith made a little boat for Harry with a gully knife and a piece of stick.

"It's a stormy night," said Mrs Thorogood, as a violent gust of wind came down the chimney and rattled the window-frames.

"Ah, it was on just such a night that, my dear old father and mother were burnt out of house and home," said the blacksmith; "well do I mind about it, for I was over ten years old at the time. We never found out what it was that set the house alight, but when it had once caught, it fetched way like lightning—the wind was so high. The first thing that woke me was sneezin' wi' the smoke. Then, I'd just opened my eyes when I saw the head of a ladder come crash through the window. It was the fire-escape. Father tried to save mother, but he was lame, and fell down half-choked. I tried to help him, but I was too young. Then a strapping fireman stepped in at the window, as cool as a cucumber, pitched us all into the escape, one after another; and so, through God's mercy, we were saved. I've loved the firemen ever since. They are the boys to show you how to do things well; to do things with might and main, and no fuss, and to submit to discipline without a word."

"Oh, father!" cried Harry with blazing eyes, "I should dearly like to be a fireman, an' go fightin' the flames."

"And Dick?" asked Mrs Thorogood, "wouldn't *you* like to be one, too?"

"No, mother. It's very grand, but I don't like smoke. I'd rather be a lifeboat-man, to fight wi' the storm, and save people from the roarin' waves."

Tom glanced at one of his toy ships, and said he'd like to fight the battles of his country on the sea. Bob looked affectionately at a wooden sword and gun which stood in a corner, and thought he'd prefer to fight *his* battles on the land.

"You're all for fighting, I see," chimed in soft-eyed Molly; "I wonder what little Jim would like to be, if he was awake."

"I know what battles *I* would like to see him fighting," said Mrs Thorogood.

"Why," exclaimed the blacksmith in surprise, "I thought you hated fighting of all kinds?"

"No, not all kinds. I should like to see little Jim fighting the battle of the Prince of Peace."

Of course there was a clamorous questioning as to what that meant, but we must not devote space to this subject. Neither can we afford to follow the history of each member of this family step by step. We will grow them up at once, and tell you what came of all their enthusiastic desires and lofty aspirations in succeeding chapters.

Only thus much will we say in conclusion; when the blacksmith said it was time to be off to bed that night, the children rose *at once*; gave and received a hearty kiss all round, and went off to "turn in," as sailors express it, "with a will." They had learned *obedience*—the most difficult lesson that man has got to learn—the lesson which few learn thoroughly, and which our Lord sets us as a test of our loyalty to Himself, when He says says,– "If ye love Me, keep My commandments."

Chapter Two

It was what sailors call a “dirty night.” When you looked out upon the sea, it seemed as if there were nothing there but horrible darkness. If you went down to the beach, however,—close under the fishing village of Sunland—you found that there was just enough of light to make the darkness visible.

Tremendous waves came rolling madly into the bay, their white crests gleaming against the black sky until they came down like thunder on the sand. The wind roared and whistled over the bay, cutting off the foam-tops of the billows, and hurling them against the neighbouring cliffs. Mingled rain and hail filled the shrieking blast, and horrid uproar seemed to revel everywhere.

“God have mercy on those at sea,” was uttered by many a lip that night. It was a most suitable prayer! Some there were, doubtless, who uttered it with a little shudder as they turned in their beds, but said and did nothing more. Others there were, weak in body perhaps, but strong in spirit, who reflected, with some degree of comfort, that they had given of their gold to help those whose business it is to help the perishing. And there were others who had little gold to give, but who gladly gave their strong, stalwart bodies, and risked their precious lives to save the perishing.

Many of these last were on the beach at Sunland that night, with oilskin coats and caps, cowering in the lee of boats and rocks, or leaning against the furious gale as they tried to gaze out to sea through the blinding sleet and spray.

Among these fishermen were two young men—tall and strong—who seemed to despise shelter, and stood at the very edge of the raging sea. One was a black-bearded man of the Coastguard. The other, as his dress betokened, was a Jack-tar of the Royal Navy.

“There, she shows a light,” said the naval youth, as a flame, like that of a blazing tar-barrel, shot suddenly up against the dark sky and showed the rigging of a wreck, far out in the bay where the war of wind and waves was fiercest.

Scarcely had this light appeared when the Coastguardsman laid his hand on the young sailor’s shoulder and pointed towards the cliffs far away to the left of the bay. There a rocket had cut the heavens with a line of vivid fire. While they gazed, another sprang up into the sky.

“A vessel on the rocks!” said the Coastguardsman, (he had to shout in the other’s ear, so loud was the gale); “my duty lies there. Will you go with me, or stay to see the lifeboat start?”

“I’ll stick by the lifeboat,” shouted the man-of-war’s man, and they parted.

Ah! it was grand to see that lifeboat go into action. She could be easily seen, though the night was so dark, for she was painted pure white and bright blue, with a scarlet strip round her—a “thing of light,” but by no means a light thing! She was so large, and stout, and heavy, that she required a strong carriage on four wheels to transport her from her boat-house to the edge of the sea, which foamed, and hissed, and leaped up at her bow as if to taste the morsel which it hoped soon to swallow.

While the boat was yet on its carriage, her stout coxswain, or captain, clambered in.

“Now then, my jolly volunteers,” he shouted, “jump up, and on wi’ your life-belts.”

At that word our handsome young sailor laid his hands on the edge of the boat and vaulted into her as if he had been made of india-rubber. Ten more men followed his example, and quickly put on their belts.

“Nobody’s allowed to go off without a life-belt,” said the coxswain to the young sailor, “besides, it’s against rules to let you go.”

“How’s that?” asked the youth; “you called for volunteers.”

“Yes, but our volunteer-crew is already made up, so you must jump out. Thank you all the same, my fine fellow.”

The man-of-war’s man was too well disciplined to think of resistance, even for a moment. With a look of disappointment and an active bound, he leaped out upon the sand.

At that moment one of the men raised an oar, which was blown round by a sudden blast, and its end struck another of the crew on the temple, rendering him almost insensible. He had to be put out at once, and another volunteer was called for. Like a flash of light, our youthful seaman again vaulted into the boat. His services were now accepted, and a cork life-belt was given to him, which he quickly put on.

Meanwhile crowds of men, and even some women and boys, stood ready at the launching-ropes. The word was given. There was a strong and a long pull altogether, and the lifeboat sprang into the sea as if it had been alive, with her crew seated and the oars out. A huge wave caught her bow and raised her up almost perpendicular. She seemed as if about to dance a reel upon her rudder. Our man-of-war's man had rode in many a wild sea, but never before had he seen the like of that. Nevertheless, he clung to his seat like a limpet, and pulled at his oar with all his might. The others were more accustomed to that special work. Just as she seemed about to topple over, the boat dropped forward and plunged out to sea. The next wave caught her in the same way, but with less power. Another stroke of the short, stout oars, and they had got fairly off into deep water.

Then did the heart of the young sailor beat wildly, for, besides rejoicing in that fierce struggle with the storm, he knew that his mission was one of mercy as well as danger. But how much more wildly did his heart beat when he reached the wreck, and, by the light of the blazing tar-barrel, beheld about twenty human beings—some of them women and children—clinging to the wreck, which was buried in foaming water by every sea.

One by one they were got into the lifeboat with great difficulty. Then the boat was pushed off and rowed towards the land. What a deep-toned shout there was on shore when her light form was dimly seen coming in on the crest of a great billow! And what a mighty cheer rang out when she drew closer, and the man at the bow-oar stood up and cried, "Thank God, *all* saved!"

Just then a monster wave fell on the stern of the boat and filled it. One little girl was swept overboard and went away with the backward rush of water, as the boat was hauled out of danger. Every one saw this, and a terrible cry went up, but only one man moved. Our young sailor sprang after the child. He knew that it was almost certain death to enter that surf without a rope, but a spirit of self-sacrifice—founded on the great example of Jesus—urged him on. He had no time to think—only to act. He caught the child and was dragged along with her into the wild sea. At that moment another Coastguardsman, who chanced to be a friend of the man-of-war's man, came upon the scene. Seeing what had occurred, he seized the end of a rope which some men had just brought down, tied it round his waist, dashed into the sea, caught the sailor and the girl in the wide grasp of his strong arms—and then all three were hauled to the land in safety.

The poor child was nearly insensible, and had to be carried to a neighbouring cottage; and the young sailor staggered so from exhaustion that his friend and another man were obliged to support him as he went.

"Who is he?" inquired one of the fisherwomen, as she followed behind.

The Coastguardsman looked over his shoulder with a proud glance in his sparkling eye, and said aloud, "His name is Richard Thorogood."

A statement which was received with three loud and ringing cheers.

Chapter Three

But what of the wreck under the Sunland cliffs, which had sent up rocket-signals of distress on that same dismal night?

When our Coastguardsman with the black beard reached the scene, he found, as he had expected, that his comrades of the Coastguard had not been idle. They had brought down the famous rocket apparatus, with which so many lives are saved every year on our stormy shores.

The wreck was in a very different position from that in the bay. Instead of being far away from shore, among rolling billows that raged over the flat sands, this vessel, a brig, lay hard and fast among the rocks, not a hundred yards from the foot of the cliffs. Against these frowning cliffs the wild waves thundered as if they wished to beat them down. Failing in that, they fell back and seemed to go mad with disappointment; leaping, hissing, and whirling among the rocks on which the brig had been cast. The brig was so near, that the men on shore could see the forms of her crew as they clung to the rigging, frantically waving their arms and sending up shrieks of despair and loud cries for help. Truly there was urgent need for help, for the sea broke over the vessel so furiously that it was evident she must soon go to pieces.

There was only one little spot of partial shelter at the foot of the cliffs where man could stand on that fearful night. Here the men of the Coastguard had set up the rocket apparatus. The rocket was in position, and about to be fired, when our black-bearded Coastguardsman arrived. The light was applied. Suddenly the group of spray-washed men, and a few pale-faced spectators who had ventured to descend, and part of the overhanging cliffs, burst into intense light as the great rocket went out to sea with a wild roar. It was like a horrid fiery serpent, and carried a line tied to its tail! It plunged into the waves, and all was dark again, but there was no cheer from the wreck. The aim had not been good, and the rocket-line had missed its mark.

“Fetch another! look alive!” shouted our black-bearded friend, as he seized, set up, and aimed a second rocket.

Again the light burst forth, and the rocket sprang out in the teeth of the gale. It fell beyond the brig, and the line caught in the rigging! The wrecked crew seemed to understand what was required of them, for they immediately began to haul on the rocket-line. To the shore-end of it was fastened, by the men on the rocks, a block or pulley with a double or endless line, called a “whip,” through it. When the men in the brig had hauled this block on board they fastened it to the stump of the main mast. Then the rescuers on shore tied a thick cable or hawser to their double line and ran it out to the wreck, but when this thick rope reached the crew, they did not seem to know what to do with it, for it was not hauled upon, but continued to hang loose.

“They must be foreigners, and don’t know what to do next,” said one.

“P’rhaps they’ve got too cold to work it,” said another. “I wish we had a little more light to see what they’re about.”

“We can’t afford to wait,” cried our friend Blackbeard, quickly throwing off his upper garments; “run me out, lads, on the whip. There won’t be much risk if you’re quick.”

“Risk!” exclaimed one of his comrades; “it will be certain death!”

But the daring Coastguardsman had already seized the thin line and plunged into the boiling surf.

His anxious comrades knew that delay would only make death more certain, so they hauled on the endless line as quickly as they could. Of course, being rove through the block before mentioned, the other half of it went out to the wreck with the gallant rescuer holding on. And what an awful swim that was! The line pulled him out, indeed, but it could not buoy him up. Neither could it save him from the jagged rocks that rose out of the sea every now and then, like black teeth which were quickly re-swallowed by each crashing wave. It was more like a dive than a swim, for the seething

foam burst over him continually; but every time he rose above the surface to gasp for breath, he sent up a great shout to God for strength to enable him to save the perishing! Those loud prayers were drowned by the roaring tempest, but, though unheard by man, they did not fail to enter the ears of Him who rules in earth and Heaven.

Once the hero was thrown headlong on a rock, and so severely bruised that he lost hold of the rope, and when swept off again was left foundering in the foam. His comrades could barely see that something had happened to him, and a loud cry of consternation arose when they felt the line run light and slack. But our hero caught it again, and the cry was changed to a cheer as they ran him out to the vessel's side.

He was soon on board, and saw at a glance what was the matter. The crew of the brig, being benumbed by long exposure, had not strength to tie the heavy cable round the mast. This the Coastguardsman did for them at once, and, as he did so, observed that there were two little girls among the crew. Then he gave a well-understood signal with a ship's lantern to the men on shore, who fastened a slung lifebuoy to their whip line, hung it by a block to the thick cable, and ran it quickly out to the wreck.

There was no time to lose now. Our hero seized the two little girls and put them into the bag which hung from the circular lifebuoy.

"Take care of my darlings," gasped the captain of the brig, who clung to the ship's side almost quite exhausted.

"Come, get into the buoy, and go ashore with 'em yourself," cried our hero.

"No. The three of us would be too heavy; send the steward. He's a light man and brave," replied the captain.

The steward was ordered to jump on the buoy and cling to it, so as to guard the little ones and prevent their being thrown out.

A signal having been again given with the lantern, the lifebuoy was drawn swiftly to land. It was a terrible passage, for the brig had begun to roll on her rocky bed, and at every roll the hawser and the lifebuoy dipped into the sea, or were jerked violently out of it, while the risk of being let drop on the black rocks that came grinning to the surface was very great.

But all went well. The three were received on the rocks with cheers, and conveyed up the cliffs to the Coastguard-house above, where warm welcome and shelter awaited them. The cheers were not heard by those in the wreck, but the re-appearance of the lifebuoy proved that the children had been saved, and a deep "Thanks be to God!" burst from their father's lips.

Still the captain refused to go, when urged. "No," he said, "let the men go first."

So, one by one, the men were safely hauled on shore.

"Now, captain, it's your turn at last," said our hero, approaching him.

He still hesitated. Then the stout Coastguardsman absolutely lifted him into the lifebuoy.

"No time for ceremony," he said, with a smile, giving the signal with his lantern, "the brig's going fast. Tell 'em to look sharp on shore, for I'm gettin' used up with all this work."

Away went the captain, and in a few minutes back came the lifebuoy. Not a moment too soon. Blackbeard sprang in as the mizzen-mast snapped with a report like a cannon, and went over the side. The next wave broke up the wreck itself. Before the lifebuoy had gained the shore it was plunged into the sea, out of which it no longer rose, the support of the wreck being gone. The men on shore now hauled on the rope with desperate energy, for a few minutes more would be sure to settle the question of life or death. Through the surging breakers and over the rugged rocks the lifebuoy was dragged, and a shout of relief arose when the gallant Coastguardsman was seen clinging to it. But he was insensible, and it was with difficulty that they loosened the grip of his powerful hands.

Then they bore him up the cliffs and laid him in his own bed, and looked anxiously upon his deadly white face as they covered him with blankets, applied hot bottles to his feet, and chafed his cold, stiff limbs.

At last there came a fluttering sigh, and the eyelids gently opened.

"Where am I?" he asked faintly.

A young man having the appearance of a clergyman, laid his hand gently on his shoulder.

"All right, Tom!" he said; "through the goodness of the Lord you're saved, and fourteen souls along with you."

"Thank God!" said Tom Thorogood fervently, and, as he said so, the tide of life once more coursed strongly through his veins, and brought back the colour to his manly face.

Chapter Four

The great city was sound asleep. It was the deadest hour of the night, if we may apply that term to three o'clock in the morning, the hour at which most people have sought and found their pillows. Late revellers had ceased to shout and sing, early risers had yet a good hour of rest before them, if not more. Of course there were many wakeful sick folk—ah! how many in that mighty hive called London! But these did not disturb the profound quiet that had descended on the city: only a few weak but steady lights in windows here and there told of their existence.

Among the sleepless, on that calm dark night, there was one man to whom we draw attention. His bronzed cheeks and tall muscular frame told that he was not one of the wakeful sick, neither was he a sick-nurse, to judge from things around him. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped, gazing into the fire and meditating—perhaps building castles in the flames. His eyebrows were very bushy and his looks stern, but there was a play of gentle, kindly feeling round his mouth. He was one of a gallant band of picked men whose duty it is to do battle with the flames, a member of the London Fire-brigade. Two other men like himself lay on two little iron beds sound asleep with their clothes on. There was this difference between them, however, that the wakeful man wore brass epaulettes on his shoulders. Brass helmets and axes hung round the room. A row of boots hung in a rack, a little telegraph instrument stood on a table near a map of London, and a small but sociable clock ticked on the wall.

That clock had quite a lively, cheerful tick. It seemed to talk to the fireman with the bushy brows until he smiled and looked at it.

"Tic—tic—tic!" said the man, "how low and gentle your voice seems to-night. Everything is so still and quiet, that you appear to be only whispering the flight of time."

"Tic—tic—tic," replied the clock.

But the fireman heard no more, for just then a faint, far-distant sound broke upon his ear. It drew near, like a rushing wind. Then like the noise of hurrying feet. The man rose and nudged one of the sleepers, who sat up and listened, after which he got up quickly, reached down his helmet, and awoke his companion, while the first fireman went to the station door. Some one ran against it with fearful violence as he laid his hand on the lock, and the alarm-bell rang a tremendous peal as he threw it open.

"Fire!" yelled a man who seemed all eyes and hair.

"Just so; where is it?" replied the fireman, calmly glancing at the clock.

"Fire!" again yelled the man of eyes and hair, who was for the moment mad with excitement.

"You've said that twice; where *is* it?" said the fireman, seizing the man by his arm, while the two men, who had been asleep, slipped out like fleet but quiet ghosts. One called up the sleeping firemen, the other got out two horses which stood ready harnessed in their stalls.

The fireman's grasp sobered the madman. A street was named. The outbreak of the fire was instantly telegraphed to head-quarters, and thence to other stations concerned. Round came the horses; in flowed the roused firemen, buttoning their garments as they ran each to his own peg for helmet and axe. At the same time two or three hauled out the steam fire-engine and yoked the horses. Three minutes from the first shout of fire had barely elapsed when the whip cracked, eight or ten helmeted men sprang to their seats, the steeds bounded away and tore along the no longer quiet streets, leaving a trail of sparks behind them.

Haste! haste! was the one idea. One minute saved may be a matter of life or death in cases of fire.

Constant training, stern drill, made every man act like a calm, cool, collected thunderbolt. No fuss, but tremendous energy. No noise, but now and then a deep bass roar when any vehicle chanced to get in the way, and a quiet smile when the danger was passed.

Thus they rushed along, like a fierce fiery monster, until they reached a square in the great city which was bright as with the sun at noon-day. A mansion was blazing from cellars to attics!

Our engine was soon at work. Other engines, whose stations lay nearer to the scene of action, were already pumping volumes of water into the flames. A strong force of police kept back the vast crowd, so as to let the firemen do their work undisturbed. It was deadly work they had to do! Not only were flames spouting from every window, but masses of brickwork and blazing beams were falling in various places, rendering the service full of danger. A London crowd is usually well-behaved, but there are sometimes a few forward geese in it who think they can do things better than other people. One such, a huge man with a foreign accent, became excited, shouted, “Oh! vy don’t you put ’im hout?” broke through the crowd, and rushed among the firemen.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.