ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

JEFF BENSON, OR THE YOUNG COASTGUARDSMAN

Robert Michael Ballantyne

Jeff Benson, or the Young Coastguardsman

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36097197
Jeff Benson, or the Young Coastguardsman:

Содержание

R. M. Ballantyne
Jeff Benson, or the Young Coastguardsman

Chapter One
Our Hero Introduced with some of his Friends

A poor schoolmaster named Benson died, not long ago, in a little town on the south-east coast of England, which shall be called Cranby.

He left an only son, Jeffrey, and an elder brother, Jacob, to mourn his loss. The son mourned for his father profoundly, for he loved him much. The brother mourned him moderately, for he was a close-fisted, hard-hearted, stern man of the law, whose little soul, enclosed in a large body, had not risen to the conception of any nobler aim in life than the acquisition of wealth, or any higher enjoyment than a social evening with men like himself.

The son Jeffrey was a free-and-easy, hearty, good-natured lad, with an overgrown and handsome person, an enthusiastic spirit, a strong will, and a thorough belief in his own ability to achieve

anything to which he chose to set his mind.

Up to the time of his father's death, Jeff's main idea of the desirable in life was—*fun*! Fun in all its more innocent phases seemed to him the sum of what was wanted by man. He had experienced it in all its scholastic forms ever since he was a little boy; and even when, at the mature age of fifteen, he was promoted to the rank of usher in his father's school, his chief source of solace and relaxation was the old play-ground, where he naturally reigned supreme, being the best runner, rower, wrestler, jumper, gymnast, and, generally, the best fellow in the school.

He had never known a mother's love, and his father's death was the first blow that helped to shatter his early notions of felicity. The cloud that overshadowed him at that time was very dark, and he received no sympathy worth mentioning from his only relative, the solicitor.

"Well, Jeff, what d'you think of doing?" asked that austere relative, two days after the funeral. "Of course at your age you can't carry on the school alone."

"Of course not," answered the boy, with a suppressed sob.

"What say you to entering my office and becoming a lawyer, Jeff?"

"Thanks, uncle, I'd rather not."

"What will you do, then?" demanded the uncle, somewhat offended at this flat rejection of his proposal.

The lad thought for a moment, and then said quietly but decidedly, "I'll go to sea."

"Go to the world's end if you like," returned the uncle, who was proud and touchy, and hated the sea; "but don't ask me to help you."

"Thank you, uncle," replied the lad, who was as proud as himself, though not touchy, and had a strong affection for the sea; "having no particular business at the world's end just now, I'll put off my visit to a more convenient season."

They parted, and we need scarcely add that the brief intercourse of uncle and nephew which had thus suddenly begun as suddenly ceased.

It is not usually difficult for a strong, active lad, with merry black eyes and cheery manners, to obtain employment. At least Jeffrey Benson did not find it so. A few miles from his native town there was a seaport. Thither he repaired, and looked about him. In the harbour lay a small vessel which looked like a yacht, it was so trim and clean. On the quay near to it stood a seafaring man with an amiable expression of countenance.

"Is that your schooner?" asked Jeff of this man.

"Yes, it is."

"D'you want a hand?"

"No, I don't."

Jeff turned on his heel, and was walking away, when the seafaring man recalled him.

"Have 'ee ever bin to sea, lad?" he asked.

"No, never."

"D'ye know anything about ships?"

"Next to nothing."

"D'ye think you could do anything, now, aboard of a ship?"

"Perhaps."

"Come along, then, wi' me to the office, an' I'll see to this."

Thus was Jeff introduced to the skipper of the coasting vessel in which he spent the succeeding six years of his life. At the end of that time his schooner was totally wrecked in a gale that sent more than two hundred vessels on the rocks of the British Isles. The skipper was washed overboard and drowned, but Jeff was saved along with the rest of the crew, by means of the rocket apparatus.

By that time our hero had become a tall, powerful man, with a curly black beard and moustache. Through the influence of a friend he was offered a situation in the coastguard; accepted it, and, to his great satisfaction, was stationed in the neighbourhood of Cranby, his native town.

Now, near to that town Jeff had a confidante, into whose sympathetic bosom he had poured his joys and sorrows from the days of little boyhood. Of course this confidante was a woman —a thin, little, elderly creature, with bright blue eyes, and grey hair that had once been golden, who had a sort of tremble in her voice, and whose frame was so light that the fishermen were wont to say of her that if she was to show her nose outside when it was blowing only half a gale she'd be blowed away like a fleck of foam. Nevertheless Miss Millet was a distinct power in Cranby.

Being off duty one fine afternoon, our coastguardsman

walked along the beach in the direction of Cranby, bent on paying a visit to Miss Millet, whom he had not seen for several years. On his way he had to pass a piece of common close to the town, where he found that a number of the townsmen and some of the fishermen from the neighbouring hamlet had assembled to hold high holiday and engage in athletic exercises. The memory of school-days came strong upon him as he watched the sport, and he longed to join, but was modest enough to feel that his offering to do so in connection with games which seemed to have been already organised might be an intrusion.

Two men were wrestling when he joined the circle of spectators—one was a fisherman, the other a huge blacksmith of the town. They were well matched; for, although the fisherman was shorter than the blacksmith, he was an unusually powerful man.

Great was the excitement as the two herculean men strove for the mastery, and loud was the cheer when at last the blacksmith prevailed and threw his adversary.

But the enthusiasm was somewhat damped by the boastful manner in which the victor behaved; for it is not easy to sing the praises of a man whose looks and words show that he greatly overrates himself.

"You don't need to look so cocky, Rodger," cried a cynical voice in the crowd. "There be lots o' men as could throw thee, though they ben't here just now."

Rodger turned sharply round, intending to give an angry

defiance to the speaker; but seeing that it was only Reuben Drew, a white-haired old shoemaker of small stature, he burst into a sarcastic laugh.

"Well, I don't deny," he said, "that there may be many men as could throw me, but I defy any of 'ee now present to do it."

This was an opening for Jeff Benson, who was not slow to avail himself of it. Stepping into the ring he threw off his coat.

"Come along, Rodger," he said, with a good-humoured look; "you'll have to make good your words."

Of course our hero was received with a cheer of satisfaction; for although Jeff was two inches shorter than his adversary—the latter being six feet two—it could be seen at a glance that he was at least his match in breadth of shoulder and development of muscle. But in truth the young coastguardsman was much more than the blacksmith's match, for at school he had received special training in the art of wrestling from his father, who was a Cornishman, and hard service in the coasting trade had raised his strength of limb to the highest possible point.

"Surely I've seen that young man somewhere," whispered one of the spectators to Reuben.

"So have I," returned the latter. "Don't he look uncommon like the old schoolmaster's son? Hallo!"

And well might Reuben exclaim "hallo!" for Jeff, instead of grasping his opponent round the waist, had suddenly seized him with one hand by the neck, with the other by the leg, and lifting him completely off the ground, had flung him on his back.

The people were too much astonished at first to cheer. They burst into a fit of laughter, which, however, extended into a hearty cheer when Reuben cried out, "It is Jeffrey Benson, as sure as I'm alive," and claimed him as a townsman.

"You're right, Reuben," said Jeff, as he put on his coat, "though I am a good bit changed, no doubt, since I was here last."

"Then the townsman have beaten the seaman after all," exclaimed one who was inclined to triumph.

"Not so," returned Jeff quickly, "for I'm a seaman myself and take sides with the fishermen."

"Well said; give us your hand, mate," cried John Golding, one of the latter, holding out his hand, which our hero grasped warmly, for he had known the man in former years.

"You've done well in credit o' the sea."

"An' better still," said little Reuben, "in doing credit to the land by refusin' to boast."

Nevertheless, though Jeff Benson did not boast, it is but just to say that he *felt* considerable satisfaction in his triumph, and rejoiced in the possession of so powerful a frame, as he continued his walk to Miss Millet's house. It did not occur to him, however, to thank God for his strength of body, because at that time "God was not in all his thoughts."

Miss Millet was a woman of action and projects. Her whole being was absorbed in one idea—that of doing good; but her means were small, very small, for, besides being exceedingly poor, she was in delicate health and getting old. She subsisted on

quite a microscopic annuity; but, instead of trying to increase it, she devoted the whole of her time to labours of love and charity. The labour that suited her health and circumstances best was knitting socks for the poor, because that demanded little thought and set her mind free to form unlimited projects.

The delight which Miss Millet, experienced in meeting with her old friend Jeffrey Benson was displayed in the vivacity of her reception of him and the tremulosity of her little cap.

"It's just like coming home, auntie—may I still venture to call you so?"

Jeff had been wont to sit on a stool at the good lady's feet. He did so now—on the old stool.

"You may call me what you please, Jeff. It was your child-fancy to accord to me that honourable relationship; so you may continue it if you will. How you are grown, too! I could not have known you had I met you—so big, and with that horrible black beard."

"Horrible! Miss Millet?"

"Well, terrible, if you prefer it. It's so bushy and unnatural for one so young."

"That can hardly be, auntie," rejoined the youth, with a smile that sent quite a ripple down the objectionable beard, "because my beard was provided by Nature."

"Well, Jeff," returned the spinster promptly, "were not scissors and razors provided by—no, it was art that provided *them*," she continued with a little smile of confusion; "but they

are provided all the same, and— But we won't pursue that subject, for you men are incorrigible! Now tell me, Jeff, where you have been, and why you didn't come to see me sooner, and why your letters have been so few—though I admit they were long."

We will not inflict on the reader all the conversation that ensued. When Jeff had exhausted his narrative, Miss Millet discovered that it was tea-time; and, while engaged in preparations for the evening meal, she enlarged upon some of her projects, being encouraged thereto by Jeff, whose heart was naturally sympathetic.

"But some of my projects are impossible," she said, with a little sigh. "Some small things, indeed, I have accomplished, with God's blessing; but there are others which are quite beyond me."

"Indeed! Tell me now, auntie, if you had Aladdin's wonderful lamp, what would you ask for?"

"I'd ask for—let me see (the old face became quite thoughtful here)—I'd ask for a library. You see, Cranby is *very* badly off for books, and people cannot easily improve without reading, you know. Then I would ask for a new church, and a school room, and a town-hall where we might have lectures and concerts, and for a whole street of model-houses for the poor, and a gymnasium, and a swimming-bath and—"

"A swimming-bath, auntie!" exclaimed Jeff. "Isn't the sea big enough?"

"Yes, but children won't learn in the sea. They're too fond of

running about the edge, and of romping in the shallow water. Besides, the bath could be used in winter, when the sea is too cold. But I'm praying for all these things. If God sees fit, He will give them. If not, I am content with what He has already given."

A somewhat sceptical smile rested for a moment on the young man's lips. Happily his heavy moustache concealed it, and saved Miss Millet's feelings. But she went on to vindicate the ways of God with man, and to impress upon Jeff the fact that in His good wisdom "ills" or "wells," and things that seem to us only evil, work out gracious ends.

Jeff listened, but said little, and evidently his difficulties were not all removed. Presently, observing that three cups were laid on the table, he asked, "Do you expect company?"

"Yes, my brother the captain is coming to tea. He is about to start for China, and I'm so glad you happen to be here; for I'd like you to know each other, and you're sure to like him."

Jeff did not feel quite so sure on that point, for he had counted on a long *tête-à-tête* with his old friend. He took care, however, to conceal his disappointment, and before he had time to reply, the door opened with a crash.

"What cheer, old girl? what cheer?" resounded in bo'sun's-mate tones through the house, and next moment a rugged sea-captain stood before them.

Chapter Two
A Sea-Captain Relates his Adventures, and Refuses to Draw Morals

Captain Richard Millet, like his sister, was rather eccentric. Unlike her, however, he was large, broad, and powerful. It would have taken considerably more than "half a gale" to blow *him* away. Even a gale and a half might have failed to do that.

"Glad to meet you," he said, extending his solid-looking hand with a frank, hearty air, on being introduced to Jeff. "My sister Molly has often spoken of you. Sorry to hear you've left the sea. Great mistake, young man—great mistake. There's no school like the sea for teaching a man his dependence on his Maker."

"The school is not very successful, if one may judge from the character of most of its pupils," replied the youth.

"Perhaps you misjudge their character," returned the captain, with a look of good-natured severity.

"I'm *sure* he does," cried Miss Millet, with enthusiasm. "Noble-hearted, simple men, who would probably never go wrong at all if it were not for their unsuspecting trustfulness and bad companions! Come, sit down, Dick. Tea is ready."

"Yes, young man," continued Captain Millet "you misjudge 'em. You should not judge of a school by the shouting and mischief of the worst boys, who always flaunt their colours, while

the good ones steer quietly on their course. You'll understand that better when your beard is grey. Youth is fond o' lookin' at the surface, an' so is apt to misjudge the character of men as well as the ways of Providence."

Jeff took the rebuke in good part, readily admitted that youth was prone to err, and slily expressed a hope that in his case coming in contact with age might do him good.

"If you mean that for a shot at me," cried the captain, with a loud guffaw, "you've missed the mark; for I'm only forty-five, an' that isn't age; is it, Molly?"

"Of course not. Why, you're little more than a baby yet," replied Miss Millet who greatly enjoyed even a small joke—indeed, she enjoyed almost everything, more or less, that was not wicked. "But now, Dick, I want you to tell Jeff some of your adventures in foreign parts—especially those that have a moral, you know."

"Why, Molly, that's a hard job—you don't want me to *draw* the moral, do you? I never was good at that, though I've known fellows with that peculiar cast o' brain as could draw a moral out of a marline-spike if they were hard put to it. Seems to me that it's best to let morals draw themselves. For instance, that time when I was wrecked on the South American coast, I came to a shallow river, an' had to wade across, but was too lazy to pull off my boots, 'cause they were long fisherman's boots, right up to the hip an' rather tight; so in I went boots an' all. Just as I was gettin' to the other side, a most awful alligator seized hold o' my

right foot. It's wonderful how easy my boot came off just then! Although I was used to tug, an' shove, and gasp, and pull, at that boot of a night, no sooner did the alligator lay hold on it than my leg came out like a cork out of a bottle, and I was out o' the water and up the bank like a squirrel. Now, Molly, what would you say was the moral that should be drawn from that—Never use an alligator as a boot-jack—eh?"

"I should say, Never wade across a South American river without your boots on," suggested Jeff.

"Well, now, *I* should say, Never wade across a South American river at all," said Miss Millet; "but, brother, that's not what I meant. Before you arrived, Jeff and I had been talking about God's ways with man, and I was trying to show that disasters and what we call misfortunes are not necessarily evil, but are often the means of great blessing. I don't think Jeff quite sees that. I can't explain myself clearly, brother; but you know what I mean."

While the old lady was speaking, the captain had become thoughtful.

"Yes, I know what you mean," he replied, "and I agree with you heartily. Is it not written of our Saviour, 'He hath done all things well?' and is He not unchangeable? Of course it is not to be expected that we shall always see through and understand His ways though we can always trust Him; but sometimes He lifts a corner of the veil and lets us see. Very odd, Molly," continued the captain, extracting a large black pocket-book with some difficulty from a breast-pocket, "very odd that you should

have touched on this question, for I have somethin' to say to you that bears on it. Look here. What's that?"

He handed an oblong piece of paper to his sister, who examined it slowly.

"Why, Dick, it's a cheque for 500 pounds."

"Just so, old girl, an' it's yours."

"Mine!"

"Ay, I might have given it to you when I first came back, but I took a fancy to keep it as a little surprise for our last evenin' together, so that I might leave you with a good taste in your mouth. Now, listen, an' I'll spin you an' Jeff a yarn. But first fill up my cup. I'm fond o' tea—nat'rally, bein' a teetotaler. Up to the brim, Molly; I like a good bucketful. Thankee—now, let me see."

The captain put his hand to his rugged brow, became thoughtful for a few moments, and then resumed.

"Just before startin' on my last voyage to China I ran down to Folkestone to see Rosebud—that's my little daughter, Jeff. Surely you must have seen her when knocking about here?"

"You forget, Captain, I have not been in these parts for six years. Nevertheless, I did see Rosebud some ten or twelve years ago with her nurse in this very room."

"Yes, so you did," chimed in Miss Millet. "She was six at that time, and the dearest little angel I ever saw."

"She was all that and a great deal more," said the enthusiastic father. "It don't become me to have much of an opinion about the angels, but I wouldn't give my Rosebud for the whole lot o'

them, an' all the cherubs throw'd into the bargain. Well, as I was sayin', I ran down to Folkestone to the school where she is, and as we were partin' she made me promise when I got to Hong-Kong to run up the river to see an old schoolmate o' hers that had gone out there with her father. I was to give Clara Rosebud's dear love, and her photograph, and get hers in exchange. I would have done this, of course, for my darlin', anyhow, but I promised all the more readily because I had some business to do with old Nibsworth, the father.

"Well, after I'd got to Hong-Kong an' seen the ship all snug, I thought of runnin' up the river in a small steamer that was ready to start. It so happened that I got a letter that very day from Nibsworth himself, who had heard of my arrival, askin' me to come without delay, as there was a grand chance of doin' a bit of business that might turn in some thousands of pounds. But it would have to be settled next day, or the chance would be lost. You may be sure I didn't waste time after readin' this, but when I got to the river-side, I found that the steamer had started, and there wasn't another till next mornin'."

"*What* a pity!" exclaimed the sympathetic sister and Jeff in the same breath.

"Yes, wasn't it? Of course it wasn't a personal loss, but it was the loss of a splendid out-o'-the-way chance to do a good turn to the owners. It was an ill wind—Jeff, almost a disaster. Hows'ever, I had to grin an' bear it. But I couldn't rest till next day; so I hired a native boat, determined to do my best in the

circumstances, and you may be sure I wasn't in the best of humours, as we went creepin' slowly up that river, when I knew that the hours of opportunity were slippin' away.

"It was not till the evenin' o' the next day that I reached old Nibsworth's house. Just before we rounded the bend of the river that brought it into view, I noticed smoke risin' pretty thick above the trees. Of course I thought nothin' of it till I found that it was the old man's house was a-fire! Didn't we bend to the oars then with a will!

"As we drew near, we found that all the servants and work-people about the place were runnin' here and there, shoutin' and yellin' for ropes and ladders. Most people seem to lose their heads in a fire. Anyhow those people had; for nobody could find a ladder long enough to reach a top window, where I could see that someone was waving his arms for help. The moment we touched the beach, I jumped out o' the boat and ran up to the house. It was blazin' fiercely in the lower rooms, and I soon found that old Nibsworth and his daughter were inside—driven to the attics by the fire and smoke. They soon left the window where I had first seen the arms waving, and threw open another that was further from the fire.

"I saw that the old man was frail. The girl, they told me, was delicate. 'Get straw, hay, branches—anything soft,' I shouted, 'an' pile 'em under the window.'

"'Him's too weak for jump,' gasped a native servant.

"'Do as I bid ye,' said I, with a glare that sent 'em all off double-

quick. Happily I found a rope handy in a storehouse hard by. I made a coil of it. You know a seaman can usually heave a coil of rope pretty well. I made a splendid heave, an' sent it right in at the window. The old man caught it.

"'Make fast to a bed-post,' I roared, 'or a table, or chest o' drawers—anything big.'

"He understood me, I could see, and presently he looked over the window an' shook his head. Then I could see the face of a dark-haired, beautiful girl. Even through the increasing smoke I could tell that she was deadly pale, and drew back with a shudder. By this time a big pile of straw lay under the window. I saw there was no hope of such an old man lettin' himself or his girl down by a rope, so up I went hand over hand. Many a time had I done the sort o' thing for a lark when I was a youngster; but bein' out o' practice, and a good deal heavier than in old days, I found it hard work, I can tell you. Hows'ever, I managed it and got in at the window, an' didn't my heart give a jump when I saw that the old chap had only made the rope fast to a light bedroom chair. If I'd bin a stone heavier, I'd have pulled that chair right over the window!

"'God bless you!' cried the tremblin' old man; 'save my Clara!'

"There was no time for pretty speeches. I made fast the end of the rope to the leg of a table, made a loop on the other end, threw it over the girl, caught her round the waist an' swung her over the window. I was in such a hurry that the rope nearly took the skin off my hands; but I landed her safe on the straw below. The

old man was heavier, and not so easy to manage; but I got him lowered safe, and then, slipping over myself, began to descend. The flames had by that time got headway, and were dartin' like fiery serpents' tongues out o' the windows below. One o' them gave me a wipe in passin', an' cleared eyelashes, eyebrows, and half the hair o' my head away. Another twined round the rope and singed it; so that when I was half-way down, it snapped, and I came to the ground with a thud that damaged my canvas ducks, though they were by no means delicate. Hows'ever, the pile of straw broke the fall, and I was none the worse.

"The gratitude o' that poor old man and his daughter knew no bounds, specially when he found I was the father of his Clara's favourite schoolmate.

"'Now, Captain Millet,' says he at partin', 'nothin' in this world can repay what we owe you. I know it would be insultin' to offer you money for such service, but sometimes men like you like to help a good cause. Will you accept of five hundred pounds for such a purpose?'

"'No sir,' says I, 'I won't! But I've a sister at home who spends all her time in tryin' to do good. If you'll be kind enough to send it to her, she'll consider it a blessed windfall, and will lay it out to the best possible advantage.'

"'Good,' said he, seizin' his pen an' writin' out the cheque. 'Is your sister well off?'

"'She might be better off,' said I.

"'Then pray beg her in my name to accept of a few shares in

an Australian tin-mine which came to me a few days ago. They are not worth much, but I don't want to be troubled with them; indeed, will consider it a favour if she will take them off my hands.'

"The old fellow said this with a laugh—so there you are, Molly, 500 pounds to the credit of your charity account an' I don't know how much tin transferred to your own."

"O brother, how good—how kind!" Miss Millet paused here, and gazed in silence at the cheque, for she had already begun to calculate how far that sum would go towards the library, and the church, and the town-hall, and the model-houses, and the gymnasium, and the swimming-bath.

"And now, young man," said the captain, turning to our coastguardsman, "the missin' of that steamer, at which I growled so much that day, turned out to be a great blessin' after all, although it seemed such a misfortune. For it caused me to arrive just in the nick of time to save two human lives—besides givin' the old girl here somethin' to think about and work upon for the next twelvemonth to come—whereas, if I had arrived the day before, I would have bin sleepin' in the house, and mayhap have bin burnt alive wi' old Nibsworth and his daughter. Seems to me as if that little story had some sort o' bearin' on the subject you was discussin' wi' Molly. But I'm not good at drawin' morals, so I'll leave you to draw it for yourself."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.