R. M. BALLANTYNE

MARTIN RATTLER

MUSAICUM ADVENTURE CLASSICS

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Martin Rattler (Musaicum Adventure Classics)

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CHAPTER ONE.

The Hero and his Only Relative.

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Martin Rattler was a very bad boy. At least his aunt, Mrs Dorothy Grumbit, said so; and certainly she ought to have known, if anybody should, for Martin lived with her, and was, as she herself expressed it, “the bane of her existence; the very torment of her life.” No doubt of it whatever, according to Aunt Dorothy Grumbit’s showing, Martin Rattler was “a remarkably bad boy.”

It is a curious fact, however, that, although most of the people in the village of Ashford seemed to agree with Mrs Grumbit in her opinion of Martin, there were very few of them who did not smile cheerfully on the child when they met him, and say, “Good day, lad!” as heartily as if they thought him the best boy in the place. No one seemed to bear Martin Rattler ill-will, notwithstanding his alleged badness. Men laughed when they said he was a bad boy, as if they did not quite believe their own assertion. The vicar, an old whiteheaded man, with a kind, hearty countenance, said that the child was full of mischief, full of mischief; but he would improve as he grew older, he was quite certain of that. And the vicar was a good judge; for he had five boys of his own, besides three other boys, the sons of a distant relative, who boarded with him; and he had lived forty years in a parish overflowing with boys, and he was particularly fond of boys in general. Not so the doctor, a pursy little man with a terrific frown, who hated boys, especially little ones,

with a very powerful hatred. The doctor said that Martin was a scamp.

And yet Martin had not the appearance of a scamp. He had fat rosy cheeks, a round rosy mouth, a straight delicately-formed nose, a firm massive chin, and a broad forehead. But the latter was seldom visible, owing to the thickly-clustering fair curls that overhung it. When asleep Martin's face was the perfection of gentle innocence. But the instant he opened his dark-brown eyes, a thousand dimples and wrinkles played over his visage, chiefly at the corners of his mouth and round his eyes; as if the spirit of fun and the spirit of mischief had got entire possession of the boy, and were determined to make the most of him. When deeply interested in anything, Martin was as grave and serious as a philosopher.

Aunt Dorothy Grumbit had a turned-up nose,—a very much turned-up nose; so much so, indeed, that it presented a front view of the nostrils! It was an aggravating nose, too, for the old lady's spectacles refused to rest on any part of it except the extreme point. Mrs Grumbit invariably placed them on the right part of her nose, and they as invariably slid down the curved slope until they were brought up by the little hillock at the end. There they condescended to repose in peace.

Mrs Grumbit was mild, and gentle, and little, and thin, and old,—perhaps seventy-five; but no one knew her age for certain, not even herself. She wore an old-fashioned, high-crowned cap, and a gown of bed-curtain chintz, with flowers on it the size of a saucer. It was a curious gown, and very cheap, for Mrs Grumbit was poor. No one knew the extent of her poverty, any more than they did her age; but she herself knew it, and felt it deeply,—never so deeply, perhaps, as when her orphan nephew Martin grew old enough to be put

to school, and she had not wherewithal to send him. But love is quick-witted and resolute. A residence of six years in Germany had taught her to knit stockings at a rate that cannot be described, neither conceived unless seen. She knitted two dozen pairs. The vicar took one dozen, the doctor took the other. The fact soon became known. Shops were not numerous in the village in those days; and the wares they supplied were only second rate. Orders came pouring in, Mrs Grumbit's knitting wires clicked, and her little old hands wagged with incomprehensible rapidity and unflagging regularity,—and Martin Rattler was sent to school.

While occupied with her knitting, she sat in a high-backed chair in a very small deep window, through which the sun streamed nearly the whole day; and out of which there was the most charming imaginable view of the gardens and orchards of the villagers, with a little dancing brook in the midst, and the green fields of the farmers beyond, studded with sheep and cattle and knolls of woodland, and bounded in the far distance by the bright blue sea. It was a lovely scene, such an one as causes the eye to brighten and the heart to melt as we gaze upon it, and think, perchance, of its Creator.

Yes, it was a scene worth looking at; but Mrs Grumbit never looked at it, for the simple reason that she could not have seen it if she had. Half way across her own little parlour was the extent of her natural vision. By the aid of spectacles and a steady concentrated effort, she could see the fire-place at the other end of the room; and the portrait of her deceased husband, who had been a sea-captain; and the white kitten that usually sat on the rug before the fire. To be sure, she saw them very indistinctly. The picture was a hazy blue patch, which was the captain's coat; with a white

patch down the middle of it, which was his waistcoat; and a yellow ball on the top of it, which was his head. It was rather an indistinct and generalised view, no doubt; but she *saw* it, and that was a great comfort.

CHAPTER TWO.

In Disgrace.

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Fire was the cause of Martin’s getting into disgrace at school for the first time; and this is how it happened.

“Go and poke the fire, Martin Rattler,” said the schoolmaster, “and put on a bit of coal, and see that you don’t send the sparks flying about the floor.”

Martin sprang with alacrity to obey; for he was standing up with the class at the time, and was glad of the temporary relaxation. He stirred the fire with great care, and put on several pieces of coal very slowly, and rearranged them two or three times; after which he stirred the fire a little more, and examined it carefully to see that it was all right; but he did not seem quite satisfied, and was proceeding to re-adjust the coals when Bob Croaker, one of the big boys, who was a bullying, ill-tempered fellow, and had a spite against Martin, called out—

“Please, sir, Rattler’s playin’ at the fire.”

“Come back to your place, sir!” cried the master, sternly.

Martin returned in haste, and resumed his position in the class. As he did so he observed that his fore-finger was covered with soot. Immediately a smile of glee overspread his features; and, while the master was busy with one of the boys, he drew his black finger gently down the forehead and nose of the boy next to him.

“What part of the earth was peopled by the descendants of Adam?” cried the master, pointing to the dux.

“Shem!” shrieked a small boy near the foot of the class.

“Silence!” thundered the master, with a frown that caused the small boy to quake down to the points of his toes.

“Asia!” answered dux.

“Next?”

“Turkey!”

“Next, next, next? Hallo! John Ward,” cried the master, starting up in anger from his seat, “what do you mean by that, sir?”

“What, sir?” said John Ward, tremulously, while a suppressed titter ran round the class.

“Your face, sir! Who blacked your face, eh?”

“I—I—don’t know,” said the boy, drawing his sleeve across his face, which had the effect of covering it with sooty streaks.

An uncontrollable shout of laughter burst from the whole school, which was instantly followed by a silence so awful and profound that a pin might have been heard to fall.

“Martin Rattler, you did that! I know you did,—I see the marks on your fingers. Come here, sir! Now tell me; did you do it?”

Martin Rattler never told falsehoods. His old aunt had laboured to impress upon him from infancy that to lie was to commit a sin which is abhorred by God and scorned by man; and her teaching had not been in vain. The child would have suffered any punishment rather than have told a deliberate lie. He looked straight in the master’s face and said, “Yes, sir, I did it.”

“Very well, go to your seat, and remain in school during the play-hour.”

With a heavy heart Martin obeyed; and soon after the school was dismissed.

“I say, Rattler,” whispered Bob Croaker as he passed, “I’m going to teach your white kitten to swim just now. Won’t you come and see it?”

The malicious laugh with which the boy accompanied this remark convinced Martin that he intended to put his threat in execution. For a moment he thought of rushing out after him to protect his pet kitten; but a glance at the stern brow of the master, as he sat at his desk reading, restrained him; so, crushing down his feelings of mingled fear and anger, he endeavoured to while away the time by watching the boys as they played in the fields before the windows of the school.

CHAPTER THREE.

The Great Fight.

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“Martin!” said the schoolmaster, in a severe tone, looking up from the book with which he was engaged, “don’t look out at the window, sir; turn your back to it.”

“Please, sir, I can’t help it,” replied the boy, trembling with eagerness as he stared across the fields.

“Turn your back on it, I say!” reiterated the master in a loud tone, at the same time striking the desk violently with his cane.

“Oh, sir, let me out! There’s Bob Croaker with my kitten. He’s going to drown it. I know he is; he said he would; and if he does aunty will die, for she loves it next to me; and I must save it, and—and, if you *don’t* let me out—you’ll be a murderer!”

At this concluding burst, Martin sprang forward and stood before his master with clenched fists and a face blazing with excitement. The schoolmaster’s gaze of astonishment gradually gave place to a dark frown strangely mingled with a smile, and, when the boy concluded, he said quietly—

“You may go.”

No second bidding was needed. The door flew open with a bang; and the gravel of the play-ground, spurned right and left, dashed against the window panes as Martin flew across it. The paling that fenced it off from the fields beyond was low, but too high for a jump. Never a boy in all the school had crossed that paling at a spring, without laying his hands upon it; but Martin did. We do not mean to say that he did

anything superhuman; but he rushed at it like a charge of cavalry, sprang from the ground like a deer, kicked away the top bar, tumbled completely over, landed on his head, and rolled down the slope on the other side as fast as he could have run down,—perhaps faster.

It would have required sharper eyes than yours or mine to have observed how Martin got on his legs again, but he did it in a twinkling, and was half across the field almost before you could wink, and panting on the heels of Bob Croaker. Bob saw him coming and instantly started off at a hard run, followed by the whole school. A few minutes brought them to the banks of the stream, where Bob Croaker halted, and, turning round, held the white kitten up by the nape of the neck.

“O spare it! spare it, Bob!—don’t do it—please don’t, don’t do it!” gasped Martin, as he strove in vain to run faster.

“There you go!” shouted Bob, with a coarse laugh, sending the kitten high into the air, whence it fell with a loud splash into the water.

It was a dreadful shock to feline nerves, no doubt, but that white kitten was no ordinary animal. Its little heart beat bravely when it rose to the surface, and, before its young master came up, it had regained the bank. But, alas! what a change! It went into the stream a fat, round, comfortable ball of eider-down. It came out a scraggy blotch of white paint, with its black eyes glaring like two great glass beads! No sooner did it crawl out of the water than Bob Croaker seized it, and whirled it round his head, amid suppressed cries of “Shame!” intending to throw it in again; but at that instant Martin Rattler seized Bob by the collar of his coat with both hands, and, letting himself drop suddenly,

dragged the cruel boy to the ground, while the kitten crept humbly away and hid itself in a thick tuft of grass.

A moment sufficed to enable Bob Croaker, who was nearly twice Martin's weight, to free himself from the grasp of his panting antagonist, whom he threw on his back, and doubled his fist, intending to strike Martin on the face; but a general rush of the boys prevented this.

"Shame, shame, fair-play!" cried several; "don't hit him when he's down!"

"Then let him rise up and come on!" cried Bob, fiercely, as he sprang up and released Martin.

"Ay, that's fair. Now then, Martin, remember the kitten!"

"Strike men of your own size!" cried several of the bigger boys, as they interposed to prevent Martin from rushing into the unequal contest.

"So I will," cried Bob Croaker, glaring round with passion. "Come on any of you that likes. I don't care a button for the biggest of you."

No one accepted this challenge, for Bob was the oldest and the strongest boy in the school, although, as is usually the case with bullies, by no means the bravest.

Seeing that no one intended to fight with him, and that a crowd of boys strove to hold Martin Rattler back, while they assured him that he had not the smallest chance in the world, Bob turned towards the kitten, which was quietly and busily employed in licking itself dry and said, "Now Martin, you coward, I'll give it another swim for your impudence."

"Stop, stop!" cried Martin, earnestly. "Bob Croaker, I would rather do anything than fight. I would give you everything I have to save my kitten; but if you won't spare it unless I fight, I'll do it. If you throw it in before you fight me, you're the greatest coward that ever walked. Just give me

five minutes to breathe and a drink of water, and I'll fight you as long as I can stand."

Bob looked at his little foe in surprise. "Well, that's fair. I'm you're man; but if you don't lick me I'll drown the kitten, that's all." Having said this, he quietly divested himself of his jacket and neckcloth, while several boys assisted Martin to do the same, and brought him a draught of water in the crown of one of their caps. In five minutes all was ready, and the two boys stood face to face and foot to foot, with their fists doubled and revolving, and a ring of boys around them.

Just at this critical moment the kitten, having found the process of licking itself dry more fatiguing than it had expected, gave vent to a faint mew of distress. It was all that was wanting to set Martin's indignant heart into a blaze of inexpressible fury. Bob Croaker's visage instantly received a shower of sharp, stinging blows, that had the double effect of taking that youth by surprise and throwing him down upon the green sward. But Martin could not hope to do this a second time. Bob now knew the vigour of his assailant, and braced himself warily to the combat, commencing operations by giving Martin a tremendous blow on the point of his nose, and another on the chest. These had the effect of tempering Martin's rage with a salutary degree of caution, and of eliciting from the spectators sundry cries of warning on the one hand, and admiration on the other, while the young champions revolved warily round each other, and panted vehemently.

The battle that was fought that day was one of a thousand. It created as great a sensation in the village school as did the battle of Waterloo in England. It was a notable fight; such as had not taken place within the memory of the oldest boy in the village, and from which, in

after years, events of juvenile history were dated,—especially pugilistic events, of which, when a good one came off it used to be said that, “such a battle had not taken place since the year of the Great Fight.” Bob Croaker was a noted fighter, Martin Rattler was, up to this date, an untried hero. Although fond of rough play and boisterous mischief, he had an unconquerable aversion to *earnest* fighting, and very rarely indeed returned home with a black eye,—much to the satisfaction of Aunt Dorothy Grumbit, who objected to all fighting from principle, and frequently asserted, in gentle tones, that there should be no soldiers or sailors (fighting sailors, she meant) at all, but that people ought all to settle everything the best way they could without fighting, and live peaceably with one another, as the Bible told them to do. They would be far happier and better off, she was sure of that; and if everybody was of her way of thinking, there would be neither swords, nor guns, nor pistols, nor squibs, nor anything else at all! Dear old lady. It would indeed be a blessing if her principles could be carried out in this warring and jarring world. But as this is rather difficult, what we ought to be careful about is, that we never fight except in a good cause and with a clear conscience.

It was well for Martin Rattler, on that great day, that the formation of the ground favoured him. The spot on which the fight took place was uneven, and covered with little hillocks and hollows, over which Bob Croaker stumbled, and into which he fell,—being a clumsy boy on his legs—and did himself considerable damage; while Martin, who was firmly knit and active as a kitten, scarcely ever fell, or, if he did, sprang up again like an India-rubber ball. Fair-play was embedded deep in the centre of Martin’s heart, so that he scorned to hit his adversary when he was down or in the act

of rising; but the thought of the fate that awaited the white kitten if he were conquered, acted like lightning in his veins, and scarcely had Bob time to double his fists after a fall, when he was knocked back again into the hollow, out of which he had risen. There were no *rounds* in this fight; no pausing to recover breath. Martin's anger rose with every blow, whether given or received; and although he was knocked down flat four or five times, he rose again, and without a second's delay rushed headlong at his enemy. Feeling that he was too little and light to make much impression on Bob Croaker by means of mere blows, he endeavoured as much as possible to throw his weight against him at each assault; but Bob stood his ground well, and after a time seemed even to be recovering strength a little.

Suddenly he made a rush at Martin, and, dealing him a successful blow on the forehead, knocked him down; at the same time he himself tripped over a molehill and fell upon his face. Both were on their legs in an instant. Martin grew desperate. The white kitten swimming for its life seemed to rise before him, and new energy was infused into his frame. He retreated a step or two, and then darted forward like an arrow from a bow. Uttering a loud cry, he sprang completely in the air and plunged—head and fists together, as if he were taking a dive—into Bob Croaker's bosom! The effect was tremendous. Bob went down like a shock of grain before the sickle; and having, in their prolonged movements, approached close to the brink of the stream, both he and Martin went with a sounding splash into the deep pool and disappeared. It was but for a moment, however. Martin's head emerged first, with eyes and mouth distended to the utmost. Instantly, on finding bottom, he turned to deal his opponent another blow; but it was not needed. When Bob

Croaker’s head rose to the surface there was no motion in the features, and the eyes were closed. The intended blow was changed into a friendly grasp; and, exerting himself to the utmost, Martin dragged his insensible school fellow to the bank, where, in a few minutes, he recovered sufficiently to declare in a sulky tone that he would fight no more!

“Bob Croaker,” said Martin, holding out his hand, “I’m sorry we’ve had to fight. I wouldn’t have done it, but to save my kitten. You compelled me to do it, you know that. Come, let’s be friends again.”

Bob made no reply, but slowly and with some difficulty put on his vest and jacket.

“I’m sure,” continued Martin, “there’s no reason in bearing me ill-will. I’ve done nothing unfair, and I’m very sorry we’ve had to fight. Won’t you shake hands?”

Bob was silent.

“Come, some, Bob!” cried several of the bigger boys, “don’t be sulky, man; shake hands and be friends. Martin has licked you this time, and you’ll lick him next time, no doubt, and that’s all about it.”

“Arrah, then, ye’re out there, intirely. Bob Croaker’ll niver lick Martin Rattler though he wos to live to the age of the great M’Thuselah!” said a deep-toned voice close to the spot where the fight had taken place.

All eyes were instantly turned in the direction whence it proceeded, and the boys now became aware, for the first time, that the combat had been witnessed by a sailor, who, with a smile of approval beaming on his good-humoured countenance, sat under the shade of a neighbouring tree smoking a pipe of that excessive shortness and blackness that seems to be peculiarly beloved by Irishmen in the humbler ranks of life. The man was very, tall and broad-

shouldered, and carried himself with a free-and-easy swagger, as he rose and approached the group of boys.

“He’ll niver bate ye, Martin, avic, as long as there’s two timbers of ye houldin’ togither.” The seaman patted Martin on the head as he spoke; and, turning to Bob Croaker, continued:

“Ye ought to be proud, ye spalpeen, o’ bein’ wopped by sich a young hero as this. Come here and shake hands with him: d’ye hear? Troth an’ it’s besmearin’ ye with too much honour that same. There, that’ll do. Don’t say ye’re sorry now, for it’s lies ye’d be tellin’ if ye did. Come along, Martin, an I’ll convarse with ye as ye go home. Ye’ll be a man yet, as sure as my name is Barney O’Flannagan.”

Martin took the white kitten in his arms and thrust its wet little body into his equally wet bosom, where the warmth began soon to exercise a soothing influence on the kitten’s depressed spirits, so that, ere long, it began to purr. He then walked with the sailor towards the village, with his face black and blue, and swelled, and covered with blood, while Bob Croaker and his companions returned to the school.

The distance to Martin’s residence was not great, but it was sufficient to enable the voluble Irishman to recount a series of the most wonderful adventures and stories of foreign lands; that set Martin’s heart on fire with desire to go to sea; a desire which was by no means new to him, and which recurred violently every time he paid a visit to the small sea-port of Bilton, which lay about five miles to the southward of his native village. Moreover, Barney suggested that it was time Martin should be doing for himself (he was now ten years old), and said that if he would join his ship, he could get him a berth, for he was much in want of an active lad to help him with the coppers. But Martin Rattler sighed deeply, and said that, although his heart was set upon going

to sea, he did not see how it was to be managed, for his aunt would not let him go.

Before they separated, however, it was arranged that Martin should pay the sailor’s ship a visit, when he would hear a good deal more about foreign lands; and that, in the meantime, he should make another attempt to induce Aunt Dorothy Grumbit to give her consent to his going to sea.

CHAPTER FOUR.

A Lesson to all Stocking-Knitters—
Martin’s Prospects begin to open up.

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In the small sea-port of Bilton, before mentioned, there dwelt an old and wealthy merchant and ship-owner, who devoted a small portion of his time to business, and a very large portion of it to what is usually termed “doing good.” This old gentleman was short, and stout, and rosy, and bald, and active, and sharp as a needle.

In the short time that Mr Arthur Jollyboy devoted to business, he accomplished as much as most men do in the course of a long day. There was not a benevolent society in the town, of which Arthur Jollyboy, Esquire, of the Old Hulk (as he styled his cottage), was not a member, director, secretary, and treasurer, all in one, and all at once! If it had been possible for man be ubiquitous, Mr Jollyboy would have been so naturally; or, if not naturally, he would have made himself so by force of will. Yet he made no talk about it. His step was quiet, though quick; and his voice was gentle, though rapid; and he was chiefly famous for *talking* little and *doing* much.

Some time after the opening of our tale, Mr Jollyboy had received information of Mrs Grumbit’s stocking movement. That same afternoon he put on his broad-brimmed white hat and, walking out to the village in which she lived, called upon the vicar, who was a particular and intimate friend of his. Having ascertained from the vicar that Mrs Grumbit