

THE PARTNERS

By Norman Duncan



"Jacky," He Said,
"Us'll Be Partners—
You an' Me"

RUDDY COVE called Eli Zitt a "hard" man. In Newfoundland that means "hardy"—not "bad." Eli was gruff-voiced, lowering-eyed, unkempt, big; he could swim with the dogs, out-dare all the reckless spirits of the Cove with the punt in a gale, bare his broad breast to the winter winds, travel the ice wet or dry, shoulder a barrel of flour; he was a sturdy, fearless giant, was Eli Zitt of Ruddy Cove. And for this the Cove properly called him a "hard" man.

When Josiah Bunger, his partner, put out to sea and never came back—an off-shore gale had the guilt of that deed—Eli scowled more than ever and said a deal less.

"He'll be feelin' bad about Josiah," said the Cove. Which may have been true. However, Eli took care of Josiah's widow and son. The Cove laughed with delight to observe his attachment to the lad. The big fellow seemed to be unable to pass the child without patting him on the back; and sometimes, so exuberant was his affection, the pats were of such a character that Jacky lost his breath. Whereupon, Eli would chuckle the harder, mutter odd endearments, and stride off on his way.

"He'll be likin' that lad pretty well," said the Cove. "Nar a doubt, they'll be partners."

And it came to pass, as the Cove surmised; but much sooner than the Cove expected. Josiah Bunger's widow died when Jacky was eleven years old. When the little gathering at the graveyard in the shelter of Great Hill dispersed, Eli took the lad out in the punt—far out to the quiet fishing grounds, where they could be alone. It was a glowing evening—red and gold in the western sky—the sea was heaving gently, and the face of the waters was unruffled.

"Jacky, b'y!" Eli whispered. "Jacky, lad! Does you hear me? Don't cry no more!"

"Aye, Eli!" sobbed Jacky. "I'll cry no more." But he kept on crying, just the same; for he could not stop; and Eli looked away quickly to the glowing sunset clouds.

"Jacky," he said, turning at last to the lad, "us'll be partners—you an' me."

Jacky sobbed harder than ever.

"Wont' us, lad?"

Eli laid his great hand on Jacky's shoulder. Then Jacky took his fists out of his eyes and looked up into Eli's compassionate face. "Aye, Eli," he said, "us'll be partners—jus' you an' me."

From then on they were partners; and Jacky Bunger was known in the Cove as the foster-son of Eli Zitt. They lived together in Eli's cottage by the tickle cove, where Eli had lived alone since many years before his mother had left him to face the world for himself. The salmon net, the herring seine, the punt, the flake, the stage—these they held in common; and they went to the grounds together, where they fished the long days through, good friends, good

partners. The Cove said that they were happy; and, as always, the Cove was right.

One night Eli came ashore from a trading schooner that had put in in the morning, smiling broadly as he entered the kitchen. He laid his hand on the table, palm down.

"They's a gift for you under that paw, lad," he said. "For me, Eli?" cried Jacky.

"Aye, lad—for my partner."

Jacky stared curiously at the big hand. He wondered what it covered. "What is it, Eli?" he asked. "Come, show me!"

Eli lifted the hand, and gazed at Jacky, grinning the while, with delight. It was a jack-knife—a stout knife, three-bladed, horn-handled, big, serviceable; just the knife for a fisher-lad. Jacky picked it up; but said never a word; for his delight overcame him.

"You're wonderful good t' me, Eli," he said at last, looking up with glistening eyes. "You're wonderful good t' me!"

Eli put his arm around the boy. "You're a good partner, lad," he said. "You're a wonderful good partner!"

Jacky was proud of that.

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They put the salmon net out in the spring. The ice was still lingering offshore. The west wind carried it out; the east wind swept it in; variable winds kept pans and bergs drifting hither and thither, and no man could tell where next the ice would go. Now the sea was clear, from the shore to the jagged, glistening, white line off the near horizon; next day, the day after, and the pack was grinding against the coast rocks. Men had to keep watch to save the nets from destruction.

The partners' net was moored off Break-heart Point. It was a good berth; but a rough one when the wind was in the northeast, the waters off the point were choppy and covered with sheets of foam from the breakers.

"Tis too rough t' haul the salmon net," said Eli, one day. "I'll be gon' over the hills t' Sou'west Harbor for a sack o' flour. An' you'll be a good b'y 'til I gets back?"

"Oh, aye, sir!" said Jacky Bunger.

It was a rough day; the wind was blowing from the

north, a freshening, gusty breeze, cold and misty; off to sea the sky was leaden, threatening, and overhead dark clouds were driving low and swift with the wind; the water was choppy—rippling black under the squalls. The ice was drifting along-shore, well out from the coast; there were a berg and the wreck of a berg of Arctic ice and many a pan from the bays and harbors of the coast.

With the wind continuing in the north, the ice would drift harmlessly past. But the wind changed. In the afternoon it freshened and veered to the east. At four o'clock it was half a gale, blowing inshore.

"I'll just be goin' out the tickle t' have a look at that ice," thought Jacky. "'Tis like it'll come ashore."

He looked over the punt carefully before setting out. It was wise, he thought, to prepare to take her out into the gale, whether or not he must go. He saw to it that the thole pins were tight and strong, that the bail-bucket was in its place, that the running gear was fit for heavy strain. The wind was then fluttering the harbor water and screaming on the hilltops; and he could hear the sea breaking on the tickle rocks. He rowed down the harbor to the mouth of the tickle, whence he commanded a view of the coast, north and south.

The ice was drifting toward Break-heart Point. It would destroy the salmon net within the hour, he perceived—sweep over it, tear it from its moorings, bruise it against the rocks. Jacky knew, in a moment, that his duty was to put out from the sheltered harbor to the wind-swept, breaking open, where the spume was flying and the heave and fret of the sea threatened destruction to the little punt. If he was a true man and good partner he would save the net.

"He've been good t' me," he thought. "Aye, Eli 've been wonderful good t' me. I'll be true partner t' him!"

So when Eli, returning over the hills from Sou'west Harbor, came to the Knob o' Heart-break, he saw his own punt staggering through the gray waves toward the net off the point—tossing with the sea and reeling under the gusty wind—with his little partner in the stern. The boat was between the ice and the breakers. The space of open water was fast narrowing; but a few minutes more and the ice would strike the rocks. Eli dropped on his knees, then and there, and prayed God to save the lad.

"O, Lard, save my lad!" he cried. "O, Lard, save my wee lad!"

He saw the punt draw near the first mooring; saw Jacky loose the sheet and let the brown sail flutter like a flag in the wind; saw him leap to the bow, and lean over, with a knife in his hand, while the boat tossed in the lap, shipping water every moment; saw him stagger amidships, bail like mad, snatch up the oars, pull to the second mooring and cut the last net-rope; saw him leap from seat to seat to the stern, grasp the tiller, haul taut the sheet, and stand off to the open sea.