HEALER FROM FAR-AWAY COVE

BY NORMAN DUNCAN

AT ODD TIMES HE PORED OVER THE OLD BOOK

"OH LARD" HE CRIED LIFTING UP HIS FACE, GREAT IS THY POWER AND MARVELOUS ARE THY WORKS

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WHEN Jared Luff came to Poverty Cove from Green Bay at the end of a search of that gray, jagged coast for better fishing, Ishmael Roth determined to go away, though he had been born there.

"They's too many folk t' Poverty Cove now, Skipper John," he called to John East one clammy dawn, when they were hauling the salmon nets off Frothy Head. "Sure I've nothin' agin Jared Luff, but with him come here they's handy t' twenty-seven families t' the Cove. 'Tis too many for me, b'y. I feels crowded like. I'll be goan' away. I'm thinkin'—far away down t' the Labrador, where 'tis quieter."

Skipper John paused, with the dripping net in his hand. He looked over the sea to the blue-black waste of rock and stunted spruce whither the mist was drifting—to that break in the bluff where the cottages were huddled as though shrinking from the desolation about. Then he said, with a wise and solemn wag of his head:

"'Tis a bit crowded, b'y. Maybe, now, you has the right of it. An' a man must follow his bent."

So, when the salmon run was over, Ishmael Roth put all that he had in a punt—his net and tackle and Bible and flour and pork and seed potatoes and the like—and set out to discover a new harbor where he might establish himself in quiet.

"I hates t' leave it," Skipper John," he said, as he pushed off from the stage. "Sure, I does! I hates wonderful t' leave un all. But 'tis gettin' fair crowded, an' I got t' goa where 'tis quiet. Iss, b'y, I got t' goa.

He called the new harbor Far-Away Cove. There he lived all alone until he was old; and he was content, for all of sea and wilderness that the horizon encompassed was his for elbow room.

"The Lard led me to this place," he told himself, by and by. "'Tis like, now, he'll have some wark for me t' do. I'll listen—I'll listen for his voice!"

In the dawn and in the dusk, when the gray wind, as it coursed over the sea, stirred up waves to fret his punt, he listened to the hiss of the waters lest the Voice should sound therein. In the mist, when the punt was hanging off shore and the sea was beating the veiled rocks, he sought the Word in the deep thud and crash of the breakers. In the night, when the nor'east gale swept from the sea's bleak hidden places—when it pelted the windows with sleet and ran like mad into the wilderness—he listened for the Voice of the Lord, surely expecting it. By and by, when his long hair had turned white and a strange light was in his eyes, he heard the Voice of the Lord, as he has said, commanding him to do some great thing.

"Sure," thought Ishmael, at Far-Away Cove, "the Lard He've called me at last. He've give me a wark t' do."

So Ishmael prepared himself for the work; this he did by diligently poring over an old book which had come down to him from his grandfather, who, as I believe, had taken it from a wreck of those old days. It was "The English Physician Enlarged. With three hundred & fifty-nine Medicines. Being an Aftrologo Phyfical Difcourse of the Vulgar Herbs of this Nation; Containing a compleat Method of Phyfick, whereby a man may preferve his Body in Health, or Cure himfelf, being Sick, for Three Pence Charge."

"Sure, the Lard He cast away the vessel," Ishmael argued, "an' the Lard sent my grandfather t' the wreck; the Lard took my grandfather when his time had come, nor neglected to give the book into the hands of my father, who gave it to me. Sure, 'tis all the doin' o' the Lard, whose voice I've heered in the waves o' the sea an' in the wind that comes from beyond."

Ishmael pored over the book by day and at night it fashioned strange dreams for him—vivid dreams, dreams of the cure of diseases.

"I am a healer by dreams," he thought. The consciousness of his high calling thrilled him. "I am a healer by dreams," he thought. "The Lard he've commanded me t' goa down the coast healin' all people."

Whereby you may know that the things of the wilderness and of the sullen sea, which are past understanding, had undone old Ishmael Roth.

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Now, while the healer from Far-Away Cove came down the coast, working strange cures, Ezra Westerly of Ragged Harbor wait' patiently for a singular manifestation of the Lord's favor and great power to heal. He was a punt fisherman, was Ezra—a young, big-boned man, gigantically framed, fearless in lop and gusty wind and used to meeting the sea in all the strength and bitterness of its raging. But he was a consumptive; a spring gale, which swept over the hills with an ugly design upon the Ragged Harbor fleet, had cast him away on an ice floe—a sleety wind, with frost following—and he was now a lean, gasping wreck.

"Sure, I wants t' get well," he said to Solomon Stride. "I does that. I thinks—I thinks I will get well. But I wants you t' know, Solomon, b'y, that I isn't afeered t' die. If the Lard takes me I'll be fair willin' t' goa. I'll do noa grievin', b'y—none at all, b'y; none at all. But—"

"Ah, but—" said Solomon. "Sure, 'twill turn out all right. 'Twill be a—"

"If 'tis," Ezra went on, closing his scrawny fist, "if 'tis oanly a son, Solomon, I'll get well. I knows it."

"Ay," said Solomon, "they's great virtue in the touch o' the seventh son of a seventh son. 'Tis like 'twill cure you."

"Just t' touch the weenie finger o' the babe," Ezra said eagerly, "an' 'twill cure you, they tells me, them that knows—'twill cure you!"

"The Lard'll send she a son, I'm thinkin'," said Solomon, hopefully.

"If oanly 'tis," was the wistful response—"if—oanly—'tis—a son!"

The wife of Thomas Bow of Fortune Harbor gave birth to the seventh son of a seventh son. Great is the favor of the Lord! said the folk of that place. But 'twas a pity, said they, that 'twas at the cost of the life of Amanda Bow, who was a neighborly woman and a good mother. There was a gale abroad that night—a sweeping, swirling wind from the northwest, where the great gales are loosed upon the sea.

"'Tis a son!" thought Ezra Westerly, when he was awakened by a great knocking on the door at dawn. "Sure, 'tis Jimmie Lute come t' tell me the news."

Again the knocking.

"Ezra! Ezra!"

The consumptive went to the window and put out his head. "Is it a son t' Fortune Harbor, Jimmie?" he gasped. The exertion of raising the window had been too much for him.

"Sure, 'tis," cried Jimmie. "I heerd un cry afore I come away. Quick, man! Leave us get started. They fears the child's a bit"—

A gust of wind put an end to the sentence. Ezra shrank from the cold, wet blast.

With the help of his wife Ezra dressed in haste.

"'Tis a son, Mary!" he said again and again, hysterically repeating it. "'Tis a son, woman. Think o' that! 'Tis the seventh son of a seventh son."

Haste and hope wrought him into a high fever of excitement. He could do nothing to help himself. Petulant exclamations broke before him.

"Hut, woman!" he cried, "has you nothin' but thumbs? That's noa way t' button a man's galluses!" When he was helped down to the wharf his clothes were all awry and his wraps were falling from him. Jimmie Lute lifted him into the punt and covered him with a tarpaulin.

"Push off, b'y! Push off!" said Ezra.

The punt ran through the narrows to the sea, where a gray light was spreading over the waves. "Drive her, b'y! Drive her!" said Ezra. Driven she was—that stout little punt. "What you can't carry you can drag," said young Jimmie Lute between his teeth. But there was a knowing hand on her sheet and tiller, for all that; and in a few hours she reeled into Fortune Harbor, with a crested wave at her heels, loggy with shipped water and dripping wet from stem to stern.

"That'll be the house, I'm thinkin'—that wee white one on the hill, under the bluff," said Ezra.

"Iss," said Jimmie. "The one with the crowd at the door. 'Tis where the child lies."

They met Thomas Bow on the path up the hill. Ezra was resting—to catch his breath and quiet his heart. Thomas was downcast and bewildered.

"Is you come t' be healed, Ezra?" he said.

"Iss, b'y. Sure, I've come t' touch the child. But I'll touch un easy, Thomas—just as easy as I'm able."

"Will you, now?" said Thomas, running his hand through his frowsy hair, staring the while at Ezra in a vacant way.

"Just a touch, b'y. Sure I wouldn't think o' hurtin' the wee thing."

"I doan't know as 'twill do you any good," said Thomas, with a puzzled frown.

Ezra darted an anxious glance into his eyes. "Is they noa cures worked yet?" he whispered.

Thomas scratched his head.

"Nar a one?" said Ezra.

"The child's dead," said Thomas.

Ezra gasped. "'Tis a pity!" he cried, his voice strong and athrill with sympathy. "'Tis a pity, man, t' lose your wee child like that. I'm fair sorry for you."

"Iss," said Thomas, with a sigh. "'Twould 'a' been grand t' have the seventh son of a seventh son t' fish from the same punt with me. 'Tis a pity."

They watched the mist break and lift—the sunlight spread over the sea.

"Leave us goa hoame, b'y," said Jimmie.

"Iss," Ezra whispered, for his voice had grown of a sudden very weak. "I'm thinkin'," he went on, with a fine smile, "that the Lord wants we in heaven. Leave us goa hoame."

They went down the path very slowly.

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Meanwhile the healer from Far-Away Cove had come down the coast, passing from harbor to harbor in a rotten, ragged old punt, everywhere applying those cures which, as he believed, the Lord disclosed to him in dreams.

"I am a healer by command o' the Lard," he told the people. "He is my helper."

"Is you, now?" said they. "By command o' the Lard! My, but 'tis a wonderful thing!"

In the evening of the day when the seventh son of a seventh son had died, Jimmie Lute made Ragged Harbor from Fortune, with Ezra Westerly lying exhausted in the bow of the punt. The west was flaring red—the wind had fallen away—all the earth was quiet—the punt slipped over long, soft billows. Ishmael Roth sounded the Pillar just as Jimmie passed the Staff; the punts crept side by side down the narrows to the still water of the harbor, where it lay at the feet of the grim hills, all crimsoned by the sun.

"Is there any place where a man can be taken in for a bit?" Ishmael called.

"Ay," said Ezra, lifting himself on his arm. "They's always a place t' Ragged Ha'bor where an honest man can bide."

Ishmael brought his punt alongside and caught hold of the other's gunwale. He saw the pallor and hollowness of Ezra's face and heard the rattle in his throat.

"You is sick, man," he said. "You is desperate sick."

"I'm tuk with the decline, zur," said Ezra.

The need of healing, the spirit of pain, made Ishmael's great heart ache. He wondered if the Lord would grant him a cure for this man.

"You has a wife, I'm thinkin'?" he said.

"And a wee babe," Ezra answered, smiling.

"An' the Lard will oanly let me," said Ishmael, looking far off, "I'll cure you."

So Ishmael was given a place in the home of Ezra Westerly. Night after night he waited for the Lord to make known the cure in a dream. By day he fished for Ezra from Ezra's punt—going regularly at dawn to the grounds off Mad Bull, and returning with his catch in the evening; taking Ezra's turn in the bait-skiff when the caplin schools came in; splitting cod far into the night, if the fish were running thick; spreading the catch to dry on the flake when the Mad Bull shallows were deserted. At odd times he poured over the old book, lest the Lord should think him lukewarm in his search for the cure. One night he read that section relating to "medicines made out of living things"—read and puzzled till his head was aching and muddled. "I am of opinion," said the book, "that the Suet of a Goat mixed with a little Saffron is excellent an oyntment, especially for pains, as any is." Then, "The Froath of the Sea, it is hot and dry; Being mixed with powdered crabs' shells, it helps chills. It helps baldness, and trimly decks the head with hair." Again, "The Bone that is found in the Heart of a Stag is as fovereign a Cordial and as great a ftrengthener of the Heart as any is, being beaten into Powder." Thus on and on—pouring over the list of strange cures.

"The heart of a stag," he thought, putting his hand to his brow. "Now they's a deal in that, I'm thinkin'."

He fell asleep over the table at last with his head on the old book.

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Ishmael brought the punt in from the grounds early next day. Ezra was sitting in the sunshine by the cottage door.

"Ishmael," said Ezra, "has you—has you had the dream?"

Hope grew strong in his face. Then his lips quivered and he turned his eyes away, fearing new disappointment.

"Ay," said Ishmael, "the dream has come."

"Is it a sure cure, man? Tell me——"

"'Tis the heart of a bull—the heart of a black bull with a white face," said Ishmael. "Sure I knows noa bull like that, but they must be one somewhere, else the Lard wouldn't 'a' told me so."

"They is," Ezra whispered in awe. "'Tis Jacob Swift's bull t' Round Island. I knows un well. 'Tis a black bull with a white face."

"I knowed they was," said Ishmael quietly. "Well, b'y," he went on, "you takes the heart from a live black bull with a white face. Then you b'iles un for two days in a black pot. Which done, you smokes un an' dries un like a salmon. Then you grinds un to powder—an' takes un reg'lar in goat's milk. 'Tis a cure for the decline—'tis a sure cure!"

"Man," said Ezra, "it must be Jacob Swift's bull. He've a wonderful white face, that one!"

"'Tis queer," Ishmael mused, "what things the Lard keeps track of. 'Tis queer, now, that he knowed they was a white-faced bull hereabout—'tis wonderful queer!"

"I wonder what Jacob Swift'll be askin' for the heart of his bull?"

"'Twill be so much, I'm thinkin'," said Ishmael, "as the whole bull's worth."

"Ay, he's a mean man."

"I've some silver," said Ishmael, "which would be a part o' the price."

"I've a punt an' two salmon nets," said Ezra. "'Tis like I can sell un for something."

"Ezra," said the wife Mary, coming through the door, "I've heered you talkin'. Man," she said, laying her clasped hands on her bosom, "but I'm—I'm—happy! I've the garden, b'y, an'—"

"Noa, noa, woman," said Ezra. "I'll not have you lose a thing your fawther give you. I'll not do it."

"But, b'y," said she, "when you gets well 'twill be easy t' get un back."

"Ay," said Ezra softly, "'tis true. When I gets well, Mary, I'll buy un back. I'll buy you two gardens, dear, when I gets t' the fishin' agin."

"Ah, Ezra," she said, "but 'twill be fine t' have you strong agin. My, but 'twill!"

"You is a lovin' wife, Mary," he answered; and he added, solemnly, "an' I'll be a lovin' man t' you."

"Blessed be the name o' the Lard," said Ishmael, "because He has made known the cure!"

Jimmie Lute was dispatched to Round Island with the healer from Far-Away Cove to buy the heart of the black bull with the white face. When Jacob Swift, who owned the bull, perceived the urgency of their business he demanded all that they had; for, said he, "If the Lard God Almighty keeps an eye on my bull, 'tis a gran' fine bull; an' if the Lard sets such a store by the heart o' the beast, 'twould be noa moare'n respectful for me t' put a good price on it." But what cared Ezra? What cared Mary? What cared the healer? What cared Jimmie Lute? What cared they all when they had the queer, black powder safe in the jar? It was a happy, wonderful hour, indeed, when the cure was begun.

"T' think o' you bein' strong agin!" said Mary. "Just t' think o' that! Sure I can hardly bear it, Ezra—I can hardly bear the joy of it."

"The herrin' bait'll be comin' in," said Ezra, taking the medicine jar in his hand to fondle it. "In three weeks I'll be settin' me nets again. 'Tis hard t' think it. Ay," he whispered, "'tis hard t' believe."

Mary was quick to mark his exhaustion—his dull stare, the flush, the rasping breath.

"'Tis time for you t' be goain' t' bed, b'y," she said softly.

"Ay," he answered, "'tis time for you t' help me up. But at this time o' night come three weeks," he went on, looking up to her with a smile, "I'll be splittin' fish—me own catch, Mary, me own catch."

"'Tis gran' t' think it," said she.

There came a night in the fall, with a gale driving the rain against the windows of the little room where Ezra lay, when the man knew that his hope had been mistaken. Great gusts of wind, breaking from the sea, where they had swirled and leaped all unopposed, shook the house as they swished past to lash the inland wilderness. In the intervals, when these rushing noises fell away, the night was filled with the deep, mighty roar of the breakers. Ezra could hardly lift his voice above it all.

"'Tis a barb'rous bad night," said he.

The old healer from Far-Away Cove sighed. His head had fallen over his breast. He had no heart to look up.

"Ah, Ishmael," said Ezra, a rush of pity for the broken man making his voice quiver and his gray lips tremble, "you'll not be grievin' no moare because the cure failed. 'Twas all a mistake, man—'twas but a mistake."

"Ay," said Mary, "he've done what he could."

Ishmael looked up. His face was sallow and haggard. He drew his hand over his eyes in a dull, helpless way. "I've been thinkin'," he whispered, "that I'm nothing but a misled man."

"Noa, noa," said Ezra. "The Lord leads you, Ishmael."

"I'm thinkin'," the healer went on, his face contorted by agony, "that I've mistook my callin'. 'Tis like the Lard never meant me t' be a healer."

"Sure He did!" said Mary. "They's nar a doubt about that."

They were silent—all cast down in bitterness and despair, while the rain rattled on the window panes and a burst of wind beat furiously upon the house.

"Ishmael," said Ezra at last, "you done your best."

"Ay," said the healer, "I done my best."

"An' I done my best," said Ezra.

"Ay, an' you done your best."

"The Lard He done His best—surely the Lard done His best," said Ezra, gently.

"Ay; surely the Lard He done His best," said Ishmael. "Blessed be the Lard."

"There's noa call t' grieve, Ishmael," said Mary. "They's noa call at all."

"I'm thinkin'," said Ezra, "that they was a mistake. The Lard would make noa mistake, Ishmael; but the instruments, man—was they noa mistake made by them?"

Ishmael looked up.

"Ishmael," said Ezra, "'twas the heart of a live bull the Lard told us t' take."

"Ay, a live bull."

"Ishmael, is you sure the bull wasn't dead when you cut the heart out?"

Then the old strange light, the light that might have burned in the prophets' eyes, shone again in Ishmael's.

"O Lard," he cried, lifting up his face, for his faith had been restored, "great is thy power and marvelous are thy works!"

Ezra sighed happily, though he was dying.

So the healer from Far-Away Cove went back to the north. "The Lard has not failed me," he said to the people. "I've failed him. I'll be preparin' myself further—makin' ready for th' wark, agin' the real time when I'm called t' do it." He went back to that far-off desolation, where, in the dawn and in the dusk, he might listen again for the Voice in the hiss of breaking waters. He sought that place where, in the thud and crash of the breakers, the word might be spoken. He passed from the inhabited coast to the loneliness of bleak rocks and a wilderness that the Lord might speak to him in the silence or in the driving gale. Again, in the evening, when the flush and flare were upon great clouds, he looked for the Lord, and for the winging hosts of angels ascending and descending, as it is written. There, from day to day, he waited for the Voice and the Call And there he died.