

DUNCAN NORMAN

DR. GRENFELL'S PARISH:
THE DEEP SEA
FISHERMAN

Norman Duncan

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The Deep Sea Fisherman**

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Dr. Grenfell's Parish: The Deep Sea Fisherman

TO THE READER

This book pretends to no literary excellence; it has a far better reason for existence – a larger justification. Its purpose is to spread the knowledge of the work of Dr. Wilfred T. Grenfell, of the Royal National Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen, at work on the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador; and to describe the character and condition of the folk whom he seeks to help. The man and the mission are worthy of sympathetic interest; worthy, too, of unqualified approbation, of support of every sort. Dr. Grenfell is indefatigable, devoted, heroic; he is more and even better than that – he is a sane and efficient worker. Frankly, the author believes that the reader would do a good deed by contributing to the maintenance and development of the doctor's beneficent undertakings; and regrets that the man and his work are presented in this inadequate way and by so incapable a hand. The author is under obligation to the editors of *Harper's Magazine*, of *The World's Work*, and of *Outing* for permission to reprint the contributed papers which, in some part, go to make up the volume. He wishes also to protest that Dr. Grenfell is not the hero of a certain work of fiction dealing with life on the Labrador coast. Some unhappy misunderstanding has arisen on this point. The author wishes to make it plain that "Doctor Luke" was *not* drawn from Dr. Grenfell.

N. D.

College Campus,
Washington, Pennsylvania, January 25, 1905.

I – THE DOCTOR

Doctor Wilfred T. Grenfell is the young Englishman who, for the love of God, practices medicine on the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador. Other men have been moved to heroic deeds by the same high motive, but the professional round, I fancy, is quite out of the common; indeed, it may be that in all the world there is not another of the sort. It extends from Cape John of Newfoundland around Cape Norman and into the Strait of Belle Isle, and from Ungava Bay and Cape Chidley of the Labrador southward far into the Gulf of St. Lawrence – two thousand miles of bitterly inhospitable shore: which a man in haste must sail with his life in his hands. The folk are for the most part isolated and desperately wretched – the shore fishermen of the remoter Newfoundland coasts, the Labrador “liveyeres,” the Indians of the forbidding interior, the Esquimaux of the far north. It is to such as these that the man gives devoted and heroic service – not for gain; there is no gain to be got in those impoverished places: merely for the love of God.

I once went ashore in a little harbour of the northeast coast of Newfoundland. It was a place most unimportant – and it was just beyond the doctor’s round. The sea sullenly confronted it, hills overhung it, and a scrawny wilderness flanked the hills; the ten white cottages of the place gripped the dripping rocks as for dear life. And down the path there came an old fisherman to meet the stranger.

“Good-even, zur,” said he.

“Good-evening.”

He waited for a long time. Then, “Be you a doctor, zur?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Noa? Isn’t you? Now, I was thinkin’ maybe you might be. But you isn’t, you says?”

“Sorry – but, no; really, I’m not.”

“Well, zur,” he persisted, “I was thinkin’ you might be, when I seed you comin’ ashore. They *is* a doctor on this coast,” he added, “but he’s sixty mile along shore. ’Tis a wonderful expense t’ have un up. This here harbour isn’t able. An’ you isn’t a doctor, you says? Is you sure, zur?”

There was unhappily no doubt about it.

“I was thinkin’ you might be,” he went on, wistfully, “when I seed you comin’ ashore. But perhaps you might know something about doctorin’? Noa?”

“Nothing.”

“I was thinkin’, now, that you might. ’Tis my little girl that’s sick. Sure, none of us knows what’s the matter with she. Woan’t you come up an’ see she, zur? Perhaps you might do something – though you isn’t – a doctor.”

The little girl was lying on the floor – on a ragged quilt, in a corner. She was a fair child – a little maid of seven. Her eyes were deep blue, wide, and fringed with long, heavy lashes. Her hair was flaxen, abundant, all tangled and curly. Indeed, she was a winsome little thing!

“I’m thinkin’ she’ll be dyin’ soon,” said the mother. “Sure, she’s wonderful swelled in the legs. We been waitin’ for a doctor t’ come, an’ we kind o’ thought you was one.”

“How long have you waited?”

“’Twas in April she was took. She’ve been lyin’ there ever since. ’Tis near August, now, I’m thinkin’.”

“They was a doctor here two year ago,” said the man. “He come by chance,” he added, “like you.”

“Think they’ll be one comin’ soon?” the woman asked.

I took the little girl’s hand. It was dry and hot. She did not smile – nor was she afraid. Her fingers closed upon the hand she held. She was a blue-eyed, winsome little maid; but pain had driven all the sweet roguery out of her face.

“Does you think she’ll die, zur?” asked the woman, anxiously.

I did not know.

“Sure, zur,” said the man, trying to smile, “’tis wonderful queer, but I *sure* thought you was a doctor, when I seed you comin’ ashore.”

“But you isn’t?” the woman pursued, still hopefully. “Is you sure you couldn’t do nothin’? Is you noa kind of a doctor, at all? We doan’t – we doan’t – want she t’ die!”

In the silence – so long and deep a silence – melancholy shadows crept in from the desolation without.

“I wisht you *was* a doctor,” said the man. “I —*wisht*—*you*—*was*!”

He was crying.

“They need,” thought I, “a mission-doctor in these parts.”

And the next day – in the harbour beyond – I first heard of Grenfell. In that place they said they would send *him* to the little maid who lay dying; they assured me, indeed, that he would make haste, when he came that way: which would be, perhaps, they thought, in “long about a month.” Whether or not the doctor succoured the child I do not know; but I have never forgotten this first impression of his work – the conviction that it was a good work for a man to be about.

Subsequently I learned that Dr. Grenfell was the superintendent of the Newfoundland and Labrador activities of the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, an English organization, with a religious and medical work already well-established on the North Sea, and a medical mission then in process of development on the North Atlantic coast. Two years later he discovered himself to be a robust, hearty Saxon, strong, indefatigable, devoted, jolly; a doctor, a parson by times, something of a sportsman when occasion permitted, a master-mariner, a magistrate, the director of certain commercial enterprises designed to “help the folk help themselves” – the prophet and champion, indeed, of a people: and a man very much in love with life.

II – A ROUND of BLEAK COASTS

The coast of Labrador, which, in number of miles, forms the larger half of the doctor's round, is forbidding, indeed – naked, rugged, desolate, lying sombre in a mist. It is of weather-worn gray rock, broken at intervals by long ribs of black. In part it is low and ragged, slowly rising, by way of bare slopes and starved forest, to broken mountain ranges, which lie blue and bold in the inland waste. Elsewhere it rears from the edge of the sea in stupendous cliffs and lofty, rugged hills. There is no inviting stretch of shore the length of it – no sandy beach, no line of shingle, no grassy bank; the sea washes a thousand miles of jagged rock. Were it not for the harbours – innumerable and snugly sheltered from the winds and ground swell of the open – there would be no navigating the waters of that region. The Strait Shore is buoyed, lighted, minutely charted. The reefs and currents and tickles¹ and harbours are all known. A northeast gale, to be sure, raises a commotion, and fog and drift-ice add something to the chance of disaster; but, as they say, from one peril there are two ways of escape to three sheltered places. To the north, however, where the doctor makes his way, the coast is best sailed on the plan of the skipper of the old *Twelve Brothers*.

“You don't catch *me* meddlin' with no land!” said he.

Past the Dead Islands, Snug Harbour, Domino Run, Devil's Lookout and the Quaker's Hat – beyond Johnny Paul's Rock and the Wolves, Sandwich Bay, Tumbledown Dick, Indian Harbour, and the White Cockade – past Cape Harrigan, the Farmyard Islands and the Hen and Chickens – far north to the great, craggy hills and strange peoples of Kikkertadsoak, Scoralik, Tunnulusoak, Nain, Okak, and, at last, to Cape Chidley itself – northward, every crooked mile of the way, bold headlands, low outlying islands, sunken reefs, tides, fogs, great winds and snow make hard sailing of it. It is an evil coast, ill-charted where charted at all; some part of the present-day map is based upon the guesswork of the eighteenth century navigators. The doctor, like the skippers of the fishing-craft, must sometimes sail by guess and hearsay, by recollection, and old rhymes.

The gusts and great waves of open water – of the free, wide sea, I mean, over which a ship may safely drive while the weather exhausts its evil mood – are menace enough for the stoutest heart. But the Labrador voyage is inshore – a winding course among the islands, or a straight one from headland to headland, of a coast off which reefs lie thick: low-lying, jagged ledges, washed by the sea in heavy weather; barren hills, rising abruptly – and all isolated – from safe water; sunken rocks, disclosed, upon approach, only by the green swirl above them. They are countless – scattered everywhere, hidden and disclosed. They lie in the mouths of harbours, they lie close to the coast, they lie offshore; they run twenty miles out to sea. Here is no plain sailing; the skipper must be sure of the way – or choose it gingerly: else the hidden rock will inevitably “pick him up.”

Recently the doctor *was* “picked up.”

“Oh, yes,” says he, with interest. “An uncharted rock. It took two of the three blades of the propeller. But, really, you'd be surprised to know how well the ship got along with one!”

To know the submerged rocks of one harbour and the neighbouring coast, however evil the place, is small accomplishment. The Newfoundland lad of seven years would count himself his father's shame if he failed in so little. High tide and low tide, quiet sea and heavy swell, he will know where he can take the punt – the depth of water, to an inch, which overlies the danger spots. But here are a hundred harbours – a thousand miles of coast – with reefs and islands scattered like dust the length of it. The man who sails the Labrador must know it all like his own back yard – not in sunny weather alone, but in the night, when the headlands are like black clouds ahead, and in the mist, when the noise of breakers tells him all that he may know of his whereabouts. A flash of white in the gray

¹ A “tickle” is a narrow passage to a harbour or between two islands.

distance, a thud and swish from a hidden place: the one is his beacon, the other his fog-horn. It is thus, often, that the doctor gets along.

You may chart rocks, and beware of them; but – it is a proverb on the coast – “there’s no chart for icebergs.” The Labrador current is charged with them – hard, dead-white glacier ice from the Arctic: massive bergs, innumerable, all the while shifting with tide and current and wind. What with floes and bergs – vast fields of drift-ice – the way north in the spring is most perilous. The same bergs – widely scattered, diminished in number, dwarfed by the milder climate – give the transatlantic passenger evil dreams: somewhere in the night, somewhere in the mist, thinks he, they may lie; and he shudders. The skipper of the Labrador craft *knows* that they lie thick around him: there is no surmise; when the night fell, when the fog closed in, there were a hundred to be counted from the masthead.

Violent winds are always to be feared – swift, overwhelming hurricanes: winds that catch the unwary. They are not frequent; but they *do* blow – will again blow, no man can tell when. In such a gale, forty vessels were driven on a lee shore; in another, eighty were wrecked overnight – two thousand fishermen cast away, the coast littered with splinters of ships – and, once (it is but an incident), a schooner was torn from her anchors and flung on the rocks forty feet above the high-water mark. These are exceptional storms; the common Labrador gale is not so violent, but evil enough in its own way. It is a northeaster, of which the barometer more often than not gives fair warning; day after day it blows, cold, wet, foggy, dispiriting, increasing in violence, subsiding, returning again, until courage and strength are both worn out.

Reefs, drift-ice, wind and sea – and over all the fog: thick, wide-spread, persistent, swift in coming, mysterious in movement; it compounds the dangers. It blinds men – they curse it, while they grope along: a desperate business, indeed, thus to run by guess where positive knowledge of the way merely mitigates the peril. There are days when the fog lies like a thick blanket on the face of the sea, hiding the head-sails from the man at the wheel; it is night on deck, and broad day – with the sun in a blue sky – at the masthead; the schooners are sometimes steered by a man aloft. The *Always Loaded*, sixty tons and bound home with a cargo that did honour to her name, struck one of the outlying islands so suddenly, so violently, that the lookout in the bow, who had been peering into the mist, was pitched headlong into the surf. The *Daughter*, running blind with a fair, light wind – she had been lost for a day – ran full tilt into a cliff; the men ran forward from the soggy gloom of the after-deck into – bright sunshine at the bow! It is the fog that wrecks ships.

“Oh, I runned her ashore,” says the castaway skipper. “Thick? Why, *sure*, ’twas thick!”

So the men who sail that coast hate fog, fear it, avoid it when they can, which is seldom; they are not afraid of wind and sea, but there are times when they shake in their sea-boots, if the black fog catches them out of harbour.

III – SHIPS in PERIL

It is to be remarked that a wreck on the Labrador coast excites no wide surprise. Never a season passes but some craft are cast away. But that is merely the fortune of sailing those waters – a fortune which the mission-doctor accepts with a glad heart: it provides him with an interesting succession of adventures; life is not tame. Most men – I hesitate to say all – have been wrecked; every man, woman, and child who has sailed the Labrador has narrowly escaped, at least. And the fashion of that escape is sometimes almost incredible.

The schooner *All's Well* (which is a fictitious name) was helpless in the wind and sea and whirling snow of a great blizzard. At dusk she was driven inshore – no man knew where. Strange cliffs loomed in the snow ahead; breakers – they were within stone's throw – flashed and thundered to port and starboard; the ship was driving swiftly into the surf. When she was fairly upon the rocks, Skipper John, then a hand aboard (it was he who told me the story), ran below and tumbled into his bunk, believing it to be the better place to drown in.

"Well, lads," said he to the men in the forecabin, "we got t' go this time. 'Tis no use goin' on deck."

But the ship drove through a tickle no wider than twice her beam and came suddenly into the quiet water of a harbour!

The sealing-schooner *Right and Tight* struck on the Fish Rocks off Cape Charles in the dusk of a northeast gale. It is a jagged, black reef, outlying and isolated; the seas wash over it in heavy weather. It was a bitter gale; there was ice in the sea, and the wind was wild and thick with snow; she was driving before it – wrecked, blind, utterly lost. The breakers flung her on the reef, broke her back, crunched her, swept the splinters on. Forty-two men were of a sudden drowned in the sea beyond; but the skipper was left clinging to the rock in a swirl of receding water.

"Us seed un there in the mornin'," said the old man of Cape Charles who told me the story. "He were stickin' to it like a mussel, with the sea breakin' right over un! 'Cod! he were!"

He laughed and shook his head; that was a tribute to the strength and courage with which the man on the reef had withstood the icy breakers through the night.

"Look! us couldn't get near un," he went on. "'Twas clear enough t' see, but the wind was blowin' wonderful, an' the seas was too big for the skiff. Sure, I *knows* that; for us tried it.

"'Leave us build a fire!' says my woman. 'Leave us build a fire on the head!' says she. 'Twill let un know they's folk lookin' on.'

"'Twas a wonderful big fire us set; an' it kep' us warm, so us set there all day watchin' the skipper o' the *Right an' Tight* on Fish Rocks. The big seas jerked un loose an' flung un about, an' many a one washed right over un; but nar a sea could carry un off. 'Twas a wonderful sight t' see un knocked off his feet, an' scramble round an' crotch hold somewheres else. 'Cod! it were – the way that man stuck t' them slippery rocks all day long!"

He laughed again – not heartlessly; it was the only way in which he could express his admiration.

"We tried the skiff again afore dark," he continued; "but 'twasn't no use. The seas was too big. Sure, *he* knowed that so well as we. So us had t' leave un there all night.

"'He'll never be there in the mornin',' says my woman.

"'You wait,' says I, 'an' you'll see. I'm thinkin' he will.'

"An' he was, zur – right there on Fish Rocks, same as ever; still stickin' on like the toughest ol' mussel ever you tasted. Sure, I had t' rub me eyes when I looked; but 'twas he, never fear – 'twas he, stickin' there like a mussel. But there was no gettin' un then. Us watched un all that day. 'Twas dark afore us got un ashore.

"'You come nigh it *that* time,' says I.

"'I'll have t' come a sight nigher,' says he, 'afore *I* goes!"

The man had been on the reef more than forty-eight hours!

The *Army Lass*, bound north, was lost in the fog. They hove her to. All hands knew that she lay somewhere near the coast. The skipper needed a sight of the rocks – just a glimpse of some headland or island – to pick the course. It was important that he should have it. There was an iceberg floating near; it was massive; it appeared to be steady – and the sea was quiet. From the top of it, he thought (the fog was dense and seemed to be lying low), he might see far and near. His crew put him on the ice with the quarter-boat and then hung off a bit. He clambered up the side of the berg. Near the summit he had to cut his foothold with an axe. This was unfortunate; for he gave the great white mass one blow too many. It split under his feet. He fell headlong into the widening crevice. But he was apparently not a whit the worse for it when his boat's crew picked him up.

A schooner – let her be called the *Good Fortune* – running through dense fog, with a fair, high wind and all sail set, struck a “twin” iceberg bow on. She was wrecked in a flash: her jib-boom was rammed into her forecastle; her bows were stove in; her topmast snapped and came crashing to the deck. Then she fell away from the ice; whereupon the wind caught her, turned her about, and drove her, stern foremost, into a narrow passage which lay between the two towering sections of the “twin.” She scraped along, striking the ice on either side; and with every blow, down came fragments from above.

“It rained chunks,” said the old skipper who told me the story. “You couldn't tell, look! what minute you'd get knocked on the head.”

The falling ice made great havoc with the deck-works; the boats were crushed; the “house” was stove in; the deck was littered with ice. But the *Good Fortune* drove safely through, was rigged with makeshift sails, made harbour, was refitted by all hands – the Labradormen can build a ship with an axe – and continued her voyage.

I have said that the Newfoundlanders occasionally navigate by means of old rhymes; and this brings me to the case of Zachariah, the skipper of the *Heavenly Rest*. He was a Newf'un'lander. Neither wind, fog nor a lippy sea could turn his blood to water. He was a Newf'un'lander of the hardshell breed. So he sailed the *Heavenly Rest* without a chart. To be sure, he favoured the day for getting along, but he ran through the night when he was crowding south, and blithely took his chance with islands of ice and rock alike. He had some faith in a “telltale,” had Zachariah, but he scorned charts. It was his boast that if he could not carry the harbours and headlands and shallows of five hundred miles of hungry coast in his head he should give up the *Heavenly Rest* and sail a paddle-punt for a living. It was well that he could – well for the ship and the crew and the folk at home. For, at the time of which I write, the *Rest*, too light in ballast to withstand a gusty breeze, was groping through the fog for harbour from a gale which threatened a swift descent. It was “thick as bags,” with a rising wind running in from the sea, and the surf breaking and hissing within hearing to leeward.

“We be handy t' Hollow Harbour,” said Zachariah.

“Is you sure, skipper?” asked the cook.

“Sure,” said Zachariah.

The *Heavenly Rest* was in desperate case. She was running in – pursuing an unfaltering course for an unfamiliar, rocky shore. The warning of the surf sounded in every man's ears. It was imperative that her true position should soon be determined. The skipper was perched far forward, peering through the fog for a sight of the coast.

“Sure, an' I hopes,” said the man at the wheel, “that she woan't break her nose on a rock afore the ol' man sees un.”

“Joe Bett's P'int!” exclaimed the skipper.

Dead ahead, and high in the air, a mass of rock loomed through the mist. The skipper had recognized it in a flash. He ran aft and took the wheel. The *Heavenly Rest* sheered off and ran to sea.

“We'll run in t' Hollow Harbour,” said the skipper.

“Has you ever been there?” said the man who had surrendered the wheel.

“Noa, b’y,” the skipper answered, “but I’ll get there, whatever.”

The nose of the *Heavenly Rest* was turned shoreward. Sang the skipper, humming it to himself in a rasping sing-song:

“When Joe Bett’s P’int you is abreast,
Dane’s Rock bears due west.
West-nor’west you must steer,
’Til Brimstone Head do appear.

“The tickle’s narrow, not very wide;
The deepest water’s on the starboard side
When in the harbour you is shot,
Four fathoms you has got.”

The old song was chart enough for Skipper Zachariah. Three times the *Heavenly Rest* ran in and out. Then she sighted Dane’s Rock, which bore due west, true enough. West-nor’west was the course she followed, running blindly through the fog and heeling to the wind. Brimstone Head appeared in due time; and in due time the rocks of the tickle – that narrow entrance to the harbour – appeared in vague, forbidding form to port and starboard. The schooner ran to the starboard for the deeper water. Into the harbour she shot; and there they dropped anchor, caring not at all whether the water was four or forty fathoms, for it was deep enough. Through the night the gale tickled the topmasts, but the ship rode smoothly at her anchors, and Skipper Zachariah’s stentorian sleep was not disturbed by any sudden call to duty.

And the doctor of the Deep Sea Mission has had many a similar experience.

IV – DESPERATE NEED

It was to these rough waters that Dr. Grenfell came when the need of the folk reached his ears and touched his heart. Before that, in the remoter parts of Newfoundland and on the coast of Labrador there were no doctors. The folk depended for healing upon traditional cures, upon old women who worked charms, upon remedies ingeniously devised to meet the need of the moment, upon deluded persons who prescribed medicines of the most curious description, upon a rough-and-ready surgery of their own, in which the implements of the kitchen and of the splitting-stage served a useful purpose. For example, there was a misled old fellow who set himself up as a healer in a lonely cove of the Newfoundland coast, where he lived a hermit, verily believing, it may be, in the glory of his call and in the blessed efficacy of his ministrations; his cure for consumption – it was a tragic failure, in one case, at least – was a bull's heart, dried and powdered and administered with faith and regularity. Elsewhere there was a man, stricken with a mortal ailment, who, upon the recommendation of a kindly neighbour, regularly dosed himself with an ill-flavoured liquid obtained by boiling cast-off pulley-blocks in water. There was also a father who most hopefully attempted to cure his little lad of diphtheria by wrapping his throat with a split herring; but, unhappily, as he has said, “the wee feller choked hisself t' death,” notwithstanding. There was another father – a man of grim, heroic disposition – whose little daughter chanced to freeze her feet to the very bone in midwinter; when he perceived that a surgical operation could no longer be delayed, he cut them off with an axe.

An original preventative of sea-boils – with which the fishermen are cruelly afflicted upon the hands and wrists in raw weather – was evolved by a frowsy-headed old Labradorman of serious parts.

“I never has none,” said he, in the fashion of superior fellows.

“No?”

“Nar a one. No, *zur!* Not *me!*”

A glance of interested inquiry elicited no response. It but prolonged a large silence.

“Have you never *had* a sea-boil?” with the note and sharp glance of incredulity.

“Not me. Not since I got my cure.”

“And what might that cure be?”

“Well, *zur,*” was the amazing reply, “I cuts my nails on a Monday.”

It must be said, however, that the Newfoundland government did provide a physician – of a sort. Every summer he was sent north with the mail-boat, which made not more than six trips, touching here and there at long intervals, and, of a hard season, failing altogether to reach the farthest ports. While the boat waited – an hour, or a half, as might be – the doctor went ashore to cure the sick, if he chanced to be in the humour; otherwise the folk brought the sick aboard, where they were painstakingly treated or not, as the doctor's humour went. The government seemed never to inquire too minutely into the qualifications and character of its appointee. The incumbent for many years – the folk thank God that he is dead – was an inefficient, ill-tempered, cruel man; if not the very man himself, he was of a kind with the Newfoundland physician who ran a flag of warning to his masthead when he set out to get very drunk.

The mail-boat dropped anchor one night in a far-away harbour of the Labrador, where there was desperate need of a doctor to ease a man's pain. They had waited a long time, patiently, day after day. I am told; and when at last the mail-boat came, the man's skipper put out in glad haste to fetch the government physician.

“He've turned in,” they told him aboard.

What did *that* matter? The skipper roused the doctor.

“We've a sick man ashore, *zur,*” said he, “an' he wants you t' come – ”

“What!” roared the doctor. “Think I'm going to turn out this time of night?”

“Sure, zur,” stammered the astounded skipper. “I – I – s’pose so. He’s very sick, zur. He’s coughin’ – ”

“Let him cough himself to death!” said the doctor.

Turn out? Not he! Rather, he turned over in his warm berth. It is to be assumed that the sick man died in pain; it is to be assumed, too, that the physician continued a tranquil slumber, for the experience was not exceptional.

“Let ’em die!” he had said more than once.

The government had provided for the transportation of sick fishermen from the Labrador coast to their homes in Newfoundland; these men were of the great Newfoundland fleet of cod-fishing schooners, which fish the Labrador seas in the summer. It needed only the doctor’s word to get the boon. Once a fisherman brought his consumptive son aboard – a young lad, with but a few weeks of life left. The boy wanted his mother, who was at home in Newfoundland.

“Ay, he’s fair *sick* for his mother,” said the father to the doctor. “I’m askin’ you, zur, t’ take um home on the mail-boat.”

The doctor was in a perverse mood that day. He would not take the boy.

“Sure, zur,” said the fisherman, “the schooner’s not goin’ ’til fall, an’ I’ve no money, an’ the lad’s dyin’.”

But still the doctor would not.

“I’m thinkin’, zur,” said the fisherman, steadily, “that you’re not quite knowin’ that the lad wants t’ see his mother afore he dies.”

The doctor laughed.

“We’ll have a laugh at *you*,” cried the indignant fisherman, “when *you* comes t’ die!”

Then he cursed the doctor most heartily and took his son ashore. He was right – they did have a laugh at the doctor; the whole coast might have laughed when he came to die. Being drunk on a stormy night, he fell down the companion way and broke his neck.

Deep in the bays and up the rivers south of Hamilton Inlet, which is itself rather heavily timbered, there is wood to be had for the cutting; but “down t’ Chidley” – which is the northernmost point of the Labrador coast – the whole world is bare; there is neither tree nor shrub, shore nor inland, to grace the naked rock; the land lies bleak and desolate. But, once, a man lived there the year round. I don’t know why; it is inexplicable; but I am sure that the shiftless fellow and his wife had never an inkling that the circumstance was otherwise than commonplace and reasonable; and the child, had he lived, would have continued to dwell there, boy and man, in faith that the earth was good to live in. One hard winter the man burnt all his wood long before the schooners came up from the lower coast. It was a desperate strait to come to; but I am sure that he regarded his situation with surprising phlegm; doubtless he slept as sound, if not as warm, as before. There was no more wood to be had; so he burnt the furniture, every stick of it, and when that was gone, began on the frame of his house – a turf hut, builded under a kindly cliff, sheltered somewhat from the winds from the frozen sea. As, rafter by rafter, the frame was withdrawn, he cut off the roof and folded in the turf walls; thus, day by day, the space within dwindled; his last fire was to consume the last of his shelter – which, no doubt, troubled him not at all; for the day was not yet come. It is an ugly story. When they were found in the spring, the woman lay dying on a heap of straw in a muddy corner – she was afflicted with hip-disease – and the house was tumbling about her ears; the child, new born, had long ago frozen on its mother’s breast.

A doctor of the Newfoundland outports was once called to a little white cottage where three children lay sick of diphtheria. He was the family physician; that is to say, the fisherman paid him so much by the year for medical attendance. But the injection of antitoxin is a “surgical operation” and therefore not provided for by the annual fee.

“This,” said the doctor, “will cost you two dollars an injection, John.”

“Oh, ay, zur,” was the ready reply. “I’ll pay you, zur. Go on, zur!”

“But you know my rule, John – no pay, no work. I can’t break it for you, you know, or I’d have to break it for half the coast.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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