

## A Metaphysician of Jug Cove.

By Norman Duncan

Jug Cove is far away—not only from these places: it is remote, even, from the harbors near by. It lies to the westward of Fog Island, something below the Black Gravestones, where the Soldier of the Cross was picked up by Satan's Tail in the Year of the Big Shore Catch. You open the Cove when the mail-boat rounds Greedy Head of the Hen-an'-Chickens, and, with face averted from the wretched settlement, wallows off toward Gentleman Tickle on the other side of the Bay. "Ay," said Tumm, the clerk of the Quick as Wink, "'tis a mean place—this Jug Cove: tight an' dismal as chokee, with walls o' black rock an' as nasty a front-yard o' sea as ever I seed in my life." And it turned out, when we dropped the anchor of the little Quick as Wink in that harbor, that Tumm was right, as always. . . .

The harbor lights were out. All the world of sea and barren rock was black. It was Sunday—after night: the first snow flying in the dark. Half a gale from the northeast troubled the rigging—by turns angry and plaintive: never at ease. The crew, from the skipper to the cook, being as hardy as pious, were all gone ashore to church. I was alone in the fore-castle—and vastly content with my situation: for the schooner was out of the heave of the sea, and the fore-castle fire was roaring, and there was no disturbance whatsoever, save the low, weird noises in the rigging, which were an inspiration to dreaming. Presently I was interrupted by the fall of feet on the deck; and almost immediately a gust of bitter wind darted down the opened hatch, and a pair of booted legs appeared on the ladder, and, in a moment, an old, old fisherman, with a marvellously wrinkled face, and a ragged white beard, and the mildest of blue eyes, in which there was a kindly twinkle, bade me good-evening in the heartiest, bluffest way.

"And welcome!" said I.

"I 'lowed I come aboard, zur," he said, by way of explanation, "just for a bit of a yarn."

"'Twas a brave idea, man!"

He laughed—this in childlike delight. Indeed, he was very much like a child: as curious and gentle and responsive.

"So," said I, "let's get at it!"

And we got underway; and we yarned of many things and places and kinds of hearts, and of many lives and deaths, while the fore-castle fire roared a sympathetic accompaniment, and the gale troubled the rigging, but did not trouble us. By and by, as foolish men will, we fell upon the intimate things—soul-deep riddles, to which we sought solutions by the light of our combined and vastly different experiences. And, at last, he looked up, with the smile of a child who is about to impart some interesting thing, newly discovered, treasured to be told.

"Look you!" he whispered.

I bent closer.

"You is," said he.

It puzzled me. He watched my wonder with engaging amusement. But still I was puzzled.

"Is?" I asked. "What am I?"

"You don't find me," said he. "I says, you is."

"Yes—but what?"

"Just—is!"

Then I understood. I had heard something like that before. But he had stated the bare conclusion—not the argument. "I think; therefore, I am." I looked up astounded.

"You find me?" he asked, gently.

"Yes," I answered; "but how did you find that out?"

"Oh," he said, with a sigh, "I thunk it out for meself—out there/on the grounds."

He was very proud of it. . . .

On the fishing grounds! This is a reef-strewn stretch of sea: distant, a coast of jagged black rock, kept wet and white by gigantic breakers; beyond, blue hills, a wilderness; elsewhere, unfeeling waters, spread with ice, roamed by the winds and fogs. The grounds provoke a morbid and superstitious philosophy; the toil of them is malfoming to the body, no less warping to the soul. "'Tis a wonderful error," Tumm once said, "for a man at the fishin' t' think. Think? Don't think! Leave some other fool t' do it for you. 'Tis unhealthy. They's too sea an' sky an' rock in the world—too much cloud an' wind an' spume. The man that thinks at the fishin' comes to a bad end. Cotch fish! I 'low your soul will be the better o' the fish you puts in your belly." 'Twas a wonder the old man had survived the evil influences. I looked into his eyes. They were steady, alight, courageous. . . .

"An'," he continued, hitching the stool nearer, "where was you?"

"We traded Dead Man's Tickle," I began, taken off my guard, "and Whale Run——"

"You don't find me," he interrupted. "Where was you afore you was is?"

"It doesn't sound right," I protested.

"Oh, ay," he replied, quickly. "'Tis a plain question. You is, isn't you? Then you must have been was. Now then, zur, where was you?"

"Oh!" said I.

"Ay," he exclaimed, with delight. "Now, you finds me. Where was you afore you was is?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"No more does I," said he; "nor where you will be. But if you is, you was; an' if you is an' was, you will be. I done a power o' thinkin' in my life, zur," he continued, "out there on the grounds, between the Dagger an' the Pillar o' Cloud; an' the more I think, the less I knowed. When I was a young feller, I 'low I had almost everything settled; but now that I'm old, I only knows three things. An' them things is this: I is; I was; I will be." He sighed. "I 'low, zur," he went on, "that I'm almighty near rid o' the was; an' if I goes on thinkin'," he added, brushing his great, toil-stained hand over his brow, "I fears me I'll get rid o' the will be."

"Oh," said I, "I hope not!"

"I fears me," he repeated, in a low voice, wearily, "that I'll get rid o' that will be."

He sighed—but immediately smiled again.