

The Sea Fit

by Algernon Blackwood

The sea that night sang rather than chanted; all along the far-running shore a rising tide dropped thick foam, and the waves, white-crested, came steadily in with the swing of a deliberate purpose. Overhead, in a cloudless sky, that ancient Enchantress, the full moon, watched their dance across the sheeted sands, guiding them carefully while she drew them up. For through that moonlight, through that roar of surf, there penetrated a singular note of earnestness and meaning—almost as though these common processes of Nature were instinct with the flush of an unusual activity that sought audaciously to cross the borderland into some subtle degree of conscious life. A gauze of light vapour clung upon the surface of the sea, far out—a transparent carpet through which the rollers drove shorewards in a moving pattern.

In the low-roofed bungalow among the sand-dunes the three men sat. Foregathered for Easter, they spent the day fishing and sailing, and at night told yarns of the days when life was younger. It was fortunate that there were three—and later four—because in the mouths of several witnesses an extraordinary thing shall be established—when they agree. And although whisky stood upon the rough table made of planks nailed to barrels, it is childish to pretend that a few drinks invalidate evidence, for alcohol, up to a certain point, intensifies the consciousness, focuses the intellectual powers, sharpens observation; and two healthy men, certainly three, must have imbibed an absurd amount before they all see, or omit to see, the same things.

The other bungalows still awaited their summer occupants. Only the lonely tufted sand-dunes watched the sea, shaking their hair of coarse white grass to the winds. The men had the whole spit to themselves—with the wind, the spray, the flying gusts of sand, and that great Easter full moon. There was Major Reese of the Gunners and his half-brother, Dr. Malcolm Reese, and Captain Erricson, their host, all men whom the kaleidoscope of life had jostled together a decade ago in

many adventures, then flung for years apart about the globe. There was also Erricson's body-servant, 'Sinbad,' sailor of big seas, and a man who had shared on many a ship all the lust of strange adventure that distinguished his great blonde-haired owner—an ideal servant and dog-faithful, divining his master's moods almost before they were born. On the present occasion, besides crew of the fishing-smack, he was cook, valet, and steward of the bungalow smoking-room as well.

'Big Erricson,' Norwegian by extraction, student by adoption, wanderer by blood, a Viking reincarnated if ever there was one, belonged to that type of primitive man in whom burns an inborn love and passion for the sea that amounts to positive worship—devouring tide, a lust and fever in the soul. 'All genuine votaries of the old sea-gods have it,' he used to say, by way of explaining his carelessness of worldly ambitions. 'We're never at our best away from salt water—never quite right. I've got it bang in the heart myself. I'd do a bit before the mast sooner than make a million on shore. Simply can't help it, you see, and never could! It's our gods calling us to worship.' And he had never tried to 'help it,' which explains why he owned nothing in the world on land except this tumble-down, one-storey bungalow—more like a ship's cabin than anything else, to which he sometimes asked his bravest and most faithful friends—and a store of curious reading gathered in long, becalmed days at the ends of the world. Heart and mind, that is, carried a queer cargo. 'I'm sorry if you poor devils are uncomfortable in her. You must ask Sinbad for anything you want and don't see, remember.' As though Sinbad could have supplied comforts that were miles away, or converted a draughty wreck into a snug, taut, brand-new vessel.

Neither of the Reeses had cause for grumbling on the score of comfort, however, for they knew the keen joys of roughing it, and both weather and sport besides had been glorious. It was on another score this particular evening that they found cause for uneasiness, if not for actual grumbling. Erricson had one of his queer sea fits on—the Doctor was responsible for the term—and was in the thick of it, plunging like a straining boat at anchor, talking in a way that made them both feel vaguely uncomfortable and distressed. Neither of

them knew exactly perhaps why he should have felt this growing malaise, and each was secretly vexed with the other for confirming his own unholy instinct that something uncommon was afoot. The loneliness of the sand-spit and that melancholy singing of the sea before their very door may have had something to do with it, seeing that both were landsmen; for Imagination is ever Lord of the Lonely Places, and adventurous men remain children to the last. But, whatever it was that affected both men in different fashion, Malcolm Reese, the doctor, had not thought it necessary to mention to his brother that Sinbad had tugged his sleeve on entering and whispered in his ear significantly: 'Full moon, sir, please, and he's better without too much! These high spring tides get him all caught off his feet sometimes—clean sea-crazy'; and the man had contrived to let the doctor see the hilt of a small pistol he carried in his hip-pocket.

For Erricson had got upon his old subject: that the gods were not dead, but merely withdrawn, and that even a single true worshipper was enough to draw them down again into touch with the world, into the sphere of humanity, even into active and visible manifestation. He spoke of queer things he had seen in queerer places. He was serious, vehement, voluble; and the others had let it pour out unchecked, hoping thereby for its speedier exhaustion. They puffed their pipes in comparative silence, nodding from time to time, shrugging their shoulders, the soldier mystified and bewildered, the doctor alert and keenly watchful.

'And I like the old idea,' he had been saying, speaking of these departed pagan deities, 'that sacrifice and ritual feed their great beings, and that death is only the final sacrifice by which the worshipper becomes absorbed into them. The devout worshipper'—and there was a singular drive and power behind the words—'should go to his death singing, as to a wedding the wedding of his soul with the particular deity he has loved and served all his life.' He swept his tow-coloured beard with one hand, turning his shaggy head towards the window, where the moonlight lay upon the procession of shaking waves. 'It's playing the whole game, I always think, man-fashion... I remember

once, some years ago, down there off the coast by Yucatan—'

And then, before they could interfere, he told an extraordinary tale of something he had seen years ago, but told it with such a horrid earnestness of conviction—for it was dreadful, though fine, this adventure—that his listeners shifted in their wicker chairs, struck matches unnecessarily, pulled at their long glasses, and exchanged glances that attempted a smile yet did not quite achieve it. For the tale had to do with sacrifice of human life and a rather haunting pagan ceremonial of the sea, and at its close the room had changed in some indefinable manner—was not exactly as it had been before perhaps—as though the savage earnestness of the language had introduced some new element that made it less cosy, less cheerful, even less warm. A secret lust in the man's heart, born of the sea, and of his intense admiration of the pagan gods called a light into his eye not altogether pleasant.

'They were great Powers, at any rate, those ancient fellows,' Erricson went on, refilling his huge pipe bowl; 'too great to disappear altogether, though to-day they may walk the earth in another manner. I swear they're still going it—especially the—' (he hesitated for a mere second) 'the old water Powers—the Sea Gods. Terrific beggars, every one of 'em.'

'Still move the tides and raise the winds, eh?' from the Doctor.

Erricson spoke again after a moment's silence, with impressive dignity. 'And I like, too, the way they manage to keep their names before us,' he went on, with a curious eagerness that did not escape the Doctor's observation, while it clearly puzzled the soldier. 'There's old Hu, the Druid god of justice, still alive in "Hue and Cry"; there's Typhon hammering his way against us in the typhoon; there's the mighty Hurakar, serpent god of the winds, you know, shouting to us in hurricane and *ouragan*; and there's—'

'Venus still at it as hard as ever,' interrupted the Major, facetiously, though his brother did not laugh because of their host's almost sacred earnestness of manner and uncanny grimness of face. Exactly how he managed to introduce that element of gravity—of conviction—into such talk neither of his listeners quite understood, for in

discussing the affair later they were unable to pitch upon any definite detail that betrayed it. Yet there it was, alive and haunting, even distressingly so. All day he had been silent and morose, but since dusk, with the turn of the tide, in fact, these queer sentences, half mystical, half unintelligible, had begun to pour from him, till now that cabin-like room among the sand-dunes fairly vibrated with the man's emotion. And at last Major Reese, with blundering good intention, tried to shift the key from this portentous subject of sacrifice to something that might eventually lead towards comedy and laughter, and so relieve this growing pressure of melancholy and incredible things. The Viking fellow had just spoken of the possibility of the old gods manifesting themselves visibly, audibly, physically, and so the Major caught him up and made light mention of spiritualism and the so-called 'materialisation séances,' where physical bodies were alleged to be built up out of the emanations of the medium and the sitters. This crude aspect of the Supernatural was the only possible link the soldier's mind could manage. He caught his brother's eye too late, it seems, for Malcolm Reese realised by this time that something untoward was afoot, and no longer needed the memory of Sinbad's warning to keep him sharply on the look-out. It was not the first time he had seen Erricson 'caught' by the sea; but he had never known him quite so bad, nor seen his face so flushed and white alternately, nor his eyes so oddly shining. So that Major Reese's well-intentioned allusion only brought wind to fire.

The man of the sea, once Viking, roared with a rush of boisterous laughter at the comic suggestion, then dropped his voice to a sudden hard whisper, awfully earnest, awfully intense. Any one must have started at the abrupt change and the life-and-death manner of the big man. His listeners undeniably both did.

'Bunkum!' he shouted, 'bunkum, and be damned to it all! There's only one real materialisation of these immense Outer Beings possible, and that's when the great embodied emotions, which are their sphere of action'—his words became wildly incoherent, painfully struggling to get out—'derived, you see, from their honest worshippers the world over constituting their Bodies, in fact—come down into matter and get condensed, crys-

tallised into form—to claim that final sacrifice I spoke about just now, and to which any man might feel himself proud and honoured to be summoned... No dying in bed or fading out from old age, but to plunge full-blooded and alive into the great Body of the god who has deigned to descend and fetch you—'

The actual speech may have been even more rambling and incoherent than that. It came out in a torrent at white heat. Dr. Reese kicked his brother beneath the table, just in time. The soldier looked thoroughly uncomfortable and amazed, utterly at a loss to know how he had produced the storm. It rather frightened him.

'I know it because I've seen it,' went on the sea man, his mind and speech slightly more under control. 'Seen the ceremonies that brought these whopping old Nature gods down into form—seen 'em carry off a worshipper into themselves—seen that worshipper, too, go off singing and happy to his death, proud and honoured to be chosen.'

'Have you really—by George!' the Major exclaimed. 'You tell us a queer thing, Erricson'; and it was then for the fifth time that Sinbad cautiously opened the door, peeped in and silently withdrew after giving a swiftly comprehensive glance round the room.

The night outside was windless and serene, only the growing thunder of the tide near the full woke muffled echoes among the sand-dunes.

'Rites and ceremonies,' continued the other, his voice booming with a singular enthusiasm, but ignoring the interruption, 'are simply means of losing one's self by temporary ecstasy in the God of one's choice—the God one has worshipped all one's life—of being partially absorbed into his being. And sacrifice completes the process—'

'At death, you said?' asked Malcolm Reese, watching him keenly.

'Or voluntary,' was the reply that came flash-like. 'The devotee becomes wedded to his Deity—goes bang into him, you see, by fire or water or air—as by a drop from a height—according to the nature of the particular God; at-one-ment, of course. A man's death that! Fine, you know!'

The man's inner soul was on fire now. He was talking at a fearful pace, his eyes alight, his voice turned somehow into a kind of sing-song that chimed well, singularly well, with the booming of

waves outside, and from time to time he turned to the window to stare at the sea and the moon-blanching sands. And then a look of triumph would come into his face—that giant face framed by slow-moving wreaths of pipe smoke.

Sinbad entered for the sixth time without any obvious purpose, busied himself unnecessarily with the glasses and went out again, lingeringly. In the room he kept his eye hard upon his master. This time he contrived to push a chair and a heap of netting between him and the window. No one but Dr. Reese observed the manoeuvre. And he took the hint.

‘The port-holes fit badly, Erricson,’ he laughed, but with a touch of authority. ‘There’s a five-knot breeze coming through the cracks worse than an old wreck!’ And he moved up to secure the fastenings better.

‘The room is confoundedly cold,’ Major Reese put in; ‘has been for the last half-hour, too.’ The soldier looked what he felt—cold—distressed—creepy. ‘But there’s no wind really, you know,’ he added.

Captain Erricson turned his great bearded visage from one to the other before he answered; there was a gleam of sudden suspicion in his blue eyes. ‘The beggar’s got that back door open again. If he’s sent for any one, as he did once before, I swear I’ll drown him in fresh water for his impudence—or perhaps—can it be already that he expects—?’ He left the sentence incomplete and rang the bell, laughing with a boisterousness that was clearly feigned. ‘Sinbad, what’s this cold in the place? You’ve got the back door open. Not expecting any one, are you—?’

‘Everything’s shut tight, Captain. There’s a bit of a breeze coming up from the east. And the tide’s drawing in at a raging pace—’

‘We can all hear *that*. But are you expecting any one? I asked,’ repeated his master, suspiciously, yet still laughing. One might have said he was trying to give the idea that the man had some land flirtation on hand. They looked one another square in the eye for a moment, these two. It was the straight stare of equals who understood each other well.

‘Some one—might be—on the way, as it were, Captain. Couldn’t say for certain.’

The voice almost trembled. By a sharp twist of the eye, Sinbad managed to shoot a lightning and significant look at the Doctor.

‘But this cold—this freezing, damp cold in the place? Are you sure no one’s come—by the back ways?’ insisted the master. He whispered it. ‘Across the dunes, for instance?’ His voice conveyed awe and delight, both kept hard under.

‘It’s all over the house, Captain, already,’ replied the man, and moved across to put more sea-logs on the blazing fire. Even the soldier noticed then that their language was tight with allusion of another kind. To relieve the growing tension and uneasiness in his own mind he took up the word ‘house’ and made fun of it.

‘As though it were a mansion,’ he observed, with a forced chuckle, ‘instead of a mere sea-shell!’ Then, looking about him, he added: ‘But, all the same, you know, there is a kind of fog getting into the room—from the sea, I suppose; coming up with the tide, or something, eh?’ The air had certainly in the last twenty minutes turned thickish; it was not all tobacco smoke, and there was a moisture that began to precipitate on the objects in tiny, fine globules. The cold, too, fairly bit.

‘I’ll take a look round,’ said Sinbad, significantly, and went out. Only the Doctor perhaps noticed that the man shook, and was white down to the gills. He said nothing, but moved his chair nearer to the window and to his host. It was really a little bit beyond comprehension how the wild words of this old sea-dog in the full sway of his ‘sea fit’ had altered the very air of the room as well as the personal equations of its occupants, for an extraordinary atmosphere of enthusiasm that was almost splendour pulsed about him, yet vilely close to something that suggested terror! Through the armour of every-day common sense that normally clothed the minds of these other two, had crept the faint wedges of a mood that made them vaguely wonder whether the incredible could perhaps sometimes—by way of bewildering exceptions—actually come to pass. The moods of their deepest life, that is to say, were already affected. An inner, and thoroughly unwelcome, change was in progress. And such psychic disturbances once started are hard to arrest. In this case it was well on the way before either the Army or Medicine had been willing to recognise the fact. There was

something coming—coming from the sand-dunes or the sea. And it was invited, welcomed at any rate, by Erricson. His deep, volcanic enthusiasm and belief provided the channel. In lesser degree they, too, were caught in it. Moreover, it was terrific, irresistible.

And it was at this point—as the comparing of notes afterwards established—that Father Norden came in, Norden, the big man's nephew, having bicycled over from some point beyond Corfe Castle and raced along the hard Studland sand in the moonlight, and then hullood till a boat had ferried him across the narrow channel of Poole Harbour. Sinbad simply brought him in without any preliminary question or announcement. He could not resist the splendid night and the spring air, explained Norden. He felt sure his uncle could 'find a hammock' for him somewhere aft, as he put it. He did not add that Sinbad had telegraphed for him just before sundown from the coast-guard hut. Dr. Reese already knew him, but he was introduced to the Major. Norden was a member of the Society of Jesus, an ardent, not clever, and unselfish soul.

Erricson greeted him with obviously mixed feelings, and with an extraordinary sentence: 'It doesn't really matter,' he exclaimed, after a few commonplaces of talk, 'for all religions are the same if you go deep enough. All teach sacrifice, and, without exception, all seek final union by absorption into their Deity.' And then, under his breath, turning sideways to peer out of the window, he added a swift rush of half-smothered words that only Dr. Reese caught: 'The Army, the Church, the Medical Profession, and Labour—if they would only all come! What a fine result, what a grand offering! Alone—I seem so unworthy—insignificant...!'

But meanwhile young Norden was speaking before any one could stop him, although the Major did make one or two blundering attempts. For once the Jesuit's tact was at fault. He evidently hoped to introduce a new mood—to shift the current already established by the single force of his own personality. And he was not quite man enough to carry it off.

It was an error of judgment on his part. For the forces he found established in the room were too heavy to lift and alter, their impetus being

already acquired. He did his best, anyhow. He began moving with the current—it was not the first sea fit he had combated in this extraordinary personality—then found, too late, that he was carried along with it himself like the rest of them.

'Odd—but couldn't find the bungalow at first,' he laughed, somewhat hardly. 'It's got a bit of sea-fog all to itself that hides it. I thought perhaps my pagan uncle—'

The Doctor interrupted him hastily, with great energy. 'The fog *does* lie caught in these sand hollows—like steam in a cup, you know,' he put in. But the other, intent on his own procedure, missed the cue.

'—thought it was smoke at first, and that you were up to some heathen ceremony or other,' laughing in Erricson's face; 'sacrificing to the full moon or the sea, or the spirits of the desolate places that haunt sand-dunes, eh?'

No one spoke for a second, but Erricson's face turned quite radiant.

'My uncle's such a pagan, you know,' continued the priest, 'that as I flew along those deserted sands from Studland I almost expected to hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn... or see fair Thetis's tinsel-slipped feet...'

Erricson, suppressing violent gestures, highly excited, face happy as a boy's, was combing his great yellow beard with both hands, and the other two men had begun to speak at once, intent on stopping the flow of unwise allusion. Norden, swallowing a mouthful of cold soda-water, had put the glass down, spluttering over its bubbles, when the sound was first heard at the window. And in the back room the manservant ran, calling something aloud that sounded like 'It's coming, God save us, it's coming in...!' Though the Major swears some name was mentioned that he afterwards forgot—Glaucus—Proteus—Pontus or some such word. The sound itself, however, was plain enough—a kind of imperious tapping on the window-panes as of a multitude of objects. Blown sand it might have been or heavy spray or, as Norden suggested later, a great water-soaked branch of giant seaweed. Every one started up, but Erricson was first upon his feet, and had the window wide open in a twinkling. His voice roared forth over those moonlit sand-dunes and out towards the line of heavy surf ten yards below.

'All along the shore of the Ægean,' he bel-
lowed, with a kind of hoarse triumph that shook
the heart, 'that ancient cry once rang. But it was a
lie, a thumping and audacious lie. And He is not
the only one. Another still lives—and, by Posei-
don, He comes! He knows His own and His own
know Him—and His own shall go to meet Him...!'

That reference to the Ægean 'cry'! It was so
wonderful. Every one, of course, except the sol-
dier, seized the allusion. It was a comprehensive,
yet subtle, way of suggesting the idea. And mean-
while all spoke at once, shouted rather, for the
Invasion was somehow—monstrous.

'Damn it—that's a bit too much. Something's
caught my throat!' The Major, like a man drown-
ing, fought with the furniture in his amazement
and dismay. Fighting was his first instinct, of
course. 'Hurts so infernally—takes the breath,' he
cried, by way of explaining the extraordinarily vio-
lent impetus that moved him, yet half ashamed of
himself for seeing nothing he could strike. But
Malcolm Reese struggled to get between his host
and the open window, saying in tense voice some-
thing like 'Don't let him get out! Don't let him get
out!' While the shouts of warning from Sinbad in
the little cramped back offices added to the gen-
eral confusion. Only Father Norden stood quiet—
watching with a kind of admiring wonder the
expression of magnificence that had flamed into
the visage of Erricson.

'Hark, you fools! Hark!' boomed the Viking
figure, standing erect and splendid.

And through that open window, along the far-
drawn line of shore from Canford Cliffs to the
chalk bluffs of Studland Bay, there certainly ran a
sound that was no common roar of surf. It was
articulate—a message from the sea—an
announcement—a thunderous warning of
approach. No mere surf breaking on sand could
have compassed so deep and multitudinous a
voice of dreadful roaring—far out over the enter-
ing tide, yet at the same time close in along the
entire sweep of shore, shaking all the ocean, both
depth and surface, with its deep vibrations. Into
the bungalow chamber came—the SEA!

Out of the night, from the moonlit spaces
where it had been steadily accumulating, into that
little cabined room so full of humanity and
tobacco smoke, came invisibly—the Power of the

Sea. Invisible, yes, but mighty, pressed forward by
the huge draw of the moon, soft-coated with brine
and moisture—the great Sea. And with it, into the
minds of those three other men, leaped instanta-
neously, not to be denied, overwhelming sugges-
tions of water-power, the tear and strain of thou-
sand-mile currents, the irresistible pull and rush
of tides, the suction of giant whirlpools—more,
the massed and awful impetus of whole driven
oceans. The air turned salt and briny, and a welter
of seaweed clamped their very skins.

'Glaucus! I come to Thee, great God of the
deep Waterways... Father and Master!' Erricson
cried aloud in a voice that most marvellously con-
veyed supreme joy.

The little bungalow trembled as from a blow at
the foundations, and the same second the big man
was through the window and running down the
moon-lit sands towards the foam.

'God in Heaven! Did you all see *that?*' shouted
Major Reese, for the manner in which the great
body slipped through the tiny window-frame was
incredible. And then, first tottering with a sudden
weakness, he recovered himself and rushed round
by the door, followed by his brother. Sinbad,
invisible, but not inaudible, was calling aloud from
the passage at the back. Father Norden, slimmer
than the others—well controlled, too—was
through the little window before either of them
reached the fringe of beach beyond the sand-
dunes. They joined forces halfway down to the
water's edge. The figure of Erricson, towering in
the moonlight, flew before them, coasting rapidly
along the wave-line.

No one of them said a word; they tore along
side by side, Norden a trifle in advance. In front of
them, head turned seawards, bounded Erricson in
great flying leaps, singing as he ran, impossible to
overtake.

Then, what they witnessed all three witnessed;
the weird grandeur of it in the moonshine was too
splendid to allow the smaller emotions of personal
alarm, it seems. At any rate, the divergence of
opinion afterwards was unaccountably insignifi-
cant. For, on a sudden, that heavy roaring sound
far out at sea came close in with a swift plunge of
speed, followed simultaneously—accompanied,
rather—by a dark line that was no mere wave
moving: enormously, up and across, between the

sea and sky it swept close in to shore. The moonlight caught it for a second as it passed, in a cliff of her bright silver.

And Erricson slowed down, bowed his great head and shoulders, spread his arms out and...

And what? For no one of those amazed witnesses could swear exactly what then came to pass. Upon this impossibility of telling it in language they all three agreed. Only those eyeless dunes of sand that watched, only the white and silent moon overhead, only that long, curved beach of empty and deserted shore retain the complete record, to be revealed some day perhaps when a later Science shall have learned to develop the photographs that Nature takes incessantly upon her secret plates. For Erricson's rough suit of tweed went out in ribbons across the air; his figure somehow turned dark like strips of tide-sucked seaweed; something enveloped and overcame him, half shrouding him from view. He stood for one instant upright, his hair wild in the moonshine, towering, with arms again outstretched; then bent forward, turned, drew out most curiously sideways, uttering the singing sound of tumbling waters. The next instant, curving over like a falling wave, he swept along the glistening surface of the sands—and was gone. In fluid form, wave-like, his being slipped away into the Being of the Sea. A violent tumult convulsed the surface of the tide near in, but at once, and with amazing speed, passed careering away into the deeper water—far out. To his singular death, as to a wedding, Erricson had gone, singing, and well content.

'May God, who holds the sea and all its powers in the hollow of His mighty hand, take them both into Himself!' Norden was on his knees, praying fervently.

The body was never recovered... and the most curious thing of all was that the interior of the cabin, where they found Sinbad shaking with terror when they at length returned, was splashed and sprayed, almost soaked, with salt water. Up into the bigger dunes beside the bungalow, and far beyond the reach of normal tides, lay, too, a great streak and furrow as of a large invading wave, caking the dry sand. A hundred tufts of the coarse grass tussocks had been torn away.

The high tide that night, drawn by the Easter full moon, of course, was known to have been exceptional, for it fairly flooded Poole Harbour, flushing all the coves and bays towards the mouth of the Frome. And the natives up at Arne Bay and Wych always declare that the noise of the sea was heard far inland even up to the nine Barrows of the Purbeck Hills—triumphantly singing.

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