

Out of the Sea

A. C. Benson

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It was about ten o'clock on a November morning in the little village of Blea-on-the-Sands. The hamlet was made up of some thirty houses, which clustered together on a low rising ground. The place was very poor, but some old merchant of bygone days had built in a pious mood a large church, which was now too great for the needs of the place; the nave had been unroofed in a heavy gale, and there was no money to repair it, so that it had fallen to decay, and the tower was joined to the choir by roofless walls. This was a sore trial to the old priest, Father Thomas, who had grown grey there; but he had no art in gathering money, which he asked for in a shamefaced way; and the vicarage was a poor one, hardly enough for the old man's needs. So the church lay desolate.

The village stood on what must once have been an island; the little river Reddy, which runs down to the sea, there forking into two channels on the landward side; towards the sea the ground was bare, full of sand-hills covered with a short grass. Towards the land was a small wood of gnarled trees, the boughs of which were all brushed smooth by the gales; looking landward there was the green flat, in which the river ran, rising into low hills; hardly a house was visible save one or two lonely farms; two or three church towers rose above the hills at a long distance away. Indeed Blea was much cut off from the world; there was a bridge over the stream on the west side, but over the other channel was no bridge, so that to fare eastward it was requisite to go in a boat. To seaward there were wide sands, when the tide was out; when it was in, it came up nearly to the end of the village street. The people were mostly fishermen, but there were a few farmers and labourers; the boats of the fishermen lay to the east side of the village, near the river channel which gave some draught of water; and the channel was marked out by big black stakes and posts that straggled out over the sands, like awkward leaning figures, to the sea's brim.

Father Thomas lived in a small and ancient brick house near the church, with a little garden attached. He was a kindly man, much worn by age and weather, with a wise heart, and he loved the quiet life with his small flock. This morning he had come out of his house to look abroad, before he settled down to writing his sermon. He looked out to sea, and saw with a shadow of sadness the black outline of a wreck that had come ashore a week before, and over which the white waves were now breaking. The wind blew steadily from the north-east, and had a bitter poisonous chill in it, which it doubtless drew from the fields of the upper ice. The day was dark and overhung, not with cloud, but with a kind of dreary vapour that shut out the sun. Father Thomas shuddered at the wind, and drew his patched cloak round him. As he did so, he saw three figures come up to the vicarage gate. It was not a common thing for him to have visitors in the morning, and he saw with surprise that they were old Master John Grimston, the richest man in the place, half farmer and half fisherman, a dark surly old man; his wife, Bridget, a timid and frightened woman, who found life with her harsh husband a difficult business, in spite of their wealth, which, for a place like Blea, was great; and their son Henry, a silly shambling man of forty, who was his father's butt. The three walked silently and heavily, as though they came on a sad errand.

Father Thomas went briskly down to meet them, and greeted them with his accustomed cheerfulness. 'And what may I do for you?' he said. Old Master Grimston made a sort of gesture with his head as though his wife should speak; and she said in a low and somewhat husky voice, with a rapid utterance, 'There is a matter, Father, we would ask you about—are you at leisure?'

Father Thomas said, 'Ay, I am ashamed to be not more busy! Let us go in the house.' They did so; and even in the little distance to the door, the Father thought that his visitors behaved very strangely. They peered round from left to right, and once or twice Master Grimston looked sharply behind them, as though they were followed. They said nothing but 'Ay' and 'No' to the Father's talk, and bore themselves like people with a terrible fear. Father Thomas made up his mind that it was some question of money, for nothing else was wont to move Master

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Grimston's mind. So he led them into his parlour and gave them seats, and then there was a silence, while the two men continued to look furtively about them, and the wife sat with her eyes upon the priest's face. Father Thomas knew not what to make of this, till Master Grimston said harshly, 'Come wife, tell the tale and make an end; we must not take up the Father's time.'

'I hardly know how to say it, Father,' said Bridget, 'but a strange and evil thing has befallen us; there is something come to our house, and we know not what it is—but it brings fear with it.'

A sudden paleness came over her face, and she stopped, and the three exchanged a glance in which terror was visibly written. Master Grimston looked over his shoulder swiftly, and made as though to speak, yet only swallowed in his throat; but Henry said suddenly, in a loud and woeful voice: 'It is an evil beast out of the sea.' And then there followed a dreadful silence, while Father Thomas felt a sudden dread leap up in his heart, at the contagion of fear that he saw written on the faces round him. But he said with all the cheerfulness he could muster, 'Come, friends, let us not begin to talk of sea-beasts; we must have the whole tale. Mistress Grimston, I must hear the story—be content—nothing can touch us here.' The three seemed to draw a faint comfort from his words, and Bridget began:

'It was the day of the wreck, Father. John was up early before the dawn; he walked out to the sands, and Henry with him—and they were the first to see the wreck—was not that it?' At these words the father and son seemed to exchange a very swift and secret look, and both grew pale.

'John told me there was a wreck ashore, and they went presently and roused the rest of the village; and all that day they were out, saving what could be saved. Two sailors were found, both dead and pitifully battered by the sea, and they were buried, as you know, Father, in the churchyard next day; John came back about dusk and Henry with him, and we sat down to our supper. John was telling me about the wreck, as we sat beside the fire, when Henry, who was sitting apart, rose up and cried out suddenly, "What is that?"'

She paused for a moment, and Henry, who sat with face blanched, staring at his mother, said, 'Ay, I did—it ran past me suddenly.' 'Yes, but what was it?' said Father Thomas trying to smile; 'a dog or cat, perhaps?' 'It was a beast,' said Henry slowly, in a trembling voice—'a beast about the size of a goat. I never saw the like—yet I did not see it clear; I but felt the air blow, and caught a whiff of it—it was salt like the sea, but with a kind of dead smell behind.' 'Was that all you saw?' said Father Thomas; 'Perhaps you were tired and faint, and the air swam round you suddenly—I have known the like myself when weary.' 'Nay, nay,' said Henry, 'this was not like that—it was a beast, sure enough.' 'Ay, and we have seen it since,' said Bridget. 'At least I have not seen it clearly yet, but I have smelt its odour, and it turns me sick—but John and Henry have seen it often—sometimes it lies and seems to sleep, but it watches us; and then again it is merry, and will leap in a corner—and John saw it skip upon the sands near the wreck—did you not, John?' At these words the two men again exchanged a glance, and then old Master Grimston, with a dreadful look in his face, in which great anger seemed to strive with fear, said 'Nay, silly woman, it was not near the wreck, it was out to the east.' 'It matters little,' said Father Thomas, who saw well enough this was no light matter. 'I never heard the like of it. I will myself come down to your house with a holy book, and see if the thing will meet me. I know not what this is,'

he went on, whether it is a vain terror that hath hold of you; but there are spirits of evil in the world, and the sea, too, doubtless hath its monsters; and it may be that one has wandered out of the waves, like a dog strayed from his home. I dare not say, till I have met it face to face. But God gives no power to such things to hurt those who have a fair conscience.'—And here he stopped and looked at the three; Bridget sat regarding him with hope in her face; but the other two sat looking at the ground; and the priest divined in some secret way that all was not well with them. 'But I will come at once,' he said, rising, 'and I will see if I can cast out or bind the thing, whatever it be—for I am in this place as a soldier of the Lord, to fight with the works of darkness.' He took a clasped book from a table, and lifted up his hat, saying, 'Let us set forth.'

Then he said as they left the room, 'Hath it appeared today?' 'Yes, indeed,' said Henry, 'and it was ill content. It followed us as though it were angered.' 'Come,' said Father Thomas turning upon him, 'you speak thus of a thing, as you might speak of a dog—what is it like?' 'Nay,' said Henry, 'I know not; I can never see it clearly; it is like a speck in the eye—it is never there when you look upon it—it glides away very secretly; it is most like a goat, I think. It seems to be horned, and hairy; but I have seen its eyes, and they were yellow, like a flame.'

As he said these words Master Grimston went in haste to the door, and pulled it open as though to breathe the air. The others followed him and went out; but Master Grimston drew the priest aside, and said like a man in a

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mortal fear, 'Look you, Father, all this is true—the thing is a devil—and why it abides with us I know not; but I cannot live so; and unless it be cast out it will slay me—but if money be of avail, I have it in abundance.' 'Nay,' said Father Thomas, 'let there be no talk of money—perchance if I can aid you, you may give of your gratitude to God.' 'Ay, ay,' said the old man hurriedly, 'that was what I meant—there is money in abundance for God, if he will but set me free.'

So they walked very sadly together through the street. There were few folk about; the men and the children were all abroad—a woman or two came to the house door, and wondered a little to see them pass so solemnly, as though they followed a body to the grave.

Master Grimston's house was the largest in the place. It had a walled garden before it, with a strong door set in the wall. The house stood back from the road, a dark front of brick with gables; behind it the garden sloped nearly to the sands, with wooden barns and warehouses. Master Grimston unlocked the door, and then it seemed that his terror overcame him, for he would have the priest enter first. Father Thomas, with a certain apprehension of which he was ashamed, walked quickly in, and looked about him. The herbage of the garden had mostly died down in the winter, and a tangle of sodden stalks lay over the beds. A flagged path edged with box led up to the house, which seemed to stare at them from its dark windows with a sort of steady gaze.

Master Grimston fastened the door behind them, and they went all together, keeping close to each other, up to the house, the door of which opened upon a big parlour or kitchen, sparely furnished, but very clean and comfortable. Some vessels of metal glittered on a rack. There were chairs, ranged round the open fireplace. There was no sound except the wind which buffeted in the chimney. It looked a quiet and homely place, and Father Thomas grew ashamed of his fears.

'Now,' said he in his firm voice, 'though I am your guest here, I will appoint what shall be done.

We will sit here together, and talk as cheerfully as we may, till we have dined. Then, if nothing appears to us,—and he crossed himself—I will go round the house, into every room, and see if we can track the thing to its lair; I will abide with you till evensong; and then I will soon return, and sleep here to-night. Even if the thing be wary, and dares not to meet the power of the Church in the daytime, perhaps it will venture out at night; and I am prepared to face it. So come, good people, and be comforted.'

So they sat together; and Father Thomas talked of many things, and told some old legends of saints; and they dined, though without much cheer; and still nothing appeared. Then, after dinner, Father Thomas decided to view the house. So he took his Bible, and they went from room to room. On the ground floor there were several chambers not used, which they entered in turn, but saw nothing; on the upper floor was a large room where Master Grimston and his wife slept; and a further room for Henry, and a guest-chamber in which the priest was to sleep; and a room where a servant-maid slept. And now the day began to darken and to turn to evening, and Father Thomas felt a shadow grow in his mind. There came into his head a verse of Scripture about a spirit who found a house 'empty, swept and garnished,' and called his fellows to enter in.

At the end of the passage was a locked door; and Father Thomas said: 'This is the last room—let us enter.' 'Nay, there is no need to do that,' said Master Grimston in a kind of haste; 'it leads nowhere—it is but a store room.' 'It would be a pity to leave it unvisited,' said the Father—and as he said the word, there came a kind of stirring from within. 'A rat doubtless,' said the Father, striving with a sudden sense of fear; but the pale faces round him told another tale. 'Come, Master Grimston, let us be done with this,' said Father Thomas decisively; 'the hour of vespers draws nigh.' So Master Grimston slowly drew out a key and unlocked the door, and Father Thomas marched in. It was a simple place enough. There were shelves on which various household matters lay, boxes and jars, with twine and cordage. On the ground stood chests.

There were some clothes hanging on pegs, and in a corner was a heap of garments, piled up. On one of the chests stood a box of rough deal, and from the corner of it dripped water, which lay in a little pool on the floor. Master Grimston went hurriedly to the box and pushed it further to the wall. As he did so, a kind of sound came from Henry's lips. Father Thomas turned and looked at him; he stood pale and strengthless, his eyes fixed on the corner—at the same moment something dark and shapeless seemed to slip past the group, and there came to the nostrils of Father Thomas a strange sharp smell, as of the sea, only there was a taint within it, like the smell of corruption.

They all turned and looked at Father Thomas together, as though seeking comfort from his presence. He, hardly knowing what he did, and in the grasp of a terrible fear, fumbled with his book; and opening it, read the

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first words that his eye fell upon, which was the place where the Blessed Lord, beset with enemies, said that if He did but pray to His Father, He should send Him forthwith legions of angels to encompass Him. And the verse seemed to the priest so like a message sent instantly from heaven that he was not a little comforted.

But the thing, whatever the reason was, appeared to them no more at that time. Yet the thought of it lay very heavy on Father Thomas's heart. In truth he had not in the bottom of his mind believed that he would see it, but bad trusted in his honest life and his sacred calling to protect him. He could hardly speak for some minutes,—moreover the horror of the thing was very great—and seeing him so grave, their terrors were increased, though there was a kind of miserable joy in their minds that some one, and he a man of high repute, should suffer with them.

Then Father Thomas, after a pause—they were now in the parlour—said, speaking very slowly, that they were under a sore affliction of Satan, and that they must withstand it with a good courage—'And look you,' he added, turning with a great sternness to the thee, 'if there be any mortal sin upon your hearts, see that you confess it and be shriven speedily—for while such a thing lies upon the heart, so long hath Satan power to hurt—otherwise have no fear at all.'

Then Father Thomas slipped out to the garden, and hearing the bell pulled for vespers, he went to the church, and the three would go with him, because they would not be left alone. So they went together; by this time the street was fuller, and the servant-maid had told tales, so that there was much talk in the place about what was going on. None spoke with them as they went, but at every corner people could be seen talking, and, as the Father approached a silence would fall upon a group, so that they knew that their terrors were on every tongue. There was but a handful of worshippers in the church, which was dark, save for the light on Father Thomas' book. He read the holy service swiftly and courageously, but his face was very pale and grave in the light of the candle. When the vespers were over, and he had put off his robe, he said that he would go back to his house, and gather what he needed for the night, and that they should wait for him at the churchyard gate. So he strode off to his vicarage. But as he shut the door, he saw a dark figure come running up the garden; he waited with a fear in his mind, but in a moment he saw that it was Henry, who came up breathless, and said that he must speak with the Father alone.

Father Thomas knew that some dark secret was to be told him. So he led Henry into the parlour and seated himself, and said, 'Now, my son, speak boldly.' So there was an instant's silence, and Henry slipped on to his knees.

Then in a moment Henry with a sob began to tell his tale. He said that on the day of the wreck his father had roused him very early in the dawn, and had told him to put on his clothes and come silently, for he thought there was a wreck ashore. His father carried a spade in his hand, he knew not then why. They went down to the tide, which was moving out very fast, and had left but an inch or two of water on the sands. There was little light, but, when they had walked a little, they saw the black hull of a ship before them, on the edge of the deeper water, the waves driving over it; and then all at once they came upon the body of a man lying on his face on the sand. There was no sign of life in him, but he clasped a bag in his hand that was heavy, and the pocket of his coat was bulging; and there lay, moreover, some glittering things about him that seemed to be coins. They lifted the body up, and his father stripped the coat from the man, and then bade Henry dig a hole in the sand, which he presently did, though the sand and water oozed fast into it. Then his father, who had been stooping down, gathering something up from the sand, raised the body up, and laid it in the hole, and bade Henry cover it. And so he did till it was nearly hidden. Then came a horrible thing; the sand in the hole began to move and stir, and presently a hand was put out with clutching fingers; and Henry dropped the spade, and said, 'There is life in him,' but his father seized the spade, and shovelled the sand into the hole with a kind of silent fury, and trampled it over and smoothed it down—and then he gathered up the coat and the bag, and handed Henry the spade. By this time the town was astir, and they saw, very faintly, a man run along the shore eastward; so, making a long circuit to the west, they returned; his father had put the spade away and taken the coat upstairs; and then he went out with Henry, and told all he could find that there was a wreck ashore.

The priest heard the story with a fierce shame and anger, and turning to Henry he said, 'But why did you not resist your father, and save the poor sailor?' 'I dared not,' said Henry shudder-ing, 'though I would have done so if I could; but my father has a power over me, and I am used to obeying him.' Then said the priest, 'This is a dark matter. But you have told the story bravely, and now will I shrive you, my son.' So he gave him shrift. Then he

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said to Henry, 'And have you seen aught that would connect the beast that visits you with this thing?' 'Ay, that I have,' said Henry, 'for I watched it with my father skip and leap in the water over the place where the man lies buried.' Then the priest said, 'Your father must tell me the tale too, and he must make submission to the law.' 'He will not,' said Henry. 'Then will I compel him,' said the priest, 'Not out of my mouth,' said Henry, 'or he will slay me too.' And then the priest saw that he was in an awkward position for he could not use the words of confession of one man to convict another of his sin. So he gathered his things in haste, and walked back to the church; but Henry went another way, saying 'I made excuse to come away, and said I went elsewhere; but I fear my father much—he sees very deep; and I would not have him suspect me of having made confession.'

Then the Father met the other two at the church gate; and they went down to the house in silence, the Father pondering heavily; and at the door Henry joined them, and it seemed to the Father that old Master Grimston regarded him not. So they entered the house in silence, and ate in silence, listening earnestly for any sound. And the Father looked oft on Master Grimston, who ate and drank and said nothing, never raising his eyes. But once the Father saw him laugh secretly to himself, so that the blood ran cold in the Father's veins, and he could hardly contain himself from accusing him. Then the Father read prayers, and prayed earnestly against the evil, and that they should open their hearts to God, if he would show them why this misery came upon them.

Then they went to bed; and Henry asked that he might sleep in the priest's room, which he willingly granted. And so the house was dark, and they made as though they would sleep; but the Father could not sleep, and he heard Henry weeping silently to himself like a little child.

But at last the Father slept—how long he knew not—and suddenly woke from his sleep with a horror of darkness all about him, and he knew that there was some evil thing abroad. He looked upon the room. He heard Henry mutter heavily in his sleep as though there was a dark terror upon him; and then, in the light of the dying embers, the Father saw a thing rise upon the hearth, as though it had slept there, and woken to stretch itself. And then in the half-light it seemed softly to gambol and play; but whereas when an innocent beast does this it seems a fond and pretty sight, the Father thought he had never seen so ugly a sight as the beast gambolling all by itself, as if it could not contain its own dreadful joy; it looked viler and more wicked every moment; then, too, there spread in the room the sharp scent of the sea, with the foul smell underneath it, that gave the Father a deadly sickness; he tried to pray, but no words would come, and he felt indeed that the evil was too strong for him. Presently the beast desisted from its play, and looking wickedly about it, came near to the Father's bed, and seemed to put up its hairy forelegs upon it; he could see its narrow and obscene eyes, which burned with a dull yellow light, and were fixed upon him. And now the Father thought that his end was near, for he could stir neither hand nor foot, and the sweat ran down his brow; but he made a mighty effort, and in a voice which shocked himself, so dry and husky and withal of so loud and screaming a tone it was, he said three holy words. The beast gave a great quiver of rage, but it dropped down on the floor, and in a moment was gone. Then Henry woke, and raising himself on his arm, said something; but there broke out in the house a great outcry and the stamping of feet, which seemed very fearful in the silence of the night. The priest leapt out of his bed all dizzy, and made a light, and ran to the door, and went out, crying whatever words came to his head. The door of Master Grimston's room was open, and a strange and strangling sound came forth; the Father made his way in, and found Master Grimston lying upon the floor, his wife bending over him; he lay still, breathing pitifully, and every now and then a shudder ran through him. In the room there seemed a strange and shadowy tumult going on; but the Father saw that no time could be lost, and kneeling down beside Master Grimston, he prayed with all his might.

Presently Master Grimston ceased to struggle and lay still, like a man who had come out of a sore conflict. Then he opened his eyes, and the Father stopped his prayers, and looking very hard at him he said, 'My son, the time is very short—confess your sins.' Then Master Grimston, rolling his haggard eyes upon the group, twice strove to speak and could not; but the third time the Father, bending down his head, heard him say in a thin voice, that seemed to float from a long way off, 'I slew him . . . my sin.' Then the Father swiftly gave him shrift, and as he said the last word, Master Grimston's head fell over on the side, and the Father said, 'He is gone.' And Bridget broke out into a terrible cry, and fell upon Henry's neck, who had entered unseen.

Then the Father bade Henry lead her away, and put the poor body on the bed; as he did so he noticed that the face of the dead man was strangely bruised and battered, as though it had been stamped upon by the cloven hoofs of some beast. Then Father Thomas knelt, and prayed until the light came filtering in through the shutters and the cocks crowed in the village, and presently it was day. But that night the Father learnt strange secrets, and

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something of the dark purpose of God was revealed to him.

In the morning there came one to find the priest, and told him that another body had been thrown up on the shore, which was strangely smeared with sand, as though it had been rolled over and over in it; and the Father took order for its burial.

Then the priest had a long talk with Bridget and Henry. He found them sitting together, and she held her son's hand and smoothed his hair, as though he had been a little child; and Henry sobbed and wept, but Bridget was very calm. 'He hath told me all,' she said, 'and we have decided that he shall do whatever you bid him; must he be given to justice?' and she looked at the priest very pitifully. 'Nay, nay,' said the priest. 'I hold not Henry to account for the death of the man; it was his father's sin, who hath made heavy atonement—the secret shall be buried in our hearts.'

Then Bridget told him how she had waked suddenly out of her sleep, and heard her husband cry out; and that then followed a dreadful kind of struggling, with the scent of the sea over all; and then he had all at once fallen to the ground and she had gone to him—and that then the priest had come.

Then Father Thomas said with tears that God had shown them deep things and visited them very strangely.

Then lastly he went with Henry to the store-room; and there, in the box that had dripped with water, lay the coat of the dead man, full of money, and the bag of money too; and Henry would have cast it back into the sea, but the priest said that this might not be, but that it should be bestowed plentifully upon shipwrecked mariners unless the heirs should be found. But the ship appeared to be a foreign ship, and no search ever revealed whence the money had come.

Master Grimston was found to have left much wealth. But Bridget sold the house and the land, and it mostly went to rebuild the church. Then Bridget and Henry moved to the vicarage and served Father Thomas faithfully, and they guarded their secret.

Now the beast troubled those of whom I write no more; but it is easier to raise up evil than to lay it; and it is said to this day that a man or a woman with an evil thought in their hearts may see on a certain evening in November, at the ebb of the tide, a goatlike thing wade in the water, snuffing at the sand, as though it sought but found not.