

The Lure of the Sea

One day, many, many years ago, Jake found a strange object in a part of the garden he rarely went into. He wondered what it was and why he had never seen it before.

It reminded him a bit of snail shells he had found. But the shape was wrong and it was bigger even than the shells of Roman snails he had found where, they said, the old Roman road had been. He wondered what it was as he turned it around in his hands, examining it. Then, for what reason he did not know, he held it up to his ear. He heard a sound he had never heard before and it stirred something inside him. It stirred a longing for something he felt he had lost, but he did not know what it was.

Back in the house, he asked his parents what it was.

"It looks a bit like a snail shell," he said, "but 'tis bigger than any I've seen and more pointy."

His parents looked a bit concerned, and Dad replied: "'Tain't a snail shell, Jake. 'Tis a *sea shell*."

"A sea shell?" queried Jake.

"That's right," said Mum. "The shell of some critter that lived in the sea - that vast water that surrounds the land. 'Tis full of wondrous and fearsome critters, the sea is."

"Don't believe everything your Mum says," laughed Dad. "I don't think the critter that lived in that shell was too fearsome."

"Oh," said Jake, "but when I holds the shell to my ear I hears a strange sound."

"That," said Dad, "is the noise of the sea trapped inside the shell."

"Yes," said Mum, "'tis the sea calling you - 'tis the lure of the sea."

"The lure of the sea?" said Jake. "What do you mean?"

"Every so often in our family," said Dad, "some one gets the lure of the sea and they're never happy till they gets to the sea."

"Yes," said Mum, "the last one to be afflicted was your Dad's uncle Arthur. He was terribly fretful till he went to sea."

"And," continued Dad, "I reckons *you* ain't going to be happy till you gets to the sea."

"And we loses you," Mum added, beginning to sob.

"You ain't going to lose me," said Jake, "I wants to stay with you both. I don't want to go to the sea - specially if 'tis as frightful as Mum says."

"Oh, we are just a pair of old land lovers," said Mum, "who've hardly ever left the village. The furthest we've ever been is Trantchester. What do we know about the sea except old wives' tales?"

"Mum's right," said Dad. "We knows nothing about the sea. But I reckon 'tis the lure of the sea that's calling you."

Jake protested he would never leave Mum and Dad, but they knew he would. As the days went by Jake became more and more moody till at last Mum said:

"We can't go on like this, Jake. You ain't going to be happy till you sees the sea. 'Tis luring you - to what, I knows not. But what I knows is that you ain't going to be happy till you're there."

"'Tis right," said Dad. "And on market day I'm going to take you into Trantchester and see how what we can do."

So next market day they all went off into town as they often did. But this time they were more solemn than usual and Jake had packed things to take away and Mum had made sure he had plenty of things to eat.

In Trantchester Dad went to see a friend of his who worked in the Town Hall and explained that Jake wanted to get to the sea.

"Whatever for?" asked Dad's friend.

"I don't rightly know," said Dad. "But he's been afflicted by the lure of the sea; he won't be happy till he gets there."

"All right," his friend said. "Rivers do flow to the sea. So if he follows the River Trant he'll get to the sea, I reckon."

"I reckon that's so," said Dad.

"What I'll do," said Dad's friend, "is to write him out something official like that he can carry with him and show people in the towns and villages along the way. Young Jake's old enough now, isn't he, to be able to do a bit of odd jobbing along the way to earn his keep."

"He can do that," agreed Dad.

So it was arranged. It was a tearful parting when Mum and Dad left to return to the village. Jake spent the night at Dad's friend's house and set out the next day.

It was mid summer and pleasant walking along by the river. He arrived in a small village before lunch and stopped there awhile. Folks were curious to see him, and he showed them his official piece of paper and they thought he must be someone important but could not understand why he would want to be going to the sea.

In the afternoon he pushed onto the next village where he spent the night in its one and only inn. By the next day he was beginning to run out of provisions his Mum had given him, so when he arrived at the next village he looked for odd jobs to earn money for food and lodging. His "official" document helped, as it meant he was not a vagabond.

So he continued making his way along the river from village to village. As he had to work his passage, so to speak, progress was not fast. People in the villages he went through could not understand why he wanted to reach the sea. "No good will come of it," some muttered.

Then one day he came to a village where the villagers were not surprised. "Good luck," they said and wished him well.

This he found in the next villages along. Then one day he saw birds he did not recognize flying and swooping. They were quite large, like crows, except they were white with black markings on their heads and wings. They had harsh, squawking calls, as unmelodious as crows but quite different from a crow's croaking caw. He wondered what they were and asked the next person he came across.

"Why," said the person, "they're sea gulls, of course. Come up river a bit, I grant you, but we often sees them here. 'Tis only a day or so's walking from the sea after all."

Jake explained to the man that he had never seen the sea and had not known about sea gulls. The man was a bit surprised but wished him well on his journey.

The next day Jake noticed that the river, which of course he had noticed all along getting wider, was now behaving oddly. At one time it was high up almost as though it might overflow its bank, then it gradually got lower and lower, leaving a muddy bank which attracted all sorts of birds Jake had never seen

before.

When he got to the next village Jake asked what had happened to the river. "Was it draining away?"

The villagers laughed. "Draining away? Why, ain't you ever heard of tides? When the tide ebbs, the river gets lower, then when it turns and the tide is on the flood the river rises again."

Jake admitted that he had never heard of tides, and did not know what they did. They tried to explain to Jake and he tried to understand what they said, but he still found it rather puzzling. But he realized it did mean he must be getting closer to the sea; and he was reassured as he saw the river beginning to rise again.

The next day as he walked along marveling at the way the river behaved and at the many new birds he saw, he noticed something else. There was a salty tang to the air; he knew instinctively that it must be the sea and grew excited. That night he could scarcely sleep for excitement and on the following day he saw it: the sea - and a bustling harbor, and men busy and shouting, and the ships with their tall masts at anchor. Jake felt he had come home.

In the harbor he told his story. When he mentioned his great uncle Arthur, one of the old sailors there said: "I knowed old Arthur. He was a good sailor, he was. We had some good times together."

The others chuckled away and said: "Why, you must have the sea in your blood."

And he had, so to speak. Jake became a sailor, a very good one. After a few years he became captain of his own ship and became wealthy. But he never forgot his Mum and Dad back in the village.

He wrote to them often and visited them whenever he could, which became easier after the Trant canal had been built. He even managed to persuade his Mum and Dad to come down the canal to see his ship in the harbor, though Mum was worried about the "critters in the canal" and she would not set foot on his ship. Dad, however, did have a look and they were both pleased Jake was doing so well, though they never understood the lure of the sea.