

# Isaac and the Parson of Brönö

By Jonas Lie



**The Parson of Brönö**

*(Story of the Sea-boot)*

In Helgeland there was once a fisherman called Isaac. One day when he was out halibut fishing he felt something heavy on the lines. He drew up, and, lo! there was a sea-boot.

“That *was* a rum ’un!” said he, and he sat there a long time looking at it.

It looked just as if it might be the boot of his brother who had gone down in the great storm last winter on his way home from fishing.

There was still something *inside* the boot too, but he durst not look to see what it was, nor did he exactly know what to do with the sea-boot either.

He didn’t want to take it home and frighten his mother, nor did he quite fancy chucking it back into the sea again; so he made up his mind to go to the parson of Brönö, and beg him to bury it in a Christian way.

“But I can’t bury a sea-boot,” quoth the parson.

The fellow scratched his head. “Na, na!” said he.

Then he wanted to know how much there ought to be of a human body before it could have the benefit of Christian burial.

“That I cannot exactly tell you,” said the parson; “a tooth, or a finger, or hair clippings is not enough to read the burial service over. Anyhow, there ought to be so much remaining that one

can see that a soul has been in it. But to read Holy Scripture over a toe or two in a sea-boot! Oh, no! that would never do!”

But Isaac watched his opportunity, and managed to get the sea-boot into the churchyard on the sly, all the same.

And home he went.

It seemed to him that he had done the best he could. It was better, after all, that *something* of his brother should lie so near God’s house than that he should have heaved the boot back into the black sea again.

But, towards autumn, it so happened that, as he lay out among the skerries on the look-out for seals, and the ebb-tide drove masses of tangled seaweed towards him, he fished up a knife-belt and an empty sheath with his oar-blade.

He recognised them at once as his brother’s.

The tarred wire covering of the sheath had been loosened and bleached by the sea; and he remembered quite well how, when his brother had sat and cobbled away at this sheath, he had chatted and argued with him about the leather for his belt which he had taken from an old horse which they had lately killed.

They had bought the buckle together oven at the storekeeper’s on the Saturday, and mother had sold bilberries, and capercaillies, and three pounds of wool. They had got a little tipsy, and had had such fun with the old fishwife at the headland, who had used a bast-mat for a sail.

So he took the belt away with him, and said nothing about it. It was no good giving pain to no purpose, thought he.

But the longer the winter lasted the more he bothered himself with odd notions about what the parson had said. And he knew not what he should do in case he came upon something else, such as another boot, or something that a squid, or a fish, or a crab, or a Greenland shark might have bitten off. He began to be really afraid of rowing out in the sea there among the skerries.

And yet, for all that, it was as though he were constantly being drawn thither by the hope of finding, perhaps, so much of the remains as might show the parson where the soul had been, and so move him to give them a Christian burial.

He took to walking about all by himself in a brown study.

And then, too, he had such nasty dreams.

His door flew open in the middle of the night and let in a cold sea-blast, and it seemed to him as if his brother were limping about the room, and yelling that he must have his foot again, the Draugs were pulling and twisting him about so.

For hours and hours he stood over his work without laying a hand to it, and blankly staring at the fifth wall.<sup>1</sup>

At last he felt as if he were really going out of his wits, because of the great responsibility he had taken upon himself by burying the foot in the churchyard.

He didn’t want to pitch it into the sea again, but it couldn’t lie in the churchyard either.

It was borne in upon him so cleanly that his brother could not be among the blessed, and he kept going about and thinking of all that might be lying and drifting and floating about among the skerries.

So he took it upon himself to dredge there, and lay out by the sea-shore with ropes and dredging gear. But all that he dredged up was sea-wrack, and weeds, and star-fish, and like rubbish.

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<sup>1</sup> *I.e.*, at nothing—a house having usually only *four* walls.

One evening as he sat out there by the rocks trying his luck at fishing, and the line with the stone and all the hooks upon it shot down over the boat's side, the last of the hooks caught in one of his eyes, and right to the bottom went the eye.

There was no use dredging for *that*, and he could see to row home very well without it.

In the night he lay with a bandage over his eye, wakeful for pain, and he thought and thought till things looked as black as they could be to him. Was there ever any one in the world in such a hobble as he?

All at once such an odd thing happened.

He thought he was looking about him, deep down in the sea, and he saw the fishes flitting and snapping about among the sea-wrack and seaweeds round about the fishing line. They bit at the bait, and wriggled and tried to slip off, first a cod, and then a hug, and then a dog-fish. Last of all, a haddock came and stood still there, and chewed the water a little as if it were tasting before swallowing it.

And he saw there what he couldn't take his eyes off. It looked like the back of a man in leather clothes, with one sleeve caught beneath the grapnel of a *Femböring*.

Then a heavy white halibut came up and gulped down the hook, and it became pitch dark.

"You must let the big halibut slip off again when you pull up to-morrow," something said, "the hook tears my mouth so. 'Tis of no use searching except in the evening, when the tide in the sound is on the ebb."

Next day he went off, and took a piece of a tombstone from the churchyard to dredge the bottom with; and in the evening, when the tide had turned, he lay out in the sound again and searched.

Immediately he hauled up the grapnel of a *Femböring*, the hooks of which were clinging to a leather fisherman's jacket, with the remains of an arm in it.

The fishes had got as much as they could of it out of the leather jacket.

Off to the parson he rowed straightway.

"What! read the service oven a washed-out old leather jacket!" cried the parson of Brönö.

"I'll throw the sea-boot into the bargain," answered Isaac.

"Waifs and strays and sea salvage should be advertised in the church porch," thundered the parson.

Then Isaac looked straight into the parson's face.

"The sea-boot has been heavy enough on my conscience," said he; "and I'm sure I don't want to be saddled with the leather jacket as well."

"I tell you I don't mean to cast consecrated earth to the winds," said the parson; he was getting wroth.

Isaac scratched his head again. "Na, na!" said he.

And with that he had to be content and go home.

But Isaac had neither rest nor repose, there lay such a grievous load upon him,

In the night time he again saw the big white halibut. It was going round and round so slowly and sadly in the selfsame circle at the bottom of the sea. It was just as if some invisible sort of netting was all round it, and the whole time it was striving to slip through the meshes.

Isaac lay there, and gazed and gazed till his blind eye ached again.

No sooner was he out dredging next day, and had let down the ropes, than an ugly heavy squid came up, and spouted up a black jet right in front of him.

But one evening he let the boat drive, as the current chose to take it, outside the skerries, but within the islands. At last it stopped at a certain spot, as if it were moored fast, and there it grew wondrously still; there was not a bird in the air on a sign of life in the sea.

All at once up came a big bubble right in front of the jib, and as it burst he heard a deep heavy sigh.

But Isaac had his own opinion about what he had seen.

“And the parson of Brönö shall see to the funeral too, or I’ll know the reason why,” said he.

From henceforth it was bruited abroad that he had second sight, and saw many things about him which were hid from other folks.

He could tell exactly where the fish were to be found thick together by the sea-banks, and where they were not; and whenever they asked him about such things, he would say—

“If I don’t know it, my brother does.” Now one day it chanced that the parson of Brönö had to go out along the coast on a pious errand, and Isaac was one of them who had to row him thither.

Off they went with a rattling good breeze.

The parson got quickly there, and was not very long about his business, for next day he had to hold divine service in his own parish church.

“The firth seems to me a bit roughish,” said he, “and ’tis getting towards evening; but as we have come hither, I should think we could get back again also.”

They had not got very far on their homeward journey when the rising gale began to whistle and whine, so that they had to take in four clews.

And away they went, with the sea-scud and the snow-flakes flying about their ears, while the waxing rollers rose big as houses.

The parson of Brönö had never been out in such weather before. They sailed right into the rollers, and they sailed out again.

Soon it became black night.

The sea shone like mountain snow-fields, and the showers of snow and spray rather waxed than waned.

Isaac had just taken in the fifth clew also when one of the planks amidships gave way, so that the sea foamed in, and the parson of Brönö and the crew leaped upon the upper deck, and bawled out that the boat was going down.

“I don’t think she’ll founder this voyage,” said Isaac; and he remained sitting where he was at the rudder.

But as the moon peeped forth from behind a hail-shower, they saw that a strange foremastman was standing in the scuppers, and baling the water out of the boat as fast as it poured in.

“I didn’t know that I had hired that fellow yonder,” said the parson of Brönö; “he seems to me to be baling with a sea-boot; and it also seems to me as if he had neither breeches nor skin upon his legs, and the upper part of him is neither more nor less than an empty fluttering leather jacket.”

“Parson has seen him before, I think,” said Isaac.

Then the parson of Brönö grew angry.

“By virtue of my sacred office,” said he, “I adjure him to depart from amidships.”

“Na, na!” answered Isaac; “and can parson also answer for the plank that has burst?”

Then the parson bethought him of the evil case he was in.

“The man seems to me mortally strong, and we have great need of him,” said he; “nor is it any great sin, methinks, to help a servant of God’s over the sea. But I should like to know what he wants in return.”

The billows burst, and the blast howled around him.

“Only some two or three shovels of earth on a rotten sea-boot and a mouldy skin-jacket,” said Isaac.

“If you’re able to gad about again here below, I suppose there’s nothing against your being able to enter into bliss again, for all that I know,” bawled the parson of Brönö; “and you shall have your shovelfuls of earth into the bargain.”

Just as he said this, the water within the skerries all at once became quite smooth, and the parson’s boat drove high and dry upon the sandbank, so that the mast cracked.