

The Loot of Bombasharna

By Lord Dunsany

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Things had grown too hot for Shard, captain of pirates, on all the seas that he knew. The ports of Spain were closed to him; they knew him in San Domingo; men winked in Syracuse when he went by; the two Kings of the Sicilies never smiled within an hour of speaking of him; there were huge rewards for his head in every capital city, with pictures of it for identification—and all the pictures were unflattering. Therefore Captain Shard decided that the time had come to tell his men the secret.

Riding off Teneriffe one night, he called them all together. He generously admitted that there were things in the past that might require explanation: the crowns that the Princes of Aragon had sent to their nephews the Kings of the two Americas had certainly never reached their Most Sacred Majesties. Where, men might ask, were the eyes of Captain Stobbud? Who had been burning towns on the Patagonian seaboard? Why should such a ship as theirs choose pearls for cargo? Why so much blood on the decks and so many guns? And where was the Nancy, the Lark, or the Margaret Belle? Such questions as these, he urged, might be asked by the inquisitive, and if counsel for the defence should happen to be a fool, and unacquainted with the ways of the sea, they might become involved in troublesome legal formulae. And Bloody Bill, as they rudely called Mr. Gagg, a member of the crew, looked up at the sky, and said that it was a windy night and looked like hanging. And some of those present thoughtfully stroked their necks while Captain Shard unfolded to them his plan. He said the time was come to quit the Desperate Lark, for she was too well known to the navies of four kingdoms, and a fifth was getting to know her, and others had suspicions. (More cutters than even Captain Shard suspected were already looking for her jolly black flag with its neat skull—and—crossbones in yellow.) There was a little archipelago that he knew of on the wrong side of the Sargasso Sea; there were but thirty islands there, bare, ordinary islands, but one of them floated. He had noticed it years ago, and had gone ashore and never told a soul, but had quietly anchored it with the anchor of his ship to the bottom of the sea, which just there was profoundly deep, and had made the thing the secret of his life, determining to marry and settle down there if it ever became impossible to earn his livelihood in the usual way at sea. When first he saw it it was drifting slowly, with the wind in the tops of the trees; but if the cable had not rusted away, it should be still where he left it, and they would make a rudder and hollow out cabins below, and at night they would hoist sails to the trunks of the trees and sail wherever they liked.

And all the pirates cheered, for they wanted to set their feet on land again somewhere where the hangman would not come and jerk them off it at once; and bold men though they were, it was a strain seeing so many lights coming their way at night. Even then ... ! But it swerved away again and was lost in the mist.

And Captain Shard said that they would need to get provisions first, and he, for one, intended to marry before he settled down; and so they should have one more fight before they left the ship, and sack the sea-coast city of Bombasharna and take from it provisions for several years, while he himself would marry the Queen of the South. And again the pirates cheered, for often they had seen seacoast Bombasharna, and had always envied its opulence from the sea.

So they set all sail, and often altered their course, and dodged and fled from strange lights till dawn appeared, and all day long fled southwards. And by evening they saw the silver spires of slender Bombasharna, a city that was the glory of the coast. And in the midst of it, far away though they were, they saw the palace of the Queen of the South; and it was so full of windows all looking toward the sea, and they were so full of light, both from the

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sunset that was fading upon the water and from candles that maids were lighting one by one, that it looked far off like a pearl, shimmering still in its haliotis shell, still wet from the sea.

So Captain Shard and his pirates saw it, at evening over the water, and thought of rumours that said that Bombasharna was the loveliest city of the coasts of the world, and that its palace was lovelier even than Bombasharna; but for the Queen of the South rumour had no comparison. Then night came down and hid the silver spires, and Shard slipped on through the gathering darkness until by midnight the piratic ship lay under the seaward battlements.

And at the hour when sick men mostly die, and sentries on lonely ramparts stand to arms, exactly half-an-hour before dawn, Shard, with two rowing boats and half his crew, with craftily muffled oars, landed below the battlements. They were through the gateway of the palace itself before the alarm was sounded, and as soon as they heard the alarm Shard's gunners at sea opened upon the town, and before the sleepy soldiery of Bombasharna knew whether the danger was from the land or the sea, Shard had successfully captured the Queen of the South. They would have looted all day that silver sea-coast city, but there appeared with dawn suspicious topsails just along the horizon. Therefore the captain with his Queen went down to the shore at once and hastily re-embarked and sailed away with what loot they had hurriedly got, and with fewer men, for they had to fight a good deal to get back to the boat. They cursed all day the interference of those ominous ships which steadily grew nearer. There were six ships at first, and that night they slipped away from all but two; but all the next day those two were still in sight, and each of them had more guns than the Desperate Lark. All the next night Shard dodged about the sea, but the two ships separated and one kept him in sight, and the next morning it was alone with Shard on the sea, and his archipelago was just in sight, the secret of his life.

And Shard saw he must fight, and a bad fight it was, and yet it suited Shard's purpose, for he had more merry men when the fight began than he needed for his island. And they got it over before any other ship came up; and Shard put all adverse evidence out of the way, and came that night to the islands near the Sargasso Sea.

Long before it was light the survivors of the crew were peering at the sea, and when dawn came there was the island, no bigger than two ships, straining hard at its anchor, with the wind in the tops of the trees.

And then they landed and dug cabins below and raised the anchor out of the deep sea, and soon they made the island what they called shipshape. But the Desperate Lark they sent away empty under full sail to sea, where more nations than Shard suspected were watching for her, and where she was presently captured by an admiral of Spain, who, when he found none of that infamous crew on board to hang by the neck from the yard-arm, grew ill through disappointment.

And Shard on his island offered the Queen of the South the choicest of the old wines of Provence, and for adornment gave her Indian jewels looted from galleons with treasure for Madrid, and spread a table where she dined in the sun, while in some cabin below he bade the least coarse of his mariners sing; yet always she was morose and moody towards him, and often at evening he was heard to say that he wished he knew more about the ways of Queens. So they lived for years, the pirates mostly gambling and drinking below, Captain Shard trying to please the Queen of the South, and she never wholly forgetting Bombasharna. When they needed new provisions they hoisted sails on the trees, and as long as no ship came in sight they scudded before the wind, with the water rippling over the beach of the island; but as soon as they sighted a ship the sails came down, and they became an ordinary uncharted rock.

They mostly moved by night; sometimes they hovered off sea-coast towns as of old, sometimes they boldly entered river-mouths, and even attached themselves for a while to the mainland, whence they would plunder the neighbourhood and escape again to sea. And if a ship was wrecked on their island of a night they said it was all to the good. They grew very crafty in seamanship, and cunning in what they did, for they knew that any news of the Desperate Lark's old crew would bring hangmen from the interior running down to every port.

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And no one is known to have found them out or to have annexed their island; but a rumour arose and passed from port to port and every place where sailors meet together, and even survives to this day, of a dangerous uncharted rock anywhere between Plymouth and the Horn, which would suddenly rise in the safest track of ships, and upon which vessels were supposed to have been wrecked, leaving, strangely enough, no evidence of their doom. There was a little speculation about it at first, till it was silenced by the chance remark of a man old with wandering: "It is one of the mysteries that haunt the sea."

And almost Captain Shard and the Queen of the South lived happily ever after, though still at evening those on watch in the trees would see their captain sit with a puzzled air or hear him mutter now and again in a discontented way: "I wish I knew more about the ways of Queens."