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# THE TREASURE OF VASCO GOMEZ

by Stephen Vincent Benét

THE brig was already a white-sailed toy on blue waters. Soon enough she would be hull down on the horizon, then nothing at all. No man among her crew would ever set foot again willingly on the island where that crew had marooned its captain. And Vasco Gomez, lost and alone on a pin-point of earth set down among waves that seemed to come from the other end of the world, stretched out his arms and laughed loudly for the first time since they had set him ashore.

He was known as a clever man and a lucky captain in every waterside tavern where the freebooters gathered. But this marooning of himself on a lost and uncharted island was the cleverest and luckiest exploit in a career that had held little mercy and no noteworthy failures.

It had not been an easy task. No, even for Vasco Gomez, it had not been easy. His own name for good fortune had worked against him, as had the quite justifiable fear his reputation inspired in the most hard-bitten of free companions. It had taken untiring craft and skill to bring even a crew of wolves to the point of mutiny against Vasco Gomez. And even greater art to see to it that these wolves, once roused, should maroon a living man where he wished to be, and not merely cast a hacked body overside.

But it had been done, and well done—his luck had held. He was alive—he was here. He had taken the first huge step toward his kingdom. And it was time, for, though he was still as strong in body as any three men of the crew that had deserted him, he knew by certain warnings that he had entered middle age.

Middle age. The drying up of the life in a man, the gradual slowing of the heart. And yet, a man stronger and more cunning than the run of men might still manage to have his cake and eat it too—to get off scot-free and whistling—even to grow old. A man like him, for example.

And more than scot-free—rich—if he knew a secret. Rich. His eyes gleamed as he rolled the word on his tongue. He stared around him, measuring the extent of his riches.

They had left him without fresh water, but not a hundred paces inland were a spring and a stream. They had left him without victual, but he knew this island of old. There was provision for the crew of a frigate on the island; the unceasing provision of nature.

They had left him without tools or weapons, except for the sheath-knife hidden in his boot. But he had flint and steel, and the axes in the second cache should not have rusted by now, for they lay in dry soil. For that matter, if worst came to worst, he could hollow a boat by burning out a tree-bole. It might take time—but what was time to him, now? There was no time in this solitude—the measurements of time had ceased. There was only one long hour, his hour, the hour of his kingdom. He felt the first wave of it wash over him, peacefully, slowly. His heart rose in his body to meet it, his lips drank it in.

"A long time on the way—you've been a long time on the way here, Vasco Gomez," he thought to himself. But it was over now. Pedro's treasure lay buried where it had always lain, not ten feet down, between the rock and the palm. He had not yet seen it with his eyes, but he knew that it was still there. For seven years he had carried the secret, locked under his ribs, closer to him than his heart.

He exhaled a long breath, staring back through the years. He was the only man alive who knew.

There had been others who had an inkling. He had made it his business to find them and see that they got no further. There was a legend still, but a legend that few believed. And for a while, of course, there had been Pedro.

He saw the dark cruelty of that insatiable face swim up at him, in memory, like something seen through a wraith of sea

fog. He smiled. Pedro was long since turned into leather at Execution Dock. He had not been able to come back, though he'd tried. But Vasco Gomez had come back. And, from the moment that he had landed on the island this noon, the treasure had been Pedro's no longer, but his treasure—the treasure of Vasco Gomez.

The men who had actually buried the spoil were safe enough. Their bones lay in the second cache with the tools of their labor. They would not disturb him. The one thing that did disturb him was the thought that the bags and chests that held the treasure might have rotted. In that case he would have to make new ones, somehow—one could not put to sea with half a boat-load of naked gold.

Half a boat-load at the least; there might be more. It would be interesting to see the full extent of the loot. He had only caught hasty glimpses of it by the bad light of the lanterns, on that night that was burned in his memory. But there would be enough for his wants—enough at the least to buy fat days and fine feathers—or even God's pardon, perhaps, weighed out in masses and candles. Enough to buy love and hate—and age for Gomez.

And all that remained to be done was so simple. A week, two, to lift the treasure. Two months, three months, to make a boat and provision it. Longer, perhaps, for he would not attempt the sea journey in the stormy season, but what was time, now he had all time to spend? Then a sixty-mile sail in an open boat to that other island, a daring exploit enough for landsmen, but child's play for Vasco Gomez. There were tamed Indians on that other island; he knew them, he had been careful to make them his friends. Then a little policy—a little murder, perhaps—another ship—a little intrigue with the mainland—he knew the fellow who had the Governor's ear and how to use him. And after that, anything: a king's coat to wear, a king's commission to carry—"Our well-beloved Vasco Gomez"—a decent estate at home, a little respectability, a little repentance, an altar of rose marble in an old cathedral to hold God strictly to the bargain,—and not only this world but the next one flung open for the penitent buccaneer.

All for gold—all there to be bought by gold. Nothing existed that could not be bought by gold.

He came out of his muse and stared seaward again, eagerly. The brig was only a speck, now; soon the abrupt night would come down. He must gather wood, make a fire, knock over a crab or two, find water, devise a bed. Tomorrow he would start building a hut for himself. Perhaps he might even finish his boat before he lifted the treasure. The treasure could wait—it would not run away. There was no time on earth that could take him from his treasure now.

It was one morning, when Vasco Gomez was busily at work upon his almost completed boat, that he first felt himself definitely alone.

To him it was a strange sensation. So strange, in fact, that when he received the first impact of it, the knife which he was using dropped from his hand as if something had struck him on the wrist. Then, after a moment, he picked up the knife again. But the feeling persisted.

His life, to say the least of it, had been an active and a crowded one. He had dealt with men and women and they had dealt with him, but never without physical impact. If he were to gaze back through the last score of years, he would hardly be able to find a single waking moment, even in shipwreck, when he had been entirely alone, divided from the world. He was alone now.

He was alone, and with that knowledge came thought. He was not used to thinking—Vasco Gomez—least of all to thinking about himself.

The work he was doing took up some of his thought but not all of it—not enough. Before, in the pauses of action, there had always been the treasure to think about, to plan for. Now the treasure was here. That space in his mind was suddenly filled by other, unaccustomed thoughts.

"Who is this fellow, Vasco Gomez?" he found himself thinking after a while, beset with a queer fear.

"Vasco Gomez? Why, that's you—that's me—you're here, man—you're making a boat!" He said the words aloud; they

comforted him. But after a while he began to think again.

Vasco Gomez—he certainly knew who Vasco Gomez was! He saw him fighting, drinking, kissing a wench's shoulder, climbing a ship's red side with a long knife bitten in his teeth. A big, scarred bull of a man, solid and awe inspiring.

But that wasn't Vasco Gomez any more. Vasco Gomez was here. Vasco Gomez was here—and entirely alone.

He felt himself diminish as he thought the words—diminish as the brig had diminished. The brig, too, had been solid and bulky at first—then smaller—then a puppet—a speck on the sea. So now with him. He saw a little man on a toy island—an ant-size figure set down on a spoonful of land in the midst of blue immensities.

His face dripped with sweat, though he had not been working hard. The rasp of his knife on the wood made an acute and lonely sound. It seemed to him that he could hear that small sound go out and out, through infinities of water and air, and still meet no other sound that could be its fellow—and still—meet—no—other—sound.

His mind righted itself with a jerk. No, he had the clue to his thinking. He had been on the island for very nearly five months, as he reckoned. Well, he knew what happened sometimes to men so marooned, the look they got in their eyes, the voices they thought they heard.

He had not expected this to happen to him; he was too strong, too clever. But if it were so, so be it—he now knew where the danger lay and could guard against it. As soon as he had settled this in his mind, he felt restored. The sky and sea shrank back to their proper proportions.

He had hardly expected to finish the boat in less than ten days, but a fury of work took hold of him. While he toiled, he could not diminish—the sky and sea held their places. He found himself now and then trying over sentences in the jargon the Indians spoke. He caught himself listening thirstily as the sentences fell from his mouth. Only they lacked something—they lacked the note of a voice that was not his own.

In four days the boat was finished and afloat in the cove.

He had been gathering provisions during the last months. He had even made a keg for his water. It took no time at all to put these aboard or to rig his improvised sail. He wondered at himself, while he labored, that he labored so feverishly. Surely it did not matter if he set sail in a week or a month, now the season of storms was past. But, in these last days, time was no longer the one long hour that belonged to him and his treasure. It had become again a sifting of hasty grains through the blue hour-glass of the sky—and each grain that fell seemed to steal a little strength from his heart.

He stood up at last, hot and sweating. Night had fallen. All was ready now, except for the actual lifting of the treasure—and it was not sensible to begin that work at night. But he woke before the dawn.

When he had wakened, he lay there a moment without moving; entirely happy. He had known many women in his life, but today was the day of his true nuptials.

The sun was sinking when he uncovered the final chest. He struck a great blow with his axe at a rusty lock and stared. It was the bridal. The gold seemed to leap up at him, from the ground.

Next moment he was down among it, both fists were full. He felt as if he had been running, his breath came and went in the runner's gasp. How good it was to touch, how thick and heavy and smooth—better than any woman's shoulder—better than bread!

Slowly, luxuriously, he broke open the other chests. It was all there—idol and pyx—blood-ruby and rough cut emerald—the grandee's studded scabbard—the soft masks of virgin gold that the heathen priests had worn. He had dreamed of it as a king's ransom—he smiled at the poverty of his dreams.

The abrupt night came, shut down, but he did not stir. He did not light a fire, he did not go back to his hut. Time had resumed its long hour—time was not. He lay all night in the pit, he was perfectly happy.

The dawn came and he rose, but not as he had risen twenty-four hours ago. That morning, when he got up, he was still poor and an adventurer; this morning he got up rich, with the cares of riches.

He laughed when he thought of his furious labor of the last few days. Time was his friend, not his enemy, there was no need to fight it. The boat was ready—put the gold aboard—cast off—and everything else would follow, as the ship's wake follows the ship.

The business of the Indians first. They were his friends, but even so they would not do all he wanted without reward. Well, there he could get off cheaply—they hardly knew the uses of the yellow metal. But then there was the Governor's friend and the Governor himself—and he frowned. Everything could be bought with a price, no doubt, but, even for the rich, certain things came high.

He knew, none better, what palms would have to be greased.

If it had but matched with the poverty of his dreams—even then, he saw the difficulty. But this king's ransom—why even the king himself might want a finger in the pie!

Yesterday, he would gladly have given half the treasure to get off safe with the other half. But now he had seen it and touched it.

A dull anger began to rise in him. What business had all these strangers, meddling with his treasure? They hadn't schemed for it or found it.

Now he saw them, one and all, roosted around the edge of the pit like vultures—the Indians, the Governors, the lawyers and courtiers, the women with thirsty eyes, a bishop even, a red-hatted cardinal. Yes, even the Church itself, even God Himself exacted a portion of the treasure! They came closer, they stretched out their hands, bit by bit, drop by drop, then bled him of his precious gold. They gave him empty, useless things in return—a kiss—a patent of nobility—an altar of rose-marble—but the bleeding never ceased. At last, an old man crouched over the pitiful remnant of a king's ransom—and even then there were creatures coming to bleed him anew. He waved his arm in the air to drive off the vision.

Decidedly, he would have to revise his plans. He hurriedly tried to think of the least—the very least—he must spend to be safe. He pared his bribes down and down—and yet the total appalled him.

Then the mere passage of time brought with it a certain balm. After all, he did not have to set sail till he wished. He would eat and drink and sleep and play with his treasure—and in time some perfect plan might come to him.

The hours slipped into days, the days into weeks. One evening, notching his calendar-stick, he realized with a start that it was nearly two months since he had first uncovered the treasure. It seemed impossible, but it was true. Well, Vasco Gomez, he thought with an odd lethargy, it is time you were setting off, my friend—tomorrow we will begin.

The morrow came, the sea seemed calm as a mill pond. And yet, far down to the south—was not that the edge of a cloud? He shook himself impatiently—was he losing his mind?—a sailor and afraid of a speck of white? With dragging steps, he turned toward his boat. Then a rescuing thought came to him—the bags for the treasure. The old bags were rotten—he would have to devise new bags, new chests. He felt at peace again immediately; he spent the morning happily, selecting the wood for his chests.

They were finished at last, but not before the stormy season. Vasco Gomez was no madman—he would not put out with such a cargo till the storms were done.

Meanwhile, with his treasure about him, Vasco Gomez lived many lives. Up till now, his life had left him little time for imagination beyond the needs of the day, but now his imagination flowered like a great poppy—his dreams spread a scarlet cloth for his bare feet to tread.

At first they were the simple visions and Elysiums of any sailor—enough food and drink, the easy girls of the ports—but as time went on they grew more elaborate, more refined, more clearly intense. He feasted delicately; music played while he feasted; the wines, poured for him, were the rarest of their kind. He did not gorge or lie drunken. When he went to take the air, outriders went before him; the king called him cousin and kissed him on the cheek. And when he returned to his palace, it was no girl of the ports whose lips were turned to him, but a king's daughter, a mermaid, a creature of light

and foam. Sometimes she was dark as the soft nights, sometimes golden as the first spear of morning. It did not matter—she was whatever he wished, she was all women he had known, yet she was always new.

Then his power broadened, his shadow increased. He made wars and calmed them, raised one nation and put down another, appeased famine, tamed the seas. The king no longer called him cousin,—he threw the king bones from his table and the king was grateful. Men whispered among themselves that only the protected of heaven could cast such a shade. And, indeed, to this man came messengers not wholly of this world.

Gomez, walking one morning when the season of storms had passed, came suddenly upon a boat, beached high and dry, protected by a rude shelter. For a moment he stared at it without recognition. Then he remembered—it was his boat, and he would never find better weather for his journey.

He looked the boat over carefully. The storms had not touched her—she was seaworthy still. He launched her in the cove again. Then he went slowly to the place where his chests were kept, and loaded them aboard. Only one thing remained, to fill the chests with the treasure. He dropped a rose-noble in one chest—it made a queer sound on the wood. Then he started for the rest of the treasure.

Two hours later, he sat in the boat, with his head in his hands. He had built his boat too small for the weight she was to carry.

Well, he must build another boat, that was all. But, as he thought this, he knew that even if he could build a boat big enough to bear that weight of gold, the boat would take more than one man to handle.

He could ferry what he now had aboard to the other island, bury it, come back for more. That meant a thousand risks with every voyage. He had lived with his treasure too long. He could not bear to bury a part of it elsewhere and leave it.

Well then, he would put it back in Pedro's old cache, taking only enough away with him to make a fresh start. Hire a ship—come back—to let other men into his secret—to go shares from the very first in what was his alone.

He thought for a long time, wearily revolving plans in his head. He knew that he could follow none of them. There must be another plan. All things were to be bought, if one had gold enough.

He lay all night in the boat, thinking. Morning came at length, and his riddle was still unsolved, but for a while he had ceased to think of it.

He had gone back, for a moment, to one of his many dreams. It was quite a simple dream and made but a poor show among his more ornate visions, yet he liked to dream it, at times.

He saw a tumbledown wine-shop with a dried bush over the door, on the crest of a hill road in Portugal. There was a girl in the wine-shop, a girl with fresh lips and hair as black as her comb.

She had a soldier for a lover, and a proud heart. Gomez was poor and a thief—it was in the days before he went to sea. They drove him away from the wine-shop often enough, but he came back to it. Once the soldier beat him, he took the beating with shut lips. The girl looked on, smiling. When at last Gomez saw that it was useless, he left the soldier in a mountain gully with a knife in his back and ran away before they caught him. Then his real life began.

In Gomez' dream, however, there was no soldier. There was only the girl, and himself as he had been at that time. But she was no longer scornful and they smiled at each other between the kisses.

The dream seemed very real to him, this time. He leaned over the side of the boat and stared at the water idly.

There was a face, reflected in the water. He observed it as he might the face of a stranger at first.

His own face was the face of the boy in his dream—a young, sharp face, ready for good or evil, but as yet not deeply marked with either—the face of youth. This was the withered face of an old man.

Slowly and wonderingly, he passed his hands over his body, regarded his legs, his arms. He had not looked at himself for a long time. But this scarecrow was he. "You've come a long way, Gomez," he muttered.

A new picture came to him, out of his other dreams. The splendid Vasco Gomez, the lord of the treasure, in his fine bed alone. The breath came faintly from the lips of the dying man. On one side of the bed was seated a priest, on the other a lawyer, but the dying eyes saw neither crucifix nor testament. They were staring ahead into darkness, trying to see something they could not fix upon. Outside the door, a servant kept back a silent throng—the throng of the claimants, the inheritors. A black-gloved personage waited in a corner, without impatience. Every man's end.

If some miracle—some incredible bribing of God—could set him ashore on the mainland, with his treasure! Even so, there were only so many lives in the world to live. And, already, he had lived those lives. If not in the body, yet very completely, very thoroughly. The body could do no more for him, the treasure could do no more. All but the one picture of the girl and the wine-shop—and that no treasure could repurchase, for it belonged to a past year.

Vasco Gomez braced one hand in the other hand till the muscles in his back stood out. He had always been a strong man, a clever and wary fighter. Now he must fight again, without ruth or scruple or weakness, as in the old days. But this time the adversary was invisible.

The next morning found him walking the beach, still fighting. Now and then he looked out to sea. It was very calm and clear. Then he realized that even the sea was a servant of his adversary, and turned his eyes away.

He sat down in the sand at last, arms lax, heart and body worn out. He was very tired but he would not give up the fight while breath was in him.

Everything to be bought with gold, he repeated to himself doggedly. One cannot fail with money—everything with a price in money—men—governors—kings—old age—God Himself, at the last. . . .

The wave came from afar—he could hear it coming. He braced himself to meet it, but it was too late. It was no wave of the sea, the sea was quiet enough. This wave gathered—rose—burst over him. He felt the shock, and trembled. He was beaten now.

Everything to be bought with gold, up to God Himself. Not without exception. You could buy much. You could buy candles and masses. But God, at the last, was not to be bought. That was the truth.

Slowly, without revulsion or outcry, for he was beaten, he lay on the sand and felt the cells of his body drink in this truth. After a long while a little stirring of peace began to move in his breast.

He rose at last. He felt weak when he had risen, and when he moved, his steps were the steps of an old man. But he would have strength enough for the work that remained.

He went back to the little cove where his boat was moored, and stood for a moment gazing at the water. Yes, that was the place. He had swum there often but never yet found bottom. The bottom must be very deep.

He took the piece of his treasure nearest to hand—it was one of the golden masks—and let it fall from his hand into the water. It shimmered as it went down, then that too was lost. He gave a sharp sigh, stooped stiffly and picked up the grandee's sword.

At last only one rose-noble was left. He weighed it in his hand a moment, as curiously as if it had been a sea-shell. It had a man's face on one side—the man had a nose like Pedro's. Strange, to put a man's face on a thing like that! He let it fall—it shone through green glooms and was gone.

Up till now, each piece that he had let fall had seemed to carry a small portion of his soul with it as it sank. But now, when there was no more treasure to drown, he felt otherwise. His soul could be divided no longer. It was either here in his body or down under the water with the treasure—but it did not matter, for, wherever it was, it was not in morsels.

He stared at the water anew with mild curiosity. A fish was swimming where the rose-noble had shimmered.

After a while, he wandered back to the beach and sat looking out toward the sea. For a moment he thought of his lost battle, but not with pain or shame. He had fought well and long. Now the fight was over. He would not fight again. There had been only one battle after all—it had lasted all his life—but he was done with it now.

He could not have eaten food for a long time. A day, perhaps more than a day? He could not remember. But when he thought of food, the thought revolted him. He was hungry now, but he was not hungry for bread.

The night fell and found him still on the beach. He thought of going back to his hut, but did not do so. Instead he moved farther up the beach and ensconced himself in a sort of niche, where one boulder overhung another. The bottom boulder was raised—it was out of the way of the landcrabs—the top one was almost a roof. He sat there, with his back propped by the rear of the niche, his hands on his knees. The night air was cool and pleasant, the stars had come out. He looked out over the sea and felt the cool air on his face. There was a horizon there, hidden away in that gulf of starry darkness, but he was not seeking that horizon.

After some hours, he moved a little and spoke. "You've come a long way, Vasco Gomez," he said anew, with a certain touch of affirmation. Nothing replied to the words.

Some eight months later, H.M.S. *Vixen*, sloop-of-war, blown out of her course by contrary gales, sent a boat ashore to the island in the hope of finding fresh water and fruit for a crew already in danger of scurvy. The lieutenant in charge of the landing-party proceeded with all due precaution at first. But when the water-casks had been filled, and it was evident that the island was uninhabited, he allowed his men some liberty, and himself strolled down the beach.

It was a pretty beach and seemed to encircle the island completely. He had got this far in his musings when a shout from one of the men farther down the beach made him clap his hand to his cutlass. Then he saw that the man was standing up and waving his arms. He walked hurriedly.

The buzzing group of sailors fell back before him. He found himself abruptly face to face with a stranger. The man was seated in a species of natural niche made by two boulders, his hands on his knees, in an attitude of contemplation, his eyes staring out to sea. Some rags of clothing still clung to him and the crabs had not even touched him, but his whole body was the color and texture of leather. He must have been dead for a number of months—what remained was a mummy that the sun and the wind had embalmed between them. Yet the features were quite recognizable—there was even an expression upon them—an expression that the lieutenant had seen before. He touched his lips with his handkerchief, remembering the last time he had seen it. No, even the work of sun and wind could not account entirely for that emaciation.

A sailor was at his elbow, pulling a forelock.

"Do you know who that is, sir?" he said, in an eager voice. "It's Gomez, the bloody pirate, sir—I seen him before and so has Tom—and serve him right, the Portugee devil, that's what I say!"

"Yes," said the lieutenant, hardly listening, "it may well be he. We heard he had been marooned and—"

"Marooned is right, sir," said the sailor, "the bloody villain! Even his own crew got sick of him at the last and—" He leaned forward as if to spit upon the leathered image.

"Keep your wits about you, my man!" said the lieutenant, sternly, and the sailor retired. Now he and his fellows were reciting the dead man's crimes, but the lieutenant did not hear them.

He was looking at Vasco Gomez. He must be right—you could not mistake that expression, once you had seen it. And yet he could not understand.

His eye traveled down the beach to the land-crabs scuttling busily—yes, there were turtles, beyond there—fruit inland, fish in the sea. A small island, but provision enough to feed a whole ship's crew.

"And yet I could swear that the man died of hunger," muttered the lieutenant to himself. "It is strange."

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## TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *The Treasure of Vasco Gomez*, by Stephen Vincent Benét]