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# THE ISLAND OF THE STAIRS



Being a True Account of Certain Strange and Wonderful Adventures of Master John Hampdon, Seaman, and Mistress Lucy Wilberforce, Gentlewoman, in the Great South Seas.

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

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### PROLOGUE.

Here's a tale of the sea and the treasure isle, of long hid gems and bad men's guile, of perils on land and wave well met, spite storm and mutiny's awful threat.

The way of a man with a maid is told as they voyage the seas in quest of gold—the man so brave and the maid so fair. For her sake naught he will not dare.

From English fields to south sea shore their path they follow while billows roar, but it leads them safe to their goal at last, with their love and their treasure tightly clasped.

### CHAPTER I.

Wherein I Bait the Duke Over the Dead.

I CANNOT say that I was greatly surprised when I stumbled across the body of Sir Geoffrey in the spinney, which is not for a moment meant to convey the impression that I was not shocked. I had expected that Sir Geoffrey would come to some such sad end; therefore I say that I was not surprised. But as I stood over him in the gray dawn, looking down upon him lying so quietly on his back with the handsome, silver mounted, ivory handled dueling pistol which had done the damage still clasped in his right hand I was fascinated with horror.

Sir Geoffrey had carefully put his bullet through his heart. It was less disfiguring and brutal, less hard on those left behind, less troublesome, more gentlemanly. His sword lay underneath him, the diamond hilt protruding.

I guessed that he was glad enough, after all, that the end had come, for there was not that look of pain or horror or fear which I have so often seen on the faces of the dead, but his features were calm and composed. He had not been dead long. As I bent over him I noticed that he had something in his left hand. A nearer look showed it to be an envelope. I drew it away and saw that it was addressed to Mistress Lucy. Trusting it in the pocket of my coat, I rose to my feet.

At that instant I heard steps and voices. Now I had nothing on earth to fear from anybody. The death of Sir Geoffrey was too obviously a suicide for any one to accuse me even if there had been any reason on earth for bringing me under suspicion. The letter which I carried in my pocket addressed to Mistress Lucy would undoubtedly explain everything there was to explain. Something, however, moved me to seek concealment. I am a sailor, as you will find out, and can act quickly in an emergency by a sort of instinct.

Sir Geoffrey lay on the side of the path through the spinney, and beyond him the coppice thickened. The path twisted and turned. From the sound of the footsteps I judged that men were coming along it. I instantly stepped across the body and concealed myself behind a tree trunk in the leafy foliage of the undergrowth. I could see without being seen and hear as well.

I did not expect that any of the guests of the castle would make their appearance at that hour. The footsteps stopped. Two men, one of whom had been pointed out to me as Baron Luftdon, in the lead, followed by another who was strange to me, suddenly appeared. A voice which I recognized as Luftdon's at once exclaimed in a westerly tone:

"By gad, he's done it! Here's a pretty affair!"

"Oh, I don't know," said the second; "it might be worse!"

"Worse for him? Great heavens, man, he's dead!"

"Worse for us."

"What d'ye mean? I don't understand."

The two stepped a little nearer. The first speaker, Lord Luftdon, one of the young bloods who had been having high carouse with Sir Geoffrey for the past week at the castle, bent over him.

"Well," continued the drawler nonchalantly as for me, I hated them both, but the latter speaker the more, if possible, for reasons which you will presently understand—"this relieves me greatly."

"What do you mean? After such a night as we had to come upon this is enough to unsettle any man."

"Pooh, pooh, man; you're nervous!"

"Well, I don't know how it relieves you. And after all's said and done, Wilberforce was a gentleman, a good player and a gallant loser."

"Exactly, and he lost his all like a gentleman."

"And you got it, at least most of it."

"Patience, my friend; you had your share."

"I don't know but I would give it back to have poor old Geoff with us once again," said Luftdon, with some heat.

"That is a perfectly foolish statement, my buck," returned the other. "Somebody was bound to get it. Wilberforce has been going the pace for years. We happened to be in at the death, that's all."

"Well, how does it relieve you, then? Do you think Wilberforce would have attempted to get you to support him?"

"The drawler laughed.

"Of course not. This"—he pointed to the dead body—"is proof enough of the spirit that was in him. But, of course, I cannot marry the girl now."

"You can't?"

"Certainly not. Her father a bankrupt, a suicide—"

"But the castle and this park?"

"Mortgaged up to the hilt. Speaking of hilt"—he stooped down and, daintily avoiding contact with the corpse, drew from the scabbard the diamond hilted sword "this belongs to me. It's worth taking. You remember he staked it last night on the last deal."

"Good God, man," protested the first speaker, "don't take the man's sword away! Let him lie with his weapons like a gentleman."

"Tut, tut! You grow scrupulous, it seems. We will provide a cheaper badge of his knighthood, if necessary."

"And about the girl?"

"'Tis all off."

"You will have some trouble breaking your engagement with her, I am thinking."

"Not I. To do her justice, the girl has the spirit of her father. A whisper that I am disinclined to the match will be sufficient."

"Aye, but who will give her that whisper?"

"We will arrange that some way. Truth to tell, I am rather tired of the mix. She bores me with her high airs. She does not know that she is penniless and disgraced. And as for her good looks, 'tis a country beauty, after all."

"Poor girl!" began Luftdon, whose face, though bloated and flushed, still showed some signs of human kindness.

At that point I intervened. I could bear no more. When they spoke so slightly of my mistress it was more than I could stand. I burst out of the brush and stood before them—mad, enraged all through. I will admit that I lacked the composure and breeding of these precious two. They started back at my sudden appearance, from which he of the slow speech speedily recovered.

"Now, who may you be, and what may you want?" he said.

"Who I am matters nothing," said I, "but what I want matters a great deal."

"Ah! And what is it that you want that matters so?"

"In the first place that sword."

"This?" said the man, nodding Sir Geoffrey's handsome weapon up lightly by the blade.

"That," said I.

"I am accustomed to move quickly

fore he knew it I had it by the hilt, and but that he released the blade instantly I would have cut his hand as I withdrew it. He swung round and clapped his hand on his own sword, a fierce oath breaking from his lips, his face black as thunder.

"Don't draw that little spilt," I said, "or I will be under the necessity of breaking your back."

I towered above both of them, and I have no doubt that I could have made good my boast. The man had the courage of his race and station. He faced me unflinching, his hand on his sword hilt.

"Would you rob me of mine own?" he asked calmly.

"I might do so, and with justice," I replied. "You had no hesitation in robbing the living or the dead."

"Zounds!" cried the first man, "it was in fair play; we risked each what we had, and Sir Geoffrey lost."

"Yes; I see," I replied. "Having paid with everything else, he had to throw away his life. I heard what you said. You wonder how Mistress Wilberforce is to learn the situation. You wonder who is to tell her. I will."

"That is good; well thought of," said the drawler with amazing assurance. "I could not have wished it better. You are doubtless some servant of the house—"

"I am no man's servant," I interrupted in some heat.

"Somebody born on the place, he probably cherishes a yoke of the admiration for the lady of the place."

I flushed like a girl at this. I never was good at the dissimulation that goes on in polite society.

"Tell her, my man, tell her," he cried, "tell her that she is a beggar and her father a suicide and that I have all her property without her. She can go to your agus. She is not meet for the Duke of Arcester."

So this was Arcester! I had heard of him, as I had of Luftdon, two of the most debauched, unprincipled rakes, idlers, fortune hunters, gamblers, men about town, in all England. I stepped closer to him and struck him with the palm of my hand. His sword was out on the moment, but before he could make a pass I wrenched it from him, broke the blade over my knee and hurled the two pieces into the coppice.

"I can match you with swords," said I. "I have fought with men, not popinjays in my day all over the world, and I know the use of the weapon, but I would not demean myself, being an honest man though no gentleman, by crossing blades with such a ruffian."

"By God," cried the man, "I will have you flung into the mill pond. I will clap you in jail I will!"

"You will do nothing of the sort," said I. "There is no man on the estate who would not take my part against yours, especially when I repeat what you have said about Mistress Lucy."

"And who would believe you?" queried the duke, whose anger was at a frightful height in being thus braved

and insulted. In his agitation he tore at his neck cloth. "I would be your word against mine, and—"

"For the matter of that, my word will not be uncorroborated," I interrupted swiftly.

"What do you mean?"

"This gentleman"—

"By gad," said Lord Luftdon, "you are right to appeal to me and you were right to strike Arcester. I'm sorry for the girl and for Sir Geoffrey and ashamed for my friend."

"Would you turn against me in this?" cried the duke.

"I certainly would."

"God," whispered his grace hotly, fumbling at the empty sheath, "I wish I had my sword!"

"There is Sir Geoffrey's sword," said Lord Luftdon, who did not lack courage, clutching his own blade as he spoke and making as if to draw it.

"No," said I, master of the situation as I meant to be, "there will be no more fighting over the dead body of Sir Geoffrey. You and Lord Luftdon can settle your differences elsewhere."

"On second thought, there will be no further settlement," said Luftdon, regaining his coolness and thrusting back into its scabbard his half drawn blade. "His grace and I are in too many things to make a permanent difference between us possible."

"I thought so," I replied.



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