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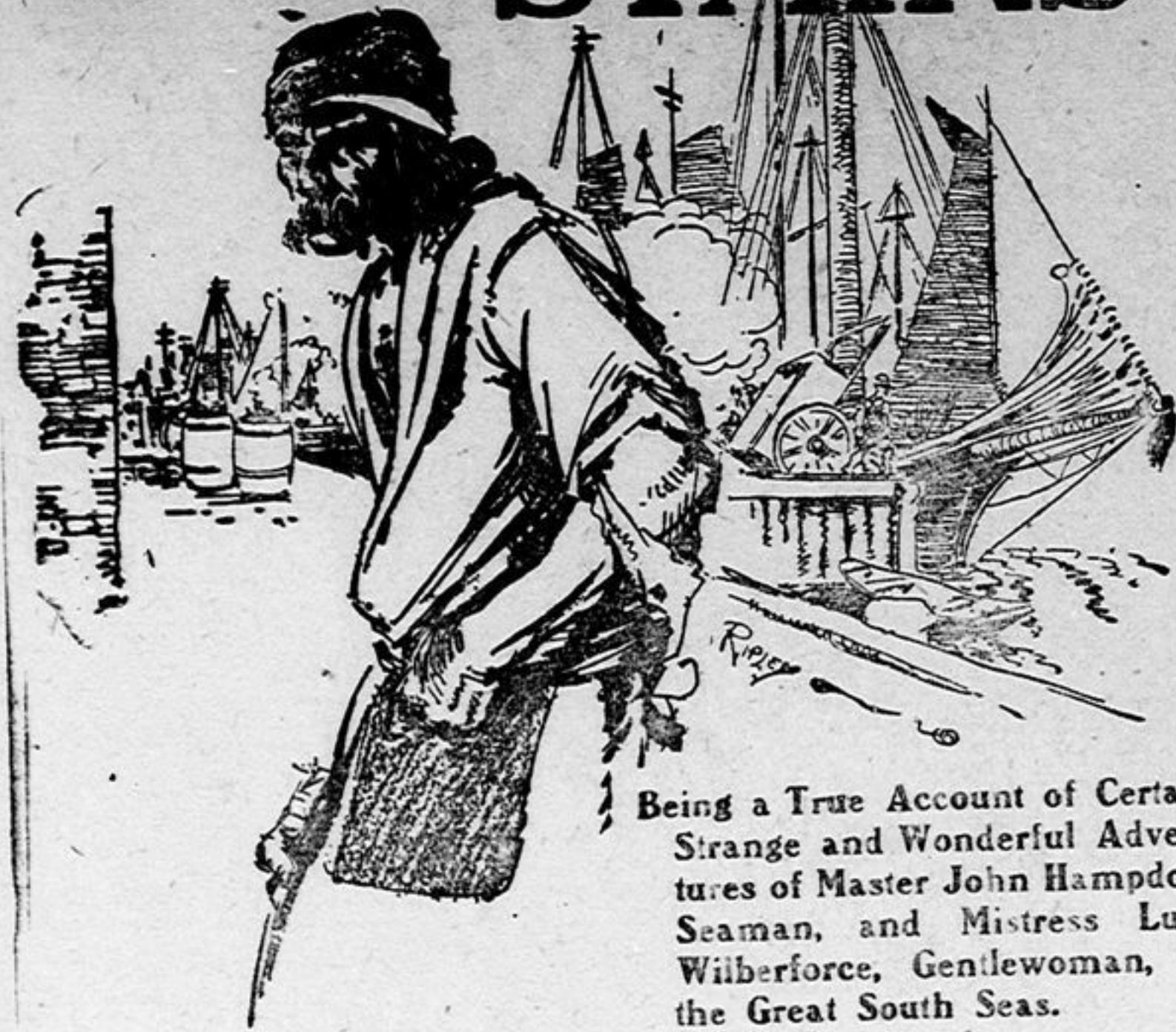
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THE ISLAND OF THE STAIRS



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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CHAPTER III.

In Which I Deliver a Letter.

SIR GEOFFREY'S will, as Master Ficklin read it, was a simple affair. It left everything of which he died possessed to his daughter. Unfortunately, he died possessed of nothing. The document was mere waste paper. Everything was mortgaged, every family portrait even. Mistress Lucy appeared to have no legal right to anything in or out of the castle, save the clothes she wore.

"The point is," Mistress Lucy said, as Master Ficklin bowed deferentially toward her, "that I have nothing?"

"Nothing from your father, madam."

"But my mother's estate?"

"I regret to say," said Master Ficklin, "that most of it has been converted into money and lost by your father. There is left in my hands, madam, only a matter of some £2,000, out of interest, which you, being now of full age!"

"I was eighteen on my last birthday."

"Exactly, so that it is at your present disposal."

"What shape is it in?"

"It is invested in consols."

"Can they be realized upon?"

"Instantly."

"To advantage?"

"Most certainly."

"I thank you, Master Ficklin, for your provident care of my little fortune. It is most unexpected," she faltered.

"Believe me, Mistress Lucy, it is a happiness to do anything for you," said the old attorney, rising and gathering up his papers and bowing low before her. "You may command me in everything. A temporary loan or—"

"Thank you, Master Ficklin," said Mistress Lucy; "you touch me greatly, but I need nothing at present. My father made me an allowance and generally paid it. It was a generous one, and, living alone as I did, I did not spend it. I have a few hundred pounds in my own name at the bank, and with that for temporary use and my mother's legacy I shall lack nothing."

"But where will you live, Mistress Lucy?"

"It matters little," she answered listlessly.

"My sister and I," said the old attorney, "live alone in the county town. The house is large. If you would accept our hospitality until your future is decided we should be vastly honored."

"I accept your kindly proffer most thankfully," was her reply. "I have been invited to various homes here and there in the county, but I prefer to go to you."

"Good," said Master Ficklin briskly. "That is settled then. I am empowered by those who hold the mortgage to tell you that the pictures of your father or mother or anything strictly personal they waive their claim to."

"Thank you," said Mistress Lucy. "I shall take but small advantage of their generosity."

"I know that," answered Master Ficklin, "and now I will return to the town. If you will be ready about 6 o'clock" (it was then about 2) "I will return and fetch you to our home."

"I shall be ready. Goodby."

The little lawyer bent over her hand and left the room. I sat dumb and silent during the whole interview, although I had listened to everything with the deepest interest. As usual, it was she who broke the silence when we were alone again.

"Master Hampdon," she began, "to what a sorry pass am I reduced! What shall I do now?"

"My lady," said I, "the sorriest part of the pass to which you have been brought is that you have in me such a poor counselor, a rough sailor, but one who would, nevertheless, give his heart's blood to promote your welfare, or do you any service."

Now, as I said that I laid my hand on the breast of my coat, and as I bent awkwardly enough toward her—I could not even bow as gracefully as the little attorney just departed—I felt the paper which I had taken from Sir Geoffrey's hand and which I had exte-

tirely forgotten in the hurry and confusion of the days that had followed his death. I stood open mouthed with surprise and shame at my careless forgetfulness, and stared at her.

"What is it?" she asked, instantly noting my amazement.

"I am a fool, madam, a blundering fool," said I, drawing forth the paper, "here is a letter addressed to you which I should have delivered at once." I continued, extending it toward her.

She tore open the envelope as she spoke and drew forth a letter, unfolded it and there dropped from it a little piece of parchment which I instantly picked up and extended to her, but she was so engrossed in the letter that she did not see my action and paid no attention to my outstretched hand.

I looked at the parchment I held in my hand. It was evidently the half of a larger sheet which had been torn in two. The right half was in my possession. A glance showed me that it was a part of a rudely drawn map, apparently of an island, although lacking the other half of that I could not be quite certain. It was lettered in characters which were very old and quaint, and some figures in the upper left hand corner gave a latitude. The outlines of the map and the letters and figures were all very dim and faded.

My lady's letter was a short one, for she looked up from it presently, her eyes filled with tears, the first I had seen there, and for that reason I was glad she should enjoy this relief. I suppose the fact that she was so alone and had no one else induced her to confide in me. At any rate she extended the paper to me.

"Read it," she said. "Tis my father's last word to me."

I took it from her, and this is what I read:

My Dear Lucy—As an ancient king of France once said, "Everything is lost but honor," and that trembles in the balance. I have speculated, gambled, tempted fortune, first because I loved it and at last hoping to win for you. But everything has gone wrong for you. You are penniless. Even your mother's fortune, of which she foolishly made me trustee, has followed my own. Master Ficklin may save something from the wreck. I hope so. I can do no more, and perhaps—nay, certainly—the best thing I can do for you is to leave you. May God help you since I cannot. Your shamed and unhappy father,
GEOFFREY WILBERFORCE.

Post Scriptum.—The last thing that I possess is this scrap of parchment. It has been handed down from father to son for five generations. The tradition of it is lost, but there has always been attached to it a singular value. Perhaps some day the missing part may turn up. At any rate, of all that I once had this is what is left. Should you marry and have children pass it to them. A foolish request, but I am moved to make it as my father made it to me. G. W.

I read it slowly. It was not a brave man's letter. I liked Sir Geoffrey less than ever before. Some of the ancient awe and reverence I felt for the family went out of my heart then.

"Here," said I, "is the inclosure to which your father refers."

She took it listlessly, but as her glance fell upon it her face brightened.

"Why," she exclaimed, brushing aside her tears, "I have the other half. It came to me from my mother. When she died, five years ago, she gave it to me with much the same account as my father gives. I have never shown it to any one—never mentioned it even."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I scarcely know. It was valueless. I attached no special importance to it. But now, now—"

"It is a miracle," I said, "that the two pieces should have come together in your hands."

"I don't yet understand what it all means," she said, "but—"

"Meanwhile," said I, "may I respectfully suggest that you get the other piece and let me look at it?"

"You!" she dashed out in one of those sudden changes of mood, sometimes so delightful and sometimes the reverse.

"I am a seafaring man, as you know, mistress," said I humbly, "and I am accustomed to study maps and charts. Perhaps this may contain information vital to your fortunes which I can decipher more easily than another."

She nodded and went rapidly out of the room. In a few moments she came



"It is an island!" she exclaimed, back with another piece of parchment. I placed them side by side, and the torn and jagged edges fitted into each other perfectly. I had laid them on a table and we bent over them in great excitement—excitement on my part caused by her proximity rather than by the faded, yellow sheepskin.

"It is an island!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said I.

"Where is it?" she asked.

I pointed with my huge index finger to the figures in the upper left hand corner and the upper right hand corner marked respectively latitude and longitude.

"That will tell us exactly."

"And you can find it?"

"If it is there where the figures say I can as easily as I can find the park gate yonder."

She looked at me with a certain amount of awe. "Why, that is wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"Not at all. It is done by seamen every day."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No," said I. "I have crossed the south seas several times, but I have never chanced upon that island or, in fact, sailed anywhere near that latitude or longitude."

"But you know where it is?"

"Exactly, and if I had my great chart of the south seas here I could put my finger upon it and show it to you."

"What," she asked, pointing with her own dainty finger in her turn, "is that ring around the island?"

"That will be a coral reef, I take it. They usually are broken at some point so that ships can sail within, but here is a complete circle inclosing the island. There seems to be no entrance anywhere. 'Tis unusual and most strange."

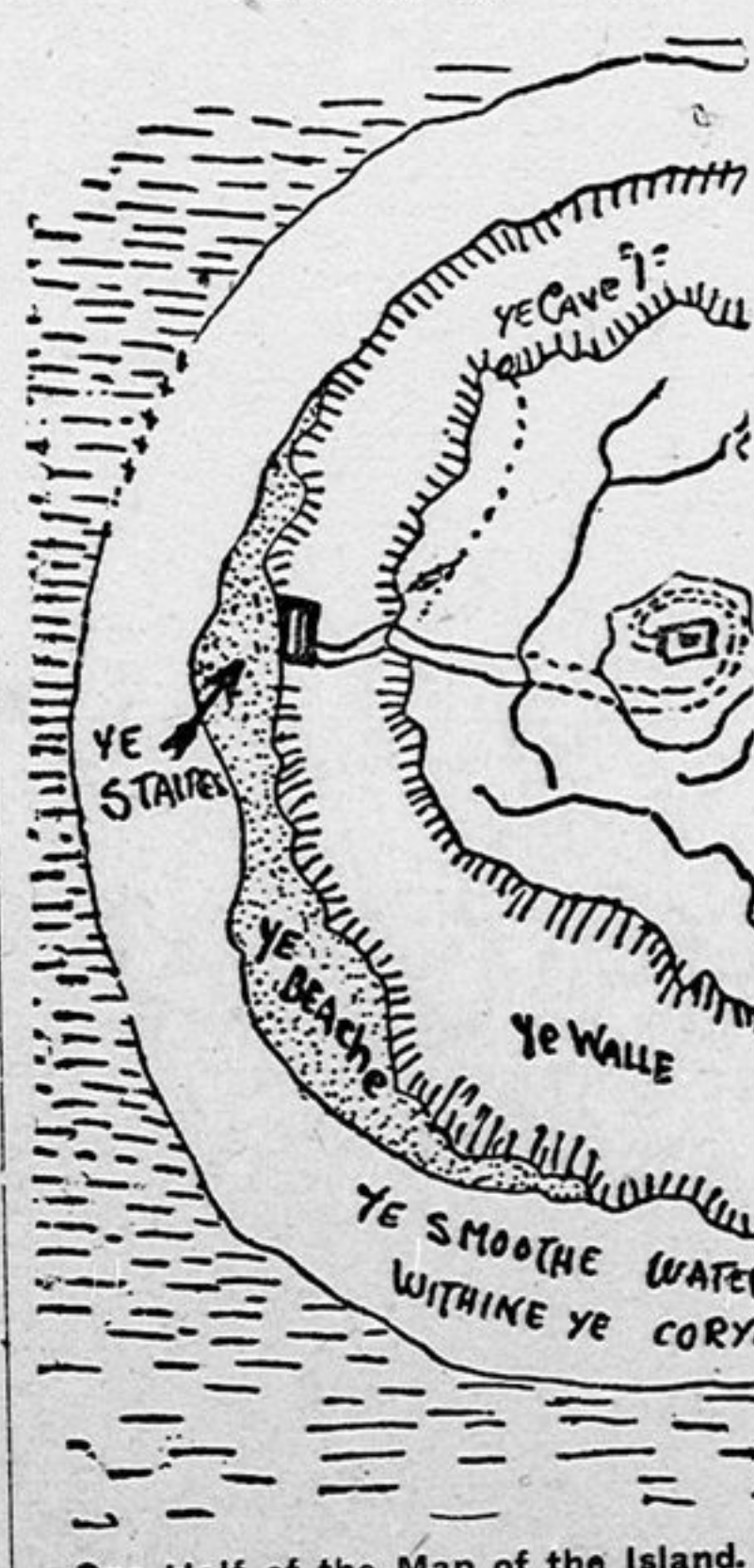
"Perhaps the man that drew it made a mistake."

"I think not. The map has been made by a seafaring man, that is plain."

"I see, and the island itself is a circle," she said, bending to inspect it more closely.

"Yes," said I, "and it is like no island that I have ever seen, for here be two great rings like a gigantic wall and a

YELAT, 21°-40'S



One Half of the Map of the Island.

hill or something of the sort in the middle." I bent lower over it in my turn. My eyes are unusually keen, and I saw a word written on the outside of the island proper and between it and the coral reef. "See," said I, "the word 'Stairs!'"

"Stairs!" exclaimed the girl in amazement. "Did you ever see stairs on an island?"

"No, I have not, but these may be some natural means of ascent."

"It is most strange and meaningless," she said. "You have been a faithful, devoted servant, Master Hampdon, and I have no hesitation in telling you all I know. My mother and father were distantly related—that is, they were descendants in the fifth generation from two brothers."

"Exactly," said I. "Your father's

Continued on page 7.

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