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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 IV.

Wherein We Decide to Go Voyaging.

LET'S put the two pieces together and take them to the light and see if we cannot decipher it," said I. "Mistress Wilberforce," I continued. "I have the sailor's premonition that we are on the track of something that will greatly better your fortunes." And I read:

"In ye yeare of our Lorde 1595 I, Philip Wilberforce, Et. of ye countie of Devon, being ye captaine of ye good shippe Scourge of Malice, didde take ye grate Spanishe galleon Nuestra Senora de la Concepcion, after a bloudie encountre, wherein mine own shippe was sunke. Ye lading of ye galleon was worthe muche monaie, millones of pounds esterling. I take ye. Withe manie jewelles and stones of price, pieces of eight and bullione, together with silkes and spicerie. Being blowne to ye southe and weste manie days in a grate tempeste. Ye galleon was caste awaye on Ye Ilande of ye Staires. Wee landed ye tresor and hidde yt in ye walle. Alle my menne being in ye ende dead ye natives came over ye seas in their grate canoes and tooke me, being like a madd manne. Godde mercifullie preserving my life, I escaped frome themm and at last am come safe intoe mine owne sweet lande of Englande once more. Toe find ye monthes of ye tresor cave, take a bearing alonge ye southe of ye three Goddes on ye Altar of Skulles on ye middell hille of ye ilande. Where ye line strykes ye knicke in ye walle with ye bigge pamme tree bee three hoals Climbe ye stones, enter ye center one. Yt is there. Lette him that wille seek and indee."

When I had finished reading we both stopped and stared. There was much in it, of course, that we could not possibly understand. We could only comprehend it fully if we were lucky enough to stand beside the "Stone Gods" on the island itself. Still the general purport was sufficiently clear. Sir Philip Wilberforce had evidently concealed a very considerable treas-

ure on the island, and commanded and founded and manned you could reach the spot without difficulty.

"How much would it cost?" Well, I quickly and roughly estimated in my mind the necessary outlay. Such a vessel as she would require might be bought for perhaps £2,500 or £3,000. Provisioning and outfitting, together with the pay of the officers and the crew, would require perhaps £1,500 or £2,000 more, or a total between five and six thousand pounds. And she had but two! I was about to tell her the prohibitive truth when the solution of the problem suddenly came to me. In one way or another I had been a fortunate voyager, and I had saved up or earned by trading and one or two adventures in which I had taken part something over £4,000, which was safely lodged to my credit in a London bank.

"I should think," I said slowly, "that £2,000 would be ample to cover every thing."

"Ah," she said, "exactly the sum that Master Ficklin said, was left of my mother's fortune."

"Yes," said I, and then I added in duty bound. "But you surely would not be so foolish, Mistress Wilberforce, as to risk your all in this wild goose chase?"

"If you were in my position, Master Hampdon, what would you do?" "I am a man," I answered, "accustomed to shift for myself. I might take a risk which I would not advise you to essay."

"I must shift for myself, too," she said, her eyes sparkling. The Goddess Chance, which had ruined her father, was evidently joggling her elbow. "Indeed, I shall take the chance," she persisted.

"But you could easily live on £2,000 for a long while," I urged, against my wish, for I was keen to go a treasure hunting with her for a shipmate.

"Not such life as I crave. If I cannot have enough for my desires I would be worse off had I nothing."

Well, I was arguing against my wishes from a sense of duty, so I at last gave way. After all, the treasure might be there. If so, it was hers, and it would be a shame not to get it. The pulse of adventure leaped in my veins.

"So be it," I said. "Will you help me to make my arrangements? You are accustomed to the sea, and—"

"I will do more than that," said I. "With your gracious permission I will go with you."

"To the island?" "To the end of the world," I replied. Whereat she stared at me a moment, then looked away.

She extended her hand to me and I tried to kiss it like a gentleman. I made no doubt, a blundering effort, but at least it was that of an honest man.

"I must go and get ready to go to Master Ficklin in the town," she said softly. "You know the house."

I nodded. "Come to me there tomorrow and we will talk further about the project."

When we broached the subject to Master Ficklin the next day at his house, he would not hear of it. He examined the parchment with interest, but pookpooked the tale because, forsooth, it had no legal backing and was couched in the phraseology of the sea rather than in the dry verbiage of the law. He pointed out that he had only succeeded in saving this last £2,000 of my lady's fortune because he had skillfully concealed its existence from Sir Geoffrey. He asked pertinently what would happen to her when all was gone and she had found no treasure, the very existence of which he affected to disbelieve.

A very hard headed, practical person was Master Ficklin. I had stern ideas of duty, too, and Master Ficklin's good sense ever appealed to me. Yet when did mere good sense ever appeal to a woman against her wish? My lady had the gambling instinct, too—I wonder she did not have it stronger, since 'twas in her blood!—and she would fain challenge fortune.

At any rate, not being in any hurry, although I was frantically urged by my lady, who could scarcely possess her soul in patience before she began her treasure hunting, I looked about a good deal in order to get just what I wanted. Finally from a merchant of Plymouth I purchased a stout little ship of three hundred and fifty tons burden called the Rose of Devon, which had been engaged in the West Indian and the American colonial trade.

It was my first design to have gone as master of her myself, and my lady would fain have had it so, but after reflection I decided it were better to have a much older man than I to command so long as she went as a passenger, and so I engaged a worthy seaman, one Samuel Matthews, old enough to be my father, with whom I had often sailed; in fact, the man under whom I made my first cruise. I did engage myself as mate, however, and I even tried in vain to induce Master Ficklin and his sister to go with us.

It seemed proper in venturing among Islands filled according to common report with savage peoples to provide for fighting. Therefore, after consulting with Captain Matthews, whom I fully acquainted with the entire project in all its details, I shipped a crew of thirty men and I provided in the equipment plenty of muskets, pistols and cutlasses, with the necessary powder and ball, and in addition a small brass cannon which I mounted on the forecastle. Nor did our cargo lack means for friendly trading and barter should such be found, practicable.

Naturally the unusualness of these preparations attracted attention, and Captain Matthews and I were overwhelmed with applications from adventurous men who desired to make the voyage, surmising that it was after treasure of some sort.

I left the work of engaging the crew to Captain Matthews. He had as boatswain a seaman named Pimball, in whom he placed great confidence. He was a villainous looking man with a white scar running from his left eye across his cheek, caused by a cut he had received in some fight, and the line of white showing against the bronzed, weather beaten cheek he sported did not improve his appearance. But that he was a prime seaman was evident. Captain Matthews seemed to have great confidence in him.

To anticipate, when we boarded the ship I liked the crew not much better than the boatswain. I will say this for them, however, that a smarter, quicker set of seamen never hauled on brace or laid on yardarm. It was not their skill or strength or courage that I did not like, but they were not the kind of men I would have sought for a ship of my own, and the presence of my lady and her maid, a worthy woman, a long time servant at the castle, who had elected to follow her fortunes, made me timid, yet I was not unusually apprehensive. I had a sublime confidence in my own ability to deal with any man or any group of men.

I did not stint the outfitting of the ship, and when I finished, having left nothing out that either my own or Captain Matthews' experience or imagination would suggest, there was left of our joint funds enough to pay the wages of the officers and of the men out and back and no more, that is, allowing a year for the round voyage. The lines of the Rose of Devon were unusually good. She had a reputation for being a speedy boat, and that was more time than enough. It was my purpose to go around the world with her rather than retrace our course about Cape Horn after we reached the island, if we ever reached it, so we staked everything we had on the future. If my lady had had the least knowledge of the value of ships she would have seen how little way her £2,000 had gone, but she was as guileless as any other woman on that subject, and Master Ficklin was not much better. I lied to them both with a good grace and with an easy conscience. It was for her sake.

Continued next week.

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