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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 Wiib-force, Gentlewoman, In the Great South Seas.

By **CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY**

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CHAPTER IX.

In Which We Plan to Escape Together From the Ship.

I HAD no idea that it was morning already, the night had passed so quickly. The eastern sky was already gray, and although the day bade fair to be an unpleasant one there was already light enough to distinguish land off to starboard. We had run quite near it in the night. It was still too gray to make out much more than the existence of the land itself, but I thought I saw beyond the nearest island others rising. At any rate, there it was where it ought to be, and I didn't make any doubt but that it was the island which we had been seeking these weary months at sea.

The whole crew was on deck. I didn't see any signs of Captain Matthews' body, although I looked hastily about for it. I learned later that they had tumbled him overboard without a prayer or word after they had knocked him on the head. Pimball, Glibby and one or two others of the older seamen were on the quarterdeck, the rest being strung along the leeward in the waist staring at the island. Two hands were at the wheel. The ship was pitching and laboring heavily, and it required two hands to hold her up to it.

During the night they had taken a second reef in the tops'ls. A whole gale was now blowing. Everything above the tops'ls yards had been furled of course. The Rose of Devon was a wet ship in a seaway, and she was making heavy weather out of it. I noticed one thing with satisfaction. They had evidently not thought it worth while to break open the arms chest or to force the key from me, which they could easily have done, and none of them was armed.

"Well," I began, as I climbed over the hatch combing and turned aft. "I sent for you, Hampdon," began Pimball insolently, and his failure to "mister" me or to give me any title indicated our present relations, "because of that," and he pointed to the leeward toward the island.

"It looks like land," I said. "It is land. What land?" "How can I tell?" I answered. "I have never been in these seas before."

"Well, you took an observation yesterday, didn't you?" "Certainly." "And where were we?"

I named a latitude and longitude, not exactly what I had worked out, but near enough. I didn't want these ruffians to know exactly where we were. He pulled out the chart as I spoke and compared its figures with what I had given them. He could read figures if not letters.

"At any rate," he said, after studying over the map for a little time, "that is not far from the point we are making for, is it?" "No," I admitted, "not very."

"Do you think that can be it?" "I can't tell for certain," I replied. "Until I get another shot at the sun, I should think the latitude about right, but as to the longitude—"

"And you can't get no shot at the sun until noon, can you?" unceremoniously put in Glibby, casting a long look to the eastward where the sky was thick and cloudy already.

"I can't even get an observation then unless we have clear weather," I answered. "There'll be no clear weather today, I take it," said an old seaman standing with the other two.

"I don't much think it," I assented. "Well, what do you advise then?" asked Pimball.

well under her lee, distant perhaps a league and a half or maybe two leagues. Personally I should not have hove to a ship on a lee shore. I should not have advised it, and indeed would have protested against it had I not suddenly developed a plan a plan as desperate as ever came into man's head. But



"That is not far from the point we are making for, is it?"

then the situation required desperate remedies. And for the accomplishment of the plan the ship was now in the very best position I could have put her. I was minded to desert the ship with my lady, get ashore and trust our selves to the tender mercies of whatever natives there were rather than stay with the vessel. I took no stock in the sailors' promises and agreements. Once they got the treasure it would follow that they would kill me and take her.

When we got the Rose of Devon safely hove to the men all knocked off work at once, leaving the decks in a state of confusion. Indeed, save to clear up the gear, there was nothing to do but wait. Two or three men were stationed on watch, and the rest were given the freedom of the ship. I was in doubt as to what to say about the cabin; but, strangely enough, nobody made any effort to take advantage of the mastery of the crew to quarter himself there. Indeed, their quarters forward were almost as ours, and they evidently preferred to be together. The ship was generously provisioned, and the fare of the men had been unusually good. They did, however, break into the lazarette and help themselves to whatever they liked out of the cabin stores, including a case of bottled spirits.

I brought out other liquor and let them have as much as they wanted. A little liquor would make them ugly and intractable, I reasoned; a lot would make them drunk, and enough would render them completely helpless. I even joined them in their carousal. It was easy enough to spill my liquor and make a pretense at drinking, which soon deceived them. They took to the liquor like ducks to water.

The men on watch kept reasonably sober for a time, but even they were not too abstemious. I saw to that. Later on the cook, who was not yet too drunk, fixed them up a regular banquet out of the cabin stores, and there was no objection to my taking a portion to my lady in the stateroom below, where she kept close and remained out of the way by my urgent entreaty.

My communications that long day with my sweet charge were necessarily intermitted and short. I did not dare to be long away from the men on deck. I still wore my sword, and I searched through the captain's cabin and found two heavy pistols, which I

carefully charged, concealing them in the deep pockets of my pea jacket. I passed among the men freely, handing out the spirits, opening fresh bottles and bandying rough jests, but took care never to be in any position where I could not command the companion hatch, which led to the cabin.

Our drift was slowly but surely in the direction of the island. Indeed, I think we had made half a league or more to leeward since we had been hove to. From time to time I searched the shore with a glass, seeing that the land was protected and completely inclosed by a reef, on that side at least, which agreed with the chart, but the sky continued overcast, and the mist grew thicker, so I couldn't make out much more than that. It was land, and that was enough. It was big enough to support life, and I thought that I detected green patches here and there that betokened vegetation and, if so, water and life.

Nobody took any care to strike the bells, but when darkness fell I declared noisily that I would go below and turn in. All but the most seasoned and hardy drinkers were by this time dead drunk. There was evidently some little remembrance of my rank, for no one yet conscious made any objection. Pimball, lying supine on the deck, and Glibby, who was in no better case, with drunken effusiveness assured me that they would take care of the ship, and I went below, having provided all of them with a fresh supply of drink just before.

I sometimes wonder if I would not have been justified in killing them all while they were rendered thus helpless. But I could not bring myself to such wholesale murder, richly as they deserved it and little as I was inclined to mercy. I also thought of clapping them in irons and stowing them below. But there were not irons enough aboard for that purpose, and Mistress Lucy and I could not work the ship unaided. We could not even feed and water our prisoners. Yet if I could have counted on three or four true men's assistance I would have risked it.

How Mistress Lucy had passed the dragging, anxious hours of that awful day you can better imagine than I can describe. And my occasional visits had scarcely reassured her greatly. Yet in an emergency I have never known a woman who had more spirit.

She had left her noon meal practically untouched, and she was sitting there in the cabin nervously clutching the pistol, frightened half to death. Poor girl! I don't blame her. Whatever may have been the cause of it, she was genuinely glad to see me when I came in and lighted the cabin lanterns.

"Oh," she cried, "I have been an agony the whole day. Every sound has caused me to seize this weapon, and when I have not been watching the door I have been on my knees praying for you and for myself. I do not think I can stand another day like this."

"Please God, dear lady, you shall not," I said, smiling reassuringly at her.

"What do you mean? Have you a plan?" "I have. The men are all drunk. I am going to leave the ship and take you with me."

"But how—when?" For answer I threw open the stern window of her cabin. On a level with it swung a small boat, a whaleboat. Now I had taken occasion during the day to lower that boat little by little, a few inches at a time and then a few inches at another time, as I had opportunity to get near the falls and to manipulate them unobserved, but I had brought it down to the level of the cabin windows. Its sea lashings were cast off, and I had no doubt, if conditions on deck were as I expected them, I could lower it all the way later with impunity.

"What do you mean?" she asked, staring out of the window and into the empty boat.

"I mean that you and I are going to embark in that boat tonight and leave this ship."

"But where are we going?" "There is land not a league and a half under our lee. It seems to be the most easterly of a cluster of islands."

"Is it the island we seek, do you think?" "We are in exactly the latitude and the longitude of the chart if my calculations are correct."

"The island was uninhabited when my ancestor was cast away upon it."

"Yes," said I, "but there may be natives there now, but no savages of the south seas could be more cruel and ruthless than the men on this ship."

"Let us go," she said, shuddering. "What is your plan?"

"I want you to dress yourself in your stoutest clothes, with your heaviest shoes, wrap yourself up in a boat cloak and take with you a change of clothes and some few necessities for your comfort. I will go and rummage the lazarette for provisions, and I will see if I can turn up any more weapons in the captain's room. I dare not go to the arms chest—it was below in the hold anyway, and I could not waste the time to hunt it out—we must hurry."

"Why, you said they were insensible."

"They'll recover their senses before we know it. I want as long a start as possible."

"Wait a moment," she said. She opened a drawer under her berth and drew out a leather case, which she opened and placed before me. There were two ivory-handled silver mounted pistols in it. "They belonged to my father," she said. "With one of them he—he"—Her voice broke. I nodded. I knew what he had done with one of them. She rummaged further and drew out an exquisite sword, quite unlike my heavy one, but if I could judge anything about weapons, of fine temper and

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Five newspaper correspondents, including Richard H. Davis, novelist and dramatist, were arrested in Mexico City, but were soon released when the British Consul got busy.

Continued on page 7.