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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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"It is indeed," I said, "just as it was set forth in the parchment."  
"And the great stone faces," she added in a voice in which there was a touch of awe.

"Let us go nearer and ascend the stairs," I said, taking her hand and leading the way, and she was so preoccupied that she did not notice.

I observed as we approached the stairs that the rock had been worn smooth by the wind and weather, or maybe by the passing of many feet and were quite practicable for ascent. The angle at which they rose was steep too.

The ascent was easy enough for me, but hard for her, and several times I made bold to lift her up the higher steps, which she suffered without complaining. She told me long afterward that my manner toward her then and thereafter had been perfect.

When we at last reached the top before us lay a broad pathway rudely paved with the same hard stone. This road led straight into the interior of the island of which we could see as yet nothing, because the wall hereabouts was covered with dense, luxuriant vegetation. Progress was difficult even in the pathway. It would have been impossible in some places but for my heavy cutlass with which I cut a path where the place had become overgrown by trees and bushes which had forced their way through the cracks, overturning and breaking the heavy flagstones and blocking up the path, which it was evident had not been traversed for generations, perhaps not since the old buccaneer himself had walked along it beneath the spreading trees.

For perhaps a mile we pursued our journey across the top of the wall, winding in and out among the trees through the jungle, the path evidently seeking the most level direction, for the top of the wall was very much broken and irregular.

At last we came to an open spot on the inner edge overlooking the whole island, and before us lay such a picture as few eyes, at least of our race, had ever looked upon. The wall ended abruptly and fell on the inner or landward side as precipitously as it rose outwardly and to seaward. Before us lay a most entrancing valley, perhaps three or four miles across and maybe half as long again in the other direction and which was walled about on every hand. It was sunk beneath this wall crest for perhaps 100 feet or more.

In the center of the valley the land rose a little higher than the island wall in a very considerable hill, tree crowned on the slopes, but largely bare on the crest. Through the valley ran a brook, which ended in a little lake, which I suspected had some subterranean connection with the ocean. As far as we could see—and the whole circuit of the island was now clearly visible to us—the inclosing wall was unbroken. The valley was filled with clusters of trees and alternating stretches of grassy meadow.

We should have been hard put to it to descend the wall to the valley were it not for the fact that the same people who built the stairs that gave access to the wall from the sea had built a similar flight which led to the valley. Before we essayed the descent of the stairs we drank our fill of the beauty and mysterious charm of it all. Indeed, there was no sound that came to us except the twittering of the birds, of which there were many, brilliantly plumaged, flitting in the trees. All else was still, lonely, deserted, oppressively so in fact.

"What think you of this?" My lady broke the silence. "Is it not like the crater of a volcano?"  
"No," said I; "these are coral rocks, and there is no sign of lava about them, yet it has somewhat of the appearance, especially that flattened hillock in the center."  
I have since talked with many men and studied the writings of the most learned geologists. They have fancied that perhaps the rocky projection in the middle of the valley, where we saw the great altar of sacrifice with its attendant idols later on, was the original island, which was once surrounded by a coral reef, which was now be-

coming a wall, and that some great upheaval had lifted the whole up out of the water in ages gone by and that the barrier reef over which we had passed was the second attempt of the busy little insects to surround the island again.

"What is to be done now?" asked my little mistress.

"I hardly know," I answered. "What is exercising me most now is, first of all, what is going on in that same mutinous ship, and, next, how we shall finally get away from here."

"You are impatient," returned my lady, smiling.

"Impatient for you, madam," I interrupted, checking myself from further self-revealing speech just in time.

"One thing at a time," she continued. "By the favor of God, we have escaped from the murderers and mutineers. We shall not starve upon this island, and I have no doubt that sooner or later you will devise some means of our escape."

It was past noon by this time. I made sure of it by looking at the sun and confirming it by my watch, which I most carefully kept running during all our sojourn on the island, which indicated close on two bells, 1 o'clock. Our talk of the ship recalled me to myself.

"I think," said I, "that we had better postpone the exploration of the island until another day and go back to our landing place. If I know the men on that ship they will guess that we have escaped to this island and they will bring her round to this side, where we may have them under view and they us."

"Think you that they can come at us?" she asked, in sudden alarm.

"I think not," I answered confidently, "but still to make sure I should like to have them under observation."

Well, to make a long story short, we retraced our steps over the broken path until we reached the stairs on the other side. The descent of them was much easier than the ascent, and by 2 of the clock we stepped on the sand again. There before us in the offing was the ship. We saw them quite plainly, and I doubt not they caught sight of us immediately also. They were scarcely a quarter of a mile away from the reef, perilously near, I thought, and we could mark them crowding the rail and staring landward. We could see them brandishing their weapons and we could imagine the yells which must have arisen from the decks when they caught sight of us.

The ruffians aboard the ship did not content themselves with simply staring at us, for presently they assembled on the port quarter—the ship was under all plain sail on the starboard tack at the time, the wind having fallen to a gentle breeze during the day—and clambered into the cutter, swinging at the davits. As she was lowered into the water, fully manned, Mistress Lucy drew closer to my side, seizing my arm with both hands.

"Let us fly! They are coming to take us!" she cried in great alarm.

"But they are on a vain errand," I reassured her.

"But why? How can you know that? Oh, Master Hampdon, let us hasten away."

"We have a protector," I answered confidently enough.

"God?" she asked.

"His handiwork," I replied, as I indicated with a gesture the barrier reef over which the waves were breaking.

"But we passed it."

"Yes, in a light dinghy, and you remember the difficulty and danger. They will never surmount it in the heavy cutter. They will not attempt it, trust me."

"But if there should be an opening?"

"I don't believe there is one," was my reassuring reply. "I have no fear that they can get at us."

"And we can't get to them," she answered more composedly.

"I have no wish so to do," I laughed.

"You don't understand me," she persisted. "What keeps them out keeps us in."

"Yes," I admitted, "that is true, but



"Let us fly! They are coming to take us!"

for the present I don't mind being kept in so long as they are kept out."

She looked at me quickly and confessed afterward that my words begot some quick suspicion which she admitted was unworthy of her and unwarranted by any act of mine, but I looked so placid that it soon passed from her mind. As a matter of fact, I had not appreciated the significance of my words. I should have been perfectly willing, I should be still, to pass the rest of my life alone on that island or anywhere else with my little mistress only. I was happy then. I had got her to myself; she must look to me for everything. The haughty little queen of the quarter-deck was now the humble dependent by my side.

**CHAPTER XII.**  
Inside the Barrier.

WE trudged along the sand parallel to the boat, which was following the course of the barrier reef, seeking what I knew they would not find—an entrance to the lagoon and thence to the island. The lagoon narrowed in places, until had it not been for the roar of the waves in the reef a hall could easily have carried. I am ashamed to say that I used insulting gestures on occasion, whereat some of them stood up in the boat and shook their fists in our direction. Although I was sure they could not reach us, their presence was a menace and a barrier to us. After they had rowed the length of the island they gave it up and went back to the ship, which had followed their course.

By this time the day was far spent. We retraced our steps and came to the place where I had hauled up the dingy. We were hungry. The provisions we had taken with us we had eaten during the journey. The first business was supper. I had noticed some coconut trees and other strange tropical fruits, so I had no fear of starvation. We could live on the island indefinitely; therefore I was not sparing with the provisions. We kindled a fire and made shift to boil some coffee. We had neither milk nor sugar, but the taste of civilization did us good.

For the night I capsize the boat and drew it close against the coral wall, spread the sail and boat cloak upon the clean, dry sand, gave her one blanket and bade her take her rest. It was snug, dry and comfortable.

"But you?" she asked.

"I shall do very well here with my boat cloak and one of the blankets, and I shall lie across the stern of the boat between it and the cliff, out of sight, but within touch or call if you need me."

"I am afraid," she said softly.

"Nothing can come to you except over my body, and I am a light sleeper. Anything will rouse me." I said reassuringly.

"I would not have you harmed, either," she persisted.

"I shall not be."

"There may be wild beasts."

"I do not think there is an animal on this island," I laughed, "and we have seen no signs of man. The ship certainly would have attracted the attention of some one had not the island been deserted."

"But those men out there?"

"You forget the rampart that God has flung about us. Now, madam, you can go to sleep in safety, I assure you."

"Before that," she said, dropping down on her knees in the sand and motioning me to follow her example, which I did awkwardly enough—I hope I am not a mocker or disbeliever, but I confess that I didn't often bend the knee—"we will have a prayer together."

She had slipped a little prayer book within her dress, and she now drew it forth from her bosom and by the light of the fire read the Psalm of David, which begins: "Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice." And then she prayed, using some of the old collects of the church and adding one of her own making in which she besought God to care for us further, while she thanked him for having raised up a defense for her in my poor person, only she did not so describe it. I listened very humbly, saying a heartfelt "Amen" at the end.

There was a silence for a little space

Continued on page 7.

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