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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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SYNOPSIS

The body of Sir Geoffrey Wilberforce, ruined gambler and suicide, is found by Hampdon, a sailor. Hampdon quarrels with the Duke of Arcester.

Hampdon breaks the news to Lucy Wilberforce and delivers a letter found on her father's body.

It contains half of a map of a treasure island. Lucy already has the other half. There are directions for finding the treasure.

Hampdon punishes the duke for insulting Lucy. Hampdon and Lucy start in a ship for the island of the Stairs.

Hampdon steals a kiss, and Lucy has him imprisoned in a cabin. Desperate men in the crew mutiny.

Pimball and Glibby demand the map of the island of Hampdon, who pretends to join the mutiny. Hampdon demands possession of Lucy.

He treats her with respect and offers to save her from the mutineers. The pair plot to escape to the island of the Stairs.

The mutineers become intoxicated, and Hampdon and Lucy leave the ship for the island, which is nearby.

They are carried over a coral reef to the island, where they find rude staircases and mount a gigantic staircase of stone.

The mutineers pursue them, but are stopped by the reef, and Hampdon and Lucy make a search for the hidden treasure.

They pass a strange altar surrounded by masses of human bones and skulls and find the cave mentioned on the map.

They discover a vast quantity of gold, silver and precious stones. War canoes of savages approach the island. Hampdon and Lucy flee to the treasure cave.

They are attacked by the savages, led by Pimball and Glibby. Lucy asks Hampdon to kiss her goodbye.

They are saved by an earthquake, which routs the savages and mutineers, but closes the mouth of the cave.

They escape from the cave and the island, are picked up by a ship, and Hampdon wins the love of Lucy.

CHAPTER XIV. In Which We Find the Treasure and Are Attacked.

WE did not need to go further into the cave, for there before us lay a number of large wooden boxes or chests, moldy and ancient. The boxes had once been iron strapped, but the iron had rusted and the wood had rotted, I found. I stepped over to one of them, lifted the lid, which crumbled at my touch, and there was the treasure—in gold and silver! Thousands of pounds lay to our hands! The old buccaner had told the truth. The story of the parchment was not a romance; the plunder of the ancient galleon was there. For my part I would gladly have exchanged it all for a stout boat and a clear passage through the reef, with a chance for freedom.

"Well, your great-great-grandfather, for how many generations back I know not, was right," I said at last. "The treasure is here and we have found it. It is yours."

"Yes," she said, to whom the same thought had come, "but now that we have found it of what value or use is it?"

"None," I admitted, "that I can see." "And what may be its value, think you?"

"I would make good ballast for a ship," I answered lightly. "But if we could take it hence to England?"

"Millions I can only guess." "I will give you one-half of it for your share," she said, laughing softly. "I want none of it," I returned seriously enough.

What possessed her to do it I know not, and she since confessed she knows not either. We stood there, looking down upon the useless treasure, when she turned to me on a sudden.

"Now that you have seen it are you still of the same mind," she said mischievously, "that you would give up your portion of the treasure—for me?"

"Great God!" I cried, moved beyond measure by her imprudent remark and thrown off my balance by her—dare I say—coquetry. "I would give up the world itself for you. Don't you know it?"

And I made a step toward her, but she put up her hand. "Hush, hush, Master Hampdon!" she cried, affrighted at the consequences of her pleasantry, and I could swear she turned crimson in the candlelight.

"This is not time or place now. Remember that I am alone and that I am at your mercy."

"I shall never forget that again," I said grimly. "This treasure removes you further away from me than ever."

"What mean you?" "When you get back to England and take your place once more among your friends in that society to which your birth entitles you and which this



Thousands of Pounds Lay to Our Hands.

wealth will enable you to sustain"— "And who is to take me back to England?"

"I—" "How?" "I know not, but I shall do it."

"And with the treasure?" "With the treasure, too; at least a sufficiency of it for all your needs."

"And when you have done this amazing thing for me you expect to disappear from my life, Master Hampdon?" "Aye, if need be."

She laughed and I did not understand the meaning of that laugh either. "Let us search and see if there be anything else. Your ancestor spoke of jewels," he said.

"Yes," she said, "there should be a smaller casket. Let us look further." There were perhaps a dozen large boxes I opened them all. Some were quite empty, with a little pile of dust in them and a few shreds of color here and there which indicated silk had been packed in them. There were also broken barrels around which still clung a faint odor of spices. There were piles of rotted debris further on, and as I stirred one of them with my sword I struck something more solid.

I brushed aside what seemed to be the decayed remains of cordage and canvas and finally came upon a smaller casket bound, hinged, and cornered with some kind of metal which I afterward found to be silver, for iron would have rusted away long since. The casket was about a foot long by six inches wide and six inches deep. The metal which completely covered it was curiously chased. The casket was locked I crumbled the wood in my hands, but could not open the lock. The edge of my ax, however, proved a potent key, and at last forced it apart, and as I did so out fell a little heap of what I judged to be precious stones. There were green, red, blue and white ones, among them many pearls sadly discolored and valueless. The stones glistened with an almost living energy. My mistress was more familiar with these things than I, and I presented a handful to her.

"Why, they are precious stones!" she cried in an awe struck whisper. "Look!" She held up a diamond as big as her thumb nail. It sparkled like a sun in the candlelight. "And there is an emerald," she cried, picking up one of the green stones. "This blue one is a sapphire; this a ruby. Why," she exclaimed, "here is a fortune alone. These jewels must be of fabulous value. The gold and silver we might leave behind, but these we can carry with us."

In my heart I was sorry we had found them, yet I had the grace immediately to say: "I am glad for that. We must gather them up, but where shall we put them?"

"In the pockets of your coat for the present," she answered.

Now there were not so many of them—perhaps three or four handfuls—not nearly enough to fill the casket. I figured that it had been a jewel box with little trays or drawers and that the stones had been wrapped separately, but had all fallen together when the partitions rotted away. I easily found room for them in the capacious side pockets of my coat, and then we turned back to the outer room. Passing by the hideous altar, we gained the light. It was now late in the afternoon, we found to our surprise.

We had spent hours over the treasure and we had just time to retrace our steps and get back to the boat on the beach and partake of our evening meal when night fell. As we sat by the fire that night I made little bags out of a piece of canvas taken from a bread bag and we put the jewels into them, dividing them into equal parts.

One bag she wore constantly thereafter on her person and I the other. She insisted that the rough and ready division we had made was permanent; that the bag I carried belonged to me and the bag she carried belonged to her. But I refused to have it so in spite of her argument, and there we left it.

During the next two or three days we leisurely explored the island. There was nothing else on it to see which merits any particular description. We did not again visit the central hill, nor did we enter any other cave. We did not even go near the treasure cave

again. On the contrary, we kept to the open. We chose to live near the sea on the beach which was high above all tides and which was removed from the charnel spots which made a mockery of the sylvan groves within the walls. The island was well provided with tropical fruits, many being good for food as I knew. We caught fish in the lagoon and turtle on the sand. We lacked nothing to make us comfortable, even happy, except the means of escape.

We spent our days in trying to devise some means of getting across the reef and back home again—that is, when I was not idly lying at the feet or following the footsteps of the woman I loved. I didn't want to get away, so far as I was concerned. I didn't care whether we ever got away. I had wit enough not to let her see, not to let her suspect that for a moment, however, and I tried to convince her by my conduct toward her that my kissing her on the ship had been but momentary madness, but I learned later that I failed lamentably. She says now that a baby could see that I was dying for her, and I suppose it is true, but at least I didn't say anything. After that outbreak in the cave I kept silence.

Late one afternoon we stood at the head of the stairs looking seaward. We had come from a long ramble throughout the cup of the island, and as we stood on the top our gaze as usual instinctively turned toward the sea, perhaps seeking for the sail of some rescuing ship. The water was black with great savage war canoes. "Great God!" I cried, "look yonder!"

"I see, I see," she cried in turn. "Who can they be?" "Dwellers from the other islands to the westward," I answered.

"They could not see us yet, fortunately; but after all, that mattered little. My little lady did not seem to be nearly as disturbed as I."

"The reef will protect us," she said at last, looking at me confidently. "Not for a moment," I answered. "They will ride that reef in those light canoes more easily than we did."

"And you think"—she instantly began. "Our lives are in God's hands. If I know anything these will be ferocious, bloodthirsty savages. See! They are armed."

I pointed to one tall brown man, who stood up in the bow of the nearest canoe, flourishing a broad bladed spear. "We must hide," she said.

"But where? They will search the island."

"In the treasure cave," she answered. And indeed that was the most likely spot. We had brought but little with us that afternoon. I had thrust a brace of pistols in my belt, and she herself, by my advice, always carried her two small ones, and I had my sword and ax, but everything else was in the boat on the beach. For a moment I thought of running down there and getting some of our things, but as I half turned to descend the stairs she detained me, divining my purpose.

"No, no!" she urged, clasping my arm with both hands. "We must make shift with what we have. Perhaps they may not discover us, and we can hide safely until they depart. Come! Let us go."

There was sense in her remarks. It might be that after performing their awful worship these most unwelcome visitors would return as they came, and by keeping closely hid we might escape an encounter with them. They would certainly find all our goods as soon as they crossed the reef and landed. But there was no help for that now. We had to make the best of a bad situation.

We turned and ran down the path across the wall. I had forethought to gather a number of coconuts and some other fruits as we passed. I filled my own pockets, and then she made a bag out of the skirt of her dress and carried the rest. Presently I reflected that we had no need for such haste. There would be plenty of time for us to reach the cave and conceal ourselves long before they landed, so we progressed more slowly. It was almost dusk when we reached our shelter. I uprooted a small tree just as we started to climb the pile of stones, which I used as a lever to push down the heap in every direction as we climbed, so that it would be impossible for any one else to enter the cave without piling up the stones again. We passed by the stone altar and its skeletons, crept into the inner room, flung ourselves panting upon the sand, and there we waited.

In that secret and secluded shelter I thought that we were safe for the time being. Especially was I sure that they would make no effort to find us at night, as the place had anciently been some sort of a shrine. And in the morning I did not think that they would chance upon that particular cave out of the many in the coral walls without a long search, unless they had proposed coming just there for other reasons than we gave them. Even if they did stumble upon our hiding place early in the hunt, which I felt sure would be made for us as soon as they discovered evidences of our presence on the island in the shape of the dinghy, or at least at day-break, it would take them some time to rebuild the rock wall again; and when they did enter the outer room they would find it a matter of extreme difficulty to get into the inner chamber so long as I was there. Unfortunately we had brought no powder or ball with us. We had no means of reloading our firearms, once they had been discharged. I resolved to reserve the four pistols we had for the last emergency. For other weapons I had my ax and sword, to say nothing of stones and even of the human skulls about the altar.

I have said, I think, that the inner

Continued on page 7.

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