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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 Arcestr.

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 statues 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.

I didn't come off unscathed, for as I sprang back after having thrown another skull and taken my look an arrow hit me in the fleshy part of the arm. My mistress noticed it instantly. The stone head had broken off, and it was the work of an instant to draw out the slender wood shaft. It was not a bad wound, but it was painful. The next thing she did amazed me beyond measure, for before I could prevent it she had put her lips to the wound.

"What mean you?" I cried, when I could recover myself.

"It might have been poisoned," she said, quietly looking at me with luminous eyes, "and I cannot have you die!"

I was amazed, astounded even, at her hardihood in sucking any possible poison out of that wound in my arm at so great a risk to her own life, if the weapon had been envenomed. And I was most profoundly touched too. But I had had my lesson. I viewed it as done out of common humanity and to preserve a life useful to her—nothing more. Meanwhile, in my turn, I took such hasty precautions for her safety as I could. I bade her rinse out her mouth thoroughly with cold water and then with the strong spirit of which I still had in my flask.

CHAPTER XVI.

In Which We Fight For Life In the Cave of the Treasure.

WE had withdrawn by this time to the back of the outer cave. Indeed, that was the only safe place for us, for a constant succession of weapons was thrown through the opening. We needed no further warning to keep out of reach. Master Pimball was showing himself something of a general. He was keeping us away from the entrance, and with the great host of men at his command he was building up the broken down heap of stones which would presently enable them to come to us.

I considered what was to be done. I had four loaded pistols and, therefore, four lives in my hand. No man could show his head in that entrance without receiving a shot. After that I could account for a few more, perhaps, with sword, ax or naked fist, but in the end they would inevitably master me. Unfortunately, the entrance was broad enough for three or four, or even more, to enter abreast.

Should I open the battle there or retreat into the inner cave and wait? was the question that had to be decided.

Perhaps the latter would be the safer plan, but I had a strange unwill-

ing the outer cave, for that matter, but still it seemed so. We could at least see the sky and the sunlight. Should we stay there or go further into the wall?

I decided upon the former course. I explained to my mistress that I would keep the outer cave as long as I could, begging her to retreat to the inner chamber. She demurred at first, but when I spoke to her peremptorily at last God forgive me she acceded to my request humbly enough. I thrust the best pistol into her hand and told her to reserve it for herself in case her capture was inevitable, but not to pull the trigger until the last moment; and I promised her faithfully that I would not foolishly or uselessly jeopardize myself, but that after I had made what fight I could I would join her, if it were in any way possible.

She hung in the wind awhile, seeming loath to go when all had been said between us. Finally she approached me, laid her hand on my arm, and looked up at me.

"Master Hampdon," she said softly, "here we be, a lone man and woman among these savages and murderers with but little chance for our lives. I take it I am sorry that I struck you on the ship, and—you may—kiss me goodby."

With that she proffered me her lips. I could face a thousand savages, a hundred Pimballs, without a quiver of the nerves, but at these words and that proffer my knees fairly smote together before this small woman. I stood staring down at her.

"You were overzealous once to take from me what I now offer you willingly," she said, half turning away.

With that I caught her to me and once again I drank the sweetness of her lips. I forgot the savages outside, the spears, the arrows streaming through the entrance. I held her in my arms and without resistance, I could have held her there forever, quite willing to die in such sweet embrace. She pushed me from her at last and I could swear that my kisses had been returned, and then with a whispered blessing she dropped to her knees and crawled within the cave.

I could have fought the world there, after, for her kisses intoxicated me like wine. Yet even then I did not delude myself. I knew that, on her part at least, it was a farewell kiss, such as two friends might give each other in the face of death. To her the pressure of my lips had only been as the salute of an ancient gladiator about to die with the Caesar who watched the struggle. Well, I blessed her even for that condescension.

With a pistol in each hand and the third upon a rock close at hand I waited. I had not long to wait. There was a sudden fiercer rain of arrows and spears, some of which struck at my feet or by my side. I gathered up a sheaf of them and laid them with the pistol on the rock.

The next instant two tremendous savages and a white man appeared in the opening. The shot was easy, the target fine. I couldn't miss. The first bullet went into the brain of Master Glibby, the next tore off the head of the leading chief. Reserving the third pistol, I seized a spear and drove it through the throat of the other savage. I shouted with triumph, and Mistress Lucy has since confessed to me that, kneeling down and peering through the opening, contrary to my explicit order, which was for her to seek safe cover, she saw all, and that my call of victory was the sweetest sound she had ever heard in her life.

I thought we had done, but they were an indomitable lot those south sea islanders, and they were well urged. Four others took their places at once, spears in hand, which they threw at me. I jumped aside with difficulty and let fly the third pistol. They came crowding this time, and the bullet from the heavy weapon accounted for two others, but the survivors had gained a footing and the shelf behind them was suddenly filled with lifting heads and climbing men. I clubbed my weapons and hurled them one after another fair and square into the mass. One went down with a broken skull. The rush was checked; they gave a little. I cast spears at them and arrows, but now the shield men had come up, and they caught the missiles on their shields. The front rank wavered, and perhaps, if they had been unsupported, they might have been driven below, but the crowd behind would not let them. Slowly they began to move toward me.

I doubt not I was a terrible figure, for I had whipped out my cutlass by this time and stood at bay. I had forgotten for the moment all else but the lust of the conflict, and in another second I had flung myself upon them in fury. It was my mistress who recalled me to myself.

"Save yourself!" she shrieked. "They are upon you. Come hither!"

With that I dropped to my knees and made a spring for the opening. I had waited too long. The leading man would have pinned me to the earth with his spear. The entrance was wide, fortunately, and Mistress Lucy could see through the part I did not block with my huge bulk. Disregarding entirely my instructions, she fired the last pistol at the nearest man. He went down like a ninepin, both legs broken, which gave me time to gain the inner chamber and stand upright. I was bleeding, for I had been cut here and there, but was otherwise all right.

"That shot saved my life!" I cried, panting. "You should have kept it for yourself."

knew not, they came on. The narrow entrance was suddenly black with the islanders, who thrust their spears at us. Fortunately, my mistress had moved aside and was out of range, but I was perilously near being cut down. Mistress Lucy had the sword which I had thrust into her hand, and I the great ax which I had cast into the inner cave ahead of me.

Those outside were even less able to see than we, and perhaps they



She Fired the Last Pistol at the Nearest Man.

thought we had withdrawn or been driven back, for they crept forward. While I had lived in the gardener's lodge of Wilberforce castle I had got to be quite an axman. I brought down the heavy weapon on the first head, striking with just enough force to kill the man and yet leave me able to recover myself without delay, and when three heads had been knocked that way in rapid succession with no more damage to me than a trifling spear cut on the ankle, the battle stopped for a moment. I laughed.

"Come on, you dogs!" I shouted. "I can play at that game until you are more tired of it than I."

I spoke without thought, however, for those outside the opening drew back the bodies by their legs and thus cleared the entrance. I judged that the outer cave, which was large and spacious, was now filled with men. They were shouting and gesticulating in great excitement. But none made any effort to enter. Finally I heard a human voice speaking English. It was Pimball.

"Master Hampdon!" he cried. "Speak not to me, you murdering villain!" I answered.

"Now, this is madness," he went on. "You are trapped like rats. We have only to wall up the entrance or build a fire in front of it and you will die."

"It is better to die even so," I replied, "than to live with men like you."

"You are a fool!" he exclaimed. He dropped down on his knees as he spoke, and I could see his face in the opening, but too far away for me to swing my ax. If it were my last effort I was determined that I would get him, and so I waited.

"Don't lose the sword!" I cried to my lady across the chamber, where her white face stared at me out of the dimness.

"I shall not," she answered undauntedly.

Then I lifted the ax and waited for Master Pimball and his men to come on. But he had a better plan. Bullets and powder they had in plenty, and he knew from the fact that I had thrown my pistols at them that I had none left. With a deafening roar a storm of bullets from a dozen weapons swept into the cave. I leaped back. I had to or I should have been shot where I stood. Of the way this opened they took advantage, and under cover of a second volley they entered. Well, it was all up. All I could do was to leap upon them as they rose, and—

But at that moment the solid rock beneath my feet began to sway. It was as if I had been instantly translated to the deck of a tossing ship. I stood rooted to the spot trying to maintain a balance. Pimball had lifted himself upon one knee and was almost clear of the entrance, but he, too, stopped appalled. A sickening feeling of apprehension that all the savages on earth could not inspire came over me. My mistress screamed faintly. The natives outside broke into terror-stricken shouts and cries; on oath burst from the lips of the leader of the mutineers.

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