



# THE ISLAND OF THE STAIRS



Being a True Account of Certain Strange and Wonderful Adventures of Master John Hampton, Seaman, and Mistress Lucy Wilberforce, Gentlewoman, in the Great South Seas.

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

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"Add who is to take me back to Eng-

land?"

"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 amaz-

ing thing for me you expect to disap-

pear from my life, Master Hampton?"

"Aye, if need be."

She laughed and I did not under-

stand 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

round, hinged, and cornered with some

kind of metal which I afterward found

to be silver, for iron would have rust-

ed 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

shaded. The casket was locked. I

rumbled 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 discol-

ored and valueless. The stones glist-

ened 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

large as her thumb nail. It sparkled like

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 val-

ue. The gold and silver we might

have behind, but these we can carry

with us."

In my heart I was sorry we had

found them, yet I had the grace im-

mediately to say:

"I am glad for that. We must

rather 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

turned back to the outer room. Pass-

ing by the hideous altar, we gained the

light. It was now late in the after-

noon, we found to our surprise.

We had spent hours over the treas-

ure 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 thereaf-

ter on her person and I the other. She

insisted that the rough and ready divi-

sion 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 remov-

ed from the charnel spots which made

a mockery of the sylvan groves with-

in 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 de-

vis 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 wo-

man 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 mo-

ment, 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 lat-

er 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. Af-

ter that outbreak in the cave I kept si-

lence.

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, fortunat-

ly; but, after all, that mattered little.

My little lady did not seem to be near-

ly 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 be-

gan.

"Our lives are in God's hands. If I

know anything these will be ferocious,

bloodthirsty savages. See! They're

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 land-

ed. 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 an-

ciently 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 dis-

charged. 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 al-

tar.

I have said, I think, that the inner

cave was slightly damp. The damp-

ness arose from a spring of water

which bubbled away in some dark

corner which we had not cared to explore.

We had what provisions we had

brought with us left over from our

luncheon, which I had luckily

preserved instead of throwing it away,

and an armful of coconuts and other

fruit. These, however, would last us