

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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CHAPTER XV.

Wherein We Are Besieged in the Cave.

I did not occur to us for a single moment that the savages had any knowledge of the treasure and that they could be after that. Not for the thousandth part of a second did I dream that the savages were led by Pimball, Glibby and most of the other seamen of the Rose of Devon. I did not know then that the Rose of Devon had gone ashore in the terrific storm I had described, or that there had been a battle with the savages, who were unable to contend successfully against the firearms with which the ship was abundantly provided. A means of communication between the ship and the shore had been found subsequently through one of the seamen who had sailed the south seas. The savages had been told of the treasure, of which indeed they had some dim traditions from days gone by; they also held the cave as one of their most sacred spots, scarcely less sacred than the great altar on the hillock in the center of the island, for what reason I cannot tell. Some of this I learned afterward from our assaults, and much of it I learned on reflection on our voyage homeward.

By some persuasion, I know not what, Pimball and Glibby had won them over. Together they had organized an expedition to come and seize us and take the treasure. The Rose of Devon I guessed was not badly damaged and could easily be made seaworthy.

We sat silent in the cave for a long time. I had not lighted the lantern we had left there at our last visit, and some of the light of the dying day filtered through from the outside cave. There was nothing that we needed light for. We sat close together on the remains of one of the chests to protect us from the damp sand. I always carried with me a flask of spirits. Not that I am a drunken man; I left and still leave that practice to the gallants of the day, but I have often found it useful in some dire emergency, and as Mistress Lucy shivered in the chill, damp air I heartened her and strengthened her with a dram.

As it was summer and not far from the line, I had not brought the worst cloak with us. I had not even worn my sailor jacket, but my waistcoat was heavy and warm, and I took it off and, despite her protestations, slipped it on her. In girth it was big enough to encircle her twice, which was all the better for her comfort. I drew it around to cover her breast with a double fold, and with a length of line I had in my pocket I made it fast. We sat close together and talked in low whispers, and I thrilled at the contact of her sweet presence in spite of our peril.

How long we talked or how long we waited I have no means of telling. It grew dark in the cave very early, and when I ventured into the outside room after what seemed an interminable wait, I found night had fallen. I felt pretty sure that we need apprehend no attack that night, and yet it was necessary to keep watch, so I proposed that one of us should sleep while the other listened. Naturally she was the first to take rest. It was too damp and cold to lie down on the sand, so I wedged myself against one of the least rotted of the chests, whose shape had been kept intact by the pile of gold and silver bars, and somewhat hesitatingly offered her the shelter of my arms.

"Madam," I said, with all the formality I could muster, "you must have sleep. You cannot lie upon this damp sand, and it is bad enough to sit upon it, but upon my shoulder and within the support of my arms you shall have rest. I swear to you."

"Swear not," she replied, coming closer to me. "I trust you, and if I am to sleep I know that I will be safe within your arms."

"As my sister, had I one, or as my mother, were she here, will I support you," said I.

Before she closed her eyes she made her evening prayer for herself and for me, and then she made me promise that I would awaken her when I judged it to be midnight, and, upon my

promise, without more to do she nestled down and went to sleep, her head upon my shoulder.

Surely, never had man a greater compliment paid him than I by that maid that night!

I sat there motionless, my bared sword at my side, listening. I could hear nothing, no sound except her soft breathing and once in awhile the sigh of the night wind through the trees outside, which penetrated faintly into the cave, and at frequent intervals the cry of some night bird came to me, but there was no sound of humanity.

How long we sat there I know not. It was my purpose to keep awake the night through, and I think I must have kept awake the greater part thereof, but toward morning my head dropped back on the pile of ingots, and I fell asleep. Yet I did not relax my grasp upon the sleeping figure lying upon my breast. It was she who awakened when the dim light began to sift through the narrow opening into the little cave where we sat.

"Master Hampdon," she said, bending over me, having arisen without disturbing me, "it is morning."

I sprang to my feet instantly, as she shook me gently and grasped my sword as I did so, whereat she laughed.

"Why did you not awaken me?" she asked reprovingly.

"I don't know. I must have"—I began in great confusion.

"You must have gone to sleep yourself," she laughed.

"I am ashamed," I replied, "that I should have fallen in my duty to keep good watch. I didn't awake you when I might because you needed sleep yourself, and then, like a big animal, I went to sleep myself."

"I am glad," she said, smiling at me, and I could just see her lovely face faintly in the dark twilight of the cave, "that you did and nothing happened."

"It is just as well then," I said, smiling in turn, "we have both slept. I feel greatly refreshed."

"And?"

"Thank God!" I said fervently.

"What is to be done now?" she asked.

"First, breakfast."

I broke open a coconut with my ax. I had become expert at it, and we had food and drink in plenty and for variety some of the hard bread which still remained which I had brought with us and other fruit. I lighted the lantern for a moment and went toward the sound of the falling water. The coconut shell made an excellent cup, and I brought her enough clear, cool, sweet water to lave her face and hands. Save for the stiffness of the constrained position and some slight pain caused by the damp we were both fit for any adventure.

Well, we should have need of our strength. When we finished our meal and our refreshing ablutions, she looked at me inquiringly.

"Well, what next?"

"The next thing," said I, "is to see what is toward."

"You won't leave the cave," she said, catching me by the shoulder.

"I should find it difficult were I so minded," I answered, smiling and thrilling to her touch again, as always. Indeed, I have never got used to it, but even after all these years. As I look back at it now I do not think I have ever had happier moments in my life than those in which she clung to me and was dependent upon me.

"Why not?" she asked.

"You forget that we broke down the way last night."

"But you are a sailor; you might make shift."

"Yes; but not you," I answered.

"Without me?"

"Without you I go nowhere."

She looked at me with shining eyes.

"Come," said I, "let us go into the outer room. We may find out something."

I had wound my watch in the dark and looked at it now as we came into the light. It was three bells in the morning watch, or about half after 9. We went past the altar with its grim, bony circle of attendants and stered through the entrance. There was an open space in front of the cliff forty or fifty yards wide perhaps. After looking some time and seeing nothing I foolishly—and yet it would have made no difference in the end—stepped out upon the shelf which made a sort of platform in front of the cave, and Mistress Lucy fearlessly came with me.

We had scarcely appeared in view when to our astounded surprise we heard the report of a firearm and a heavy bullet struck the rock wall just over our heads. I had just time to mark the spot whence it came by the betraying smoke as I leaped back into the shelter, carrying my precious charge before me. I was puzzled beyond measure. I was certain that the savages in these parts of the south seas knew nothing about firearms, and I could not account for it. The shower of arrows and spears that came harmlessly—and yet it would have made account for, but not that shot.

"That," said I solemnly, "was a narrow escape."

"Do these islanders have firearms?" she said, the same thought in her mind.

"I never heard of it. I cannot account for it."

"I can, though," she said. "Just before the discharge of that gun I caught the sight of a man in clothes such as you wear. Could it be possible that it was some one from the ship?"

I nodded my head.

"It is quite likely," I answered.

"At this moment conversation was interrupted by a hail. I heard in that lonely island my own name called.

"Master Hampdon," the cry came to us, "will you respect a flag of truce? If so show yourself at the opening, and I shall do the same."

"Don't go," cried my little mistress, hearing all; "they are utterly without honor and!"

"I think it will be best for me to go," I said. "Stand clear so that if any treacherous movement be made I shall have space to leap backward, and meanwhile look to your weapons."

I examined my pistols and then calling out that I would faithfully observe

the flag of truce I stepped out into the open. There below me on the edge of the glade, convenient to a tree behind which he could leap, for the rascal



Pimball Had a White Neck Cloth Tied to the Muzzle of His Gun.

trusted me apparently as little as I trusted him, stood the wretch, Pimball. Back of him, beneath the trees, I distinguished Glibby and a number of the crew, nearly all of them. I should judge, and back of these were massed the savages. Pimball had a white neck cloth tied to the muzzle of his gun.

"Say what you have to say and be quick about it," I said, but he looked past me and took off his hat with a profound sweep.

"Good morning, Mistress Wilberforce," he cried.

I turned in a hurry and found that she had stepped out by my side. The two of us presented a fair mark for any weapon. One might have escaped, but hardly two.

"I stay where you are," she answered firmly. "See, I too am armed. Her little hand lifted a heavy pistol.

"I can talk with the two of you just as well as with one," said Pimball.

"Talk on and be brief," I returned, seeing that there was no use arguing with my little mistress.

"You have found the treasure," he began; "there is no use denying it. We have it from our savage friends that the things are there. In years gone by they sacrificed here and on the cone yonder; but for generations the island has been taboo. The white man has broken the ban and we are here to take the treasure."

"Indeed!" said I sarcastically, whereat he turned pale with anger but still mastered himself.

"We offer you," he continued, "safety. We cannot take you with us, but we will leave you here on the island after we have taken the treasure, and, if his eyes turned from me to my companion, "if you are willing to give up the woman I will enroll you with our following and we will all get away together on the Rose of Devon."

"What of the ship?" I asked.

"It was a hard thing to control my temper, but I wanted the information."

"She was badly stove up but not entirely wrecked. We fought the savages, conquered them, made them our friends. We can get away in her and you can navigate her or we can do without you for that matter and make shift to get back to the South American coast at least."

"So you offer me free passage and my share of the treasure if I will give up Mistress Wilberforce, do you?"

"That is it," answered Pimball. "Eh, mates?" whereat a deep chorus of approval came from Glibby and the men.

"And this is my answer," I said furiously, leveling my pistol at him. "Get back, you villain, or you will have looked your last on life."

"But the flag of truce?" he cried, dropping his weapon.

"It is not meant to cover such propositions as yours. As for the treasure you shall have it when you can get it."

As I spoke he sprang behind the tree and motioned to his men to fire, but I was too quick for him, and we were safely within the cave when the sound of the reports came to us.

"Now what is to be done?" said my little mistress.

"The next move," I answered, "is with them."

"Shall we go further back into the cave?"

"No," I replied. "We will stay here for the present."

We were not long left in suspense, for I could hear them breaking through the woods and rushing toward the opening. Missiles in the way of weapons there were none in the cave, but I picked up a skull that lay on the floor and hurled it out of the opening into the unseen crowd below. A shriek told me that I had hit some one, but I saw at once that the game was one I could not play. The white men had some skill at warfare. They had posted covering parties to protect the workmen. I crept cautiously toward the entrance, where I could see them working hard, piling up the stones to enable them to get at us, while back of them stood others with drawn bows and pointed weapons.

I didn't come off unscathed, for as I sprang back after having thrown an arrow and taken my look at the other skill and taken my look at 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 unwillingness to adopt it. It would be like burying ourselves, for once within we should never get out alive, except as prisoners, so long as they had the outer cave. And I could never dislodge them from it. There was not much more chance of getting out alive from 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

"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 emphatically 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 as though there were no more, 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 thereafter, 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 was to the Caesar who watched the struggle. Well, I blessed her even for that cold sensation.

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 fierce 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 by 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 chief 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 plumed 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."

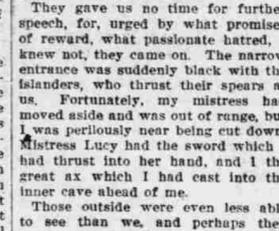
"I can find means to die," she answered. "If I naught else," by her sword blade."

"Good," I exclaimed, proud of her prowess and her resolution.

They gave us no time for further speech, for, urged by what promises of reward, what passionate hatred, I 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 live even so," I replied, "than to live with men like you."

"You are a fool!" he exclaimed.

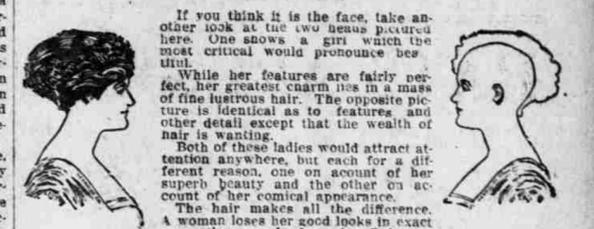
He dropped down on his knees as he spoke, and I could see his face in the opening, but too far away for me to swing my ax. If it were my last effort I was determined that I would get him, and so I waited.

"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

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stood. Of the way thus 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 minefitters.

The next moment, with a crash like a thousand thunder peals, the earth was rent in twain.

The earthquake shook that rocky island like a baby's cradle. A great mass of rock over the entrance fell. With another roar like the first the cliff was riven in every direction. The noise outside eased. The men with Pimball were ground to death. Upon his legs lay fifty feet of broken rock. Darkness, total and absolute, succeeded the dim light. I remember realizing that the attack had failed and then something struck me. Down upon the wet, still quivering sand I fell and knew no more.

Water, icy cold, trickling upon me from some spring, opened in the wall by the earthquake presently brought me to myself. I lay for a moment listless. I could hear nothing at first, but in a little while a deep groan and then a faint whispered prayer came to me.

I strove desperately to collect my senses, and finally I realized where I was—the cave, the battle, the earthquake, Pimball and the woman!

"Mistress Lucy!" I cried.

"Oh, thank God!" her voice came through the darkness hysterical, "I thought you were killed."

"No," I answered, slowly rising to my knees and stretching my members to see if I had control of them, which, fortunately, I soon discovered I had. "I was stunned but otherwise I believe I am not much hurt. How is it with you?"

"I am well and unharmed."

"Thank God!"

"For heaven's sake, water," interrupted a trembling hoarse, anguished voice.

"Who speaks?" I asked.

"I, Pimball. I am pinned to the ground, my legs are crushed, my back is broken, I am dying."

"There should be a lantern here," I said. "I placed it—let me think—where did I place it?"

"It was just to the left of the opening," answered my little mistress.

I was turned around and giddy, but I managed to fix the direction of the entrance by Pimball's groans and by good fortune presently found the lantern. It would burn but a few hours, but we never needed a light as we did then. My flint and steel I carried ever in my pocket, and to kindle a flickering flame was but the work of a moment. If I had not possessed it I would have given years of my life for that light which threw a faint illumination about the place.

There, opposite me, where I had stationed her, protected by a niche in the cave from the rain of rocks which had beaten me down, was my mistress, safe and unharmed. I stepped toward her and with a low cry of thankfulness she fell into my arms. I soothed her for a moment and then turned to the other occupant of the chamber. The entrance was blocked up, the rock had settled down. Pimball's legs were broken and his back as well. It was impossible to release him—what lay upon him weighed tons and tons.

"You murdering hound!" I cried, "you have brought this upon us." But he would only plead for water, disregarding my reproaches.

I was for killing him with my cutlass, which I picked up, but she would not have it so. She filled a half coconut shell with water and brought it to him. She bathed his brow and gave him some to drink. It gave him temporary relief, but his minutes were numbered. His life was going out by seconds.

"God!" he cried as his eyes caught the gleam of the gold and silver; "the treasure!" He stretched out his hand toward it and then stopped. "I am undone," he choked out with a fearful scream. "Mistress!"

"Yes?"

"Forgive!"

Indeed, she forgave him, I make no doubt, but her forgiveness came too late, for his head dropped—he had been looking sideways—and his face buried itself in the wet sand.

"Is he dead?" she asked, awestruck. I nodded. No closer inspection was needed to establish the truth of that fact.

"And we, too, shall die," she said, shuddering. "We are buried here in the bowels of the earth, in this treasure-lined prison."

"The earthquake which closed the mouth of the cave may have opened the other end."

"It is possible," she answered, "but not likely."

"And, besides, you remember the running stream on the other side, which we did not follow?"

"Yes."

"It must run somewhere."

"Well?"

"Whose water runs man and woman may follow."

"At least it will do no harm to try."

"Come, then," said I, extending my hand to her and holding the lantern before me for pitfalls.

(To Be Concluded Next Wednesday.)

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