

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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(CONTINUED.)

I had carefully taken my bearings during the day and as I had a good compass on the boat I knew exactly how to steer. Fortunately the wind was steady. I laid her course so to clear the northeast end of the island, around which I intended to go so as to be hidden from the boat at daybreak.

I told her after awhile that she was not. No sound had come from the boat and the lights in the cabin which I thought we could see dimly presently appeared. Our escape had not been covered. I suggested at last that she should go to sleep. I arranged the blankets and although I had to be much persuaded I finally called upon her to lie down in the cabin. Her head by my knees, and thus I called on through the night. When day broke I hauled aft the anchor and headed the boat to the southward, for I had now crossed the head of the island and could run down the side. By the time it was fairly dark I had made enough southing to get to the north end of the island before ourselves and the ship. I steered the boat toward the land.

My hopes were high and I felt a kind exhilaration at our escape, although I by no means inclined to minimize the possibilities of peril we might be compelled to meet. The island was our destination, however, and for before I determinedly headed my craft with its precious and still fully sleeping cargo.

The island was unlike any I had ever seen upon. In the first place, like the Pacific islands, it was inclosed by a barrier reef, over which the waves broke in whitecaps as far as I could see. I supposed that somewhere there would be an opening in the reef which we could sail. That invariably the case with all such islands that I had ever known or read of. But I could not see the opening from the boat yet. The lagoon entered by the barrier reef seemed to be either a half or a mile wide.

The strangest part of the whole was that the island itself looked whitish gray wall rising straight from the lagoon for, I suppose, from 100 to the lowest part to 300 feet above without a break. Its top was covered with greenery. It stood upon a solid rampart of stone. From where we were I couldn't see the end of the island, although from my inspection of it the day before I judged it to be six or eight miles long, and I had sailed past it I estimated it to be about the same breadth and near-regular in shape.

At a long distance away on the other side and hard to be seen at all from the level of the sea in the small boat other islands, faintly outlined on the far horizon.

"I suppose I must have thrashed out somewhat when I brought the boat to the wind and changed her course, for presently my little mistress spoke. She sat up instantly, and after my briefest acknowledgment of my good morning and the briefest reply to my inquiry as to how she did she stared at the land toward which we were edging in so far as the wind could blow. It was a bleak, inhospitable looking place, that gray, rough wall, in spite of its infrequent crusting of verdure, I will admit, and she, too, found it so. After she had stared fixed at the land she cast an anxious glance to leeward, but, of course, could make nothing of the distant islands there.

"We must get ashore," said I, "as soon as possible. By the time their debauch will have worn off they will either bring the ship here or send the boat after us. Afloat we can do nothing, ashore we may find some concealment and probably make some discovery."

"It is a bleak looking spot," indeed, not a curl of smoke anywhere betrayed the presence of man. Had it not been for depressions in the walls of the cliff here and there which were filled with vegetation, one might have supposed the island to be nothing but a desolate and arid rock, but this reassured me. I thought it strange that there was no mountain or hill rising from beyond the top of the wall, but I was yet to see how strange the island was.

But as it was full morning now I decided that first of all the creature comforts had to be thought of. I offered to relinquish the tiller and prepare something to eat, but Mistress Lucy took that upon herself. What we had was cold, but there was plenty of it, and at my urging she ate heartily. For myself I needed no stimulus but my raging hunger. I wanted her to be in bed for whatever might happen and a wife caught it or one broke over it we should be lost, but I had foreseen the danger. I threw out my oar and with every pound of strength in arm, leg and body I thrust blindly, desperately, against the thrust of the sea. It was an unequal combat, a man against the Pacific ocean. I couldn't have maintained it for long. And yet it seemed hours. The strain was terrific.

The wave we were riding broke just as we reached the top. We sank down into what seemed a valley of water, the breakers roared in our ears, the spray fell over us like rain. We sank lower and lower, there was a sound of grinding along the keel. We had struck the coral evidently. I thought this was all, for another moment and the bottom would have been ripped out of her; but no, we were over in safety.

The last remainder of the wave broke fairly over us and struck me in the back as I stood aft with such force as to bring me to my knees. However, in that position I acted as a sort of breakwater and the dinghy was not completely filled. Although she had shipped quantities of sea, she still floated. The force with which we had been thrown over the crest of the wave drove us landward with tremendous

"Madam," said I at last, "there is naught for us but to try to go over the reef in some fashion. As I examined the island yesterday through the glasses I couldn't see any opening in the reef on that side, and, although I never saw or heard of a case like this before, I make no doubt but what the reef is continuous and there is no access to the island except over it. And come to think of it, Sir Phillip's chart showed no opening either."

"I recall that the reef completely encircles the island in the map," assented my lady.

"Then we must even pass over it as we can. I have had some experience in taking a boat through the surf, and, although it is a prodigious risk, I believe I can take this one over. I think we shall win through if you will sit perfectly quiet and trust to me."

"I will do whatever you tell me," she said with a most becoming and unusual meekness. "I think—I know—I trust you entirely, Master Hampdon."

"Very well," said I quietly, "and may God help us!"

Fortunately the tide was making toward the shore of the island. I selected a spot where the huge, rolling waves seemed to break more smoothly than elsewhere, which argued a greater depth of water over the barrier, less roughness and fewer possibilities of being wrecked on the jagged points of the coral reef. Dousing the sail, unshipping the tiller and rudder and pulling the oars with all my strength after an unuttered prayer I shot the boat directly toward the spot I had chosen. Just before I reached it I threw the oars inboard, seized one of them, which I wished to use as a steering oar, and stepped aft past my lady, who sat a little forward and well down in the bottom of the boat. I braced myself in the stern sheets and waited. We were racing toward that reef with dizzy speed, rising with the uplift of the wave. I had just time for one word.

"If we die," I shouted, "remember that I have been your true servant all ways."

She nodded her head, her eyes glistening, and then I lost sight of her. A huge roller overtook us. The little boat rose and rose and rose with a giddy, furious motion. Suddenly it began to turn. If it went broadside to the reef

speed. It was terrific. I was stunned for a moment, but the sweetest voice in the world recalled me to my senses. "It was glorious, magnificent!" cried my mistress exultantly. "Are you hurt? Are we safe?"

Her clothes had been drenched, of course, but she was otherwise unharmed and there was a strange light in her eyes.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



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