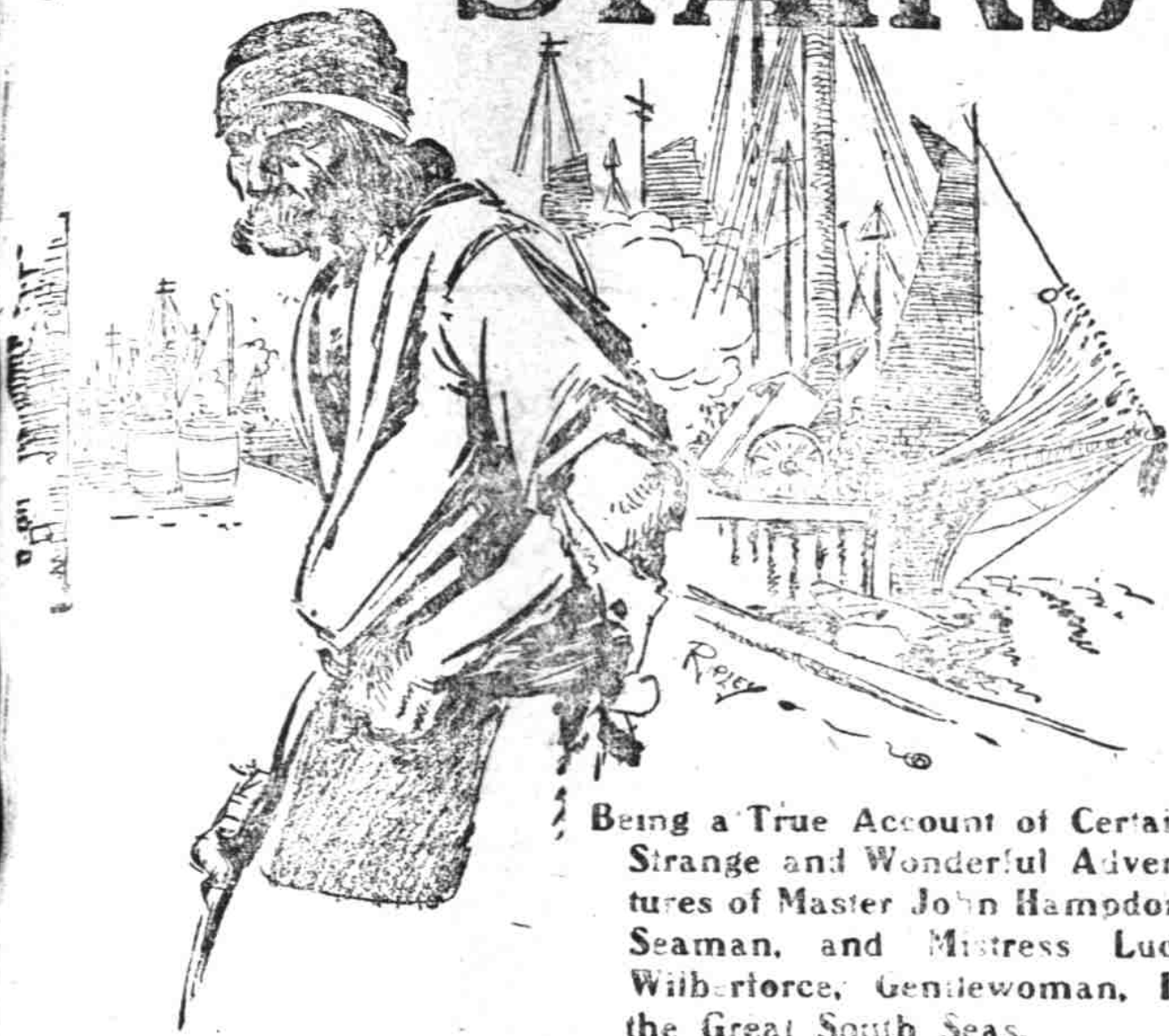




THE ISLAND OF THE STAIRS



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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I leaped down and then turned to help my little mistress. She was very white, and I thought she was going to faint. I don't blame her, the scene was so terrible. I acted promptly. I reached up and took her in my arms and carried her as if she had been a baby, and, indeed, she was no great burden for me. Her head dropped to my shoulder. I didn't know whether she had fainted or not. Her eyes were closed. I ran swiftly across the enclosure, descended the steps and without hesitation turned to the edge of the cliff. I stopped there, cursing myself for not having brought any water, but as I stopped she opened her eyes.

"You are safe," said I gently. "The horrors are all behind us. See, there is before you naught but the beautiful greenery of the island, and"—

An expression of gratitude came across her face.

"Let us go down," she replied. "We must never come near here again."

"Please God, no," I repeated as we retraced our steps down the cliff and along the winding path. Mistress Lucy gaining strength and color as we passed out of sight of the hideous platform. It was necessary to go back along the path to the foot of the stairs. There were savannas here and there in the way where we rested and a lovely brook of cool, delicious water, where we broke our fast, though it was not yet noon, but the openings all stopped before they reached the foot of the wall which was almost hidden in vegetation. I remembered the paths which had led off on either side from the stairs too. We followed one of them easily.

The wall to our left was dotted with openings to caves, but none of them seemed to fit the description we carried in our memories. The undergrowth deepened and grew denser as we progressed, and finally I had to open a way with my ax. The tangled masses soon gave way before my sturdy energy, and we entered a little clearing which extended to the wall. There above us were the three openings beneath the depression in the crest sure enough, the one in the middle being greater than the others, the entrance high enough to admit me, who am much above the usual stature, without bending my head. It was elevated half way up the surface of the cliff, and approach to it was by a pile of stones, not laid with the order and regularity of the giant stairs, but apparently piled together haphazard by people unskilled to make any other practical way of ascent.

It was difficult enough for us to climb as it was. The heap of stones evidently had not been mounted for years, and the stones had broken and fallen away in many places. Indeed I had to rebuild the pile here and there. When after arduous labor I peered within the cave I could see nothing but the blackness. When we left the ship we had taken a lantern and a few candles. I had brought the lantern with me that day. We now lighted it with the flint and steel and tinder and stepped silently in. My lady followed me close, being, as she had said, unwilling to be left alone and ever ready to face any peril in my company.

Above the low entrance the cave wall rose to a height of perhaps twenty feet, making a vast vaulted chamber with gothic suggestions about it, for the coral before it hardened had been built into curious shapes and fantastic figures. We didn't notice this so much at first, for with a wild shriek, my gentle companion suddenly caught my arm and pointed downward.

The floor, like that of the central altar, was covered with human bones, a grewsome sight for any one and certainly for a woman, and made more grewsome because of the dull lighting of the cave. The bones were bleached white also and had evidently been there a long time. We could scarcely take a step without treading upon them. I had all I could do to keep my mistress from running back toward the mouth and thence to the ground, and it was not until I had reassured her that she would consent to go on.

As we had been compelled to pass on by our desire to get our bearings before, so if we were to get the treasure we would have to suffer this now. She summoned her courage and we went on.

As our eyes became accustomed to the light, for, indeed, the candle lantern cast but a dim radiance over the vast apartment, the entrance was so small that little daylight came through, we saw the same kind of altar, built of the same stones as on the hill, though much smaller. Bones of human beings, men, women and children, I judged from the difference in sizes, lay upon it, and there were heaps of bones on the floor around it. It came across me that it was another altar of sacrifice and that the worshippers had been also eaters of flesh—cannibals!

Turning away from the altar to the right we found the way clear, and, with a sigh of relief, I drew Mistress Lucy reluctantly on. She clung to me and was so frightened that I finally slipped my arm about her waist, whereat she made no objection. She has confessed since that she was indeed greatly pleased and that it was a comfort to her to feel the strength and power of my grasp.

Holding the lantern before me, we cautiously proceeded farther into the cave toward the inner wall. The cave wall opened out into rooms apparently. I didn't dare go any distance from the main entrance for fear that I should lose my way, so I stopped, undecided what to do, which opening to enter, that is.

"Oh, let's go back!" begged my mistress. "There is no treasure here, I am sure."

"Nay," I answered. "With your permission, Mistress Lucy, I intend to explore further into the matter. Let's see." I held the lantern high above my head as I spoke. There above a certain entrance I saw a rude Latin cross. "Look!" I continued. "Some one has been here. 'Tis the sign of the cross!"

"Yes," she said, her hopes reviving and her spirits returning a little at the sight of that sacred symbol of our faith. "Don't you remember on the map marking the position of the cave there was a little cross?"

"So there was!" I exclaimed. "although the reading did not mention it."

"No, but it is there nevertheless."

I stooped down—the entrance was scarcely three feet high, but quite broad—and made to go through.

"Wait!" She seized me in great alarm. "You can't go there and leave me here!" she cried.

"I promise you that I will not stir three feet from the entrance if you will suffer me that far," I answered.

"I must come, too, then," she urged. "I will see what is there first, and if it is safe you shall come with me." I answered.

As I spoke I crawled through and found myself in another smaller chamber. There being no danger, I stretched out my hand to her and brought her through after me. From some distant crevice the air came to us. We could feel it blow upon us, and it was sweet; also I could hear water babbling over rocks in the distance. It was a little damp in the cave, perhaps because of that. There was little light, however, save that cast by the lantern. I could not see the farther wall.

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—ingots of 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?"

"It 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 mis-



Thousands of Pounds Lay to Our Hands.

chievously, "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.

"'Tis 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 wealth will enable you to sustain"—

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