

Stables Gordon

In Far Bolivia: A Story of a Strange Wild Land



Gordon Stables
**In Far Bolivia: A Story
of a Strange Wild Land**

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23149203

In Far Bolivia: A Story of a Strange Wild Land:

Содержание

CHAPTER I-ON THE BANKS OF THE GREAT AMAZON	6
CHAPTER II-STRANGE ADVENTURES IN THE FOREST-LOST!	19
CHAPTER III-BURNLEY HALL, OLD AND NEW	32
CHAPTER IV-AWAY DOWN THE RIVER	44
CHAPTER V-A DAY IN THE FOREST WILDS	56
CHAPTER VI-"NOT ONE SINGLE DROP OF BLOOD SHED"	66
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	74

Stables Gordon

In Far Bolivia: A Story of a Strange Wild Land

PREFACE

Every book should tell its own story without the aid of "preface" or "introduction". But as in this tale I have broken fresh ground, it is but right and just to my reader, as well as to myself, to mention prefatorially that, as far as descriptions go, both of the natives and the scenery of Bolivia and the mighty Amazon, my story is strictly accurate.

I trust that Chapter XXIII, giving facts about social life in La Paz and Bolivia, with an account of that most marvellous of all sheets of fresh water in the known world, Lake Titicaca, will be found of general interest.

But vast stretches of this strange wild land of Bolivia are a closed book to the world, for they have never yet been explored; nor do we know aught of the tribes of savages who dwell therein, as far removed from civilization and from the benign influence of Christianity as if they were inhabitants of another planet. I have ventured to send my heroes to this land of the great unknown, and have at the same time endeavoured to avoid everything that

mightborder on sensationalism.

In conclusion, my boys, if spared I hope to takeyou out with me again to Bolivia in another book, and together we may have stranger adventures thanany I have yet told.

THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER I-ON THE BANKS OF THE GREAT AMAZON

Miles upon miles from the banks of the mighty river, had you wandered far away in the shade of the dark forest that clothed the valleys and struggled high over the mountain-tops themselves, you would have heard the roar and the boom of that great buzz-saw.

As early as six of a morning it would start, or soon after the sun, like a huge red-hot shot, had leapt up from his bed in the glowing east behind the greenery of the hills and woods primeval.

To a stranger coming from the south towards the Amazon-great queen of all the rivers on earth-and not knowing he was on the borders of civilization, the sound that the huge saw made would have been decidedly alarming.

He would have stopped and listened, and listening, wondered. No menagerie of wild beasts could have sent forth a noise so loud, so strange, so persistent! Harsh and low at times, as its great teeth tore through the planks of timber, it would change presently into a dull but dreadful *basso profundo*, such as might have been emitted by antediluvian monsters in the agonies of death or torture, rising anon into a shrill howl or shriek, then subsiding once again into a steady grating roar, that seemed to shake the very earth.

Wild beasts in this black forest heard the sounds, and crept stealthily away to hide themselves in their caves and dens; caymans or alligators heard them too, as they basked in the morning sunshine by lake or stream—heard them and crawled away into caves, or took to the water with a sullen plunge that caused the finny inhabitants to dart away in terror to every point of the compass.

"Up with the tree, lads. Feed him home," cried Jake Solomons loudly but cheerily. "Our pet is hungry this morning. I say, Bill, doesn't she look a beauty. Ever see such teeth, and how they shine, too, in the red sunlight. Guess you never did, Bill. I say, what chance would the biggest 'gator that ever crawled have with Betsy here. Why, if Betsy got one tooth in his hide she'd have fifty before you could say 'Jerusalem', and that 'gator'd be cut in two. Tear away, Betsy! Grind and groan and growl, my lass! Have your breakfast, my little pet; why, your voice is sweetest music to my ear. I say, Bill, don't the saw-dust fly a few? I should smile!

"But see," he continued, "yonder come the darkies with our matutinal. Girls and boys with baskets, and I can see the steam curling up under Chloe's arm from the great flagon she is carrying! Look how her white eyes roll, and her white teeth shine as she smiles her six-inch smile! Good girl is Chloe. She knows we're hungry, and that we'll welcome her. Wo, now, Betsy! Let the water off, Bill. Betsy has had her snack, and so we'll have ours."

There was quietness now o'er hill and dell and forest-land.

And this tall Yankee, Jake Solomons, who was fully arrayed in cotton shirt and trousers, his brown arms bare to the shoulder, stretched his splendidly knit but spare form with a sort of a yawn.

"Heigho, Bill!" he said. "I'm pining for breakfast. Aren't you?"

"That I am," replied Burly Bill with his broadest grin.

Jake ran to the open side of the great saw-mill. Three or four strides took him there.

"Ah! Good-morning, Chloe, darling! Morning, Keemo! Morning, Kimo!"

"Mawning, sah!" This was a chorus.

"All along dey blessed good-foh-nuffin boys I no come so queeck," said Chloe.

"Stay, stay, Chloe," cried Jake, "never let your angry passions rise. 'Sides, Chloe, I calculate such language ain't half-proper. But how glittering your cheeks are, Chloe, how white your teeth! There! you smile again. And that vermilion blouse sets off your dark complexion to a nicety, and seems just made for it. Chloe, I would kiss you, but the fear of making Bill jealous holds me back."

Burly Bill shook with laughter. Bill was well named the Burly. Though not so tall as Jake, his frame was immense, though perhaps there was a little more adipose tissue about it than was necessary in a climate like this. But Bill's strength was wonderful. See him, axe in hand, at the foot of a tree! How the chips fly! How set and determined the man's face, while the great beads of sweat stand like pearls on his brow!

Burly Bill was a white man turned black. You couldn't easily have guessed his age. Perhaps he was forty, but at twenty, when still in England, Bill was supple and lithe, and had a skin as white as a schoolboy's. But he had got stouter as the years rolled on, and his face tanned and tanned till it tired of tanning, and first grew purple, and latterly almost black. The same with those hirsute bare arms of his.

There was none of the wild "Ha! ha!" about Bill's slaughter. It was a sort of suppressed chuckle, that agitated all his anatomy, the while his merry good-natured eyes sought shelter behind his cheeks' rotundity.

Under a great spreading tree the two men laid themselves down, and Chloe spread their breakfast on a white cloth between them, Jake keeping up his fire of chaff and sweet nothings while she did so. Keemo and Kimo, and the other "good-foh-nuffin boys" had brought their morning meal to the men who fed the great buzz-saw.

"Ah, Chloe!" said Jake, "the odour of that coffee would bring the dead to life, and the fish and the beef and the butter, Chloe! Did you do all this yourself?"

"All, sah, I do all. De boys jes' kick about de kitchen and do nuffin."

"Dear tender-eyed Chloe! How clever you are! Guess you won't be so kind to me when you and I get spliced, eh?"

"Ah sah! you no care to marry a poor black gallike Chloe! Dere is a sweet little white missie waiting somew'eres foh Massa

Jake. I be your maid, and shine yo' boots till all de samee's Massa Bill's cheekfoh true."

As soon as Chloe with her "good-foh-nuffin boys" had cleared away the breakfast things, and retired with a smile and saucy toss of her curly poll, the men lay back and lit their pipes.

"She's a bright intelligent girl that," said Jake. "I don't want a wife or-but I say, Bill, why don't you marry her? I guess she'd make ye a tip-topper."

"Me! Is it marry?"

Burly Bill held back his head and chuckled till he well-nigh choked.

Honest Bill's ordinary English showed that he came from the old country, and more particularly from the Midlands. But Bill could talk properly enough when he pleased, as will soon be seen.

He smoked quietly enough for a time, but every now and then he felt constrained to take his meerschaum from his mouth and give another chuckle or two.

"Tchoo-hoo-hoo!" he laughed. "Me marry! And marry Chloe! Tchoo-hoo-hoo!"

"To change the subject, William," said Jake, "seein' as how you've pretty nearly chuckled yourself silly, or darned near it, how long have you left England?"

"W'y, I coom over with Mr. St. Clair hisse'f, and Roland w'y he weren't more'n seven. Look at 'enow, and dear little Peggy, 'is sister by adoption a seiver was, weren't a month over four. Now Rolly 'e bees nigh onto fifteen, and Peggy-the jewel o'

the plantation-she's goin' on for twelve, and main tall for that. W'y time do fly! Don't she, Jake?"

"Well, I guess I've been here five years, and durn me if I want to leave. Could we have a better home? I'd like to see it. I'd smile a few odd ones. But listen, why here comes the young 'uns!"

There was the clatter of ponies' feet, and next minute as handsome a boy as ever sat in saddle, and as pretty and bright a lassie as you could wish to meet, galloped into the clearing, and reined up their spirited little steeds close to the spot where the men were lounging.

Burly Bill stuck his thumb into the bowl of his meerschaum to put it out, and Jake threw his pipe on the bank.

Roland was tall for his age, like Peggy. But while a mass of fair and irrepressible hair curled around the boy's sun-burned brow, Peggy's hair was straight and black. When she rode fast it streamed out behind her like pennons in the breeze. What a bright and sunny face was hers too! There was ever a happy smile about her red lips and dark eyes.

"You've got to begin to smoke again immediately," said the boy.

"No, no, Master Roland, not in the presence of your sister."

"But," cried Peggy, with a pretty show of pomposity, "I command you!"

"Ah, then, indeed!" said Jake; and soon both men were blowing clouds that made the very mosquitoes change their quarters.

"Father'll be up soon, riding on Glancer. This nagthrew Father, coming home last night. Mind, Glanceris seventeen hands and over."

"He threw him?"

"That he did, in the moonlight. Scared at a 'gator.Father says he heard the 'gator's great teeth snappingand thought he was booked. But lo! Jake, at thatvery moment Glancer struck out with both hind-legs-youknow how he is shod. He smashed the 'gator'sskull, and the beast turned up his yellow belly tothe moon."

"Bravo!"

"Then Father mounted mighty Glancer and rodequietly home.

"Peggy and I," he continued, "have ridden alongthe bank to the battlefield to hold a coroner's inqueston the 'gator, but he's been hauled away by hisrelations. I suppose they'll make potato soup of him."

Burly Bill chuckled.

"Well, Peggy and I are off. See you in the evening,Jake. By-by!"

And away they rode, like a couple of wild Indians, followed by a huge Irish wolf-hound, as faithful a dogto his mistress-for he was Peggy's own pet-as everdog could be.

They were going to have a day in the forest, andeach carried a short six-chambered rifle at the saddle.

A country like the wild one in which they dweltsoon makes anyone brave and fearless. They meantto ride quite a long way

to-day and not return till the sun began to decline in the far and wooded west. So, being already quite an old campaigner, Roland had not forgotten to bring luncheon with him, and some for bold Brawn also.

Into the forest they dashed, leaving the mighty river, which was there about fifteen miles broad probably, in their rear.

They knew every pathway of that primeval woodland, and it mattered but little to them that most of these had been worn by the feet of wild beasts. Such tracks wind out and in, and in and out, and meet others in the most puzzling and labyrinthine manner.

Roland carried a compass, and knew how to use it, but the day was unusually fine and sunny, so there was little chance of their getting lost.

The country in which they lived might well have been called the land of perpetual summer.

But at some spots the forest was so pitchy dark, owing to the overhanging trees and wild flowering creepers, that they had to rein up and allow Coz and Boz, as their ponies were named, to cautiously feel the way for themselves.

How far away they might have ridden they could not themselves tell, had they not suddenly entered a kind of fairy glade. At one side it was bounded by a crescentic formation of rock, from the very centre of which spouted a tiny clear crystal waterfall. Beneath was a deep pool, the bottom of which was sand and yellow shingle, with here and there a patch of snow-white quartz. And away from this a little stream went meandering slowly

through the glade, keeping it green.

On the other side were the lordly forest trees, bedraped with flowering orchids and ferns.

Flowers and ferns grew here and there in the rockfaceitself. No wonder the young folks gazed aroundthem in delighted wonder.

Brawn was more practical. He cared nothing forthe flowers, but enjoyed to the fullest extent the clearcool water of the crystal pool.

"Oh, isn't it lovely?" said Roland.

"And oh, I am so hungry, Rolly!"

Rolly took the hint.

The ponies were let loose to graze, Brawn beingtold to head them off if they attempted to take to thewoods.

"I understand," said Brawn, with an intelligentglance of his brown eyes and wag of his tail.

Then down the boy and girl squatted with thenoble wolf-hound beside them, and Roland speedilyspread the banquet on the moss.

I dare say that hunger and romance seldom treadthe same platform-at the same time, that is. Itis usually one down, the other up; and notwithstandingthe extraordinary beauty of their surroundings, for some time both boy and girl appliedthemselves assiduously to the discussion of the goodthings before them; that meat-pie disappearing as ifby magic. Then the hard-boiled eggs, thewell-buttered and flouriest of floury scones, received

their attention, and the whole was washed down with *vinum bovis*, as Roland called it, cow's wine, or goodmilk.

Needless to say, Brawn, whose eyes sparkled like diamonds, and whose ears were conveniently erect, came in for a good share.

Well, but the ponies, Boz and Coz, had not the remotest idea of running away. In fact they soon drew near to the banqueting-table. Coz laid his nose affectionately on his little mistress's shoulder and heaved an equine sigh, and Boz began to nibble at Roland's ears in a very winning way.

And the nibbling and the sigh brought them cakes galore.

Roland offered Boz a bit of pie.

The pony drew back, as if to say, "Vegetarians, weren't you aware?"

But Brawn cocked his bonnie head to one side, knowingly.

"Pitch it this way, master," he said. "I've got a crop for any kind of corn, and a bag for peas."

A strange little rodent creature, much bigger than any rat, however, with beautiful sad-looking eyes, came from the bush, and stood on its hind-legs begging, not a yard away. Its breast was as white as snow.

Probably it had no experience of the genus *homo*, and all the cruelties he is guilty of, under the title of sport.

Roland pitched several pieces of pie towards the innocent. It just tasted a morsel, then back it ran towards the wood with wondrous speed.

If they thought they had seen the last of it, they were

much mistaken, for the innocent returned in two minutes time, accompanied not only by another of his own size, but by half a dozen of the funniest little fairies ever seen inside a forest.

"My wife and children," said innocent No. 1.

"My services to you," bobbed innocent No. 2.

But the young ones squawked and squealed, and tumbled and leapt over each other as they fed in a manner so droll that boy and girl had to laugh till the woods rang.

Innocent No. 1 looked on most lovingly, but took not a morsel to himself.

Then all disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

Truly the student of Nature who betakes himself to lonely woods sees many wonders!

It was time now to lie back in the moss and enjoy the *dolce far niente*.

The sky was as blue as blue could be, all between the rifts of slowly-moving clouds. The whisper of the wind among the forest trees, and the murmur of the falling water, came like softest music to Roland's ears. Small wonder, therefore, that his eyes closed, and he was soon in the land of sweet forgetfulness.

But Peggy had a tiny book, from which she read passages to Brawn, who seemed all attention, but kept one eye on the ponies at the same time.

It was a copy of the "Song of Hiawatha", a poem which Peggy thought ineffably lovely. Hark to her sweet girl voice as she reads:

"These songs so wild and wayward,
These legends and traditions".

They appealed to her simple soul, for dearly did she love the haunts of Nature.

"Loved the sunshine of the meadow,
Loved the shadow of the forest,
Loved the wind among the branches,
The rushing of great rivers
Through their palisades of pine-trees."

She believed, too:

"That even in savage bosoms
There are longings, yearnings, strivings
For the good they comprehend not;
That feeble hands and helpless,
Groping blindly in the darkness,
Touch God's right hand...
And are lifted up and strengthened".

—

Roland slumbered quietly, and the day went on apace.
He slept so peacefully that she hardly liked to arouse him.
The little red book dropped from her hand and fell on the moss,

and her thoughts now went far, far away down the mighty river that flows so sadly, so solemnly onwards to the great Atlantic Ocean, fed on its way by a hundred rapid streams that melt in its dark bosom and are seen nevermore.

But it was not the river itself the little maiden's thoughts were dwelling on; not the strange wild birds that sailed along its surface on snow-white wings; not the birds of prey—the eagle and the hawk—that hovered high in air, or with eldritch screams darted on their prey like bolts from the blue, and bore their bleeding quarries away to the silent forest; not even the wealth of wild flowers that nodded over the banks of the mighty stream.

Her thoughts were on board a tall and darksome raft that was slowly making its way seaward to distant Pará, or in the boats that towed it. For there was someone on the raft or in those boats who even then might be fondly thinking of the dark-haired maiden he had left behind.

But Peggy's awakening from her dream of romance, and Roland's from his slumber, was indeed a terrible one.

CHAPTER II-STRANGE ADVENTURES IN THE FOREST-LOST!

Fierce eyes had been watching the little camp for an hour and more, glaring out on the sunny glade from the dark depths of a forest tree not far off; out from under a cloudland of waving foliage that rustled in the balmy wind. Watching, and watching unwaveringly, Peggy, while she read; watching the sleeping Roland; the great wolf-hound, Brawn; and watching the ponies too.

Ever and anon these last would come closer to the tree, as they nibbled grass or moss, then those fierce eyes burned more fiercely, and the cat-like tail of a monster jaguar moved uneasily as if the wild beast meditated a spring.

But the ponies, sniffing danger in the air, perhaps—who can tell? – would toss their manes and retreat to the shadow of the rocks.

Had the dog not been there the beast would have dared all, and sprung at once on one of those nimble steeds.

But he waited and watched, watched and waited, and at long last his time came. With a coughing roar he now launched himself into the air, the elasticity of the branch giving greater force to his spring.

Straight on the shoulders or back of poor Bozhe alighted. His talons were well driven home, his white teeth were preparing to tear the flesh from the pony's neck.

Both little steeds yelled wildly, and in nightmarish terror.

Up sprang Brawn, the wolf-hound, and dashed on to the rescue.

Peggy seized her loaded rifle and hurried after him.

Thoroughly awake now, and fully cognizant of the terrible danger, Roland too was quickly on the scene of action.

To fire at a distance were madness. He might have missed the struggling lion and shot poor Boz, or even faithful Brawn.

This enormous dog had seized the beast by one hock, and with his paws against the pony was endeavouring to tear the monster off.

The noise, the movement, the terror, caused poor Roland's head to whirl.

He felt dazed, and almost stupid.

Ah! but Peggy was clear-headed, and a brave and fearless child was she.

Her feet seemed hardly to touch the moss, so lightly did she spring along.

Her little rifle was cocked and ready, and, taking advantage of a few seconds' lull in the fearful scrimmage, she fired at five yards' distance.

The bullet found billet behind the monster's ear, his grip relaxed, and now Brawn tore him easily from his perch and

finished him off on the ground, with a wailing din and habbering.

Then, with blood-dripping jaws he came with his ears lower, half apologetically, to receive the praise and caresses of his master and mistress.

But though the adventure ended thus happily, frightened beyond measure, the ponies, Coz and Boz, had taken to the bush and disappeared.

Knowing well the danger of the situation, Roland and Peggy, with Brawn, tried to follow them. But Irish wolf-hounds have but little scent, and so they searched and searched in vain, and returned at last to the sun-kissed glade.

It was now well on towards three o'clock, and as they had a long forest stretch of at least ten miles before them ere they could touch the banks of the great queen of waters, Roland determined, with the aid of his compass, to strike at once into the beast-trodden pathway by which they had come, and make all haste homewards before the sun should set and darkness envelop the gloomy forest.

"Keep up your heart, Peggy; if your courage and your feet hold out we shall reach the river before dusk."

"I'm not so frightened now," said Peggy; but her lips were very tremulous, and tears stood in her eyes.

"Come, come," she cried, "let us hurry on! Come, Brawn, good dog!"

Brawn leapt up to lick her ear, and taking no thought for the skin of the jaguar, which in more favourable circumstances would have been borne away as a trophy, and proof of Peggy's valour,

they now took to the bush in earnest.

Roland looked at his watch.

"Three hours of light and more. Ah! we can do it, if we do not lose our way."

So off they set.

Roland took the lead, rifle in hand, Peggy came next, and brave Brawn brought up the rear.

They were compelled to walk in single file, for the pathways were so narrow in places that two could not have gone abreast.

Roland made constant reference to his little compass, always assuring his companion that they were still heading directly for the river.

They had hurried on for nearly an hour, when Roland suddenly paused.

A huge dark monster had leapt clear and clean across the pathway some distance ahead, and taken refuge in a tree.

It was, no doubt, another jaguar, and to advance unannounced might mean certain death to one of the three.

"Are you all loaded, Peggy?" said Roland.

"Every chamber!" replied the girl.

There was no tremor about her now; and no backwoods Indian could have acted more coolly and courageously.

"Blaze away at that tree then, Peg."

Peggy opened fire, throwing in three or four shots in rapid succession.

The beast, with a terrible cry, darted out of the tree and came

rushing along to meet and fight the little party.

"Down, Brawn, down! To heel, sir!"

Next moment Roland fired, and with a terrible shriek the jaguar took to the bush, wounded and bleeding, and was seen no more.

But his yells had awakened the echoes of the forest, and for more than five minutes the din of roaring, growling, and shrieking was fearful.

Wild birds, no doubt, helped to swell the pandemonium.

After a time, however, all was still once more, and the journey was continued in silence.

Even Peggy, usually the first to commence a conversation, felt in no mood for talking now.

She was very tired. Her feet ached, her brow was hot, and her eyes felt as if boiling in their sockets.

Roland had filled his large flask at the little waterfall before leaving the glade, and he now made her drink.

The draught seemed to renew her strength, and she struggled on as bravely as ever.



Just two and a half hours after they had left the forest clearing, and when Roland was holding out hopes that they should soon reach the road by the banks of the river, much to their astonishment they found themselves in a strange clearing which

they had never seen before.

The very pathway ended here, and though the boy went round and round the circle, he could find no exit.

To retrace his steps and try to find out the right path was the first thought that occurred to Roland.

This plan was tried, but tried in vain, and so weary and hopeless now beyond measure they returned to the centre of the glade and threw themselves down on the soft green moss.

Lost! Lost!

The words kept repeating themselves in poor Roland's brain, but Peggy's fatigue was so complete that she preferred rest even in the midst of danger to going farther.

Brawn, heaving a great sigh, laid himself down beside them.

The warm day wore rapidly to a close, and at last the sun shimmered red through the forest trees.

Then it sank.

The briefest of twilight, and the stars shone out.

Two hours of starlight, then solemnly uprose the round moon and flooded all the glade, draping the whispering trees in a blue glare, beautifully yet realizing them.

Sorrow bringeth sleep.

"Good-night, Rolly! Say your prayers," murmured Peggy.

There were stars in the sky. There were stars too that flitted from bush to bush, while the winds made murmuring music among the lofty branches.

Peggy was repeating to herself lines that she had read that very

day:

... "the firefly Wah-wah-tay-see,
Flitting through the dusk of evening,
With the twinkle of its candle,
Lighting up the brakes and bushes.

* * * * *

Wah-wah-tay-see, little firefly,
Little, flitting, white-fire insect,
Little dancing, white-fire creature,
Light me with your little candle.
Ere upon my bed I lay me,
Ere in sleep I close my eyelids."

—

The forest was unusually silent to-night, but ever and anon might be heard some distant growl showing that the woods sheltered the wildest beasts. An owl with mournful cry would flap its silent wings as it flew across the clearing.

But nothing waked those tired and weary sleepers.

So the night wore on and on. The moon had reached the zenith,

and was shining now with alustre that almost rivalled daylight itself.

It must have been well on towards two o'clock in the morning when Brawn emitted a low and threatening growl.

This aroused both Roland and Peggy, and the former at once seized his rifle.

Standing there in the pale moonlight, not twenty yards away, was a tall, dark-skinned, and powerful-looking Indian. In his right hand he held a spear or something resembling one; in his left a huge catapult or sling. He was dressed for comfort—certainly not for ornament. Leggings or galligaskins covered his lower extremities, while his body was wrapped in a blanket. He had no head-covering, save a matted mass of hair, in which were stuck a few feathers.

Roland took all this in at a glance as he seized his rifle and prepared for eventualities. According to the traditional painter of Indian life and customs the proper thing for this savage to have said is "Ugh!" He said nothing of the sort. Nor did he give vent to a whoop and yell that would have awakened the wild birds and beasts of the forest and every echo far and near.

"Who goes there?" cried Roland, raising his gun.

"No shootee. No shootee poor Indian man. Ifriendee you. Plenty friendee."

Probably there was a little romance about Roland, for, instead of saying: "Come this way then, old chap, squat down and give us the news," he said sternly:

"Advance, friend!"

But the Indian stood like a statue.

"No undahstandee foh true."

And Roland had to climb down and say simply:

"Come here, friend, and speak."

Brawn rushed forward now, but he looked a terror, for his hair was all on end like a hyena's, and he growled low but fiercely.

"Down, Brawn! It's a good man, Brawn."

Brawn smelt the Indian's hand, and, seemingly satisfied, went back to the spot where Peggy sat wondering and frightened.

She gathered the great dog to her breast and hugged and kissed him.

"What foh you poh chillun sleepee all in de woodso? S'pose wild beas' come eatee you, w'at den you do?"

"But, friend," replied Roland, "we are far from Burnley Hall, our home, and we have lost everything. We have lost our ponies, lost our way, and lost ourselves."

"Poh chillun!" said this strange being. "But now go sleepee foh true. De Indian he lie on blanket. He watchee till de big sun rise."

"Can we trust him, Peggy?"

"Oh yes, yes!" returned Peggy. "He is a dear, good man; I know by his voice."

In ten minutes more the boy and girl were fast asleep.

The Indian watched.

And Brawn watched the Indian.

When the sun went down on the previous evening, and there were no signs of the young folks returning, both Mr. St. Clair and his wife became very uneasy indeed.

Then two long hours of darkness ensued before the moon sailed up, first reddening, then silvering, the wavelets and ripples on the great river.

"Surely some evil must have befallen them," moaned Mrs. St. Clair. "Oh, my Roland! my son! I may never see you more. Is there nothing can be done? Tell me! Tell me!"

"We must trust in Providence, Mary; and it is wrong to mourn. I doubt not the children are safe, although perhaps they have lost their way in the woods."

Hours of anxious waiting went by, and it was nearly midnight. The house was very quiet and still, for the servants were asleep.

Burly Bill and Jake had mounted strong horses at moonrise, and gone off to try to find a clue. But they knew it was in vain, nay, 'twould have been sheer madness to enter the forest now. They coo-eeed over and over again, but their only answer was the echoing shriek of the wild birds.

They were just about to return after giving their last shrill coo-ee-ee, when out from the moonlit forest, with a fond whinny, sprang Coz and Boz.

Jake sprang out of his saddle, throwing his bridle to Bill.

In the bright moonlight, Jake could see at once that there was something wrong. He placed his hand on Boz's shoulder. He staggered back as he withdrew it.

"Oh, Bill," he cried, "here is blood, and the pony is torn and bleeding! Only a jaguar could have done this. This is terrible."

"Let us return at once," said Bill, who had a right soft heart of his own behind his burly chest.

"But oh!" he added, "how can we break the news to Roland's parents?"

"We'll give them hope. Mrs. St. Clair must know nothing yet, but at early dawn all the ranch must be aroused, and we shall search the forest for miles and miles."



Jake, after seeing the ponies safe in their stable, left Bill to look to Boz's wounds, while with St. Clair's leave he himself set off at a round gallop to get assistance from a neighbouring ranch.

Day had not yet broken ere forty good men and true were on the bridge-path and tearing along the river's banks. St. Clair himself was at their head.

I must leave the reader to imagine the joy of all the party when soon after sunrise there emerged from the forest, guided by the strange Indian, Roland, Peggy, and noble Brawn, all looking as fresh as the dew on the tender-eyed hibiscus bloom or the wildflowers that nodded by the river's brim.

"Wirr-rr-r-wouff, wouff, wouff!" barked Brawn, as he bounded forward with joy in every feature of his noble face, and I declare to you there seemed to be a lump in his throat, and the sound of his barking was half-hysterical.

St. Clair could not utter a word as he fondly embraced the children. He pretended to scold a little, but this was all bluff, and simply a ruse to keep back the tears.

But soft-hearted Burly Bill was less successful. He just managed to drop a little to the rear, and it was not once only that he was fain to draw the sleeve of his rough jacket across his eyes.



But now they are mounted, and the horses' heads are turned homewards. Peggy is seated in front of Burly Bill, of whom she is very fond, and Roland is saddled with Jake. The Indian and Brawn ran.

Poor Mrs. St. Clair, at the big lawn gate, gazing westward, sees the cavalcade far away on the horizon.

Presently, borne along on the morning breeze come voices raised in a brave and joyous song:

"Down with them, down with the lords of the forest".

And she knows her boy and Peggy are safe.

"Thank God for all his mercies!" she says fervently, then,

woman-like, bursts into tears.

CHAPTER III-BURNLEY HALL, OLD AND NEW

I have noticed more than once that although the life-story of some good old families in England may run long stagnant, still, when one important event does take place, strange thing after strange thing may happen, and the story rushes on with heedless speed, like rippling brooklets to the sea.

The St. Clairs may have been originally a Scottish family, or branch of some Highland clan, but they had been settled on a beautiful estate, far away in the wilds of Cornwall, for over one hundred and fifty years.

Stay, though, we are not going back so far as that. Old history, like old parchment, has a musty odour. Let us come down to more modern times.

When, then, young Roland's grandfather died, and died intestate, the whole of the large estate devolved upon his eldest son, with its fat rentals of fully four thousand a-year. Peggy St. Clair, our little heroine, was his only child, and said to be, even in her infancy, the very image of her dead-and-gone mother.

No wonder her father loved her.

But soon the first great event happened in the life-story of the St. Clairs. For, one sad day Peggy's father was borne home from the hunting-field grievously wounded.

All hope of recovery was abandoned by the doctor shortly after he had examined his patient.

Were Herbert to die intestate, as his father had done, his second brother John, according to the old law, could have stepped into his shoes and become lord of Burnley Hall and all its broad acres.

But, alive to the peril of his situation, which the surgeon with tears in his eyes pointed out to him, the dying man sent at once for his solicitor, and a will was drawn up and placed in this lawyer's hands, and moreover he was appointed one of the executors. This will was to be kept in a safe until Peggy should be seventeen years of age, when it was to be opened and read.

I must tell you that between the brothers Herbert and John there had long existed a sort of blood-feud, and it was as well they never met.

Thomas, however, was quickly at his wounded brother's bedside, and never left it until-

"Clay-cold Death had closed his eye".

The surgeon had never given any hopes, yet during the week that intervened between the terrible accident and Herbert's death there were many hours in which the doomed man appeared as well as ever, though scarce able to move hand or foot. His mind was clear at such times, and he talked much with Thomas about the dear old times when all were young.

Up till now this youngest son and brother, Thomas, had led rather an uneasy and eventful life. Nothing prospered with him,

though he had tried most things.

He was married, and had the one child, Roland, to whom the reader has already been introduced.

"Now, dear Tom," said Herbert, one evening after he had lain still with closed eyes for quite a long time, and he placed a white cold hand in that of his brother as he spoke, "I am going to leave you. We have always been good friends and loved each other well. All I need tell you now, and I tell you in confidence, is that Peggy, at the age of seventeen, will be my heir, with you, dear Tom, as her guardian."

Tom could not reply for the gathering tears. He just pressed Herbert's hand in silence.

"Well," continued the latter, "things have not gone over well with you, I know, but I have often heard you say you could do capitally if you emigrated to an almost new land—a land you said figuratively 'flowing with milk and honey'. I confess I made no attempt to assist you to go to the great valley of the Amazon. It was for a selfish reason I detained you. My brother John being nobody to me, my desire was to have you near."

He paused, almost exhausted, and Tom held a little cup of wine to his lips.

Presently he spoke again.

"My little Peggy!" he moaned. "Oh, it is hard, hard to leave my darling!"

"Tom, listen. You are to take Peggy to your home. You are to care for her as the apple of your eye. You must be her father, your

wife hermother."

"I will! I will! Oh, brother, can you doubt me!"

"No, no, Tom. And now you may emigrate. I leave you thirty thousand pounds, all my deposit account at Messrs. Bullion & Co.'s bank. This is for Peggy and you. My real will is a secret at present, and that which will be read after-I go, is a mere epitome. But in future it will be found that I have not forgotten even John."

Poor Peggy had run in just then, and perched upon the bed, wondering much that her father should lie there so pale and still, and make no attempt to romp with her. At this time her hair was as yellow as the first approach of dawn in the eastern sky.



That very week poor Squire St. Clair breathed his last.

John came to the funeral with a long face and a crape-covered hat, looking more like a mute than anything else.

He sipped his wine while the epitomized will was read; but a wicked light flashed from his eyes, and he ground out an oath at its conclusion.

All the information anyone received was that though sums varying from five hundred pounds to a thousand were left as little legacies to distant relations and to John, as well as *douceurs* to the servants, the whole of the estates were willed in a way that could not be divulged for many a long year.

John seized his hat, tore from it the crape, and dashed it on the

floor. The crape on his arm followed suit. He trampled on both and strode away slamming the door behind him.

Years had flown away.

Tom and his wife had emigrated to the banks of the Amazon. They settled but a short time at or near one of its mouths, and then Tom, who had no lack of enterprise, determined to journey far, far into the interior, where the land was not so level, where mountains nodded to the moon, and giant forests stretched illimitably to the southward and west.

At first Tom and his men, with faithful Bill as overseer, were mere squatters, but squatters by the banks of the queen of waters, and in a far more lovely place than dreams of elfinland. Labour was very cheap here, and the Indians soon learned from the white men how to work.

Tom St. Clair had imported carpenters and artificers of many sorts from the old country, to say nothing of steam plant and machinery, and that great resounding steel buzz-saw.

Now, although not really extravagant, he had an eye for the beautiful, and determined to build himself a house and home that, although not costing a deal, would be in reality a miniature Burnley Hall. And what a truly joyous time Peggy and her cousin, or adopted brother, had of it while the house was gradually being built by the busy hands of the trained Indians and their white brethren!

Not they alone, but also a boy called Dick Temple, whose uncle was Tom St. Clair's nearest neighbour, that is, he lived a

trifle over seven miles higher up the river. Dick was about the same age and build as Roland.

There was a good road between Temple's ranch and Tom St. Clair's place, and when, after a time, Tom and Peggy had a tutor imported for their own especial benefit, the two families became very friendly indeed.

Dick Temple was a well-set-up and really brave and good-looking lad. Little Peggy averred that there never had been, or never could be, another boy half so nice as Dick.

But I may as well state here at once and be done with it—Dick was simply a reckless, wild dare-devil. Nothing else would suffice to describe young Dick's character even at this early age. And he soon taught Roland to be as reckless as himself.



Time rolled on, and the new Burnley Hall was a *fait accompli*.

The site chosen by Tom for his home by the river was a rounded and wooded hill about a quarter of a mile back from the immediate bank of the stream. But all the land between the hill and the Amazon was cultivated, and not only this, but up and down the river as well for over a mile, for St. Clair wanted to avoid too close contact with unfriendly alligators, and these scaly reptiles avoid land on which crops are growing.

The tall trees were first and foremost cleared off the hill; not all though. Many of the most beautiful were left for effect, not to

say shade, and it was pleasant indeed to hear the wind whispering through their foliage, and the bees murmuring in their branches, in this flowery land of eternal summer.

Nor was the undergrowth of splendid shrubs and bushes and fruit-trees cleared away. They were thinned, however, and beautiful broad winding walks led up through them towards the mansion.

The house was one of many gables; altogether English, built of quartz for the most part, and having a tower to it of great height.

From this tower one could catch glimpses of the most charming scenery, up and down the river, and far away on the other shore, where forests swam in the liquid air and giant hills raised their blue tops far into the sky.

So well had Tom St. Clair flourished since taking up his quarters here that his capital was returning him at least one hundred per cent, after allowing for wear and tear of plant.

I could not say for certain how many white men he had with him. The number must have been close on fifty, to say nothing of the scores and scores of Indians.

Jake Solomons and Burly Bill were his overseers, but they delighted in hard work themselves, as we have already seen. So, too, did Roland's father himself, and as visitors to the district were few, you may be certain he never wore a London hat nor evening dress.

Like those of Jake and Bill, his sleeves were always rolled up, and his muscular arms and brave square face showed that he was

fit for anything. No, a London hat would have been sadly out of place; but the broad-brimmed Buffalo Bill he wore became him admirably.

That big buzz-saw was a triumph. The clearing of the forest commenced from close under the hill where stood the mansion, and strong horses and bullocks were used to drag the gigantic trees towards the mill.

Splendid timber it was!

No one could have guessed the age of these trees until they were cut down and sawn into lengths, when their concentric rings might be counted.

The saw-mill itself was a long way from the mansion-house, with the villages for the whites and Indians between, but quite separate from each other.

The habitations of the whites were raised on piles well above the somewhat damp ground, and steps led up to them. Two-roomed most of them were, but that of Jake was of a more pretentious character. So, too, was Burly Bill's hut.

It would have been difficult to say what the Indians lived on. Cakes, fruit, fish, and meat of any kind might form the best answer to the question. They ate roasted snakes with great relish, and many of these were of the deadly-poisonous class. The heads were cut off and buried first, however, and thus all danger was prevented. Young alligators were frequently caught, too, and made into a stew.

The huts these faithful creatures lived in were

chiefly composed of bamboo, timber, and leaves. Sometimes they caught fire. That did not trouble the savages much, and certainly did not keep them awake at night. For, had the whole village been burned down, they could have built another in a surprisingly short time.

When our hero and heroine got lost in the great primeval forest, Burnley Hall was in the most perfect and beautiful order, and its walks, its flower-garden, and shrubberies were a most pleasing sight. All was under the superintendence of a Scotch gardener, whom St. Clair had imported for the purpose.

By this time, too, a very large portion of the adjoining forest had been cut down, and the land on which those lofty trees had grown was under cultivation.

If the country which St. Clair had made his home was not in reality a land flowing with milk and honey, it yielded many commodities equally valuable. Every now and then—especially when the river was more or less in flood—immense rafts were sent downstream to distant Pará, where the valuable timber found ready market.

Several white men in boats always went in charge of these, and the boats served to assist in steering, and towing as well.

These rafts used often to be built close to the river before an expected rising of the stream, which, when it did come, floated them off and away.

But timber was not the only commodity that St. Clair sent down from his great estate. There were splendid quinine-trees.

There was coca and cocoa, too.

There was a sugar plantation which yielded the best results, to say nothing of coffee and tobacco, Brazil-nuts and many other kinds of nuts, and last, but not least, there was gold.

This latter was invariably sent in charge of a reliable white man, and St. Clair lived in hope that he would yet manage to position a really paying gold-mine.

More than once St. Clair had permitted Roland and Peggy to journey down to Pará on a great raft. But only at the season when no storms blew. They had an old Indian servant to cook and "do" for them, and the centre of the raft was hollowed out into a kind of cabin roofed over with bamboo and leaves. Steps led up from this on to a railed platform, which was called the deck.

Burly Bill would be in charge of boats and all, and in the evenings he would enter the children's cabin to sing them songs and tell them strange, weird tales of forest life.

He had a banjo, and right sweetly could he play. Old Beebo, the Indian, would invariably light his meerschaum for him, smoking it herself for a good five minutes first and foremost, under pretence of getting it well alight.

Beebo, indeed, was altogether a character. Both Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair liked her very much, however, for she had been in the family, and nursed both Peggy and Roland, from the day they had first come to the country. As for her age, she might have been any age between five-and-twenty and one hundred and ten. She was dark in skin—oh, no! not black, but more of copper colour,

and showed a few wrinkles at earlymorn. But when Beeboo was figged out in her nicestwhite frock and her deep-blue or crimson blouse, with her hair hanging down in two huge plaits, then, with the smile that always hovered aroundher lips and went dancing away up her face till itflickered about her eyes, she was very pleasantindeed. The wrinkles had all flown up to the moonor somewhere, and Beeboo was five-and-twenty once again.

I must tell you something, however, regarding her, and that is the worst. Beeboo came from a race ofcannibals who inhabit one of the wildest and almostinaccessible regions of Bolivia, and her teeth had beenfiled by flints into a triangular shape, the form bestadapted for tearing flesh. She had been broughtthence, along with a couple of wonderful monkeysand several parrots, when only sixteen, by an Englishtraveller who had intended to make her a presentto his wife.

Beeboo never got as far as England, however. Shehad watched her chance, and one day escaped to thewoods, taking with her one of the monkeys, who wasan especial favourite with this strange, wild girl.

She was frequently seen for many years after this.It was supposed she had lived on roots and rats-I'mnot joking-and slept at night in trees. She managedto clothe herself, too, with the inner rind of the barkof certain shrubs. But how she had escaped deathfrom the talons of jaguars and other wild beasts noone could imagine.

Well, one day, shortly after the arrival of St. Clair, hunters

found the jaguar queen, as they called her, lying in the jungle at the foot of a tree.

There was a jaguar not far off, and a huge piece of sodden flesh lay near Beeboo's cheek, undoubtedly placed there by this strange, wild pet, while close beside her stood a tapir.

Beeboo was carried to the nearest village, and the tapir followed as gently as a lamb. My informant does not know what became of the tapir, but Beeboo was tamed, turned a Christian too, and never evinced any inclination to return to the woods.

Yet, strangely enough, no puma nor jaguar would ever even growl or snarl at Beeboo.

These statements can all be verified.

CHAPTER IV-AWAY DOWN THE RIVER

Before we start on this adventurous cruise, let us take a peep at an upland region to the south of the Amazon. It was entirely surrounded by caoutchouc or india-rubber trees, and it was while wandering through this dense forest with Jake, and making arrangements for the tapping of those trees, the juice of which was bound to bring the St. Clair much money, that they came upon the rocky table-land where they found the gold.

This was some months after the strange Indian had found the "babes in the wood", as Jake sometimes called Roland and Peggy.

"I say, sir, do you see the quartz showing white everywhere through the bloom of those beautiful flowers?"

"Ugh!" cried St. Clair, as a splendidly-coloured but hideous large snake hissed and glided away from between his feet. "Ugh! had I tramped on that fellow my prospecting would have been all ended."

"True, sir," said Jake; "but about the quartz?"

"Well, Jake."

"Well, Mr. St. Clair, there is gold here. I do not say that we've struck an El Dorado, but I am certain there is something worth digging for in this region."

"Shall we try? You've been in Australia. What say you to a

shaft?"

"Good! But a horizontal shaft carried into the base of this hill or hummock will, I think, do for the present. It is only for samples, you know."

And these samples had turned out so well that St. Clair, after claiming the whole hill, determined to send Jake on a special message to Pará to establish a company for working it.

He could take no more labour on his own head, for really he had more than enough to do with his estate.

No white men were allowed to work at the shaft. Only Indians, and these were housed on the spot. So that the secret was well kept.

And now the voyage down the river was to be undertaken, and a most romantic cruise it turned out to be.

St. Clair had ordered a steamer to be built for him in England and sent out in pieces. She was called *The Peggy*, after our heroine. Not very large—but little over the dimensions of a large steam-launch, in fact—but big enough for the purpose of towing along the immense raft with the aid of the current.

Jake was to go with his samples of golden sand and his nuggets; Burly Bill, also, who was captain of the *Peggy*; and Beeboo, to attend to the youngsters in their raft saloon. Brawn was not to be denied; and last, but not least, went wild Dick Temple.

The latter was to sleep on board the steamer, but he would spend most of his time by day on the raft.

All was ready at last. The great raft was floated and towed

out far from the shore. All the plantationhands, both whites and Indians, were gathered on thebanks, and gave many a lusty cheer as the steamerand raft got under way.

The last thing that those on shore heard was thesonorous barking of the great wolf-hound, Brawn.

There was a ring of joy in it, however, that brought hope to the heart of both Tom St. Clair and hiswinsome wife.

Well, to our two heroes and to Peggy, not to mention Brawn and Burly Bill, the cruise promised to be all one joyous picnic, and they set themselves to make the most of it.

But to Jake Solomons it presented a more serious side. He was St. Clair's representative and trusted man, and his business was of the highest importance, and would need both tact and skill.

However, there was a long time to think about all this, for the river does not run more than three miles an hour, and although the little steamer could hurry the raft along at probably thrice that speed, still long weeks must elapse before they could reach their destination.

As far as the raft was concerned, this would not be Pará. She would be grounded near to a town far higher up stream, and the timber, nuts, spices, and rubber taken seaward by train.

In less than two days everyone had settled down to the voyage.

The river was very wide and getting wider, and soon scarcely could they see the opposite shore, except as a long low green cloud on the northern horizon.

Life on board the raft was for a whole week a most uneventful

dreamy sort of existence. Oneday was remarkably like another. There was theblue of the sky above, the blue on the river's greatbreast, broken, however, by thousands of lines ofrippling silver.

There were strangely beautiful birds flying tackand half-tack around the steamer and raft, wavingtrees flower-bedraped-the flowers trailing andcreeping and climbing everywhere, and even dipping theirsweet faces in the water, – flowers of every hue of therainbow.

Dreamy though the atmosphere was, I would nothave you believe that our young folks relapsed intoa state of drowsy apathy. Far from it. They werevery happy indeed. Dick told Peggy that their life,or his, felt just like some beautiful song-waltz, andthat he was altogether so happy and jolly that hehad sometimes to turn out in the middle watch to laugh.

Peggy had not to do that.

In her little state-room on one side of the cabin, andin a hammock, she slept as soundly as the traditionaltop, and on a grass mat on the deck, with a footstoolfor a pillow, slumbered Beeboo.

Roland slept on the other side, and Brawn guardedthe doorway at the foot of the steps.

Long before Peggy was awake, and every morningof their aquatic lives, the dinghy boat took the boysa little way out into mid-stream, and they strippedand dived, enjoyed a two-minutes' splash, and gotquickly on board again.

The men always stood by with rifles to shoot any alligator that might be seen hovering nigh, and more than once reckless Dick had a narrow escape.

"But," he said one day in his comical way, "one has only once to die, you know, and you might as well die doing a good turn as any other way."

"Doing a good turn?" said Roland enquiringly.

"Certainly. Do you not impart infinite joy to a cayman if you permit him to eat you?"

The boys were always delightfully hungry half an hour before breakfast was served.

And it was a breakfast too!

Beeboo would be dressed betimes, and have the cloth laid in the saloon. The great raft rose and fell with a gentle motion, but there was nothing to hurt, so that the dishes stuck on the cloth without any guard.

Beeboo could bake the most delicious of scones and cakes, and these, served up hot in a clean white towel, were most tempting; the butter was of the best and sweetest. Ham there was, and eggs of the gull, with fresh fried fish every morning, and fragrant coffee.

Was it not quite idyllic?

The forenoon would be spent on deck under the awning; there was plenty to talk about, and books to read, and there was the ever-varying panorama to gaze upon, as the raft went smoothly gliding on, and on, and on.

Sometimes they were in very deep water close to the bank, for men were always in the chains taking soundings from the steamer's bows.

Close enough to admire the flowers that draped the forest trees; close enough to hear the wild lilt of birds or the chattering of monkeys and parrots; close enough to see tapirs moving among the trees, watched, often enough, by the fierce sly eyes of ghastly alligators, that flattened themselves against rocks or bits of clay soil, looking like a portion of the ground, but warily waiting until they should see a chance to attack.

There cannot be too many tapirs, and there cannot be too few alligators. So our young heroes thought it no crime to shoot these squalid horrors wherever seen.

But one forenoon clouds banked rapidly up in the southern sky, and soon the sun was hidden in sulphurous rolling banks of cumulus.

No one who has ever witnessed a thunderstorm in these regions can live long enough to forget it.

For some time before it came on the wind had gone down completely. In yonder great forest there could not have been breeze or breath enough to stir the pollen on the trailing flowers. The sun, too, seemed shorn of its beams, the sky was no longer blue, but of a pale saffron or sulphur colour.

It was then that giant clouds, like evil beasts bent on havoc and destruction, began to show head above the horizon. Rapidly they rose, battalion on battalion, phalanx on phalanx.

There were low mutterings even now, and flashes of fire in the far distance. But it was not until the sky was entirely overcast that the storm came on in dread and fearful earnest. At this time it was so dark, that down in the raft saloon an open book was barely visible. Then peal after peal, and vivid flash after flash, of blue and crimson fire lit up forest and stream, striking our heroes and heroine blind, or causing their eyes for a time to overrun with purple light.

So terrific was the thunder that the raft seemed to rock and shiver in the sound.

This lasted for fully half an hour, the whole world seeming to be in flames.

Peggy stood by Dick on the little deck, and he held her arm in his; held her hand too, for it was cold and trembling.

"Are you afraid?" he whispered, during a momentary lull.

"No, Dick, not afraid, only cold, so cold; take me below."

He did so.

He made her lie down on the little sofa, and covered her with a rug.

All just in time, for now down came the awful rain. It was as if a water-spout had broken over these seemingly doomed raft, and was sinking it below the dark waters of the river.

Luckily the boys managed to batten down in time, or the little saloon would have been flooded.

They lit the lamp, too.

But with the rain the storm seemed to increase in violence, and

a strong wind had arisen and added greatly to the terror of the situation. Hail came down as large as marbles, and the roaring and din was now deafening and terrible.

Then, the wind ceased to blow almost instantaneously. It did not die away. It simply dropped all of a sudden. Hail and rain ceased shortly after.

Dick ventured to peep on deck.

It was still dark, but far away and low down on the horizon a streak of the brightest blue sky that ever he had seen had made its appearance. It broadened and broadened as the dark canopy of clouds, curtain-like, was lifted.

"Come up, Peggy. Come up, Rol. The storm is going. The storm has almost gone," cried Dick; and soon all three stood once more on the deck.

Away, far away over the northern woods rolled the last bank of clouds, still giving voice, however, still spitting fire.

But now the sun was out and shining brightly down with a heat that was fierce, and the raft was all enveloped in mist.

So dense, indeed, was the fog that rose from the rain-soaked raft, that all the scenery was entirely obscured. It was a hot vapour, too, and far from pleasant, so no one was sorry when Burly Bill suddenly appeared from the lower part of the raft.

"My dear boys," he said heartily, "why, you'll be parboiled if you stop here. Come with me, Miss Peggy, and you, Brawn; I'll come back for you, lads. Don't want to upset the dinghy all among the 'gators, see?"

Bill was back again in a quarter of an hour, and the boys were also taken on board the boat.

"She's a right smart little boat as ever was," said Bill; "but if we was agoin' to get 'er lip on to the water, blow me tight, boys, if the 'gators wouldn't board us. They'm mebbe very nice sociable kind o' animals, but bust my buttons if I'd like to enter the next world down a 'gator's gullet."

Beeboo did not mind the steam a bit, and by two o'clock she had as nice a dinner laid in the raft saloon as ever boy or girl sat down to.

But by this time the timbers were dry once more, and although white clouds of fog still lay over the low woods, all was now bright and cheerful. Yet not more so than the hearts of our brave youngsters.

Courage and sprightliness are all a matter of strength of heart, and you cannot make yourself brave if your system is below par. The coward is really more to be pitied than blamed.

Well, it was very delightful, indeed, to sit on deck and talk, build castles in the air, and dream daydreams.

The air was cool and bracing now, and the sun felt warm, but by no means too hot.

The awning was prettily lined with green cloth, the work of Mrs. St. Clair's own hands, assisted by the indefatigable Beeboo, and there was not anything worth doing that she could not put willing, artful hands to.

The awning was scalloped, too, if that be the woman's word for

the flaps that hung down a wholefoot all round. "Vandyked" is perhaps more correct, but then, you see, the sharp corners of the vandykingwere all rounded off. So I think scalloped muststand, though the word reminds me strangely ofoysters.

But peeping out from under the scalloped awning, and gazing northwards across the sea-like river, boatsunder steam could be noticed. Passengers on boardtoo, both ladies and gentlemen, the former all riggedout in summer attire.

"Would you like to be on board yonder?" saidDick to Peggy, as the girl handed him back theorgnettes.

"No, indeed, I shouldn't," she replied, with a saucytoss of her pretty head.

"Well," she added, "if you were there, little Dickie,I mightn't mind it so much."

"Little Dick! Eh?" Dick laughed right heartily now.

"Yes, little Dickie. Mind, I am nearly twelve; andafter I'm twelve I'm in my teens, quite an old girl.A child no longer anyhow. And after I'm in myteens I'll soon be sixteen, and then I suppose I shallmarry."

"Who will marry you, Peggy?"

This was not very good grammar, but Dick was indownright earnest anyhow, and his young voice hadsoftened wonderfully.

"Me?" he added, as she remained silent, with hereyes seeming to follow the rolling tide.

"You, Dick! Why, you're only a child!"

"Why, Peggy, I'm fifteen-nearly, and if I live I'mbound to get

older and bigger."

"No, no, Dick, you can marry Beeboo, and I shall get spliced, as the sailors call it, to Burly Bill."

The afternoon wore away, and Beeboo came up to summon "the chillun" to tea.

Up they started, forgetting all about budding love, flirtation, and future marriages, and made a rush for the companion-ladder.

"Wowff-wowff!" barked Brawn, and the 'gator on shore and the tapirs in the woods lifted heads to listen, while parrots shrieked and monkeys chattered and scolded among the lordly forest trees.

"Wowff-wowff!" he barked. "Who says cake and butter?"

The night fell, and Burly Bill came on board with his banjo, and his great bass voice, which was as sweet as the tone of a 'cello.

Bill was funnier than usual to-night, and when Beeboo brought him a big tumbler of rosy rum punch, made by herself and sweetened with honey, he was merrier still.

Then to complete his happiness Beeboo lit his pipe.

She puffed away at it for some time as usual, by way of getting it in working order.

"Spouse," she said, "Beeboo not warm de bowl ob de big pipe plenty proper, den de dear chile Bill take a chill."

"You're a dear old soul, Beeb," said Bill.

Then the dear old soul carefully wiped the ambermouth-piece with her apron, and handed Burly Bill his comforter.

The great raft swayed and swung gently to and fro, so Bill sang

his pet sea-song, "The Rose of Allandale".He was finishing that
bonnie verse-

"My life had been a wilderness,
Unblest by fortune's gale,
Had fate not linked my lot to hers,
The Rose of Allandale",

when all at once an ominous grating was heardcoming from
beneath the raft, and motion ceased assuddenly as did Bill's song.
"Save us from evil!" cried Bill. "The raft is aground!"

CHAPTER V-A DAY IN THE FOREST WILDS

Burly Bill laid down his banjo. Then he pushed his great extinguisher of a thumb into the bow of his big meerschaum, and arose.

"De good Lawd ha' mussy on our souls, chillun!" cried Beeboo, twisting her apron into a calico rope. "We soon be all at de bottom ob de deep, and de'gators a-pickin' de bones ob us!"

"Keep quiet, Beeb, there's a dear soul! Never a'gator'll get near you. W'y, look 'ow calm Miss Peggyis. It be'ant much as'll frighten she."

Burly Bill could speak good English when he took time, but invariably reverted to Berkshire when in the least degree excited.

He was soon on board the little steamer.

"What cheer, Jake?" he said.

"Not much o' that. A deuced unlucky business. May lose the whole voyage if it comes on to blow!"

"W'y, Jake, lad, let's 'ope for the best. No use givin' up; be there? I wouldn't let the men go to prayers yet awhile, Jake. Not to make a bizness on't like, I means."

Well, the night wore away, but the raft never budged, unless it was to get a firmer hold of the mud and sand.

A low wind had sprung up too, and if it increased to a gale she

would soon begin to break up.

It was a dreary night and a long one, and few onboard the steamer slept a wink.

But day broke at last, and the sun's crimson light changed the ripples on the river from leaden gray to dazzling ruby.

Then the wind fell.

"There are plenty of river-boats, Bill," said Jake. "What say you to intercept one and ask assistance?"

"Bust my buttons if I would cringe to ne'er a one on 'em! They'd charge salvage, and sponge enormous. I know the beggars as sails these puffin' Jimmies well."

"Guess you're about right, Bill, and you know the river better'n I."

"Listen, Jake. The bloomin' river got low all at once, like, after the storm, and so you got kind o' befoozled, and struck. I'd a-kept further out. But Burly Bill ain't the man to bully his mate. On'y listen again. The river'll rise in a day or two, and if the wind keeps in its sack, w'y we'll float like a thousand o' bricks on an old Thames lumper! Bust my buttons, Jake, if we don't!"

"Well, Bill, I don't know anything about the bursting of your buttons, but you give me hope. So I'll go to breakfast. Tell the engineer to keep the fires banked."

Two days went past, and never a move made the raft.

It was a wearisome time for all. The "chillun", as Beeboo called them, tried to beguile it in the best way they could with reading, talking, and deck games.

Dick and Roland were "dons" at leap-frog, and it mattered not which of them was giving the back, but as soon as the other leapt over Brawn followed suit, greatly to the delight of Peggy. He jumped in such a business-like way that everybody was forced to laugh, especially when the noble dog took a leap that would have cleared a five-barred gate.

But things were getting slow on the third morning, when up sprang Burly Bill with his cartridge-belt on and his rifle under his arm.

"Cap'n Jake," he said, touching his cap in Royal Navy fashion, "presents his compliments to the crew of this durned old stack o' timber, and begs to say that Master Rolly and Master Dick can come on shore with me for a run among the 'gators, but that Miss Peggy had better stop on board with Beeboo. Her life is too precious to risk!"

"Precious or not precious," pouted the girl, "Miss Peggy's going, and Brawn too; so you may tell Captain Jake that."

"Bravo, Miss Peggy! you're a real St. Clair. Well, Beeboo, hurry up, and get the nicest bit of cold luncheon ready for us ever you made in your life."

"Beeboo do dat foh true. Plenty quick, too; but oh, Massa Bill, 'spose you let any evil ting befall de poh chillun, I hopes de 'gators'll eat you up!"

"More likely, Beeb, that we'll eat them; and really, come to think of it, a slice off a young 'gator's tail ain't 'arf bad tackle, Beeboo."

An hour after this the boat was dancing over the rippling river. It was not the dinghy, but a gig. Burly Bill himself was stroke, and three Indians handled the other bits of timber, while Roland took the tiller.

The redskins sang a curious but happy boat-lilt as they rowed, and Bill joined in with his 'cello voice:

"Ober de watter and ober de sea-ee-ee,
De big black boat am rowing so free,
Eee-Eee-O-ay-O!
De big black boat, is it nuffin' to me-ee-ee,
We're rowing so free?"

"Oh yes, de black boat am some-dings to me
As she rolls o'er de watter and swings o'er de sea,
Foh de light ob my life, she sits in de stern,
An' sweet am de glance o' Peggy's dark e'e,
Ee-ee-O-ay-O-O!"

"Well steered!" said Burly Bill, as Roland ran the gig on the sandy beach of a sweet little backwater.

Very soon all were landed. Bill went first as guide, and the Indians brought up the rear, carrying the basket and a spare gun or two.

Great caution and care were required in venturing far into this wild, tropical forest, not so much on account of the beasts that infested it as the fear of getting lost.

It was very still and quiet here, however, and Bill had taken the precaution to leave a man in the boat, with orders to keep his weather ear "lifting", and if he heard four shots fired in rapid succession late in the afternoon to fire in reply at once.

It was now the heat of the day, however, and the hairy inhabitants of this sylvan wilderness were all sound asleep, jaguars and pumas among the trees, and the tapirs in small herds wherever the jungle was densest.

There was no chance, therefore, of getting a shot at anything. Nevertheless, the boys and Peggy were not idle. They had brought butterfly-nets with them, and the specimens they caught when about five miles inland, where the forest opened out into a shrub-clad moorland, were large and glorious in the extreme.

Indeed, some of them would fetch gold galore in the London markets.

But though these butterflies had an immense spread of quaintly-shaped and exquisitely-coloured wings, the smaller ones were even more brilliant.

Strange it is that Nature paints these creatures in colours which no sunshine can fade. All the tints that man ever invented grow pale in the sun; these never do, and the same may be said concerning the tropical birds that they saw so many of to-day.

But no one had the heart to shoot any of these. Why should they soil such beautiful plumage with blood, and so bring grief and woe into this love-lit wilderness?

This is not a book on natural history, else gladly would I

describe the beauties in shape and colour of the birds, and their strange manners, the wary ways adopted in nest-building, and their songs and queer ways of love-making.

Suffice it to say here that the boys were delighted with all the tropical wonders and all the picturesque gorgeousness they saw everywhere around them.

But their journey was not without a spice of real danger and at times of discomfort. The discomfort we may dismiss at once. It was borne, as Beebo would say, with Christian "forty-tood", and was due partly to the clouds of mosquitoes they encountered wherever the soil was damp and marshy, and partly to the attacks of tiny, almost invisible, insects of the jigger species that came from the grass and ferns and heaths to attack their legs.

Burly Bill was an old forester, and carried with him an infallible remedy for mosquito and jigger bites, which acted like a charm.

In the higher ground where tropical heath and heather painted the surface with hues of crimson, pink, and purple snakes wriggled and darted about everywhere.

One cannot help wondering why Nature has taken the pains to paint many of the most deadly of these insects with colours that rival the hues of the humming-birds that yonder flit from bush to bush, from flower to flower.

Perhaps it is that they may the more easily seek their prey, their gaudy coats matching well with the shrubs and blossoms that they wriggle amongst, while gliding on and up to seize helpless birds

in their nests or to devour the eggs.

Parrots here, and birds of that ilk, have an easy way of repelling such invaders, for as soon as they see them they utter a scream that paralyses the intruders, and causes them to fall helplessly to the ground.

To all creatures Nature grants protection, and clothes them in a manner that shall enable them to gain a subsistence; but, moreover, every creature in the world has received from the same great power the means of defending or protecting itself against the attacks of enemies.

On both sides, then, is Nature just, for though she does her best to keep living species extant until evolved into higher forms of life, she permits each species to prey on the overgrowth or overplus of others that it may live.

Knocking over a heap of soft dry mould with the butt end of his rifle, Dick started back in terror to see crawl out from the heap a score or more of the most gigantic beetles anyone could imagine. These were mostly black, or of a beautiful bronze, with streaks of metallic blue and crimson.

They are called harlequins, and live on carrion. Nothing that dies comes wrong to these monsters, and a few of them will seize and carry away a dead snake five or six hundred times their own weight. My readers will see by this that it is not so much muscle that is needed for feats of strength as indomitable will and nerve force. But health must be at the bottom of all. Were a man, comparatively speaking, as strong as one of these beetles, he

could lift on his back and walk off with a weight of thirty tons!

Our heroes had to stop every now and then to marvel at the huge working ants, and all the wondrous proofs of reason they evinced.

It was well to stand off, however, if, with snapping horizontal mandibles and on business intent, any of these fellows approached. For their bites are as poisonous as those of the green scorpions or centipedes themselves.

What with one thing or another, all hands were attacked by healthy hunger at last, and sought the shade of a great spreading tree to satisfy Nature's demands.

When the big basket was opened it was found that Beeboo had quite excelled herself. So glorious a luncheon made every eye sparkle to look at it. And the odour thereof caused Brawn's mouth to water and his eyes to sparkle with expectancy.

The Indians had disappeared for a time. They were only just round the shoulder of a hill, however, where they, too, were enjoying a good feed.

But just as Burly Bill was having a taste from a clear bottle, which, as far as the look of it went, would have passed for cold tea, two Indian boys appeared, bringing with them the most delicious offruits as well as fresh ripe nuts.

The luncheon after that merged into a banquet.

Burly Bill took many sips of his cold tea. When I come to think over it, however, I conclude there was more rum than cold tea in that brown mixture, or Bill would hardly have smacked his lips

and sighed with such satisfaction after every taste.

The fruit done, and even Brawn satisfied, the whole crew gave themselves up to rest and meditation. The boys talked low, because Peggy's meditations had led to gentle slumber. An Indian very thoughtfully brought a huge plantain leaf which quite covered her, and protected her from the chequered rays of sunshine that found their way through the tree. Brawn edged in below the leaf also, and enjoyed a good sleep beside his little mistress.

Not a gun had been fired all day long, yet a more enjoyable picnic in a tropical forest it would be difficult to imagine.

Perhaps the number of the Indians scared the jaguars away, for none appeared.

Yet the day was not to end without an adventure.

Darkness in this country follows the short twilight so speedily, that Burly Bill did well to get clear of the forest's gloom while the sun was still well above the horizon.

He trusted to the compass and his own good sense as a forester to come out close to the spot where he had left the boat. But he was deceived. He struck the river a good mile and a half above the place where the steamer lay at anchor and the raft aground on the shoals.

Lower and lower sank the sun. The ground was wet and marshy, and the 'gators very much in evidence indeed.

Now the tapirs-and droll pig-bodied creatures they look, though in South America nearly as big as donkeys-are of a

very retiring disposition, but not really solitary animals as cheap books on natural history would have us believe. They frequent low woods, where their long snouts enable them to pull down the tender twigs and foliage on which, with roots, which they can speedily unearth, they manage to exist—yes, and to wax fat and happy.

But they are strict believers in the doctrine of cleanliness, and are never found very far from water. They bathe every night.

Just when the returning picnic was within about half a mile of the boat, Burly Bill carrying Peggy on his shoulder because the ground was damp, a terrible scrimmage suddenly took place a few yards round about water.

There was grunting, squeaking, the splashing of water, and cries of pain.

"Hurry on, boys; hurry on; two of you are enough! It's your show, lads."

The boys needed no second bidding, and no sooner had they opened out the curve than a strange sight met their gaze.

CHAPTER VI-"NOT ONE SINGLE DROP OF BLOOD SHED"

A gigantic and horribly fierce alligator had seized upon a strong young tapir, and was trying to drag it into the water.

The poor creature had both its feet set well in front, and was resisting with all its might, while two other larger animals, probably the parents, were clawing the cayman desperately with their fore-feet.

But ill, indeed, would it have fared with all three had not our heroes appeared just in the nick of time.

For several more of these scaly and fearsome reptiles were hurrying to the scene of action.

Dick's first shot was a splendid one. It struck the offending cayman in the eye, and went crashing through his brain.

The brute gasped, the blood flowed freely, and as he fell on his side, turning up his yellow belly, the young tapir got free, and was hurried speedily away to the woods.

Volley after volley was poured in on the enraged gators, but the boys had to retreat as they fought. Had they not done so, my story would have stopped short just here.

It was not altogether the sun's parting rays that so encrimsoned the water, but the blood of those old-world caymans.

Three in all were killed in addition to the one first shot. So that

it is no wonder the boys felt elated.

Beeboo had supper waiting and there was nothing talked about that evening except their strange adventures in the beautiful forest.

Probably no one could sleep more soundly than did our heroes and heroine that night.

Next day, and next, they went on shore again, and on the third a huge jaguar, who fancied he would like to dine off Brawn's shoulder, fell a victim to Dick Temple's unerring aim.

But the raft never stirred nor moved for a whole week.

Said Bill to Jake one morning, as he took his meerschaum from his mouth:

"I think, Jake, and w'at I thinks be's this like. There ain't ne'er a morsel o' good smokin' and on'y just lookin' at that fine and valuable pile o' timber. It strikes me conclusive like that something 'ad better be done."

"And what would you propose, Bill?" said Jake.

"Well, Jake, you're captain like, and my proposition is subject to your disposition as it were. But I'd lighten her, and lighten her till she floats; then tow her off, and build up the odd timbers again."

"Good! You have a better head than I have, Bill; and it's you that should have been skipper, not me."

Nothing was done that day, however, except making a few more attempts with the steamer at full speed to tow her off. She did shift and slue round a little, but that was all.

Next morning dawned as beautifully as any that had gone before it.

There were fleecy clouds, however, hurrying across the sky as if on business bent, and the blue between them was bluer than ever our young folks had seen it.

Dick Temple, with Roland and Peggy, had made up their minds to go on shore for another day while the work of dismantling the raft went on.

But a fierce south wind began to blow, driving heavy black clouds before it, and lashing the river into foam.

One of those terrible tropic storms was evidently on the cards, and come it did right soon.

The darkest blackness was away to the west, and here, though no thunder could be heard, the lightning was very vivid. It was evident that this was the vortex of the hurricane, for only a few drops of rain fell around the raft.

The picnic scheme was of course abandoned, and all waited anxiously enough for something to come.

That something did come in less than an hour—the descent of the mighty Amazon in flood. Its tributaries had no doubt been swollen by the awful rain and water-spouts, and poured into the great queen of rivers double their usual discharge.

A bore is a curling wave like a shore breaker that rushes down

the smaller rivers, and is terribly destructive to boating or to shipping.

The Amazon, however, did not rise like this. It came rushing almost silently down in a broad tall wave that appeared to stretch right across it, from the forest-clad bank where the raft lay to the far-off green horizon in the north.

But Burly Bill was quite prepared for eventualities.

Steam had been got up, the vessel's bows were headed for up stream, and the hawser betwixt raft and boat tautened.

On and on rushed the huge wave. It towered above the raft, even when fifty yards away, in the most threatening manner, as if about to sweep all things to destruction.

But on its nearer approach it glided in under the raft, and steamer as well-like some huge submarine monster such as we read of in fairy books of the long-long-ago-glided in under them, and seemed to lift them sky-high.

"Go ahead at full speed!"

It was the sonorous voice of Burly Bill shouting to the engineer.

"Ay, ay, sir!" came the cheery reply.

The screw went round with a rush.

It churned up a wake of foaming water as the *Peggy* began to forge ahead, and next minute, driven along on the breeze, the monster raft began to follow and was soon out and away beyond danger from rock or shoal.

Then arose to heaven a prayer of thankfulness, and a cheer

so loud and long that even the parrots and monkeys in the forest depths heard it, and yelled and chattered till they frightened both 'gators and jaguars.

Just two weeks after these adventures, the little *Peggy* was at anchor, and the great raft safely beached.

Burly Bill was left in charge with his white men and his Indians, with Dick Temple to act as supercargo, and Jake Solomons with Roland and *Peggy*, not to mention the dog, started off for Pará.

In due course, but after many discomforts, they arrived there, and Jake, after taking rooms in a hotel, hurried off to secure his despatches from the post-office.

"No letters!" cried Jake, as his big brown fist came down with a bang on the counter. "Why, I see the very documents I came for in the pigeon-hole behind you!"

The clerk, somewhat alarmed at the attitude of this tall Yankee backwoodsman, pulled them out and looked at them.

"They cannot be delivered," he said.

"And why?" thundered Jake, "Inasmuch as to wherefore, you greasy-faced little whipper-snapper!"

"Not sufficient postage."

Jake thrust one hand into a front pocket, and one behind him. Then on the counter he dashed down a bag of cash and a six-chambered revolver.

"I'm Jake Solomons," he said. "There before you lies peace or war. Hand over the letters, and you'll have the rhino. Refuse, and

I guess and calculate I'll blow the whole top of your head off."

The clerk preferred peace, and Jake strode away triumphant.

When he returned to the hotel and told the boys the story, they laughed heartily. In their eyes, Jake was more a hero than ever.

"Ah!" said the giant quietly, "there's nothing brings these long-shore chaps sooner to their senses than letting 'em have a squint down the barrel of a six-shooter."

The letters were all from Mr. St. Clair, and had been lying at the post-office for over a week. They all related to business, to the sale of the timber and the other commodities, the best markets, and so on and so forth, with hints as to the gold-mine.

But the last one was much more bulky than the others, and so soon as he had glanced at the first lines, Jake lit his meerschaum, then threw himself back in his rocker to quietly discuss it.

It was a plain, outspoken letter, such as one man of the world writes to another. Here is one extract: -

Our business is increasing at a rapid rate, Jake Solomon. I have too much to do and so have you; therefore, although I did not think it necessary to inform you before, I have been in communication with my brother John, and he is sending me out a shrewd, splendid man of business. He will have arrived before your return.

I can trust John thoroughly, and this Don Pedro Salvador, over and above his excellent business capabilities, can talk Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

I do not quite like the name, Jake, so he must be content to be

called plain Mr. Peter.

About the very time that Jake Solomons was reading this letter, there sat close to the sky-light of an outward-bound steamer at Liverpool, two men holding low but earnest conversation. Their faces were partly obscured, for it was night, and the only light a glimmer from the ship's lamp.

Steam was up and roaring through the pipes.

A casual observer might have noted that one was a slim, swarthy, but wiry, smart-looking man of about thirty. His companion was a man considerably over forty.

"I shall go now," said the latter. "You have my instructions, and I believe I can trust you."

"Have I not already given you reason to?" was there rejoinder. "At the risk of penal servitude did I not steal my employer's keys, break into his room at night, and copy that will for you? It was but a copy of a copy, it is true, and I could not discover the original, else the quickest and simplest plan would have been fire:"

"True, you did so, but" – the older man laughed lightly – "you were well paid for the duty you performed."

"Duty, eh?" sneered the other. "Well," he added, "thank God nothing has been discovered. My employer has bidden me an almost affectionate farewell, and given me excellent certificates."

The other started up as a loud voice hailed the deck:

"Any more for the shore!"

"I am going now," he said. "Good-bye, old man, and remember my last words: not one single drop of blood shed!"

"I understand, and will obey to the letter. Obedience pays."

"True; and you shall find it so. Good-bye!"

"A *Dios!*" said the other.

The last bell was struck, and the gangway was hauled on shore.

The great ship *Benedict* was that night rolling and tossing about on the waves of the Irish Channel.



Jake Solomons acquainted Roland and Peggy with the contents of this last letter, and greatly did the latter wonder what the new overseer would be like, and if she should love him or not.

For Peggy had a soft little heart of her own, and was always prepared to be friendly with anyone who, according to her idea, was nice.

Jake took his charges all round the city next day and showed them the sights of what is now one of the most beautiful towns in South America.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.