

STEAMER IN A FOREST

WONDERS OF A VOYAGE IN THE HEART OF SOUTH AMERICA.

It seems impossible that a large ship nowadays could make a voyage which no other vessel had made before, but the ss. England, which recently entered the Thames Commercial Dock, has achieved that distinction. Her officers are all experienced men, who have visited most of the ports "between Iquique and Callao round by the south and east"; but their last trip was the event of their lives. When they were at their destination they were actually about 600 feet above sea-level. The England, which is a splendid specimen of an up-to-date British tramp steamer, drawing 20 feet, has steamed into the very centre of the South American Continent, through Brazil, and to within five miles of the San Antonio Falls, near the Bolivian frontier. In fact, she got within 700 miles of the Andes, going west from Para.

In navigating the Madeira River, a tributary of the Amazon, the England sometimes had the jungle growth brushing her rigging on either side, bringing down leaves and twigs upon her decks. A few days ago she was off again for further adventures, but a Press representative had the good fortune to learn something of her last astonishing voyage before she went down river. Her captain was the very reality of Captain Kettle in leadership and character. The sublime confidence and complete knowledge which got a big steamer through uncharted difficulties and brought all the crew through a malarial voyage without the loss of a hand, is not easily matched.

Last year the England loaded railway material at Swansea for Porto Velho. It is the Madeira-Mamore Railway which is being built. The engineers have already laid about 30 miles of it in a jungle where they rarely see the sun. Once British enterprise attempted it, but the pioneers were conquered by floods, fevers, heat, insects, alligators, and jaguars, and other dulcet consequences of places near the line. They cut a clearing into the forest about 800 miles from Serpa at the junction of the Madeira with the Amazon. But the forest and fever won. The invaders were driven away—what was left of them—and gross primeval luxuriance poured back in swift green flood over the bones, the work, and the stores. The wilderness grew quiet again.

After a short stay at Para the England continued her voyage up the Amazon to Serpa. Near there she entered the tributary, which at the juncture is so vast an expanse of water that it looks like the sea. Captain Bennett found as much as 60 fathoms in the main stream. With the native pilot they commenced the experiment of taking a big vessel up the Madeira. Though usually big and wide, that river narrowed at times till the jungle brushed the England's rigging and sides, and they had only five feet of water below the keel in places where the surface of the stream was broken with snags of rocks. The propeller in the shallow places disturbed the rotting vegetation on the river bed, and then the combined heat and stench were unbearable.

"The pilots were perfect," said the skipper. "I think they would have undertaken to navigate the ship over a field if the dew was heavy enough. They watched the eccentricities of the great logs floating down—which we were always fearing would smash our propeller blades—for facts about the stream, and every dimple in the current had something to say to them." In about nine days they reached Porto Velho. All necessities there are of famine prices, and the deck hands and firemen of the England, realising their opportunity, hold a regular market on board. "They went to an extreme in selling their clothes," said an officer. "I know they made a lot of money by the prolonged 'drunks' they had when they got back to civilisation. But I've never had to work such a scandalously dressed crowd before."

In a vivid description of Porto Velho, the chief engineer said it was about the last place you would expect to see a big ship, "It is the centre of a continent and the absolute tropics. I've been practically everywhere, but it was a novelty to me to be kept awake in a steamer's cabin by the roaring jaguars in the forest outside. They were a perfect nuisance at times. No less than five orchid hunters have been lost in that neighbourhood of late, and the Indians say it is the jaguars."

"Most of our staff were seasoned men, but in spite of the heat they were like a lot of boys again with the novelties about them. Something bizarre happened every day to keep us interested. One day an anaconda, swimming alongside, was noosed, and we got the big serpent on deck. I've never been anywhere that so swarmed and crawled with all sorts of life. The heat and the moisture spawned it everywhere. The swarms of giant and brilliant butterflies in that Porto Velho clearing were astonishing. One of our men got a boxful of 'em and a few whacking hairy spiders, and sold them for £5 at Rotterdam. One night I thought a bird was in the cabin. It banged about and kept up a continual whistling. Then I found it was a beetle half as big as a shoe brush.

"The foreat our skipper forbade us to go into, as a matter of safety. It was as dark as the gloom in a cathedral beneath the trees. So we tried fishing from the deck. We caught nothing till one of the shore staff showed us the right method. He fired a dynamite cartridge and such a collection of prehistoric monsters as came up I never saw. One big brute was now even to the Indians. It was cased in armour, and from each armour plate projected a big spike. It was the wonder of the camp till it went bad, and even then it was wonderful." The England stayed there a month, and then returned to Europe.