The New Arabian Nights

By ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Rochester House was a magnificent residence on the banks of the canal. The large extent of the garden isolated it in an unusual degree from the annoyances of the neighborhood. It seemed the parc aux cerfs of some great nobleman or millionaire. As far as could be seen from the street there was not a glimmer of light in any of the numerous windows of the mansion, and the place had a look of neglect, as though the master had long been from home.

The cab was discharged, and the three gentlemen were not long in discovering the small door, which was a sort of postern in a lane between two garden walls. It still wanted ten or fifteen minutes of the appointed time. The rain fell heavily, and the adventurers sheltered themselves below some pendent ivy and spoke in low tones of the approaching trial.

Suddenly Geraldine raised his finger to command silence, and all three bent their hearing to the utmost. Through the continuous noise of the rain the steps and voices of two men became audible from the other side of the wall, and, as they drew nearer, Brackenbury, whose sense of hearing was remarkably acute, could even distinguish some fragments of their talk.

"Is the grave dug?" asked one.

"It is," replied the other; "behind the laurel hedge. When the job is done, we can cover it with a pile of stakes."

The first speaker laughed, and the sound of his merriment was shocking to the listeners on the other side.

"In an hour from now," he said.

And by the sound of the steps it was obvious that the pair had separated and were proceeding in contrary directions.

Almost immediately after the postern door was cautiously opened, a white face was protruded into the lane and a hand was seen beckoning to the watchers. In dead silence the three passed the door, which was immediately locked behind them, and followed their guide through several garden alleys to the kitchen entrance of the house. A single candle burned in the great paved kitchen, which was destitute of the customary furniture, and, as the party proceeded to ascend from thence by a flight of winding stairs, a prodigious noise of rats testified still more plainly to the dilapidation of the house.

Their conductor preceded them, carrying the candle. He was a lean man, much bent, but still agile, and he turned from time to time and admonished silence and caution by his gestures.

A HAND WAS SEEN BECKONING.

Colonel Geraldine followed on his heels, the case of swords under one arm and a pistol ready in the other. Brackenbury's heart beat thickly. He perceived that they were still in time, but he judged from the alacrity of the old man that the hour of action must be near at hand, and the circumstances of this adventure were so obscure and menacing, the place seemed so well chosen for the darkest acts, that an older man than Brackenbury might have been pardoned a measure of emotion as he closed the procession up the winding stair.

At the top the guide threw open a door and ushered the three officers before him into a small apartment lighted by a smoky lamp and the glow of a modest fire. At the chimney corner sat a man in the early prime of life and of a stout but courtly and commanding appearance. His attitude and expression were those of the most unmoved composure. He was smoking a cheroot with much enjoyment and deliberation, and on a table by his elbow stood a long glass of some effervescing beverage which diffused an agreeable odor through the room.

"Welcome," said he, extending his hand to Colonel Geraldine. "I knew I might count on your exactitude."

"On my devotion," replied the colonel, with a bow.

"Present me to your friends," continued the first, and, when that ceremony had been performed, "I wish, gentlemen," he added, with the most exquisite affability, "that I could offer you a more cheerful programme. It is ungracious to inaugurate an acquaintance upon serious affairs, but the compulsion of events is stronger than the obligation of good fellowship. I hope and believe you will be able to forgive me this unpleasant evening, and for men of your stamp it will be enough to know that you are conferring a considerable favor."

"Your highness," said the major, "must pardon my bluntness. I am unable to hide what I know. For some time back I have suspected Major Hammersmith, but Mr. Godall is unmistakable. To seek two men in London unacquainted with Prince Florizel of Bohemia was to ask too much of fortune's hands."

"Prince Florizel!" cried Brackenbury in amazement.

And he gazed with the deepest interest on the features of the celebrated personage before him.

"I shall not lament the loss of my incognito," remarked the prince, "for it enables me to thank you with the more authority. You would have done as much for Mr. Godall, I feel sure, as for the Prince of Bohemia, but the latter can perhaps do more for you. The gain is mine," he added, with a courteous gesture.

And the next moment he was conversing with the two officers about the Indian army and the native troops, a subject on which, as on all others, he had a remarkable fund of information and the soundest views.

There was something so striking in this man's attitude at a moment of deadly peril that Brackenbury was overcome with respectful admiration. Nor was he less sensible to the charm of his conversation or the surprising amenity of his address. Every gesture, every intonation, was not only noble in itself, but seemed to ennoble the fortunate mortal for whom it was intended, and Brackenbury confessed to himself with enthusiasm that this was a sovereign for whom a brave man might thankfully lay down his life.

Many minutes had thus passed when the person who had introduced them into the house and who had sat ever since in a corner and with his watch in his hand arose and whispered a word into the prince's ear.

"It is well, Dr. Noel," replied Florizel aloud, and then, addressing the others, "You will excuse me, gentlemen," he added, "if I have to leave you in the dark. The moment now approaches."

Dr. Noel extinguished the lamp. A faint gray light, premonitory of the dawn, illuminated the window, but was not sufficient to illuminate the room, and when the prince rose to his feet it was impossible to distinguish his features or to make a guess at the nature of the emotion which obviously affected him as he spoke. He moved toward the door and placed himself at one side of it in an attitude of the warliest attention.

"You will have the kindness," he said, "to maintain the strictest silence and to conceal yourselves in the densest of the shadow."

The three officers and the physician hastened to obey, and for nearly ten minutes the only sound in Rochester House was occasioned by the excursions of the rats behind the woodwork. At the end of that period a loud creak of a hinge broke in with surprising distinctness on the silence, and shortly after the watchers could distinguish a low and cautious tread approaching up the kitchen stair. At every second step the intruder seemed to pause and lend an ear, and during these intervals, which seemed of an incalculable duration, a profound disquiet possessed the spirit of the listeners. Dr. Noel, accustomed as he was to dangerous emotions, suffered an almost pitiful physical prostration. His breath whistled in his lungs, his teeth grated one upon another, and his joints cracked aloud as he nervously shifted his position.

At last a hand was laid upon the door and a bolt shot back with a slight report. There followed another pause, during which Brackenbury could see the prince draw himself together noiselessly, as if for some unusual exertion. Then the door opened, letting in a little more of the light of the morning, and the figure of a man appeared upon the threshold and stood motionless. He was tall and carried a knife in his hand. Even in the twilight they could see his upper teeth bare and glistening, for his mouth was open, like that of a hound about to leap. The man had evidently been over his head in water but a minute or two before, and even while he stood there the drops kept falling from his wet clothes and pattered on the floor.

The next moment he crossed the threshold. There was a leap, a stifled cry, an instantaneous struggle, and before Colonel Geraldine could spring to his aid the prince held the man, disarmed and helpless, by the shoulders.

"Dr. Noel," he said, "you will be so good as to relight the lamp."

And, relinquishing the charge of his prisoner to Geraldine and Brackenbury, he crossed the room and set his back against the chimney piece. As soon as the lamp had kindled, the party beheld an unaccustomed sternness on the prince's features. It was no longer Florizel, the careless gentleman. It was the Prince of Bohemia, justly incensed and full of deadly purpose, who now raised his head and addressed the captive president of the Suicide club.

"President," he said, "you have laid your last snare, and your own feet are taken in it. The day is beginning. It is your last morning. You have just swum the Regent's canal. It is your last bath in this world. Your old accomplice, Dr. Noel, so far from betraying me, has delivered you into my hands for judgment. And the grave you had dug for me this afternoon shall serve in God's almighty providence to hide your own just doom from the curiosity of mankind. Kneel and pray, sir, if you have a mind that way, for your time is short and God is weary of your iniquities."

The president made no answer either by word or sign, but continued to hang his head and gaze sullenly on the floor as though he were conscious of the prince's prolonged and unsparing regard.

"Gentlemen," continued Florizel, resuming the ordinary tone of his conversation, "this is a fellow who has long eluded me, but whom, thanks to Dr. Noel, I now have tightly by the heels. To tell the story of his misdeeds would occupy more time than we can now afford, but if the canal had contained nothing but the blood of his victims I believe the wretch would have been no drier than you see him. Even in an affair of this sort I desire to preserve the forms of honor, but I make you the judges, gentlemen. This is more an execution than a duel, and to give the rogue his choice of weapons would be to push too far a point of etiquette. I cannot afford to lose my life in such a business," he continued, unlocking the case of swords, "and as a pistol bullet travels so often on the wings of chance, and skill and courage may fail by the most trembling marksman, I have decided, and I feel sure you will approve of my determination, to put this question to the touch of swords."

When Brackenbury and Major O'Rooke, to whom these remarks were particularly addressed, had each intimated his approval, "Quick, sir," added Prince Florizel to the president, "choose a blade and do not keep me waiting. I have an impatience to be done with you forever."

For the first time since he was captured and disarmed the president raised his head, and it was plain that he began instantly to pluck up courage.

"Is it to be stand up?" he asked eagerly, "and between you and me?"

"I mean so far to honor you," replied the prince.

"Oh, come!" cried the president. "With a fair field, who knows how things may happen? I must add that I consider it handsome behavior on your highness' part, and if the worst comes to the worst I shall die by one of the most gallant gentlemen in Europe."

And the president, liberated by those who had detained him, stepped up to the table and began, with minute attention, to select a sword. He was highly elated and seemed to feel no doubt that he should issue victorious from the contest. The spectators grew alarmed in the face of so entire a confidence and adjured Prince Florizel to reconsider his intention.

"It is but a farce," he answered, "and I think I can promise you, gentlemen, that it will not be long a-playing."

"Your highness will be careful not to overreach," said Colonel Geraldine.

"Geraldine," returned the prince, "did you ever know me to fail in a debt of honor? I owe you this man's life, and you shall have it."

The president at last satisfied himself with one of the rapiers and signified his readiness by a gesture that was not devoid of rude nobility. The nearness of peril and the sense of courage, even to this obnoxious villain, lent an air of manhood and a certain grace.

The prince helped himself at random to a sword.

"Colonel Geraldine and Dr. Noel," he said, "will have the goodness to await me in this room. I wish no personal friend of mine to be involved in this transaction. Major O'Rooke, you are a man of some years and a settled reputation; let me recommend the president to your good graces. Lieutenant Rich will be so good as to lend me his attention; a young man cannot have too much experience in such affairs."

"Your highness," replied Brackenbury, "it is an honor I shall prize extremely."

"It is well," returned Prince Florizel. "I shall hope to stand your friend in more important circumstances."

And so saying he led the way out of the apartment and down the kitchen stairs.

The two men who were thus left alone threw open the window and leaned out, straining every sense to catch an indication of the tragical events that were about to follow. The rain was now over, day had almost come and the birds were piping in the shrubbery and on the forest trees of the garden. The prince and his companions were visible for a moment as they followed an alley between two flowering thickets, but at the first corner a clump of foliage intervened, and they were again concealed from view. This was all that the colonel and the physician had an opportunity to see, and the garden was so vast and the place of combat evidently so remote from the house that not even the noise of sword play reached their ears.

"He has taken him toward the grave," said Dr. Noel, with a shudder.

"God," cried the colonel, "God defend the right!"

And they awaited the event in silence, the doctor shaking with fear, the colonel in an agony of sweat. Many minutes must have elapsed, the day was sensibly broader and the birds were singing more heartily in the garden before a sound of returning footsteps recalled their glances toward the door. It was the prince and the two Indian officers who entered. God had defended the right.

"I am ashamed of my emotion," said Prince Florizel. "I feel it is a weakness unworthy of my station, but the continued existence of that hound of hell had begun to prey upon me like a disease, and his death has more refreshed me than a night of slumber. Look, Geraldine," he continued, throwing his sword upon the floor, "there is the blood of the man who killed your brother. It should be a welcome sight. And yet," he added, "see how strangely we men are made. My revenge is not yet five minutes' old, and already I am beginning to ask myself if even revenge be attainable on this precarious stage of life. The ill he did—who can undo it? The career in which he amassed a huge fortune—for the house itself in which we stand belonged to him—that career is now a part of the destiny of mankind forever, and I might weary myself making thrusts in carte until the crack of judgment and Geraldine's brother would be none the less dead, and a thousand other innocent persons would be none the less dishonored and debauched. The existence of a man is so small a thing to take, so mighty a thing to employ! Alas," he cried, "is there anything in life so disenchanting as attainment?"

"God's justice has been done," replied the doctor. "So much I behold. The lesson, your highness, has been a cruel one for me, and I await my own turn with deadly apprehension."

"What was I saying?" cried the prince. "I have punished, and here is the man beside us who can help me to undo. Ah, Dr. Noel, you and I have before us many a day of hard and honorable toil, and perhaps before we have done you may have more than redeemed your early errors."

"And in the meantime," said the doctor, "let me go and bury my older friend."

And this, observes the erudite Arabian, is the fortunate conclusion of the tale. The prince, it is superfluous to mention, forgot none of those who served him in this great exploit, and to this day his authority and influence help them forward in their public career, while his condescending friendship adds a charm to their private life. To collect, continues my author, all the strange events in which this prince has played the part of Providence were to fill the habitable globe with books. But the stories which relate to the fortunes of "The Rajah's Diamond" are of too entertaining a description, says he, to be omitted. Following prudently in the foot steps of this oriental we shall now begin the series to which he refers with the "Story of the Bandbox."

The RAJAH'S DIAMOND

PART I

Story of the Bandbox

UP to the age of sixteen at a private school and afterward at one of those great institutions for which England is justly famous Mr. Harry Hartley had received the ordinary education of a gentleman. At that period he manifested a remarkable distaste for study, and, his only surviving parent being both weak and ignorant, he was permitted thenceforward to spend his time in the attainment of petty and purely elegant accomplishments. Two years later he was left an orphan and almost a beggar. For all active and industrious pursuits Harry was unfitted alike by nature and training. He could sing romantic ditties and accompany himself with discretion on the piano; he was a graceful although a timid cavalier; he had a pronounced taste for chess, and nature had sent him into the world with one of the most engaging exteriors that can well be fancied. Blond and pink, with dove's eyes and a gentle smile, he had an air of agreeable tenderness and melancholy and the most submissive and caressing manners. But, when all is said, he was not the man to lead armaments of war or direct the councils of a state.

A fortunate chance and some influence obtained for Harry at the time of his bereavement the position of private secretary to Major General Sir Thomas Vandeleur, C. B. Sir Thomas was a man of sixty, loud spoken, boisterous and domineering. For some reason, some service the nature of which had been often whispered and repeatedly denied, the rajah of Kashgar had presented this officer with the sixth known diamond of the world. The gift transformed General Vandeleur from a poor into a wealthy man, from an obscure and unpopular soldier into one of the lions of London society. The possessor of the rajah's diamond was welcome in the most exclusive circles, and he had found a lady, young, beautiful and well born, who was willing to call the diamond hers even at the price of marriage with Sir Thomas Vandeleur. It was commonly said at the time that, as like draws to like, one jewel had attracted another. Certainly Lady Vandeleur was not only a gem of the finest water in her own person, but she showed herself to the world in a very costly setting, and she was considered by many respectable authorities as one among the three or four best dressed women in England.

"IS IT TO BE STAND UP," HE ASKED EAGERLY, "AND BETWEEN YOU AND ME?"

Harry's duty as secretary was not particularly onerous, but he had a dislike for all prolonged work. It gave him pain to ink his fingers, and the charms of Lady Vandeleur and her toilets drew him often from the library to the boudoir. He had the prettiest ways among women, could talk fashions with enjoyment and was never more happy than when criticising a shade of ribbon or running on an errand to the milliner's. In short, Sir Thomas' correspondence fell into pitiful arrears, and my lady had another lady's maid.

At last the general, who was one of the least patient of military commanders, arose from his place in a violent access of passion and hadented to his secretary that he had no further need for his services, with one of those explanatory gestures which are most rarely employed between gentlemen. The door being unfortunately open, Mr. Hartley fell downstairs headforemost.

He arose somewhat hurt and very deeply aggrieved. The life in the general's house precisely suited him. He moved, on a more or less doubtful footing, in very genteel company. He did little, he ate of the best, and he had a lukewarm satisfaction in the presence of Lady Vandeleur which, in his own heart, he dubbed by a more emphatic name.

Immediately after he had been outraged by the military foot he hurried to the boudoir and recounted his sorrows.

"You know very well, my dear Harry," replied Lady Vandeleur, for she called him by name like a child or a domestic servant, "that you never by any chance do what the general tells you. No more do I, you may say, but that is different. A woman can earn her pardon for a good year of disobedience by a single adroit submission, and, besides, no one is married to his private secretary. I shall be sorry to lose you, but since you cannot stay longer in a house where you have been insulted I shall wish you goodby, and I promise you to make the general smart for his behavior."

Harry's countenance fell, tears came into his eyes, and he gazed on Lady Vandeleur with a tender reproach.

"My lady," said he, "what is an insult? I should think little indeed of any one who could not forgive them by the score. But to leave one's friends, to tear up the bonds of affection"—

He was unable to continue, for his emotion choked him, and he began to weep.

Lady Vandeleur looked at him with a curious expression.

"This little fool," she thought, "imagines himself to be in love with me. Why should he not become my servant instead of the general's? He is good natured, obliging, and understands dress, and, besides, it will keep him out of mischief. He is positively too pretty to be unattached."

That night she talked over the general, who was already somewhat ashamed of his vivacity, and Harry was transferred to the feminine department, where his life was little short of heavenly. He was always dressed with uncommon nicety, wore delicate flowers in his buttonhole and could entertain a visitor with tact and pleasantry. He took a pride in servility to a beautiful woman, received Lady Vandeleur's commands as so many marks of favor and was pleased to exhibit himself before other men, who derided and despised him in his character of male lady's maid and man milliner. Nor could he think enough of his existence from a moral point of view. Wickedness seemed to him an essentially male attribute, and to pass one's days with a delicate woman, and principally occupied about trimmings, was to inhabit an enchanted isle among the storms of life.

One fine morning he came into the drawing room and began to arrange some music on the top of the piano. Lady Vandeleur, at the other end of the apartment, was speaking somewhat eagerly with her brother, Charlie Pendragon, an elderly young man, much broken with dissipation and very lame of one foot. The private secretary, to whose entrance they paid no regard, could not avoid overhearing a part of their conversation.

"Today or never," said the lady. "Once and for all, it shall be done today."

"Today, if it must be," replied the brother, with a sigh. "But it is a false step, a ruinous step, Clara, and we shall live to repent it dismally."

Lady Vandeleur looked her brother steadily and somewhat strangely in the face.

"You forget," she said. "The man must die at last."

"Upon my word, Clara," said Pendragon, "I believe you are the most heartless rascal in England."

"You men," she returned, "are so coarsely built that you can never appreciate a shade of meaning. You are yourselves rapacious, violent, immodest, careless of distinction, and yet the least thought for the future shocks you in a woman. I have no patience with such stuff. You would despise in a common banker the imbecility that you expect to find in us."

"You are very likely right," replied her brother. "You were always cleverer than I. A[illegible] you know my motto, 'The family before all.'"

"Yes, Charlie," she returned, taking his hand in hers, "I know your motto better than you know it yourself. 'And Clara before the family!' Is not that the second part of it? Indeed you are the best of brothers, and I love you dearly."

Mr. Pendragon got up, looking a little confused by these family endearments.

"I had better not be seen," said he. "I understand my part to a miracle, and I'll keep an eye on the Tame Cat."

"Do," she replied. "He is an abject creature and might ruin all."

She kissed the tips of her fingers to him daintily, and the brother withdrew by the boudoir and the back stair.

"Harry," said Lady Vandeleur, turning toward the secretary as soon as they were alone, "I have a commission for you this morning. But you shall take a cab. I cannot have my secretary freckled."

She spoke the last words with emphasis and a look of half motherly pride that caused great contentment to poor Harry, and he professed himself charmed to find an opportunity of serving her.

"It is another of our great secrets," she went on archly, "and no one must know of it but my secretary and me. Sir Thomas would make the saddest disturbance, and if you only knew how weary I am of these scenes! Oh, Harry, Harry, can you explain to me what makes you men so violent and unjust? But, indeed, I know you cannot. You are the only man in the world who knows nothing of these shameful passions. You are so good, Harry, and so kind! You, at least, can be a woman's friend. And, do you know, I think you make the others more ugly by comparison."

"It is you," said Harry gallantly, "who are so kind to me. You treat me like"—

"Like a mother," interposed Lady Vandeleur. "I try to be a mother to you, or at least," she corrected herself, with a smile, "almost a mother. I am afraid I am too young to be your mother really. Let us say a friend—a dear friend."

She paused long enough to let her words take effect in Harry's sentimental quarters, but not long enough to allow him a reply.

"But all this is beside our purpose," she resumed. "You will find a bandbox in the left hand side of the oak wardrobe. It is underneath the pink slip that I wore on Wednesday with my mechlin. You will take it immediately to this address," and she gave him a paper, "but do not on any account let it out of your hands until you have received a receipt written by myself. Do you understand? Answer, if you please—answer! This is extremely important, and I must ask you to pay some attention."

Harry pacified her by repeating her instructions perfectly, and she was just going to tell him more when General Vandeleur flung into the apartment, scarlet with anger and holding a long and elaborate milliner's bill in his hand.

"Will you look at this, madame?" cried he. "Will you have the goodness to look at this document? I know well enough you married me for my money, and I hope I can make as great allowances as any other man in the service; but, as sure as God made me, I mean to put a period to this disreputable prodigality!"

"Mr. Hartley," said Lady Vandeleur, "I think you understand what you have to do. May I ask you to see to it at once?"

"Stop," said the general, addressing Harry. "One word before you go." And then, turning again to Lady Vandeleur, "What is this precious fellow's errand?" he demanded. "I trust him no further than I do yourself, let me tell you. If he had as much as the rudiments of honesty, he would scorn to stay in this house, and what he does for his wages is a mystery to all the world. What is his errand, madam, and why are you hurrying him away?"

"I supposed you had something to say to me in private," replied the lady.

"You spoke about an errand," insisted the general. "Do not attempt to deceive me in my present state of temper. You certainly spoke about an errand."

"If you insist on making your servants privy to our humiliating dissensions," replied Lady Vandeleur, "perhaps I had better ask Mr. Hartley to sit down. No?" she continued. "Then you may go, Mr. Hartley. I trust you may remember all that you have heard in this room. It may be useful to you."

Harry at once made his escape from the drawing room, and as he ran upstairs he could hear the general's voice upraised in declamation and the thin tones of Lady Vandeleur planting icy repartees at every opening. How cordially he admired the wife! How skillfully she could evade an awkward question! And with what secure effrontery she repeated her instructions under the very guns of the enemy! And, on the other hand, how he detested the husband!

There had been nothing unfamiliar in the morning's events, for he was continually in the habit of serving Lady Vandeleur on secret missions, principally connected with the millinery. There was a skeleton in the house, as he well knew. The bottomless extravagance and the unknown liabilities of the wife had long since swallowed her own fortune and threatened day by day to engulf that of the husband. Once or twice in every year exposure and ruin seemed imminent, and Harry kept trotting round to all sorts of furnishers' shops telling small fibs and paying small advances on the gross amount until another term was tided over, and the lady and her faithful secretary breathed again. For Harry, in a double capacity, was heart and soul upon that side of the war. Not only did he adore Lady Vandeleur and fear and dislike her husband, but he naturally sympathized with the love of finery, and his own single extravagance was at the tailor's.

INTERESTING FACTS

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Portland Markets.

Wheat—Walla Walla, 72c; bluestem, 77c; valley, 74.

Flour—best grades, $3 35@3 65 per barrel; graham, $3 15@$3 55.

Oats—No. 1 white, $1 17@$1 20; gray $1.15 per cental.

Barley—Feed, $21 per ton; $21 brewing, rolled, $22 per ton.

Millstuffs—Bran, $23; middlings, $27; shorts, $23; chop, $18.

Hay—Timothy, $20@21; clover, $17

But'er—Fancy creamery, 20@22½c dairy, nominal; store, 17c@18 per pound

Eggs—fresh 16@17½c.

Cheese—Full cream twins, 16½@17½c; Young American, 17½c@18½c per pound.

Poultry—Chickens, mixed, 12 @ 13c per lb, hense 13½ @ 14c, roosters 10½ @ 13c; broilers @17c, fryers, 14 @ 15c, ducks 13½ @ 14c, geese 8c, turkeys, live 17c, dressed 18 @ 19c per lb.

Hogs—Gross, heavy, $6 50@7; light, $4.75 @5; dressed, 8@8½c per pound.

Veal—Small, 7½@8½c; large, 7@7½c per pound.

Beef—Gross to steers, $4.50@5.50; Hops—19@20 c per pound.

Wool—Valley 15½@16c; Eastern Oregon, 8 at 14½; mohair, 35 at 38c per pound.

Potatoes—$.50 @ $.60 per sack

Onions—40, 50c per cental;