

While staying here [mission of San Fernando], the president of the mission gave Humboldt an account of the method of proselytising. Under pretence of recovering young converts, children of eight and ten years old were stolen and detained as serfs of the Christians. Three years before, this missionary had, with his Indians, made an incursion into a native hut, where they found a woman with her three children unprotected. She attempted to escape, but was soon overtaken and captured, and had she resisted, they would have killed her—that extremity even being considered justifiable in such a cause. They were all bound and carried to San Fernando, from which place it was presumed she would be unable to find her way home. Driven to despair by her separation from her husband and her other children, who were out with him when she was captured, she made repeated attempts to escape with her little ones; but she was always retaken, and the missionary having caused her to be cruelly beaten, at last separated her from those children who had been made prisoners with her. She was conveyed down to the missions of the Rio Negro up the Atabapo. Being but slightly bound, and judging by the position of the sun that she was being carried farther away from her home and country, she threw herself into the water, and succeeded in reaching the left bank of the river; she was retaken in the evening, however, and, after being cruelly beaten again, stretched on a rock which still bears her name, "The Mother's Rock", her arms were tied behind her, and she was dragged on to the mission of Javita. The same night, with the help of her teeth she broke her bonds, and once more escaped, and four days afterwards she was seen at San Fernando, hovering round the hut where her children were confined. What she had accomplished in that journey the hardiest Indians would have hesitated to undertake. She traversed the inundated woods where the sun never penetrated the clouds; she swam across the rivulets that ran into the Atabapo, and broke her way through the thorny lianas, supporting nature on no other nourishment than the black ants. Instead of relenting in their wicked cruelty, the missionaries again separated her from her children, and sent her to one of the missions of the Orinoco, where, refusing all food, she starved herself to death.

Alexander von Humboldt, trans-Atlantic journey 1799 to 1804 , as described in an extract from *Remarkable Men*, circa 1892, published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK).

Overtown Miscellany, [overtown.org.uk](http://overtown.org.uk), John S. Sargent, 28th December 2014.