

[COMPLETE STORY.]

# The Wreck of the Alvorado

## From the Adventures of An Idle Man

By Francis Metcalfe



THE first snowflakes of the season were in the air as the cab which carried the Idle Man drove on to the pier, where excited and inexperienced travellers were making desperate efforts to sort out improperly labelled luggage and get the pieces which they wanted for the voyage from the baggage handlers, who seemed determined to lower them into the hold. He kept a practised eye upon his own belongings until one of the ship's stewards came to him, and he directed him to place them in his cabin.

"You are mistaken in the number," called a cheery voice behind him. "Steward, show that dunnage in 'A,' next to my cabin."

He turned, a smile of pleasure on his face, as he shook hands with a stout, red faced man wearing the uniform of a ship's captain.

"It is an unlooked for pleasure to have you for a fellow voyager. For I thought you were still in the transport service."

The Captain laughed. "I was until two months ago, when they put me on the beach for 30 days for language unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, just because I told a swab of a harbour master what I thought of him when he ordered me to berth my ship in the wrong place. I resigned right there and came back to the old line, and they gave me the Alvorado."

"They must have grown particular in these piping times of peace," he replied, smiling as he recalled the picturesque language of the Captain in the stress of landing an invading army on the shores of Cuba, with totally inadequate facilities. "I remember that the sea was often bluer than the water when we were off Siboney."

"Yes, and I had reformed, too, but the strain was too much for me."

A heavy truck came rattling down the pier and the Idle Man pulled the Captain to one side, just in time to prevent his being knocked over by the clumsy draught-horses. His reformation was incomplete, and he sent a cordial greet-

ing after the driver which would have raised the hair of a less hardened landsman than a New York truckman. He turned and waved his hand, an appreciative grin on his face. His load was the last of the cargo, a dozen dummy figures for the display of men's clothing, and the stevedores laughed and gave each a name, as they carried them up the gangplank.

"We have a queer manifest this cruise," said the captain as they lighted their cigars in his comfortable cabin after the ship was in blue water. "There is a circus troupe in the cabin and a whole menagerie in the 'tween decks. I don't know why it is, but as soon as the cold weather comes on we can count on a circus company or a troupe of barnstormers for the West Indies and Central America. They learn nothing from experience, and nearly every port in that part of the world has its quota of stranded performers and freaks. Many's the one I have allowed to work a passage back, but most of them, after the inevitable burst up, join the army they call 'Pan-American Hoboes' down there, and live from hand to mouth in the laziness of the tropics. The same strain of hopeful improvidence runs through every company of them. I have put some of them at my table, and I guarantee that you will find them more amusing than the swells you ordinarily find there."

"But I should think they might do well in these out of the way places," said the Idle Man, remembering the dearth of amusements offered in his experience of the tropics.

"Some of them do, for a short time, but the transportation charges eat up the profits. Everybody is hard up down there, except the dictators, and they are too busy putting down revolutions, or preparing to get away with their loot, to go to the circus."

When he went down to dinner he found the Circassian beauty seated between himself and the Captain, and at his right the high school rider, a pretty girl about twenty years old. Across the table sat the manager, a red-faced man whose heavy black moustache, pronounced clothing and yellow diamond scarf proclaimed his profession. The other seats were filled with more conventional passengers, who looked a-scanse at their unusual table companions. He ordered a bottle of champagne, which the manager and the Circassian shared with him, and the ice thus broken, the conversation became general before the fish was served.

He soon concluded that his neighbour had never been nearer to Circassia than the Bowery, and he recognised in the manager the type he was familiar with as side show man or barker at cheap shows. Under the mellowing influence of the wine he became eloquent about the grandeur of his show and the way he intended to "make 'em all sit up" when he spread the "big top" under the tropic sun. His voluble boasting in the strange showman's jargon was unintelligible to most of his table companions, but the Circassian listened to him with rapt attention, her pale blue eyes, framed in colourless eyelashes, fixed on him in adoration. The Idle Man turned to the high school rider, and asked if she were a good sailor.

"There is a patch of water off Hatteras, where we shall be to-morrow night, which has a bad reputation, you know," he said to her.

"I hope it will not live up to it then," she answered, "for although I am a good sailor, I have a horse on board to which I should be sorry to have anything happen."

"Will you show him to me?" he asked, surprised by her speech, which was that of an educated and refined woman.

you care for horses, I am sure you will admire him. He can do anything but talk."

The Idle man found plenty of amusement in his fellow voyagers whom he met in the smoking room. He drew the manager into conversation, and after listening to a description of the superlative excellence of his mammoth aggregation of performers, snake charmers and freaks, asked him casually about the high school rider.

"Ma'mselle Clementine De Vere," he said. "Oh, she's a new one; wants to make a reputation, and I don't know where she can get it better than with my show." The girl of the manager's chest visibly increased, and the Idle Man tactfully agreed with him. "I ain't strong for the hoty cote act; a tight's an' spangles turn takes better under canvas, but I got her cheap an' it helps to fill out the bill. Of course, that ain't her real name; I invented that. Ain't it a peach?"

As he volunteered no further information about her the Idle Man left him and turned in.

After an early cup of coffee in the morning he met her wandering about the deck. The sharp air had given her a pretty colour, and as he greeted her he thought that he had never seen a handsomer girl.

"You are a friend in need. I am trying to find my way downstairs to see my horse," she said.

"I believe that 'downstairs' is usually called 'below' in ship's language," he said laughing. "But come along; I think I can find the way."

"You must not ask a poor girl to learn too many languages at once," she replied, taking his proffered arm. "I am new to the show business too, and I must learn a whole lot of its argot if I am to understand what my companions are talking about."

"In some cases it is said to be folly to be wise," he said, looking at her

gravely. She withdrew her hand from his arm, and the smile left her face.

"Don't discourage me, please," she said, looking up at him. "The conversation at dinner last night was a revelation to me, and I fear that I have made a horrible mistake, but I must go through with it now."

Her lip quivered and her eyes were suspiciously moist, and when they found the horse, which greeted her with a joyful whinny, she threw her arms around its neck and buried her face in its mane. The horse, a beautiful bay thoroughbred, sniffed at the pocket of her jacket, and she raised her face from its neck and kissed its small muzzle.

"Greedy boy," she said, shaking her finger at him. "No sugar until you have said good-morning properly. The animal tossed its head, but obediently raised his off fore-leg and put the hoof gently in her outstretched hand, and the greeting over, received his reward from the girl's pink palm.

"Isn't he a beauty? I broke him and taught him all his tricks myself, and no one else has ever been on his back."

The keen, frosty nip of autumn disappeared as they passed Hatteras and the passengers found a summer atmosphere when they came on deck the second night out. The ship had entered the Gulf Stream while they were dining, and overcoats and wraps were discarded. The Idle Man and the girl sat in the stern watching the phosphorescence in the water, as it was churned up by the screws. She avoided all reference to her past life, but from a few words which she let fall he judged that her present engagement was the result of absolute necessity.

"Beggars cannot be choosers, and a beggar on horseback has less choice than another, for there is the horse to feed too. The one thing I can do well is to ride, and Marplot's intelligence will help to make a living for us both." Remembering the Captain's description of the fate of former amusement ventures, he looked at her doubtfully, but, conscious that she was whistling to keep her courage up, refrained from saying anything to discourage her. He was curious to know how a refined and sensitive girl came to be in such a position, but although he was with her a great deal during the next two days, and

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