

Out of the Doldrums

By Theodore Waters

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Down in what sailors call the horse latitudes of the Atlantic a small tramp steamer drifted idly in the swing of the equatorial current where it sets slightly toward Cape St. Roque. No smoke came from its funnel, no man held its wheel and the bunting at its forepeak floated upside down. All around it and far behind could be seen the fins of countless sharks. They had been following in its wake for days and their attendance on it was due to the regularity with which certain objects, long, narrow and canvas-covered, were dropped over the side. One of these objects had just disappeared with a splash in the water and when the last bubble had come to the surface a man and a girl who had leaned over the rail to see the thing go down straightened up and looked at one another for several moments without speaking. The day before and the day before that they had cast these objects overboard with much less emotion than characterized this day's funeral, but the crew money that had just taken place not only deprived the girl of her chief friend and protector on board, that is, the captain of the steamer, but it left her and her companion, the quartermaster, the only occupants of the vessel.

"Well," said the man at last, "he's gone. I am sorry."

"Yes," replied the girl, "he's gone."

"I suppose I'll be the next," he said.

"Oh, please, please—don't!" She sank wearily into a steamer chair nearby and covered her face with her hands. She was not deeply interested in him, but the prospect of being left alone appalled her—appalled her more than the knowledge that she was even then alone on the ocean with a man whom she had never met before going foot on the vessel. She shivered

and with food and tobacco a plenty and—"And what?" She looked at him sharply. He saw the look and said hastily:

"Oh, that was entirely aside, believe me. But meantime, we are forgetting the circumstances that left us here alone. Suppose our recent troubles should continue—suppose I should be given the opportunity to cruise alone—do you wish me to convey to anyone—"

"No one will be interested," she interrupted, shortly, and rising abruptly walked away.

Now the girl had taken his last remark not at all as he wished she had taken them, but there was no way out of it just then, as he concluded to let the situation work out its own salvation. He strolled up to the awning which had been stretched over the hurricane deck and, lighting a cigarette, took leisurely to scanning the horizon. The sun beat down on the smooth sea, but no sail appeared, though he looked through the captain's binoculars till his eyes ached and his head hurt. Yet the evening was heavenly compared to what he encountered occasionally when, with perfunctory sense of duty, he dropped down the ladder into the engine room and opened the bulkhead door of the fire room for a look at the crusted fins. He did not like to stay in there more than a few minutes at a time.

About noon she called him to his meal which she had set daintily in the upper saloon where the breeze played gently through it. It was a silent function. She volunteered no remark and he had resolved that he should open their next conversation. He helped to clear away the remains of the meal and then went back to his awning. About the middle of the afternoon he saw a long gray streak on the horizon and watched it intently as it gradually got blacker and longer, until he saw that it was

papers and fairly dying of homesickness! It was well enough before mother died; he kept up. Poor mother! I can see her yet standing in that dirty shed loading guns for those disgusting, ogling, Spanish-spitting buxas. Light!"

The quartermaster was gazing with half-closed eyes at the glare of the sea. He said nothing and the girl continued:

"And I am on my way home to see if the indictment can be quashed. I believe it is the only way to save father's life. If it cannot be done I shall go back to Rio and take mother's place."

From the depths of his chest the man choked up a word, but suppressed it again before it got fairly out. She looked at him inquiringly.

"I am sorry for you, Miss Annesley," he said. "Perhaps, however, you will succeed in your purpose when you reach shore."

And, turning from her somewhat abruptly, he walked away. She thought him ill-mannered, but her interest in her own story, which it was easy to see had become the chief moving impulse of her life, quickly obliterated him from her mind, and she stood there communing, until long after the setting sun had spilled its gold over the sea to make itself an easy path below the horizon.

Early next morning, when the girl went to prepare breakfast, she found it already on the table, and the quartermaster waiting to sit down with her. No reference was made to the conversation of the previous evening, but when the meal was over Wade said briefly:

"Miss Annesley, on second thought I have decided to try and reach shore with this boat. I have been working at the engine and I believe I can get enough steam to keep the old tub going at half speed. We might try at any rate."

look at the engine. He worked naked most of the time, and, after each round of the fires, he turned on the hose from the water tank and sprayed himself from head to foot.

And thus in the terrible heat he dragged through the morning. At noon he turned off his drafts and stopped the engine, dressed himself and went on deck. He found the girl terribly concerned over the wheel, which had suddenly refused to act with its accustomed ease. He pegged off her position on the chart and then went to get something to eat. During the meal he told her that they were about seventy miles nearer the coast than they had been at dawn.

After dinner they rested four hours to get by the heat of the day, dividing the time between sleeping and watching. They went back to their work refrained when sunset took with it the glare and the heat of the sea they decided to keep at it several hours longer. He lighted the side lamps and turned on the electric lights to minimize the chance of collision, and while she sat up under the stars playing with the wheel, he went below decks again to deal with the fires. At 10 o'clock he told her to go to bed, but at 3 they were off again, for they found it more prudent to lie in broad daylight and do their running in the evening and early morning. At 9 o'clock the girl was so exhausted that Wade let her sleep until sunset. Then they hurried on again, but this time the trick told on him, for after he came on deck after the run he made several incoherent remarks about her father and when she replied to them he got very angry indeed and ordered her to bed. Now the girl had only a vague conception of his strenuous life below deck and it hardly accounted for his sudden change of manner. She was surprised, indignant and withal somewhat frightened, and when she retired she was careful to lock the door of her room. She got little sleep that night. In the early morning, however, he seemed to have recovered. He made no reference to his words of the night before and by daylight they were under way.

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He was still alive, but she knew that the slight spark that was left in him would go out if she did not immediately get him to the deck. Again and again she lifted him up the first steps of the ladder, only to fall back exhausted each time. And she was making a final try for it when there came a shock that made the whole ship tremble and a sudden lurch pitched her head foremost on the body of Wade, crushing him to the floor. Dazed and thoroughly terrified, she ran up the ladder and out on deck. They were close inshore, but they were not moving. Left to herself, the steamer poked her nose into a mudbank and her engines were striving hard to keep her fast aground. Other vessels lay at anchor in the roadstead and boats full of men from a white ship nearby were hurrying toward the tramp.

One day about six months after the above events took place a South American steamer on the way to New York dropped anchor in the harbor of San Juan, Porto Rico. On her deck stood a young girl and a prematurely-aged man.

"There is the place, father," cried the girl, pointing to where a spar buoy swayed with the tide about a mudbank. "That is where we ran aground. The transport from which the boats came lay over in this direction. They had not far to go, but the sailors said that five minutes more and they would have been too late to save the boilers and the ship would have blown out of the water. Only think of it."

"I do not want to think of it," replied the man. "I would much rather think of the glorious things that happened afterward—first the quashing of the indictment and then all this money for bringing in the ship. You are, indeed, a wonderful girl, Mary."

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"Gadsford! Why, that is the name of the scoundrel who—"

"Yes, I know, father," interrupted the girl softly. "But he is at rest in the cemetery back of San Juan and it was from his delirium, as he died in my arms that day, I gained the information that helped your case so much with the attorney general."

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AGAIN AND AGAIN SHE TRIED TO RAISE HIM UP THE LADDER, ONLY TO FALL BACK EXHAUSTED.

slightly, although the pitch between the deck planks bubbled in the heat of the morning sun, but she was gazing moodily at the water did not notice it. He was recapitulating events as they had lately occurred on board.

The steamer was a single screw tramp, the kind that plies from ocean to ocean, satisfied with any paying cargo and any destination. Her last port of call had been Rio de Janeiro and she had gone there from Calcutta by way of Good Hope. While off the Andaman Islands, in the Indian ocean, she had picked up a wretched Punjabi adrift in a small boat. He said he was all that was left of a shipload of Mecca pilgrims wrecked on the way from Jeddah to Madras. But before he died two days later he confessed that in reality he had escaped from a plague-infested ship bound for the mouth of the Ganges. There was consternation on the tramp for many days after the Punjabi died, yet the disease did not immediately manifest its presence. Perhaps the cooler latitude held it in check. They got a clean bill of health at Rio, where the girl took passage for New York, and congratulated themselves on their escape. But when the steamer got into the warm belt of the Atlantic the scourge suddenly broke out on board, killing the man one after another with awful rapidity. At first they tried to continue on their course, since one port under the circumstances was as good as another, but at last they were unable to make any port at all, because they died so fast that panic laid hold of them and no one was in condition to work the ship. They banded the fires and let her float and occupied themselves chiefly in watching each other die. And so it came at last to the day of the captain's funeral, when no one was left alive but the girl passenger and the quartermaster.

She had been a ministering angel to the sick and diminishing numbers had forced him at last to become scullion in general to the living and the dead. But their intimacy had been occasioned by too much horror to permit confidences. Now, however, they were alone, with nothing to do or to think of that was not equally the concern of both. She found him young and good to look at and the latent possibilities of the situation made her nervous. Once or twice as the crew died off one by one this very situation had occurred to her—she had even wondered who might be left alone with her, but she had put the thought aside as one passing away the memory of a bad dream. He, gazing at her covertly, half-divined her thoughts and pitied her heartily, for the refinement of her upbringing was apparent. He suddenly resolved to set her at ease. That she needed reassuring was evident from her startled manner when she saw him walk toward her.

"Well," he began, seating himself on the rail in front of her and plunging into his subject; "the situation looks somewhat lurid, I suppose, but—it might be worse, you know."

She did not answer.

"I mean," he continued, "that we are somewhat out of the track of vessels, but we are drifting westward toward the Windward Islands. It will only be a matter of time until we sight one of them. Luckily we have a good boat under us and provisions enough to last months if necessary."

"Months!" she gasped, horrified at the prospect. "But—can we not do something; can we not—do something?"

"I'm afraid not. The crew numbered nineteen, and you know they banded the fires when they got down to eight and that fire hole—well, I wasn't brought up to live in such a climate. However, we may be sighted by some other vessel, in which case I will ask the captain to take you off."

"And you—?"

"Oh, I." He smiled curiously. "I have not been off this boat for a long, long time. Besides there are reasons why I would rather take my chances aboard it."

"Do you ever in the doldrums? Well, perhaps not, but it is not the storm season,

went from a two-funnel steamer. He smoko from a skylight and called the fact down to where she sat writing at a table. She put up her writing without a word and came out on deck. The steamer bore down on their distress signal and lay to within halting distance.

"Steamer, ahoy!" bellowed a voice from the bridge of the newcomer, "what steamer's that?"

"Deerhound! Rio to N' York. What steamer's that?"

"Zenobia, Galveston, with mules for the cape. What's the matter?"

"Berber! All dead but two. Will you take a passenger—a woman?"

"Not unless you're in danger of sinking. Don't want to hurt our health bill. British government contract, you know. Can we help you otherwise. Want medicine?"

"No; have plenty. Where are we?"

"Seventeen and five north; forty-seven west."

"Thanks! Goodby."

"Goodby."

In another minute the Zenobia was off and the Deerhound was rocking in her wake. The quartermaster walked forward.

"Dirty hound," he muttered to himself. "He'd taken her quick enough if I'd offer him the boat in return. But not if I know it. Mister Maledriver. Not when this current will take us inside the salvage limit and ask no pay for the job." And unwittingly he had peeped through the cleat he deliberately hauled down the flag of distress.

"Well," he said, when he came back to where the girl was standing, "you see, they wouldn't take you—not even to South Africa."

"Thank you very much," she said softly. "You did what you could."

Already far in the distance the hurrying vessel was kicking back the foam as though she knew and was anxious to put as much distance as possible between it and its pestilence-infected sister ship, and to the girl it typified that attitude of the whole world toward herself. It made her feel her isolation the more keenly. Yet the incident begot for her a confidence in the man which thereafter had not existed. Turning to him suddenly, she said impulsively:

"Mr. Wade, you asked me this morning if I had a message to leave in case—well, of course, it is right that you should know, at least, who I am. You have doubtless heard the captain call me Miss Annesley. I am Mary Annesley. My father is Henry Annesley of Rio, formerly of Columbus, Ohio—I—did you know him?"

Apprehension spread upon her features, but the expression on the man's face would have been hard to characterize. He tried to appear unconcerned, but it ended in his sitting down suddenly and smiling in a queer manner.

"No," he said. "That is—yes, of course I have heard of your father before, before—I used to live in Columbus—that is, years ago."

The girl turned her head away.

"Then you know—you know"—she stopped.

"Well, you see," he said hastily, "the details of the affair were not—I went to sea before the affair was definitely your father," he ended desperately, "he is doing well."

"Doing well!" She smiled bitterly. "He is running a shooting gallery in Rio."

"The money?" There was no money. Oh, yes, I know. It sounds like the old story, but I know. It would have been far better if father had remained at home and faced the exposure. I believe he could have proved that he was the dupes of that gang of bond forgers. He honestly believed it was good paper when he accepted it. But when the bank closed its doors that day and so many of his friends went down with it he could not bear to look them in the face. His going away so suddenly made it look like complicity and they indicted him. But, oh, if you could see him now, leaning over his counter, reading old New York

"We! you must be quartermaster and cook. I'll be engineer, you will succeed in fair weather and the equatorial current to help us we should make the American coast in a few days. I cannot say just where—I'm not enough of a navigator—but somewhere."

She looked at him curiously, wondering what had suddenly caused him to give up his idea of floating in the doldrums. He saw the look and added hastily:

"You had better put on old clothes if you have them with you. And we must hurry so as to make the most of the day's work." Then he hurried out of the saloon.

When she was ready she started after him. She looked down into the engine room, from which strange bursting noises periodically came forth and finally started timidly to go down the iron ladder that led to the gallery above the cylinder-heads. He called out immediately from below:

"O, Miss Annesley, you must not come down here." He came up the ladder quickly and stepped out on deck. Great beads of sweat hung upon his forehead and he was panting.

"O," she said, "really you must go slower. Haste is dangerous in this climate and it is going to be a very hot day."

"Yes," he answered dryly, "I shouldn't wonder—very hot. But let us go up to the bridge."

He looked into the binnacle and found that the steamer was drifting with her nose to the northwest. This just suited his purpose. He unlashed the wheel and told the girl to hold it where it was while he went below again, assuring her that as soon as steam went into the steering gear the little wheel then so stiff would be easy to move. And then he ran off, leaving her standing comfortably under the awning grasping the spokes. He was gone a long time and she wondered what he was doing. But presently the funnel of the tramp began to vibrate like an immense drum and to belch forth smoke. And suddenly the wheel became as pliable as a toy and she realized that the boat was moving slowly through the water. At the same time Wade came running back to the bridge. He was stripped to the waist and with his upper clothes had gone the last vestige of his ceremony. He took the wheel and swung it over several points.

"There," he said, "of course it is to the west-northwest. See, now, if you move this wheel to the right—so—her nose will turn to the left—so—her nose will turn to the right—there, see that. So keep her here at this point until I come again. But if anything goes wrong—if another vessel comes in plain sight, call me at once through this tube." And without further ado he ran below again.

It was a long morning to the girl on the bridge. At first there was the novelty of feeling that the great moving mass under her was completely subservient to her commands and several times she could not resist the temptation to prove its subservience by making the steamer veer to port or to starboard and back again to the course. The glare of the water hurt her eyes and made her head ache. The hours dragged by wearily.

But if the morning seemed long to the girl it was an age to the man. The engine itself should have had all his time, but having gone over it once with oil and waste, he was compelled to leave it to the mercy of the steam-drafting apparatus, for the fires needed his constant attention. His knowledge of boilers and engines was confined to what he had picked up on this very vessel and having established certain danger limits on the gauges he was careful to keep within them. But his utmost exertion was not likely to work the mechanism up to the smashing point. The real danger lay to himself. So he adopted a rule of action to keep within bounds. He opened the bunker doors and let the coal stream out on the floors, where he could get at it more easily. Then as the fire doors opened out of the ends of the tube formed by the firebox, he made it a point to charge twice around the cube, working door after door between each

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