

ONE "FLYING CODONA" WATCHES FROM THE GROUND—A TRAGEDY OF "THE BIG TOP"



The incomparable Lillian Leitzel. When she fell from the trapeze to her death, circus followers mourned all over the world.

ON the flamboyant circus billing, when "The Greatest Show on Earth" comes to town, they still are listed as "the Flying Codonas."

Famous for years in the strange world-apart that is the circus, these noted performers on the aerial trapeze still command the admiration of throngs under the "big top." But few of the spectators sense the drama that is enacted every time this daring aerial act is presented, for the man who is the most celebrated of all the Codonas remains on the ground—probably, it now appears, will continue to remain there.

A few years ago, Alfredo Codona was the pivotal star of the "Flying Codonas."

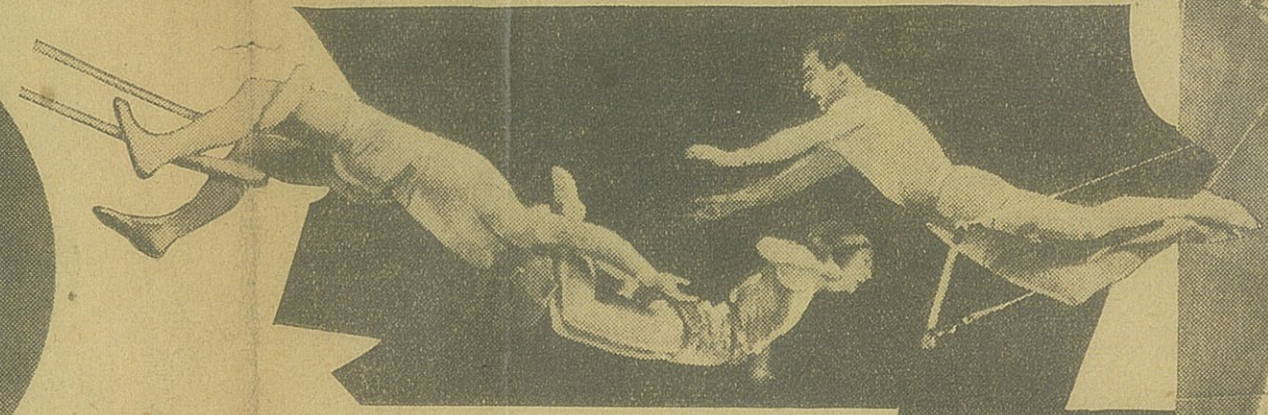
Those were the days when the bright particular luminary of circus aerialists was Lillian Leitzel. And Lillian was the wife of Alfredo. Between these two there was no shadow of professional jealousy; each was a star in his or her own right and each was proud of the accomplishments of the other. Alfredo it was who, just before Lillian

ascended to the top of the big tent for her performance, would appear—unknown to the audience—in the uniform of a mere attendant and test the ropes on which she was about to undertake her hazardous ventures.

As almost every circus follower knows, Lillian Leitzel plunged to her death under the "big top" when the act was playing Copenhagen, Denmark. Despite the occurrence of the accident in far-away Copenhagen, virtually every newspaper in America carried Lillian's obituary on its first page.

Alfredo was, for months, inconsolable. But circus life is like no other side of human existence and a strange sort of domesticity is an integral part of it. Alfredo wooed and won Vera Bruce, who had been reared on the flying trapeze and who had been chosen as her husband's partner by Lillian Leitzel herself.

Then one day, little more than a year ago, Alfredo was performing in New York's Madison Square Garden—the annual Manhattan headquarters for the circus. He was doing his almost incredible triple somersault in midair. It is the most spectacular and the most dangerous of all aerial stunts—and somehow, something slipped. Instead of being caught by the strong arms of his brother, Lalo, the flying Alfredo



THE TRIPLE SOMERSAULT!

In this rare photo, Alfredo Codona is pictured about to grasp the outstretched hands of his brother, Lalo, while Vera Bruce, his wife, takes the trapeze. It was this daring stunt that sent Alfredo into retirement, when he missed and fell.

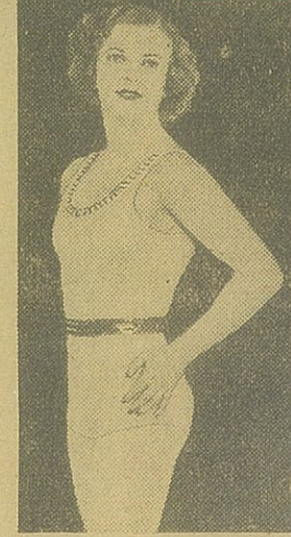
missed his grasp and fell.

For a time his injury was thought to be no very serious matter. He spent some weeks in a hospital and the act went on without him, but no one in the circus would believe he would fail to return. Yet months passed, and there was no sign of Alfredo beneath the big top.

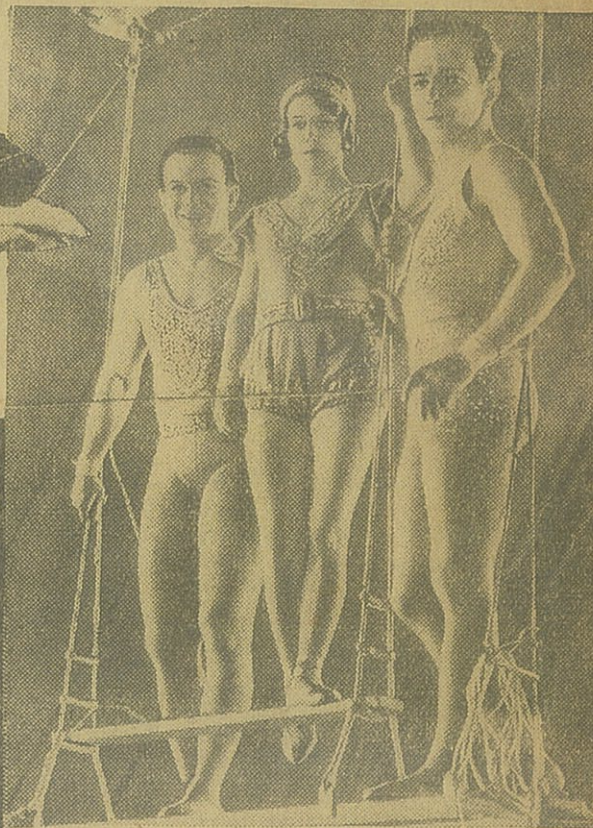
At length the public—or that part of it which concerns itself with circus life—learned that Alfredo and the other "Flying Codonas" had set up their quarters in a huge barn at Long Beach, California. There the injured Alfredo went and there he practiced, hour after hour every day for months. There he worked with Lalo and with their father, old Eduardo—he who started "the Flying Codonas" married his 14-year-old partner in Panama in 1883—and with others. And there, lately, he faces tragedy supreme.

Alfredo's torn ligaments have seemed to heal. But the split-second touch, the thousand-of-an-inch balance, is gone. Alfredo has tried, desperately, but it just hasn't worked.

Perhaps after the death of Lillian, things weren't the same. Perhaps, when Mama Codona died a year or so ago in Long Beach, that meant something too; doubtless, when old Eduardo followed her last April, it made still



Eileen Larey; she tried the triple somersault—and was injured, too.



These were "the Flying Codonas" before Alfredo was injured; now only two remain. From left to right above, Lalo Codona, Vera Bruce—Alfredo's wife—and Alfredo himself.

more of a difference.

At any rate, Alfredo—while continuing his courageous, hopeful practice—has not returned to the trapeze under the big top and present indication are that he never will. From behind the scenes, he directs the act. Lalo and Vera and those others—who are not really Codonas, but who have

been given the honor of sharing the name—carry on.

One other incident needs to be chronicled. A few weeks ago, Eileen Larey, relatively a newcomer to the "Greatest Show on Earth," essayed the triple somersault in midair. During the Boston performance, Eileen fell from the trapeze and crashed to the tanbark 40 feet below.

Circus people, like all those who perform before the public, are superstitious. The triple somersault may not be seen again for some time.