The Adventures of Captain Kettle

BY CUTCLIFFE HYNE

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THE WAR STEAMER OF DONNA CLOTILDE

I think it may be taken as one of the most remarkable attributes of Capt. Owen Kettle that, whatever circumstances might betide, he was always neat and trim in his personal appearance. Even in most affluent hours he had never been able to afford an expensive tailor; indeed, it is much to be doubted if, during all his life, he ever bought a scrap of raiment anywhere except at a ready-made establishment; but, in spite of this, his clothes were always conspicuously well-fitting, carried the creases in exactly the right place, and seemed to the critical onlooker to be capable of improvement in no one point whatsoever. He looked spruce even in oilskins and high boots.

Of course, being a sailor, he was handy with his needle. I have seen him take a white drill jacket, torn to ribbons in a rough and tumble with mutinous members of his crew, and fine-draw the rents so wonderfully that all traces of the disaster were completely lost. I believe, too, he was capable of taking a roll of material and cutting it out with his knife upon the deck planks, and fabricating garments ab initio; and though I never actually saw him do this with my own eyes, I did hear that the clothes he appeared in at Valparaiso were so made, and I marveled at their neatness.

It was just after his disastrous adventure in Cuba; he trod the streets in a state of utter pecuniary destitution; his cheeks were sunk and his eyes were haggard; but the red torpedo beard was as trim as ever; his cap was spic and span; the white drill clothes with their brass buttons were the usual miracle of perfection; and even his tiny canvas shoes had not as much as a smudge upon their pipe-clay. Indeed, in the first instance I think it must have been this spruceness, and nothing else, which made him find favor in the eyes of so fastidious a person as Clotilde La Touche.

But be this as it may, it is a fact that Donna Clotilde just saw the man from her carriage as he walked along the Paseo de Colon, promptly asked his name and, getting no immediate reply, dispatched one of her admirers there and then to make his acquaintance. The envoy was instructed to find out who he was and contrive that Donna Clotilde should meet the little sailor at dinner in the cafe of the Lion d'Or that very evening.

The dinner was given in the patio of the cafe where palm fronds filtered the moonbeams and fireflies competed with the electric lights; and at a moderate computation the cost of the viands would have kept Capt. Kettle supplied with his average rations for 10 months or a year. He was quite aware of this and appreciated the entertainment none the worse in consequence. Even the champagne, highly sweetened to suit the South American palate, came most pleasantly to him. He liked champagne according to its lack of dryness, and this was the sweetest wine that had ever passed his lips.

The conversation during that curious meal ran in phases. With the hors d'oeuvres came a course of ordinary civilities; then for a space there rolled out an autobiographical account of some of Kettle's exploits, skillfully and painlessly extracted by Donna Clotilde's naive questions; and then, with the cognac and cigarettes a spasm of politics shook the diners like an ague.

Of a sudden one of the men recollected himself, looked to this side and that with a scared face, and rapped the table with his knuckles.

"Ladies," he said imploringly, "and senores, the heat is great. It may be dangerous."

"Pah!" said Donna Clotilda, "we are talking in English."

"Which other people besides ourselves understand, even in Valparaiso."

"Let them listen," said Capt. Kettle. "I hold the same opinions on politics as Miss La Touche here, since she has explained to me how things really are, and I don't care who knows that I think the present government, and the whole system, rotten. I am not in the habit of putting my opinions in words, Mr. Silva, and being frightened of people hearing them."

"You," said the cautious man drily, "have little to lose here, captain. Donna Clotilde has much. I should be very sorry to read in my morning paper that she had died from apoplexy—the arsenical variety—during the course of the preceding night."

"Pooh," said Kettle, "they could never do that."

"As a resident in Chili," returned Silva, "let me venture to disagree with you, captain. It is a disease to which the opponents of Pres Quijarra are singularly addicted whenever they show any marked political activity. The palm trees in this patio have a reputation, too, for being phenomenally long-eared. So, if it pleases you all, suppose we go out on the roof? The moon will afford us a fine prospect—and—the air up there is reputed healthy."

He picked up Donna Clotilde's fan and mantilla. The other two ladies rose to their feet; Donna Clotilde, with a slight frown of reluctance, did the same; and they all moved off toward the stairway. Silva laid detaining fingers upon Capt. Kettle's arm.

"Captain," he said, "if I may give you a friendly hint, slip away now and go to your quarters."

"I fancy, sir," said Capt. Kettle, "that Miss La Touche has employment to offer me."

"If she has," retorted Silva, "which I doubt, it will not be employment you will care about."

"I am what they call here 'on the beach,'" said Kettle, "and I cannot afford to miss chances. I am a married man, Mr. Silva, with children to think about."

"Ah!" the Chilian murmured thoughtfully. "I wonder if she knows he's married? Well, captain, if you will go up, come along, and I'm sure I wish you luck."

The flat roof of the cafe of the Lion d'Or is set out as a garden, with orange trees growing against the parapets, and elephants' ears and other tropical foliage plants stand here and there in round green tubs. Around it are the other roofs of the city, which, with the streets between, look like some white rocky plain cut up by steep canons. A glow comes from these depths below, and with it the blurred hum of people. But nothing articulate gets up to the Lion d'Or, and in the very mistiness of the noise there is something indescribably fascinating.

Moreover, it is a place where the fireflies of Valparaiso most do congregate. Saving for the lamps of heaven, they have no other lighting on that roof. The owners (who are Israelites) pride themselves on this; it gives the garden an air of mystery; it has made it the natural birthplace of plots above numbering, and it has brought them profits almost beyond belief. Your true plotter, when his ecstacy comes upon him, is not the man to be niggardly with the purse. He is alive and glowing then; he may very possibly be dead tomorrow, and in the meanwhile money is useless and the things money can buy—and the very best of their sort—are most desirable.

One more whispered hint did Mr. Silva give to Capt. Kettle as they made their way together up the white stone steps.

"Do you know who and what our hostess is?" he asked.

"A very nice young lady," replied the mariner promptly, "with a fine taste in suppers."

"She is all that," said Silva; "but she also happens to be the richest woman in Chile. Her father owned mines innumerable, and when he came by his end in our last revolution, he left every dollar he had at Donna Clotilde's entire disposal. By some unfortunate oversight, personal fear has been left out of her composition, and she seems anxious to add it to the list of her acquirements."

Capt. Kettle puckered his brows. "I don't seem to understand you," he said.

"I say this," Silva murmured, "because there seems no other way to explain the keenness with which she hunts after personal danger. At present she is intriguing against President Quijarra's government. Well, we all know that Quijarra is a brigand, just as his predecessor was before him. The man who succeeds him in the Presidency of Chile will be a brigand also. It is the custom of my country. But interfering with brigandage is a ticklish operation, and Quijarra is always scrupulous to wring the necks of anyone whom he thinks at all likely to interfere with his peculiar methods."

"I should say that from his point of view," said Kettle, "he was acting quite rightly, sir."

"I thought you'd look at it sensibly," said Silva. "Well, captain, here we are at the top of the stair. Don't you think you had better change your mind and slip away now and go back to your quarters?"

"Why, no sir," said Capt. Kettle. "From what you tell me it seems possible that Miss La Touche may shortly be seeing trouble, and it would give me pleasure to be near and ready to bear a hand. She is a lady for whom I have got considerable regard. That supper, sir, which we have just eaten, and the wine are things which will live in my memory."

He stepped out on to the roof, and Donna Clotilde came to meet him. She linked her fingers upon his arm and led him apart from the rest. At the further angle of the gardens they leaned their elbows upon the parapet and talked, whilst the glow from the street below faintly lit their faces and the fireflies winked behind their backs.

"I thank you, captain, for your offer," she said at length, "and I accept it as freely as it was given. I have had proposals of similar service before, but they came from the wrong sort. I wanted a man, and I found out that you were that before you had been at the dinner table five minutes."

Capt. Kettle bowed to the compliment. "But," said he, "if I am that, I have all a man's failings."

"I like them better," said the lady, "than a half-man's virtues. And as a proof I offer you command of my navy."

"Your navy, miss?"

"It has yet to be formed," said Donna Clotilde, "and you must form it. But, once we make the nucleus, other ships of the existing force will desert to us, and with those we must fight and beat the rest. Once we have the navy, we can bombard the ports into submission till the country thrusts out Pres Quijarra of its own accord, and sets me up in his place."

"O," said Kettle, "I didn't understand. Then you want to be queen of Chili?"

"President."

"But a president is a man, isn't he?"

"Why? Answer me that."

"Because, well, because they always have been, Miss."

"Because men up to now have always taken the best things to themselves. Well, captain, all that is changing; the world is moving on; and women are forcing their way in, and taking their proper place. You say that no state has had a woman president. You are quite right. I shall be the first."

Capt. Kettle frowned a little, and looked thoughtfully down into the lighted street beneath. But presently he made up his mind, and spoke again.

"I'll accept your offer, miss, to command the navy, and I'll do the work well. You may rely on that. Although I say it myself, you'd find it hard to get a better man. I know the kind of brutes one has to ship as seamen along this South American coast, and I'm the sort of brute to handle them. By James, yes, and you shall see me make them do most things short of miracles.

"But there's one other thing, Miss, I ought to say, and I must apologize for mentioning it, seeing that you're not a business person. I must have my £12 a month and all found. I know it's a lot, and I know you'll tell me wages are down just now. But I couldn't do it for less, Miss. Commanding a navy's a strong order, and, besides, there's considerable risk to be counted in as well."

Donna Clotilde took his hand in both hers.

"I thank you, Captain," she said, "for your offer, and I begin to see success ahead from this moment. You need have no fear on the question of remuneration."

"I hope you didn't mind my mentioning it," said Kettle nervously. "I know it's not a thing generally spoken of to ladies. But you see, Miss, I'm a poor man and feel the need of money sometimes. Of course, £12 a month is high, but—"

"My dear captain," the lady broke in, "what you ask is moderation itself; and, believe me. I respect you for it, and will not forget. Knowing who I am, no other man in Chili would have hesitated to ask"—she had on her tongue to say "a hundred times as much," but suppressed that and said—"more. But in the meantime," said she, "will you accept this £100 note for any current expenses which may occur to you?"

A little old green-painted bark lay hove to under sail, disseminating the scent of guano through the sweet tropical day. Under her square counter the name El Almirante Cochrane appeared in clean white lettering. The long South Pacific swells lifted her lazily from hill to valley of the blue water, to the accompaniment of squealing gear and a certain groaning of fabric. The Chillian coast lay afar off, as a white feathery line against one fragment of the sea-rim.

The green-painted bark was old. For many a weary year had she carried guano from rainless Chilian islands to the ports of Europe, and though none of that unsavory cargo at present festered beneath her hatches, though, indeed, she was in shingle ballast and had her holds scrubbed down and fitted with bunks for men, the aroma of it had entered into the very soul of her fabric, and not all the washings of the sea could remove it.

A white whaleboat lay astern, riding to a grass rope painter, and Senor Carlos Silva, whom the whaleboat had brought off from the Chilian beach, sat in the bark's deckhouse talking to Capt. Kettle.

"The senorita will be very disappointed," said Silva.

"I can imagine her disappointment," returned the sailor. "I can measure it by my own. I can tell you, sir, when I saw this filthy, stinking, old windjammer waiting for me in Callao, I could have sat down right where I was and cried. I'd got my men together, and I guess I'd talked big about El Almirante Cochrane, the fine new armored cruiser we were to do wonders in. The only thing I knew about her was her name, but Miss La Touche had promised me the finest ship that could be got, and I only described what I thought a really fine ship would be. And, then, when the agent stuck out his finger and pointed out this foul old violet bed, I tell you it was a bit of a let down."

"There's been some desperate robbery somewhere," said Silva.

"It didn't take me long to guess that," said Kettle, "and I concluded the agent was the thief, and started in to take it out of him without further talk. He hadn't a pistol, so I only used my hands to him, but I guess I fingered him enough in three minutes to stop his dancing for another month. He swore by all the saints he was innocent, and that he was only the tool of other men; and perhaps that was so. But he deserved what he got for being in such shady employment."

"Still, that didn't procure you another ship?"

"Hammering the agent couldn't make him do an impossibility, sir. There wasn't such a vessel as I wanted in all the ports of Peru. So I just took this nosegay that was offered, lured my crew aboard, and put out past San Lorenzo Island, and to sea. It's a bit of a come down, sir, for a steamer-sailor like me," the little man added with a sigh, "to put an old wind-jammer through her gymnastics again. I thought I'd done with 'mainsail haul' and rawhide chafing gear, and all the white wings nonsense, for good and always."

"But, captain, what did you come out for? What earthly good can you do with an old wreck like this?"

"Why, sir, I shall carry out what was arranged with Miss La Touche. I shall come up with one of President Quijarra's government vessels, capture her and then start in to collar the rest. There's no alteration in the program. It's only made more difficult, that's all."

"I rowed out here to the rendezvous to tell you the Cancelario is at moorings in Tampique bay, and that the senorita would like to see you make your beginning upon her. But what's the good of that news, now? The Cancelario is a fine new warship of 3,000 tons. She's fitted with everything modern in guns and machinery, she's 300 men of a crew, and she lays always with steam up and an armed watch set. To go near her in this clumsy little barque would be to make yourself a laughing-stock. Why, your English Cochrane wouldn't have done it."

"I know nothing about Lord Cochrane, Mr. Silva. He was dead before my time. But whatever people may have done to him, I can tell anyone who cares to hear, that the man who's talking to you now is a bit of an awkward handful to laugh at. No, sir, I expect there'll be trouble over it, but you may tell Miss La Touche we shall have the Cancelario, if she'll stay in Tampique bay till I can drive this old lavender-box up to her."

For a minute Silva stared in silent wonder.

"Then, Captain," said he, "all I can think is, that you must have enormous trust in your crew."

Capt. Kettle bit the end from a fresh cigar. "You should go and look at them for yourself," said he, "and hear their talk, and then you'd know. The beasts are fit to eat me already."

"How did you get them on board?"

"Well, you see, sir, I collected them by promises—fine pay, fine ship, fine cruise, fine chances, and so on; and, when I'd only this smelling bottle here to show them, they hung back a bit. If there'd been only 20 of them, I don't say but what I could have hustled them on board with a gun and some ugly words. But 60 were too many to tackle; so I just said to them that El Almirante Cochrane was only a ferry to take us across to a fine war steamer that was lying out of sight elsewhere; and they swallowed the yarn, and stepped in over the side.

"I can't say they've behaved like lambs since. The grub's not been to their fancy, and I must say the biscuit was crawling; and it seems that as a bedroom the hold hurt their delicate noses; and, between one thing and another, I've had to shoot six of them before they understood I was skipper here. You see, sir, they were most of them living in Callao before they shipped, because there's no extradition there; and so they're rather a toughish crowd to handle."

"What a horrible time you must have had!"

"There has been no kid-glove work for me, sir, since I got to sea with this rose garden; and I must say it would have knocked the poetry right out of most men. But, personally, I can't say it has done that to me. You'd hardly believe it, sir; but once or twice, when the whole lot of the brutes have been raging against me, I've been very nearly happy. And afterward, when I've got a spell of rest. I've picked up pen and paper and knocked off one or two of the prettiest sonnets a man could wish to see in print. If you like, sir, I'll read you a couple before you go back to you whaleboat."

"I thank you, skipper, but not now. Time is on the move and Donna Clotilde is waiting for me. What am I to tell her?"

"Say, of course, that her orders are being carried out, and her pay being earned."

"My poor fellow," said Silva, with a sudden gush of remorse, "you are only sacrificing yourself uselessly. What can you, in a small sailing vessel like this, do with your rifles against a splendidly armed vessel like the Cancelario?"

"Not much in the shooting line, that's certain," said Kettle cheerfully. "That beautiful agent sold us even over the ammunition. There were kegs put on board marked 'cartridges,' but when I came to break one or two so as to serve out a little ammunition for practice, be hanged if the kegs weren't full of powder. And it wasn't the stuff for guns even; it was blasting powder, same as they use in the mines. O, sir, that agent was the holiest kind of fraud."

Silva wrung his hands. "Captain," he cried, "you must not go on with this mad cruise. It would be sheer suicide for you to find the Cancelario."

"You shall give me news of it again after I've met her," said Capt. Kettle. "For the present, sir, I follow out Miss La Touche's orders, and earn my £12 a month. But if you're my friend, Mr. Silva, and want to do me a good turn, you might hint that if things go well. I could do with a rise to £14 a month when I'm sailing the Cancelario for her."

The outline of Tampique bay stood out clearly in bright moonshine, and the sea down the path of the moon's rays showed a canal of silver, cut through rolling fields of purple. The green-painted bark was heading into the bay on the port tack; and at moorings, before the town, in the curve of the shore, the grotesque spars of a modern warship showed in black silhouette against the moonbeams. A slate-colored naphtha launch was sliding out over the swells toward the bark.

Capt. Kettle came up from below and watched the naphtha launch with throbbing interest. He had hatched a scheme for capturing the Cancelario, and had made his preparations; and here was an interruption coming which might very well upset everything most ruinously. Nor was he alone in his regard. The bark's topgallant rail was lined with faces; all her complement were wondering who these folk might be who were so confidently coming out to meet them.

A Jacob's ladder was thrown over the side; the slate-colored launch swept up, and emitted—a woman. Capt. Kettle started, and went down into the waist to meet her. A minute later he was wondering whether he dreamed, or whether he was really walking his quarterdeck in company with Donna Clotilde la Touche. But meanwhile the bark, held steadily along her course.

The talk between them was not for long.

"I must beseech you, miss, to go back from where you came," said Kettle. "You must trust me to carry out this business without your supervision."

"Is your method very dangerous?" she asked.

"I couldn't recommend it to an insurance company," said Kettle thoughtfully.

"Tell me your scheme."

Kettle did so in some 40 words. He was pithy, and Donna Clotilde was cool. She heard him without change of color.

"Ah," she said, "I think you will do it."

"You will know one way or another within an hour from now, Miss. But I must ask you to take your launch to a distance. As I tell you, I have made all my own boats so that they won't swim; but, if your little craft was handy, my crew would jump overboard and risk the sharks, and try to reach her in spite of all I could do to stop them. They won't be anxious to fight that Cancelario when the time comes, if there's any way of wriggling out of it."

"You are quite right, captain; the launch must go; only I do not. I must be your guest here till you can put me on the Cancelario."

Capt. Kettle frowned. "What's coming is no job for a woman to be in at, Miss."

"You must leave me to my own opinion about that. You see, we differ upon what a woman should do, captain. You say a woman should not be president of a republic; you think a woman should not be sharer in a fight; I am going to show you how a woman can be both." She leant her shoulders over the rail, and hailed the naphtha launch with a sharp command. A man in the bows cast off the line with which it towed; the man aft put over his tiller and set the engines a-going; and, like a slim, grey ghost, the launch slid quietly away in the gloom. "You see," she said, I am bound to stay with you now." And she looked upon him with a burning glance.

But Kettle replied coldly. "You are my owner, Miss," he said, "and can do as you wish. It is not for me now to say that you are foolish. Do I understand you still wish me to carry out my original plan?"

"Yes," she said curtly.

"Very well, Miss, then we shall be aboard of that war-steamer in less than 15 minutes." He bade his second mate call aft the crew; but instead of remaining to meet them, he took a keen glance at the barque's canvas, another at her wake, another at the moored cruiser ahead, and then, after peering thoughtfully at the clouds which sailed in the sky, he went to the companion-way and dived below. The crew trooped aft and stood at the break of the quarterdeck waiting for him. And in the meanwhile they feasted their eyes with many different thoughts on Donna Clotilde La Touche.

Presently Capt. Kettle returned to deck, aggressive and cheerful, and faced the men with hands in his jacket pockets. Each pocket bulged with something heavy, and the men, who by this time had to come to understand Capt. Kettle's ways, began to grow quiet and nervous. He came to the point without any showy oratory.

"Now, my lads," said he, "I told you when you shipped aboard this lavender-box in Callao, that she was merely a ferry to carry you to a fine war-steamer which was lying elsewhere. Well, there's the steamer, just off the starboard bow yonder. Her name's the Cancelario, and at present she seems to belong to Pres Quijarra's government. But Miss La Toucho here (who is employing both me and you, just for the present) intends to set up a government of her own; and, as a preliminary, she wants that ship. We've got to grab it for her."

Capt. Kettle broke off, and for a full minute there was silence. Then some one amongst the men laughed.

"That right," said Kettle. "Cackle away, you scum. You'd be singing a different tune if you knew what was beneath you."

A voice from the gloom—an educated voice—answered him, "Don't be foolish, skipper. We're not going to ram our heads against a brick wall like that. We set some value on our lives."

"Do you?" said Kettle. "Then pray that this breeze doesn't drop (as it seems likely to do), or you'll lose them. Shall I tell you what I was up to below just now? You remember those kegs of blasting powder? Well, they're in the lazaret, where some of you stowed them; but they're all of them unheaded, and one of them carries the end of a fuse. That fuse is cut to burn just 20 minutes, and the end's lighted.

"Wait a bit. It's no use going to try and douse it. There's a pistol fixed to the lazaret hatch and if you try to life it that pistol will shoot into the powder, we'll all go up together without further palaver. Steady now, there, and hear me out. You can't lower away boats and get clear that way. The boat's bottoms will tumble away so soon as you try to hoist them off the skids. I saw to that last night. And you can't require any telling to know there are far too many sharks about to make a swim healthy exercise."

The men began to rustle and talk.

"Now, don't spoil your only chance," said Kettle, "by singing out. If on the cruiser yonder they think there's anything wrong, they'll run out a gun or two and blow us out of the water before we can come near them. I've got no arms to give you; but you have your knives, and I guess you shouldn't want more. Get in the shadow of the rail there, and keep hid till you hear her bump. Then jump on board, knock everybody you see over the side, and keep the rest below."

"They'll see us coming," whimpered a voice. "They'll never let us board."

"They'll hear us," the captain retorted, "if you gallows ornaments bellow that that, and then all we'll have to do will be to sit tight where we are till that powder blows us like a thin kind of spray up against the stars. Now, get to cover with you, all hands, and not another sound. It's your only chance."

The men crept away, shaking, and Capt. Kettle himself took the wheel and appeared to drowse over it. He gave her half a spoke at a time, and by invisible degrees the bark fell off till she headed dead on for the cruiser Save for the faint creaking of her gear no sound came from her, and she slunk on through the night like some patched and tattered phantom. Far down in her lazaret the glowing end of the fuse crept nearer to the powder barrels, and in imagination every man on board was following its race.

Nearer and nearer she drew to the Cancelario, and ever nearer. The waiting men felt as though the hearts of them would leap from their breasts. Two of them fainted. Then came a hail from the cruiser: "Bark ahoy! Are you all asleep there?"

Capt. Kettle drowsed on over the wheel. Donna Clotilde, from the shadow of the house, could see him nodding like a man in deep sleep.

"Carrajo! you bark, there! Put down your helm. You'll be aboard of us in a minute."

Kettle made no reply; his hands sawed automatically at the spokes and the glow from the binnacle fell upon close-shut eyes. It was a fine bit of acting.

The Chilians shouted, but they could not prevent the collision, and when it came there broke out a yell as though the gates of the pit had been suddenly unlocked.

The bark's crew of human refuse, mad with terror, rose up in a flock from behind the bulwarks. As one man they clambered over the cruiser's side and spread about her decks.

Ill provided with weapons though they might be the Chilians were scarcely better armed. A sentry squibbed off

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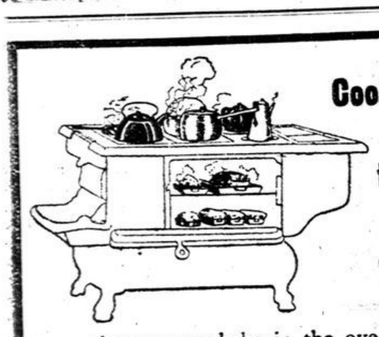

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