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The Adventures of Captain Kettle

The War Steamer Of Donna Clotilde

By CUTCLIFFE HYNÉ

No. 3



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-fitted, 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 thigh 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 nautical 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 marvelled 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, and, at a moderate pace, she was instantly struck by his name, and, getting no immediate reply, dispatched one of her admirers there and then to make his acquaintance. The envoy was instantly ordered 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 ten months or years. He was quite aware of this and appreciated the entertainment none the worse in consequence. Even the champagne, highly sweetened to suit the American palate, came most pleasantly to his liking. He drank champagne according to his lack of dexterity 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 burst of ordinary civilities; then for a space there rolled out an autobiographical account of some of Kettle's exploits, skillfully and painlessly interspersed by Donna Clotilde's naive questions; and the conversation shrank the diners like a snake.

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 humbly, "and senores, the heat is great. It may be dangerous."

"Pah!" said Donna Clotilde, "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 how they know 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 dryly, "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 Quijara are singularly addicted whenever they show any marked political activity. The palm trees in this patio have a reputation, too, for being phenomenally long-lived. 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, and 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, and 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."

James, yes, and you shall see me make them do more things short of miracles. But there's one other thing, Miss. I ought to say, to 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."

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"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, and that you would have hesitated to ask—she had on her tongue to say 'a hundred times as much'—but suppressed that and said—"

"But, Miss, the gentleman," said she, "will you accept this as not for any current expenses which may occur to you?"

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