



THE MARRIAGE OF CAPTAIN KETTLE

A Romance of the Sea

By CUTCLIFFE HYNE

CHAPTER I.

No Coal.

YOU flat-footed Senegambian, said Mr. Kettle, the Mate "if you drop any more of that green paint on my decks, I'll make you go down on your knock-knees and lick them clean. I don't believe you've ever seen a winch before, much less painted one. And yet you have the nerve to sign on here as A.B."

"I always accustomed, sar, to put on paint wid a brush. I don't consider a wad of waste a proper gentleman's tool."

"Answer me back, would you, you plum-colored son of a palm-nut? I like to point out just here—that I don't—allow—deck-hands whether they be white, yellow, snuff and but-ter-colored—or just plain black—give me any back talk—so long as I am Mr. Mate of this packet. And don't you—forget it."

The sentence was punctuated with hard kicks bestowed by a neatly pipe-clayed shoe on any part of the huge vicious-looking negro's anatomy that the little officer could reach. The man had drawn the knife from the sheath at the back of his belt, and was openly prepared for murder. But the mate gave him no chance to use it. He chased him about the decks with such vigor and venom that the fellow could not turn round to strike and when at last the man tripped over a steam-pipe and the knife went flying, Mr. Kettle instead of pitching it overboard, kicked it contemptuously back to its owner.

"There's your knife. Put it back in its sheath, or I'll smash you some more. And now get back to your work."

"Yes, sar."

"Understand how to lay on paint with a wad of waste?"

"Yes, sar."

"Get ahead, then."

The negro painted with diligence and skill, leaving the surface he touched a fine rasping green, with no superfluous paint that would subsequently run and grow rosy, and cutting clean straight lines at his edges. It is a high art to paint accurately with a wad of cotton-waste and many men, including the house-painter, have it not. But steamer tradition says that the African negro when he paints shall not see a brush, and the sea summary laws are severe. So the negro is forced to learn the skill of his business with the homelier instrument.

"Mr. Kettle?"

"Sir."

The mate looked aft to the upper bridge, and beheld there the blowy head and still blowzier tobacco-pipe of Captain Saturday Farnish.

"Will you come to the chart house a minute?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

The inside of the steamship Norman Towers' chart house smelt of clothes and varnish. Its walls were decorated with a shelf of professional works; an oil-painting of the Norman Towers in impossible colors on an impossible sea, from the brush of a large pleasant-faced lady in bursting satins, this last being Mrs. Saturday Farnish.

Captain Farnish lowered himself into a large red velvet arm-chair, which lurched dangerously as it met his weight.

"That starboard caster off again," he grumbled. "Chips must have mended it five times this trip alone."

"The carpenter's inefficient, sir," said his chief officer stiffly. "He needs keeping up to his job. If you'll let me take him in hand, I'll under-stand the boat, and he's got a neat trick with that penny whistle."

"He can blow tunes out of that whistle," the chief officer admitted grudgingly, "and that's a fact. But as a carpenter he's a holy fraud. Look here, sir, if you want a smart ship—"

"I don't. I want a comfortable one. What's the clock? Five-and-twenty to twelve. Dash my whiskers! But that's five minutes after the time for my 'morning.'"

He got up, took a whisky bottle and tumbler from inside the folding wash-stand, and poured himself out an accurate three fingers, holding the glass to the light so as to be sure of the measure. He added water to within a finger's breadth of the top, drank a third of the mixture, and resumed his seat with a sigh, glass in hand.

"That just gets to the spot where my old fever left a hole. I hope you will always enjoy good health, Mr. Kettle, me man, and not want a 'morning' till you're master of your own ship and have a mate to do the work for you. If you stick to Horner's Perfect Cure, that Mrs. Farnish brought you up on, you'll have little to complain of in the way of internal trouble."

"That you, sir, I'm pretty regular. I put in my two doses of Horner's every week, and reap the benefit. As for a 'morning,' a chief officer's pay on a tramp simply won't run to it, if he takes a bottle of beer with his dinner."

"Especially if he wants to save up for his evenings ashore when he feels it's up to him to give the girls a treat." Captain Farnish winked a damp eye. "Pretty little piece that you were trotting round Cathedral Square in Vera Cruz, Owen, me man."

The mate laughed. "She was giving me Spanish lessons, sir. But I didn't know we met you."

Owen Kettle was the son of Captain Farnish's old skipper, and after the old man went down with his ship in the China Seas, the Farnishes had brought up the boy with their own children. Mrs. Farnish ruled that household with a rod of Malacca, and during Captain Saturday Farnish's brief spells ashore, when his tongue had been lubricated into indiscretions, he often received stripes even in the bosom of his family, as all Merseyside Terrace, Birkenhead, knew full well, to its grim amusement.

Even now the narrow house in the narrow street across the river at Liverpool was the only place that Kettle considered as home throughout all the marches of the universe, and though the chance of service had thrown him on the Norman Towers as chief officer to his own foster-father, and though they addressed one another by those formal titles which the hard and fast etiquette of the sea sets out in its rubrics, there remained under its surface much of the old careless, if undefined affection.

"Well," said Captain Farnish, "as the old woman isn't here to object—God bless her!—and we seem to have made a goodish run, I think I'd repeat the prescription. You might make it up, me man. It'll be practice for you when you have a ship of your own, and have to know how to pour out whisky without overloading the dose. And put the bottle back on its shelf, and shut the wash-stand's my steward isn't tempted. Well, here's—"

But Captain Farnish's genial toast remained unvoiced, and he sat back heavily in the big broken-springed velvet chair, with the beverage slopping over the edge of his tumbler.

Kettle followed his gaze. Framed in the brass ring of a port was the billious face of Mr. Andrew Little, the chief engineer, and in front of it the black and damatory forefinger of Mr. Little pointing to the tumbler.

"At it again," muttered the mate. And then as the face and the finger whisked away, "Shall I go and attend to him?" Kettle asked.

"No, no, me man, thank you all the same. He'll pull round if we give him time."

"He'll be ramping round the decks preaching hell-for-sinners for any grinning idiot who comes to hear, in-cluding of ten minutes. His latest craze is that all who do not starve themselves are doomed to perdition. Fancy an officer, even though he be an engineer, telling that to a gang of old sailors who are ramping to get their full Board of Trade whack. I don't think it's good for the chief's tongue to be allowed the run of his tongue when these lunny fits come on him, and I'm certain it's bad for the discipline of the ship."

"Very difficult thing to coerce a chief engineer, as you'll learn, Mr. Kettle, me man, when you get a ship of your own. You can't send him to his room without entering the circumstance in the log, and that means wasting time over explanations at the office ashore when you might be sitting with your wife at a music-hall. My motto's always try for the line of least resistance."

"Mr. Little's dangerous."

"Very likely, Mr. Kettle, me man, very likely. But I tackle trouble when it comes. I don't go and hunt for it like you do, and it's astonishing how much one slips out of it if one follows that principle. There's that nigger, for instance, that you were stubbing your toe against half an hour ago."

"He's a bad nigger that, bone idle, and sneaky. But I'll make him into a good dog before I'm through with him."

"Did he ever try to knife you before?"

"Only twice that I could be sure of."

"Then why in thunder didn't you slip his weapon over into the ditch when you had it there lying on the deck before you?"

"Because I intended to show the swine I wasn't afraid of him."

"I believe you really like trouble." The little mate sighed deeply. "I am afraid I do, sir."

"I wonder where you got your taste from. It couldn't be from your upbringing. I'm sure you never got a banking for trouble from either me or the old woman, though when one comes to think of it, your pore father—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Well, he was Welsh, Owen, me man, and we'll leave it at that. But I will say that at any rate there's nothing of the thief about you, and I never caught you in a lie in all your life—Well, Mr. Mate, don't let me keep you from your duty."

With which formal dismissal Captain Saturday Farnish drank the rest of his whisky and water, closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and was promptly asleep.

The smart, keen, chief officer stepped out into the sunshine, and from place to place on the seedy under-manned steamer went about his many duties, walking crisply, talking crisply, getting a maximum of work done with the limited means at his disposal. They were voyaging from Vera Cruz to Liverpool; had passed out of the Gulf Stream through the Bahamas, south of the island of Abaco, by that channel known to the Western Ocean sailor folk as the Tole in the Wall; and were well out in the Sargasso Sea.

So far as the eye could see the only things that floated on the turquoise blue swells were bunches of orange-yellow weed. The steamer's rusty black bows sawed regularly up and down, always pushing a crumpled cascade of white water ahead of her.

But this day a portent was showing itself that even Captain Farnish's easy-going temperament could not afford to overlook. The engines had long since dropped that steady uniform rub-a-rumble rub-a-rumble which a steamer's engines should keep up from port to port (or at any rate from soundings to soundings), and were giving forth that labored kick-and-a-cough which one only hears in narrow waters and crowded traffic. And even this was slowing down.

Further, there was obvious trouble among the engine-room staff. The tender watches of firemen and trimmers were bunched on the fore-bridge; the second and fourth engineers, both very young men, were standing outside the engine-room door in the port alleyway, openly perturbed, obviously ignorant of what to do next.

"I don't like it, Mr. Kettle, me man," Captain Farnish kept on saying. "I don't like it at all. That infernal Mr. Little has been at some of his mad tricks again, and scared all those ash cats out of their great-lives. If I send for the fellow, and he'll preach offensively to me on the need of fasting, and it'll mean a row; and if I don't send for him he'll be like as not keep us rolling on here till I do send for him, and that'll take some explaining at Liverpool; and between you and me, Mr. Kettle, me man, I'm in a devil of a fix."

"I ought to have sent Little to hospital at Vera Cruz, but it would have meant a lot of letter-writing and cabling, and signing a stack of consular papers. I hate signing papers; you never know what they let you in for. I don't like to send for him, but I suppose I'd better hear what he has to say. Could you—er—just get him into the chart house here, Mr. Ket?"

"Yes, sir, understand. Quite informally. Better not send a message. I'll go for him myself."

"That's the idea, Mr. Kettle, me man, and bring him back yourself, and then stand by while we talk."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The mate walked briskly out, and made for the two white-faced juniors who were standing at the engine-room door.

"The chief's in his room," said one of them.

"My God, Kettle, he means death for every man on board," said the other.

"Oh, don't worry your small heads about that," said the mate confidently. "The old man's quite competent to attend to Mr. Little and the ship, too."

The chief engineer's room was just inside the door, and stood at the head of the ladder which led to the depths of the engine-room below, and at this moment Little himself appeared. He was stark naked, his face drawn and white, his body thin as an Indian fakir's. He had a cook's broad meat-ax in his hand, and his lips were drawn back from his teeth like those of a snarling dog.

The mate delivered his message as though such a get-up was the most ordinary uniform of shipboard life.

"Captain Farnish sends his compliments, sir, and would be glad to see you in the chart house."

"Stand out of my path."

"At once, sir, he said."

"Stand aside."

"Perhaps, if you're not feeling very well this morning, sir, you would allow me to take your arm."

The madman rushed and made a vicious slash with his ax. Kettle dodged, and the blow skimmed his sleeve. Then, with the lightning quickness of a man who had been used all his life to rough and tumble fighting, he jumped for the engine and tried to trip him to the deck. But he could get no hold, Mr. Little had rubbed himself from head

to foot with oil till he was as slippery as an eel, and, moreover, he had all of a madman's strength. Kettle found himself slimed from top to toe, and fung violently against the iron side of the house, and Little raced away forward, ax in hand.

"For God's sake let him go," said the second engineer, "and let's hope he jumps overboard. He's as good as murdered the whole lot of us."

"What do you mean? Has he put dynamite in your coffee-mill down there or something? Here you, both of you, if there's anything wrong with the engines, get below at once and put it straight."

But the engineers did not move.

"It's worse than that," said the spokesman gloomily. "He's done us in the eye over the coal. He made us believe there were two more bunkers full, easily enough for the run home to Liverpool, and like d—d fools we believed him. You see, we only joined at Vera Cruz. He'd run all his engineers and stoke-hold crew out of the ship, because—well, because—"

"Oh, get a move on you."

"Well, there isn't half a ton of coal left on the boat, and we're in the loneliest part of all the lonely seas and here I guess we'll stay till we rot. There isn't one chance in ten thousand of any steamer turning up that could tow us into port or even take us off. * * * My God, look at that bubbly yellow feed over the side there."

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