THE MARRIAGE OF CAPTAIN KETTLE

A Romance of the Sea

By CUTCLIFFE HYNE

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SYNOPSIS OF CAPTAIN KETTLE.

CHAPTER I—The British steamer Normas Towers, commanded by Captain Saturday Farnish, finds itself, through the freak of a crazy engineer, adrift in the Sargossa Sea without coal while en route from Mexico to Liverpool.

CHAPTER II—The first mate, Owen Kettle, gets off in the lifeboat with a crew of rough-necks in the hope of finding a ship that will part with enough of its coal to enable the disabled vessel to reach Liverpool. He meets the steamer Rhein.

CHAPTER III—But the Rhein refuses to stop. A woman on board, Miss Violet Chesterman, sees the dirty deed, and influences a fireman, McTodd, to disable the engines.

CHAPTER IV—Owen Kettle then overtakes the Rhein, clambers up its side with his crew, forcibly assumes charge of the vessel, and navigates it to the point where the Norman Towers is drifting, and which he re-coals.

CHAPTER V—Arrival of the Normas Towers at Liverpool. Mate Kettle surreptitiously drops out of the ship into the river Mersey in order to save his captain from a possible scandal because of the inadequacy of his coal supply and too much liquor rumpus. Two river pirates assault and rob Kettle and leave him badly injured. Is rescued and nursed back to health by Miss Dubbs, barmaid at the Mason's Arms.

CHAPTER VI—Owen Kettle engages with Sir George Chesterman to go as captain of the Wangaroo and search the African coast for an abandoned ship laden with metal of great value.

CHAPTER VII—In Liverpool Captain Kettle meets McTodd, the man who had disabled the engines of the Rhein, and sizes him as one of the crew of the Wangaroo.

CHAPTER VIII—In Las Palmas harbor Miss Dubbs appears on board the Wangaroo a stewardess, ostensibly at the suggestion of Sir George, but really because she wished to be near Captain Kettle, with whom she is in love and to whom she is engaged. Miss Violet Chesterman also becomes a passenger.

CHAPTER IX—The Wangaroo cruises cruises up and down the West African seaboard, and Captain Kettle finally locates the missing treasure ship in an almost wholly hidden bay. She proves to be the old Norman Towers.

CHAPTER X—Distracted with jealousy, caused by Miss Chesterman, Miss Dubbs cancels her engagement with Captain Kettle.

CHAPTER XI—Captain Kettle perilously navigates the Wangaroo into the harbor where lies the Norman Towers, which is in possession of natives, who are on the Wangaroo.

(Now go on with the story.)

"Quarrying what?"

"Stone as far as I could see. And it didn't look like a mine, either. There was a great chocolate-colored slab of rock sticking up out of the beach just beyond where the Towers was lying, and they were as busy on it as a hive of bees. There must have been seven or eight hundred on that job, and they stuck to it like men all the time daylight lasted. They'd a night shift, too, because we heard them working though how many there were or that it was too dark to see. Mark you, it wasn't work they were used to; they none of them seemed to have much skill in navvying, and though they'd got a heap of iron bars and shovels from the stokehold, they seemed to prefer gathering fallen stone from the screes, to splitting off fresh chunks from the face. Chocolate-colored stone it was; rummy-looking stuff."

"Perhaps it's iron ore and they're filling the Towers down to her marks with it, as a present to the salvors for their kindness in coming to remove the eyesore from their local landscape."

"Well, it might be iron ore, or copper, or gold, or just plain stone; I'm not a miner, and couldn't say; but they weren't making any attempt to bring it on board. They were simply piling it in heaps along the beach."

"Did they look as if they were building a fort with it?"

"I thought of that, but couldn't see a trace of it. If they'd intended putting up a building, one thinks they'd have piled their heaps four-square, so as to be handy for the masons. But there was no arrangement like that. The heaps were, as I've said, all strung out in a line along the beach behind the Norman Towers, and there was no attempt at sorting out the stone, or squaring up the chunks. They might have been dumped there for road-making."

Sir George Chesterman was impressed. "Violet, I wish to heaven you were back at Las Palmas."

"And I'm devoutly glad I'm not. Do you think, I'm not curious, too?"

"I think it would be most comfortable, sir," said Kettle, "if you'd allow me just to run you and the ladies back to Las Palmas first before we tackled the job."

Sir George Chesterman lay back in his chair and laughed. "My good Skipper," he said, "you're dangling the bait of a real lively new sensation before my nose, and then you propose to whisk it away, and put me back again in cotton wool. Oh, Diamond, Diamond, you little know what you have done."

Captain Kettle pulled rather nervously at his red beard. "Then am I to understand, sir, that you—"

"I'm here to watch this business put through, and to help as far as I can. You're the better man of the two, Captain, in every way, and you are in command now and I wish you to remain in command. I here and now resign my billet of idle passenger and critic of cocktails. I ask to serve under you, and am ready to take up any job you think I'm capable of, from personal aide-de-camp down to assistant cook. Miss Chesterman also, if I know anything about her, will do every ounce she can, and if, unfortunately, any one gets hurt, well, I believe she once picked up some hospital training the month she tired of the sensation of being sweet on a doctor. The ship and all that's inside of her is at your disposal, and if you want another ship and more men, say the word, and I'll get them for you. I no idea when I left England we were going to come up against what looks uncommonly like a private war, but now we're in for it I'm going to see it through."

"The blood of the Chestermans is roused, stirred," said Violet. "I all Anglo-Saxon to hear me deliberately utter the word Hoodoo. Captain Kettle, I echo my newly-awakened brother's words. I am yours to command."

"Sir, and miss," said the little sailor, "you shall never regret the confidence shown in me, and I'll pull that throughout, if I have to murder half the niggers in Africa to get her clear. It's not business, of course, to say such a thing, but a job like this always comes in sweeter to one when it turns out a lot harder than one had any decent reason to expect. I tell you there were nights in the surf-boat when we crept in to see what they were up to, when I could have sung to think what a hard nut that white man shore was baking for me to crack."

"But I thought you were to make a camp on one of the islets, and sleep in a tent?"

"That was the scheme, miss, but you see with these Moors all over the place it occurred to me that they could either swim or raft themselves across to the islands at the other side of the lagoon if they felt that way inclined, and it's unpleasant having one's sleep disturbed. So we lived it out in the boat, and the watch below had the floor boards. Those lazy of crew weren't wasted either—We used them as anchors for three of our mark buoys. You see, I didn't think it was worth while to go ashore and build those leading marks I spoke about, because it was as likely as not will a smart white man to put them to it, the Moors would pull the down and build them in other spots so that any one relying on them run in by would pile up his ship on some reef he'd calculated to avoid. You see, the trouble about the shoal over yonder is that it's all made to a pattern, with no outstanding features that one can pick up to take a bearing on."

"But you took no stove on the boat. How did you cook?"

"We didn't. We just ate our tucker as it came, and were glad it was there."

A fireman came up: "Chief engineer wishes me to tell you, sir, he got steam for eight knots."

"Right," said Captain Kettle. "Then, as all is settled, sir and miss, I'll take her in at once."

The run inshore was unnerving enough to the spectator. There was a hook-rate swell running, and though the bottle-green water did not break unless it was especially irritated here and there little angular gardens of surf spoke of danger out of sight.

As they drew nearer the shore and rose them to the eye, many of the reefs protruded, and the passage grew more and more ugly. Dog teeth of rock suddenly bit their way through smooth, oily surfaces of the water, and as suddenly were sheathed, and in other places smooth whale-backs of sand were for a moment uplifted and as quickly eclipsed.

"It isn't what you see in this beastly channel," Sir George muttered to his sister, "as what you don't see, that makes the real dangers."

In and out, first to starboard and then to port, the Wangaroo was danced, as the record of the hidden channel unreeled itself from Captain Kettle's brain, and was transmitted per orders and human hands to the powers that governed her. Twice an angle was too acute for her to turn in her stride, and Kettle had to send her hard astern on a reversed helm to get her round.

And up one narrow zigzag he backed boldly for a whole half-mile, with only a narrow canal of deep water to allow for mistakes, and spanning reefs on either beam ready to account for the smallest error of judgment or performance. The water grew smoother, as they crept inside the shelter of the outer reefs, and the channel grew more intricate.

"I swear no steamboat could have dodged in here," said Sir George, after Kettle had taken the Wangaroo through a particularly intricate figure eight, "without engines and a human crew to help her."

"The answer to that statement is that she did," retorted his sister. "What I can't understand is how any man can store up in his head all these little bits of distances, and changes of course, without a mark to help him except those half-dozen trumpery buoys, and with prompt shipwreck as a penalty for the least mistake."

"To which I remark," was the brotherly reply, "that your own pet idol is doing it this minute before your very attractive eyes, so don't talk rot. There's the Norman Towers now opening out from behind that bluff. Did you ever see anything coated with a more flawless coat of rust? By gad, look out!"

Instinctively Sir George stepped in front of his sister, who just as instinctively took hold of his loose, baggy, old shooting-coat by the rear to drag him aside.

Then there came to them the shattering roar of a brass gun, loaded with black powder, and fired at close quarters, the crash of a stone shot impacting on iron plates, and presently the tinkle of the gravel to which the shot had been reduced, dropping down upon their heads and into the water alongside, in a miniature hail-storm.

Sir George glanced up at the upper bridge. The little sailor, binoculars in hand, cold cigar between his teeth, was standing there unruffled, and fully occupied in his pilotage.

CHAPTER XII.

Saint M. Bergash, B. A.

SIR GEORGE CHESTERMAN put down the glasses and relighted his pipe. "I'm hanged if I can make out those heaps of chocolate-colored stone you told us about, Skipper. There's the cliff all right that you said they were quarrying from, but the shore below it is swept as clean as the floor of a ball-room."

"Yes, sir. That's one of the things that's bothering me a good deal."

"And I suppose the other is: Where have our dusky friends all bolted to? They bang off their tin cannon at us just as might have been expected, and then, instead of putting up the battle which one might reasonably suppose ought to follow, they calmly vanish. D'you suppose they're just lying doggo under decks, till we are kind enough to call?"

"It's possible, sir."

With their pockets full of paving stones, the aforesaid, to fire at us when we pull alongside? By the way, could they have pocketed all the stone you saw?"

"No, sir, certainly not. There must have been thousands of tons of it. They were working, working, work ing day after day, many hundreds of them. Indeed, the more I think of it the more I am convinced the wops didn't grow as they ought to have done."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"It almost seems as if they must have been, carting it away under cover of night while we were hanging about here in the surf-boat, and then as soon as our backs are turned, off goes the rest of it. As you say, sir, the beach now is swept as clear as a chapel floor over all the space behind the Towers and up to the foot of the cliff."

"Well!" said Sir George, "they can't have evaporated into thin air, all of them. Suppose we just sit down and smoke for half an hour, and see if we can't spot some one peeping at us either from the steamer or behind some bit of cover on the land side."

"With ladies to take care of here on board," said Captain Kettle, with a sigh, "that's the best thing we can do. We must move very cautious. We can't afford to take the usual men's risks."

So they set to work with binoculars and telescopes to search for what they could find.

On the Atlantic side the scheme of the land and seascape was simple enough. There was a long straggling row of reefs and islets, noisy on the outer edges with a white frill of surf, and apparently tenanted only by sea-fowl. A Moor or two might certainly have been hidden in unseen folds of the larger dunes, but the mode of their ferriage across the lagoon was not apparent, and it was hardly likely they would have put themselves adrift from any possible base.

Africa on the other side of the lagoon presented in that latitude an edge as straight as if it had been ruled, with the one exception of a small curved peninsula like a human fist an darm, mainly of chocolate-colored rock, which was thrust out into the lagoon, and in the hollow of this, the crook of the arm, so to speak, the Norman Towers was harbored. Beyond the straight edge of the hot yellow beach lay dunes of sand which bristled here and there with clumps of dry gray grass.

The heads of live-oaks and argan-trees showed beyond the dunes, stretching over a wide flat, and then there were scrub-clad foot-hills, and then steeper slopes that ran back into colossal mountains.

"The Atlas, I suppose, those big lumps at the back," said Sir George.

"Don't know, sir. I'm a sailor, and my geography doesn't go inland past the beach."

"I think all the big mountains that run out to the Atlantic about here belong to the Atlas range, or one of its spurs. Is that cloud up at the top there, do you suppose, or snow?"

"It might be either."

"And there might be villages to any extent, or even towns, for that matter, tucked away out of our sight in the valleys and folds of that range, and we should be none the wiser. I'm afraid, Skipper, we can't trace the barracks of your black regiment by merely staring at the country-side."

"Just take a line, sir, please, over that palm tree with the stem like a catapult. D'ye call that blue haze just a bit of heat mist, or is it cooking smoke?"

The sailor stared, and his employer stared, and again they decided that it might be either.

Just at this point there cantered out from behind the shoulder of a dune, twenty splendid barbaric cavalrymen. Of the two who rode first, one, obviously an inferior, carried a white naskin blowing out from the end of his long gun-barrel, and the other alongside him was in command. They halted, and for a moment regarded the rusting Norman Towers. Captain Kettle, with some quick instinct of defiance (in spite of the words he had just uttered); laid hold of the Wangaroo's siren string, and after a preliminary cough or two, to clear its throat, blew out a deep, sonorous blast. The troop leader turned to his men, and through the glasses Sir George could see him laugh. Then he touched his horse with the sharp corners of his stirrup-irons and galloped north up the beach alone, without flag of truce, without escort.

Abreast of the Wangaroo he reined up, and his black stallion stood with forefeet at the water's edge, and hind hoofs straddled out backward, as though it had been trained for the show ring. The rider brought up a hand to his headgear in salute, dropped it, dropped his reins, and sat there under the sunshine like a man carved out of iron.

"Wants to talk, I guess," said Captain Kettle. "I wonder what's his little game. Doesn't seem to have any idea we might shoot him, either."

"Well, you can't bawl at him across this distance. Besides, it's too hot for shouting. It would be interesting to hear what he's got to say. I lay a pound to a brick he'll start to prove that he's got a connection with the other darkies who whanged at us with the brass gun."

"He's a very splendid-looking man," said Violet from behind a pair of binoculars. "And, anyway, there only one of him, so you needn't be afraid."

"Yes, I'm afraid all right, miss," said Captain Kettle, grimly. "But we'll interview the gentleman for all that, if we can rake up any language among us that the other can understand. Mr. Smith?"

"Sir?"

"Call away that port quarter-boat, and fetch off that man from the beach."

"Aye, aye, sir."

When the man came up over the side, Captain Owen Kettle, as the complete ship captain, went to meet him, with his best air and his best Arabic.

"Slamma," said Kettle.

"Aleikoom slamma," said the visitor.

Captain Kettle reeled off a sentence or two to the effect that the day was fine, hospitality was waiting, and Allah was in his heaven. In the original it was a fine sonorous phrase, but as the little sailor had picked it up from the Mecca pilgrim touts in Jeddah, half the words were very much debased Arabic and the rest were made up of assorted unknown dialects.

However, it was all one to the visitor. He laughed and shook his head. "I'm sorry," said he in English, "but I am a poor linguist. I didn't know you were Portuguese."

"By James!" thundered Captain Kettle, "if any man takes me for less than I am I'll kill him. And so you speak English?"

The visitor lifted his eyebrows. "I really don't see why not. I know you islanders think you monopolize the whole earth, but I never knew that you objected to share out your language."

The man spoke with a quiet, educated voice, without effect and without accent. By this time the other two had got over their first surprise and Sir George got up and walked across.

"I'm sorry," he said, "you'll pardon Captain Kettle's natural surprise. But really you look the Moor to the life in that kit, and anyone might make a mistake. My name's Chesterman. Will you come and be introduced to my sister and have some tea?"

The visitor bowed. He had just the knack of an English gentleman's bow, not too much, not too stiff, and not in any way to be mistaken for the bow of other nations. And then he seated himself and his white draperies very comfortably in a big Madeira chair, and crossed his red leather riding boots and took up the cup that was offered him.

"The taste of this will come back like an old memory," said he. "We use green tea, you know, down here, and take it with green mint and a lot of sugar."

"I tried it once in Tangier," said Violet. "We ran over there for the day from Gibraltar. I don't think I could ever get used to it. Have you really come to like it?"

"I was brought up to the taste, you see."

"Then you have been out here a long time?"

"Ever since I came down from Cambridge, with an interlude once a week also in Gibraltar. I took a pony over there to race."

"Then you have—I mean you are—" the usually glib Miss Chesterman was at a loss for a way to put it. It dawned on her that this visitor in the Moorish clothes, head-gear bound round with camel's-hair rope, gold-sheathed hooked dagger hung over one shoulder, gold mounted pistol over the other, this man from the interior of Africa was English. Come to notice him more closely, his hair and his beard were brown, and his eyes were blue; and, though his complexion was somewhat dark, that, of course, was the sun. And, anyway, many Southern Europeans were far darker than he. He was an Englishman and a Cambridge man, and he had kicked over the traces somehow at home and discreetly vanished into the mysteries of Africa. Those, it flashed across her, were the outstanding points of his biography. "Do you like the country in there?" she asked as a compromise.

"It has its points. But, then, perhaps, I'm prejudiced. You see, I am used to it."

"I said," put in Captain Kettle, pointedly, "from the very first moment I saw by the way those niggers were being handled on the Norman Towers, that there was a white man at the back of this business somewhere."

"So?" said the visitor with polite indifference.

"I was up at Cambridge," said Sir George. "Clare was my shop. I should be a lot senior to you," and he mentioned his year.

"By Jove!" said the visitor, "that's a queer coincidence. I was next door to you, at the Hall. But I didn't go up till two years after you came down."

"So you were at Charterhouse?" said Sir George. "I wonder if you were there with my cousin Fred?"

"Fred Chesterman? I should think I was. Not that I knew him. He was a big chap in the sixth when I was a wretched little shaver at the bottom end of the lower school. But he was a great god of mine. He was the school soccer captain my first year, and fired me with ambition to play association foot-ball."

Captain Kettle, who felt outside this circle, tried his best not to glower too openly. The little sailor, it must be remembered, was holding his first command, and the weight of it rode heavily on him; but always throughout his life it is on record that the business of his owners came first, and social pleasures a bad second. This easy-mannered visitor was, in Kettle's opinion, a good deal too clever in his conversation to be entirely wholesome, and, in fact, he had felt a natural antagonism toward him from the first moment of the man's stepping on board. If he had had only his own sentiments to consider, he would have thrown his visitor overboard over the side. But at the risk of offending Captain Kettle doggedly followed up his points when he saw a chance.

"Have you lived here a long time?" he asked when the next lull came.

"Some people might call it long," the visitor replied with easy indifference, and went on to discuss with Sir George the nice point of introducing Hungarian partridges to stir up the local Barbary bird.

Captain Kettle followed his subject doggedly.

"Then one might take it you lived here?"

"One might"——The words were a trifle offensive, but a smile took the edge from them.

"A local landowner, in fact?"

"Oh, I think I am."

Captain Kettle could have shaken Sir George and Miss Chesterman just then. Why did they not back him up in his search for sound information, instead of turning the conversation back again to what the (considered) were inanities?

"I suppose you brew your own powder and make your own shot here up-country?" asked Sir George.

"Most of them do. All the big tribes in Atlas have their own powder mills, and when we run out of bullets, we mine lead and do a bit of smelting. But for Winchesters we import cartridges, and I'm afraid I'm extravagant enough to do the same for my shot-gun ammunition. Kynoch's would probably be surprised to know that their cartridges cost about eighteen pence apiece by the time they reach me here. But then, of course, you jealous nations outside are to blame. You put up an absurd interfering law making it an offense to import Arms of Precision into this part of Africa, and as you have your warships to back you up, and we are not naval fellows, cartridges cost us about seven pounds a hundred instead of some ten shillings. But, of course, we get them all the same if we like to pay."

"You take it easily. It's that small item of paying that makes things so hard for some of us."

The visitor laughed. "I apologize. I should have remembered. Here for—well, for us—you see, it's only a case of sending out a handful of one's men to do a bit of mining, and the gold slugs trickle out to the coast and come back as coin. We don't shoot coiners in this country; it's not particularly safe to do that; but it's quite as well to have them within reach, as I suppose it is all the world over."

"Then if you're a well-off man," said Captain Kettle acidly, "may I ask what you are after the Norman Towers for?"

This time there was no doubt about the visitor's dislike. Hate for an instant gleamed out of his blue eyes, and was as quickly veiled. But he did not pretend to infuse cordiality into his voice.

"My good Captain Whatever-your-name is, I don't want your wreck. And, by the way, now we are on the subject, you might kindly tell me, is she yours?"

"My owner has bought all the rights in her from Lloyds."

"Ah, Lloyds! An eminent corporation in London, I believe?" Then you had better get Lloyds to give you delivery of your bargain."

"Won't you?"

"I? What on earth have I to do with it? I'll give you a piece of local information, if you like, not that I imagine for a moment that it will satisfy you. The law of Lloyds, for anything I know, travels over the seas that Lloyds control. But their writ's not current here, and local custom has a different law. Local custom, here, south of the Atlas, says that jetsam on any beach belongs to the beach's owner."

"You can't uphold such a rule?"

The visitor shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly! At any rate, I'm not going to try. You say she's your steamer. In that case you'd better take her away—if you can. She doesn't interest me, and I'm not going to burn my fingers over your affairs. Why, who is—"

The visitor stood to his feet and bowed, and turned down his glance. Miss Dubbs had come on deck, handsome in face, opulent in hair and figure.

"You!" said Miss Dubbs.

The visitor looked up quickly but was plainly puzzled. "I'm afraid I've forgotten, madam."

"I should never forget your eyes, though I was only a little girl at the time, Mr. Bergash. Perhaps you'll remember me when I tell you I put sticking-plaster on your face where you cut it after your bicycle threw you into father's front gate. You've got the scar still there over the cheek-bone, I see. And what of the other gentleman who called you 'Saint'?"

"Oh, he's come to a bad end! He's an attache at one of the fashionable British embassies somewhere in Europe." He turned to the others. "Perhaps I'd better introduce myself.—I'm Sidi Mohammed Bergash. I can't help the sainship," he added whimsically. "That descended to me."

"Then you're a Moorish chief—or shaik—of whatever you call it?"

"No, sir. Very much the reverse. I'm a Berber, as my fathers have been for a matter of three thousand years, in spite of various attempts by Romans, Saracens, and Moors, and these parvenu nations to conquer us. And I'm said of that country up there in those mountains."

CHAPTER XIII.

A Foot-Note History.

THROUGHOUT all the ages all the successive powers, from the Romans to the present Moors, who have held Morocco, have been unsuccessful in their attacks upon the Berber strongholds in the Atlas mountains. It argues, if one opines to think of it, some particular trait of strength which keeps these two small districts alone of all the vast acreage of the globe unexplored by the pushing white man, unannexed by some other hungry nation, undisturbed by that standard which other people have been pleased to set up as civilization.

Old Kaid Bergash (father of the man Captain Kettle disliked so keenly on first sight) was a tough old warrior who ruled his tribe with a rod of iron, and was an authority on tradition. He lived in a stone castle built on an almost inaccessible spur of the Atlas, and his tribe lived there with him, and within its walls stored all their principal gear and worldly goods. The castle's ground space inside the walls measured barely an acre and a half, so that when a man or a family needed more house-room they built a story onto their existing dwelling. Some of these huddled sky-scrapers towered as much as five stories above ground level. But that was the limit. One or two ambitious architects had tried for greater heights and had brought their whole structure crumbling in ruin. At least there was a tradition that this had happened in the year A. D. 1492, when the Moors of the Moroccan lowlands were busy in Spain, and the Berber increase was not kept within reasonable limits by war.

Below the surface of the rock, great hollows had been dug out in very early days for grain and water storage, and the fact that the tribal flocks and herds were stabled in the ground floor of the houses above, and gave the water a good ammoniacal flavor was not a trifle disturb a Berber palate. And, anyway, the tribe had flourished on the arrangement for a matter of some three thousand years.

There is also a well in the middle of the castle, which has been dug down through the rock during sieges—the sinking was spread over four hundred years—and after the first four hundred feet it goes down in inclines set spiralwise round a solid central core.

(To be Continued)

Dubious Syntax, But True.

There are more people in this country eating too much than there are starving. Perhaps if the former didn't, the latter wouldn't.