

## Mr Know All – Intermediate Level Story

I was prepared to dislike Max Kelada even before I knew him. The First World War had just finished and many people wanted to travel to different parts of the world. Rooms on ocean-going ships were very hard to get and you had to put up with whatever the agents chose to offer you. You could not hope for a cabin to yourself and I was thankful to be given one in which there were only two beds.

But when I was told the name of the person I would be sharing it with my heart sank. It suggested closed portholes and the night air completely shut out. It was bad enough to share a cabin for fourteen days with anyone (I was going from San Francisco to Yokohama in Japan), but I would have been less worried if the person's name had been Smith or Brown.

When I got to the cabin I found that Mr. Kelada's bags were already there. I did not like the look of them; there were too many labels on the suitcases, and the wardrobe trunk was too big. He had unpacked his toilet things, and I observed that he used the excellent products of Monsieur Coty; for I saw on the shelf above the wash basin his cologne, shampoo and hair oils. Mr. Kelada's hair brushes, with a fancy design based on his initials printed in gold on the back, would have been all the better for a good cleaning. I did not at all like Mr. Kelada.

I made my way into the smoking-room. I called for a pack of cards and began to play patience. I had just started when a man came up to me and asked me if he was right in thinking my name was so and so.

"I am Mr. Kelada," he added, with a smile that showed a row of bright white teeth, and sat down.

"Oh, yes, we're sharing a cabin, I think."

"Bit of luck, I call it. You never know who you're going to be put in with. I was very glad when I heard you were English. I'm all for us English sticking together when we're away from home, if you understand what I mean."

I stopped what I was doing. "Are you English?" I asked, without thinking.

"Certainly! You don't think I look like an American, do you? British to the backbone, that's what I am."

To prove it, Mr. Kelada took out of his pocket a passport and airily waved it under my nose.

King George has many strange subjects. Mr. Kelada was short and of a strong build and dark skinned, clean-shaved with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large bright, watery eyes. His long black hair was shiny and curly. He spoke with a fluency in which there was nothing English and moved his hands about excitedly as he talked. I felt pretty sure that a closer look at that British passport would have given away the fact that Mr. Kelada was born under a bluer sky than is generally seen in England.

"What will you have?" he asked me.

I looked at him doubtfully. It was an American ship and Prohibition was in force. To all appearances the ship was bone dry. When I am not thirsty I do not know which I dislike more, soft drink or fruit

juice. But Mr. Kelada flashed a quick oriental smile.

"Whisky and soda or a dry martini, you have only to say the word."

He took a small metal drink container from each of his back pockets and laid it on the table before me. I chose the martini, and calling the waiter he ordered some ice and a couple of glasses.

"A very good cocktail," I said.

"Well, there are a lot more where that came from, and if you've got any friends on board, you tell them you've got another friend who's got all the drink in the world."

Mr. Kelada was chatty. He talked of New York and of San Francisco. He discussed plays, pictures, and politics. He talked of his love for Britain. The Union Jack is a grand piece of cloth, but when it is waved about by a gentleman from Alexandria or Beirut, I cannot but feel that it loses a little in its standing.

Mr. Kelada was also familiar. I do not wish to put on airs, but I cannot help feeling that the polite thing for a total stranger to do would be to put mister before my name when he addresses me. Mr. Kelada, no doubt to make me more comfortable when talking to him, did not do this. I did not like Mr. Kelada.

I had put the cards on the table when he sat down, but now, thinking that for this first occasion our conversation had lasted long enough, I went on with my game.

"The three on the four," said Mr. Kelada.

There is nothing more annoying when you are playing patience than to be told where to put the card you have turned up before you have a chance to look for yourself.

"It's coming out, it's coming out," he cried. "The ten on the jack."

With anger and hatred in my heart I finished.

Then he took the pack.

"Do you like card tricks?"

"No, I hate card tricks," I answered.

"Well, I'll just show you this one."

He showed me three. Then I said I would go down to the dining-room and get my seat at the table.

"Oh, that's all right," he said, "I've already taken a seat for you. I thought that as we were in the same cabin we might just as well sit at the same table."

I did not like Mr. Kelada.

I not only shared a cabin with him and ate three meals a day at the same table, but I could not walk round the deck without his joining me. It was impossible to get away from him. It never occurred to

him that he was not wanted. He was certain that you were as glad to see him as he was to see you. In your own house you might have kicked him downstairs and shut the door loudly in his face, and he still would not have understood that he was not a welcome visitor.

He was a good mixer, and in three days knew everyone on board. He ran everything. He managed the games, set up sports matches and collected money for prizes, organized the concert and arranged the fancy-dress ball. He was everywhere and always. He was certainly the best hated man in the ship. We called him Mr. Know-All, even to his face. He took it as a compliment.

But it was at meal times that he was most unbearable. For the better part of an hour then we could not get away and had to listen to him. He was full of warmth and friendliness, and had a happy, agreeable, talkative character. He would talk about all sorts of things, and loved arguing about them. He knew everything better than anybody else, and took it as an insult to his overly high belief in how clever he was should you disagree with him. He would not drop a subject, however unimportant, till he had brought you round to his way of thinking. The possibility that he could be wrong never occurred to him. He was the one who knew.

We sat at the doctor's table. Mr. Kelada would certainly have had it all his own way, for the doctor was lazy and I was coldly uninterested, except for a man called Ramsay who sat there also. He was as fixed in his views as Mr. Kelada and grew angry over the Levantine's certainty that everything he said was right. The discussions they had turned into bitter, seemingly endless arguments.

Ramsay was in the American Government's Foreign Service and was stationed at Kobe in Japan. He was a great heavy man from the Middle West, with loose fat under a tight skin, and his large body was too big for his ready-made clothes. He was on his way back to continue in his post, having been on a quick visit to bring back his wife who had been spending a year at home in New York.

Mrs. Ramsay was a very pretty little thing, with pleasant manners and a sense of humor. The Foreign Service is not well paid, and she was dressed always very simply. However, she knew how to wear her clothes and had the look of a woman married to a much more important man than Ramsay. I should not have paid any particular attention to her but that she possessed a quality that may be common enough in women, but nowadays is not obvious in their appearance. You could not look at her without noticing her modesty. It shone in her like a flower on a coat.

One evening at dinner the conversation by chance got on to the subject of pearls. There had been in the newspapers a good deal of talk about the cultured pearls which the cunning Japanese were making, and the doctor remarked that they must surely reduce the value of real ones. They were very good already; they would soon be perfect. Mr. Kelada, as always, took up the new topic immediately. He told us all that was to be known about pearls. I do not believe Ramsay knew anything about them at all, but he could not miss the opportunity to disagree with the Levantine, and in five minutes we were in the middle of a heated argument. I had seen Mr. Kelada defend his views forcefully and energetically before, but never so fiercely and as strongly as now. At last something that Ramsay said annoyed him, for he thumped the table and shouted.

"Well, I ought to know what I am talking about, I'm going to Japan just to look into this Japanese pearl business. I'm in the trade and there's not a man in it who won't tell you that what I say about pearls always proves to be correct. I know all the best pearls in the world, and what I don't know about pearls isn't worth knowing."

Here was news for us, for Mr. Kelada, with all his talking, had never told anyone what his business was. We only knew that he was going to Japan on some kind of business trip. He looked around the

table in a way which showed that he thought he had already won the argument.

"They'll never be able to get a cultured pearl that an expert like me can't tell with half an eye." He pointed to a chain of pearls that Mrs. Ramsay wore. "You take my word for it, Mrs. Ramsay, that chain you're wearing will never be worth a cent less than it is now."

Mrs. Ramsay's face reddened a little and in her modest way she quickly moved the chain so that it was hidden inside her dress. Ramsay leaned forward. He gave us all a look and a smile shone in his eyes.

"That's a pretty chain of Mrs. Ramsay's, isn't it?"

"I noticed it at once," answered Mr. Kelada. "Wow, I said to myself, those are pearls all right."

"I didn't buy it myself, of course. I'd be interested to know how much you think it cost."

"Oh, in the trade somewhere round fifteen thousand dollars. But if it was bought on Fifth Avenue I shouldn't be surprised to hear anything up to thirty thousand was paid for it."

Ramsay smiled coldly.

"You'll be surprised to hear that Mrs. Ramsay bought that chain at a department store the day before we left New York, for eighteen dollars."

Mr. Kelada's face became suddenly red.

"Rubbish! It's not only real, but it's as fine a set for its size as I've ever seen."

"Will you bet on it? I'll bet you a hundred dollars they are not real."

"Done."

"Oh, Elmer, you can't bet on a certainty," said Mrs. Ramsay. She had a little smile on her lips and the way she spoke showed that she was not happy with the bet.

"Can't I? If I get a chance of easy money like that I should be all sorts of a fool not to take it."

"But how can it be proved?" she continued. "It's only my word against Mr. Kelada's."

"Let me look at the chain, and if they are not real I'll tell you quickly enough. I can afford to lose a hundred dollars," said Mr. Kelada.

"Take it off, dear. Let the gentleman look at it as much as he wants."

Mrs. Ramsay did not move for a moment, but then put her hands to the clasp.

"I can't open it," she said, "Mr. Kelada will just have to take my word for it."

I had a sudden feeling that something unfortunate was about to occur, but I could think of nothing to say.

Ramsay jumped up.

"I'll open it."

He handed the chain to Mr. Kelada. The Levantine took a magnifying glass from his pocket and closely examined it. A smile of victory spread over his smooth, dark-skinned face. He handed back the chain. He was about to speak. Suddenly he caught sight of Mrs. Ramsay's face. It was so white that she looked as though she were about to faint. She was looking at him with wide and frightened eyes. It was the look of someone in a hopeless situation in need of urgent help; it was so clear that I wondered why her husband did not see it.

Mr. Kelada stopped with his mouth open. His face became redder than before. You could almost see the effort he was making over himself.

"I was mistaken," he said. "It's very good copy, but of course as soon as I looked through my glass I saw that it wasn't real. I think eighteen dollars is just about as much as the damned thing's worth."

He took out his wallet and from it a hundred-dollar note. He handed it to Ramsay without a word.

"Perhaps that'll teach you not to be so sure of yourself another time, my young friend," said Ramsay as he took the note.

I noticed that Mr. Kelada's hands were shaking.

The story spread over the ship as stories do, and he had to put up with a lot of people making friendly fun of him that evening. It was a fine joke that Mr. Know-All had been caught out. But Mrs. Ramsay went to her cabin early with a head-ache.

Next morning I got up and began to shave. Mr. Kelada lay on his bed smoking a cigarette. Suddenly there was a sound outside the door as an envelope was pushed under it. I opened the door and looked out. There was nobody there. I picked up the letter and saw it was addressed to Max Kelada. The name was written in block letters. I handed it to him.

"Who's this from?" He opened it. "Oh!"

He took out of the envelope, not a letter, but a hundred-dollar note. He looked at me and again he reddened. He tore the envelope into little bits and gave them to me.

"Do you mind just throwing them out of the porthole?"

I did as he asked, and then I looked at him with a smile.

"No one likes being made to look a perfect damned fool," he said.

"Were the pearls real?"

"If I had a pretty little wife I shouldn't let her spend a year in New York while I stayed at Kobe," said he.

At that moment I did not completely dislike Mr. Kelada. He reached out for his wallet and carefully put in it the hundred-dollar note.