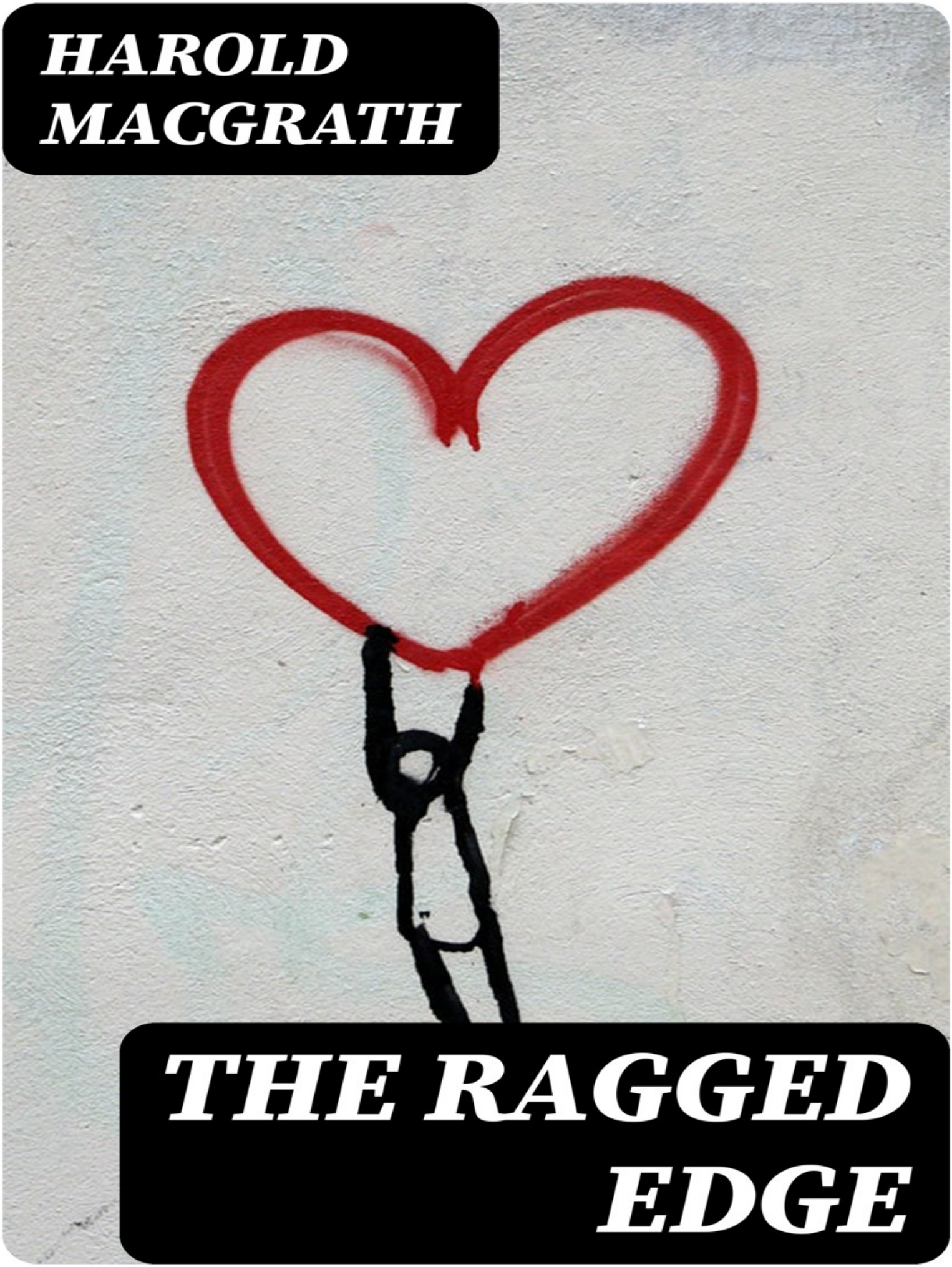
HAROLD MACGRATH



THE RAGGED EDGE

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CHAPTER I

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The Master is inordinately fond of young fools. That is why they are permitted to rush in where angels fear to tread—and survive their daring! This supreme protection, this unwritten warranty to disregard all laws, occult or apparent, divine or earthly, may be attributed to the fact that none but young fools dream gloriously. For such of us as pretend to be wise—and we are but fools in a lesser degree—we know that humanity moves onward only by the impellant of fine dreams. Sometimes these dreams are simple and tender; sometimes they are magnificent.

With what airs we human atoms invest ourselves! What ridiculous fancies of our importance! We believe we have destinies, when we have only destinations: that we are something immortal, when each of us is in truth only the repository of a dream. The dream flowers and is harvested, and we are left by the wayside, having served our singular purpose in the scheme of progress: as the orange is tossed aside when sucked of its ruddy juice.

We middle-aged fools and we old fools can no longer dream. We have only those phantoms called memories, which are the husks of dreams. Disillusion stands in one doorway of our house and Mockery in the other.

This is a tale of two young fools.

* * * * *

In the daytime the streets of the ancient city of Canton are yet filled with the original confusion—human beings in quest of food. There is turmoil, shouts, cries, jostlings, milling congestions that suddenly break and flow in opposite directions.

It was a gray day in the spring of 1910. A tourist caravan of four pole-chairs jogged along a narrow street. It had rained during the night, and the patch-work pavement was greasy with mud. From a bi-secting street came shouting and music. At a sign from Ah Cum, official custodian of the sightseers, the pole-chair coolies pressed toward the left and halted.

A wedding procession turned the corner. All the world over a wedding procession arouses laughter and derision in the bystanders. Even the children jeer. It may be instinctive; it may be that children vaguely realize that at the end of all wedding journeys is disillusion.

The girl in the forward chair raised herself a little, the better to see the gorgeous blue palanquin of the dimly visible bride.

"What a wonderful colour!" she exclaimed.

"Kingfisher feathers," said Ah Cum. "It is an ordinary wedding," he added; "some shopkeeper's daughter. Probably she was married years ago and is now merely on the way to her husband's house. The palanquin is hired and so is the procession. Quite ordinary."

The air in the narrow street, which was not eight feet wide, swarmed with smells impossible to define; but all at once the pleasantly pungent odour of Chinese incense

drifted across the girl's face, and gratefully she quickened her inhalations.

In her ears there was a medley of sound: wailing music, rumbling tom-toms and sputtering firecrackers. She had never before heard the noise of firecrackers, and in the beginning the sputtering racket caused her to wince. Presently the odour of burnt powder mingled agreeably with that of the incense.

She was conscious of a ceaseless undercurrent of sound —the guttural Chinese tongue. She foraged about in her mind for some satisfying equivalent which would express in English this gurgling drone the Chinese called a language. At length she hit upon it: bubbling water. Her eyebrows, pulled down by the stress of thought, now resumed their normal arches; and pleased with her discovery, she smiled.

To Ah Cum, who was watching her covertly, the smile was like a bit of unexpected sunshine. What with these converging roofs that shut out all but a hand's breadth of the sky, sunshine was rare at this point. If it came at all, it was as fleeting as the girl's smile.

The wedding procession passed on, and the cynical rabble poured in behind. The pole-chair caravan resumed its journey.

The girl wished that she had come afoot, despite the knowledge that she would have suffered many inconveniences, accidental and intentional jostling, insolence and ribald jest. The Cantonese, excepting in the shops where he expects profit, always resents the intrusion of the *fan-quei*—foreign devil. The chair was torture. It hung from the centre of a stout pole, each end of which rested

upon the calloused shoulder of a coolie; an ordinary Occidental chair with a foot-rest. The coolies proceeded at a swinging, mincing trot, which gave to the suspended seat a dancing action similar to that of a suddenly agitated hanging-spring of a birdcage. It was impossible to meet the motion bodily.

Her shoulders began to ache. Her head felt absurdly like one of those noddling manikins in the Hong-Kong curio-shops. Jiggle-joggle, jiggle-joggle…! For each pause she was grateful. Whenever Ah Cum (whose normal stride was sufficient to keep him at the side of her chair) pointed out something of interest, she had to strain the cords in her neck to focus her glance upon the object. Supposing the wire should break and her head tumble off her shoulders into the street? The whimsey caused another smile to ripple across her lips.

This amazing world she had set forth to discover! Yesterday at this time she had had no thought in her head about Canton. America, the land of rosy apples and snowstorms, beckoned, and she wanted to fly thitherward. Yet, here she was, in the ancient Chinese city, weaving in and out of the narrow streets some scarcely wide enough for two men to walk abreast, streets that boiled and eddied with yellow human beings, who worshipped strange gods, ate strange foods, and diffused strange suffocating smells. These were less like streets than labyrinths, hewn through an eternal twilight. It was only when they came into a square that daylight had a positive quality.

So many things she saw that her interest stumbled rather than leaped from object to object. Rows of roasted duck,

brilliantly varnished; luscious vegetables, which she had been warned against; baskets of melon seed and water-chestnuts; men working in teak and blackwood; fan makers and jade cutters; eggs preserved in what appeared to her as petrified muck; bird's nests and shark fins. She glimpsed Chinese penury when she entered a square given over to the fishmongers. Carp, tench, and roach were so divided that even the fins, heads and fleshless spines were sold. There were doorways to peer into, dim cluttered holes with shadowy forms moving about, potters and rug-weavers.

Through one doorway she saw a grave Chinaman standing on a stage-like platform. He wore a long coat, beautifully flowered, and a hat with a turned up brim. Balanced on his nose were enormous tortoise-shell spectacles. A ragged gray moustache drooped from the corners of his mouth and a ragged wisp of whisker hung from his chin. She was informed by Ah Cum that the Chinaman was one of the *literati* and that he was expounding the deathless philosophy of Confucius, which, summed up, signified that the end of all philosophy is Nothing.

Through yet another doorway she observed an ancient silk brocade loom. Ah Cum halted the caravan and indicated that they might step within and watch. On a stool eight feet high sat a small boy in a faded blue cotton, his face like that of young Buddha. He held in his hands many threads. From time to time the man below would shout, and the boy would let the threads go with the snap of a harpist, only to recover them instantly. There was a strip of old rose brocade in the making that set an ache in the girl's heart for the want of it.

The girl wondered what effect the information would have upon Ah Cum if she told him that until a month ago she had never seen a city, she had never seen a telephone, a railway train, an automobile, a lift, a paved street. She was almost tempted to tell him, if only to see the cracks of surprise and incredulity break the immobility of his yellow countenance.

But no; she must step warily. Curiosity held her by one hand, urging her to recklessness, and caution held her by the other. Her safety lay in pretense—that what she saw was as a tale twice told.

A phase of mental activity that men called courage: to summon at will this energy which barred the ingress of the long cold fingers of fear, which cleared the throat of stuffiness and kept the glance level and ever forward. She possessed it, astonishing fact! She had summoned this energy so continuously during the past four weeks that now it was abiding; she knew that it would always be with her, on guard. And immeasurable was the calm evolved from this knowledge.

The light touch of Ah Cum's hand upon her arm broke the thread of retrospective thought; and her gray eyes began to register again the things she saw.

"Jade," said Ah Cum.

She turned away from the doorway of the silk loom to observe. Pole coolies came joggling along with bobbing blocks of jade—white jade, splashed and veined with translucent emerald green.

"On the way to the cutters," said Ah Cum. "But we must be getting along if we are to lunch in the tower of the water-

clock."

As if an order had come to her somewhere out of space, the girl glanced sideways at the other young fool.

So far she had not heard the sound of his voice. The tail-ender of this little caravan, he had been rather out of it. But he had shown no desire for information, no curiosity. Whenever they stepped from the chairs, he stepped down. If they entered a shop, he paused by the doorway, as if waiting for the journey to be resumed.

Young, not much older than she was: she was twenty and he was possibly twenty-four. She liked his face; it had on it the suggestion of gentleness, of fineness. She was lamentably without comparisons; such few young men as she had seen—white men—had been on the beach, pitiful and terrible objects.

The word *handsome* was a little beyond her grasp. She could not apply it in this instance because she was not sure the application would be correct. Perhaps what urged her interest in the young man's direction was the dead whiteness of his face, the puffed eyelids and the bloodshot whites. She knew the significance: the red corpuscle was being burnt out by the fires of alcohol. Was he, too, on the way to the beach? What a pity! All alone, and none to warn him of the abject wretchedness at the end of Drink.

Only the night before, in the dining room of the Hong-Kong Hotel, she had watched him empty glass after glass of whisky, and shudder and shudder. He did not like it. Why, then, did he touch it?

As he climbed heavily into his chair, she was able to note the little beads of sweat under the cracked nether lip. He

was in misery; he was paying for last night's debauch. His clothes were smartly pressed, his linen white, his jaws cleanly shaven; but the day would come when he would grow indifferent to bodily cleanliness. What a pity!

For all her ignorance of material things—the human inventions which served the physical comforts of man—how much she knew about man himself! She had seen him bereft of all those spiritual props which permit man to walk on two feet instead of four—broken, without resilience. And now she was witnessing or observing the complicated machinery of civilization through which they had come, at length to land on the beach of her island. She knew now the supreme human energy which sent men to hell or carried them to their earthly heights. Selfishness.

Supposing she saw the young man at dinner that night, emptying his bottle? She could not go to him, sit down and draw the sordid pictures she had seen so often. In her case the barrier was not selfishness but the perception that her interest would be misinterpreted, naturally. What right had a young woman to possess the scarring and intimate knowledge of that dreg of human society, the beachcomber?

CHAPTER II

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Ah Cum lived at No. 6 Chiu Ping le, Chiu Yam Street. He was a Canton guide, highly educated, having been

graduated from Yale University. If he took a fancy to you, he invited you to the house for tea, bitter and yellow and served in little cups without handles. If you knew anything about Canton ware, you were, as like as not, sorely tempted to stuff a teacup into your pocket.

He was tall, slender, and suave. He spoke English with astonishing facility and with a purity which often embarrassed his tourists. He made his headquarters at the Victoria on the Sha-mien, and generally met the Hong-Kong packet in the morning. You left Hong-Kong at night, by way of the Pearl River, and arrived in Canton the next morning. Ah Cum presented his black-bordered card to such individuals as seemed likely to require his services.

This morning his entourage (as he jestingly called it) consisted of the girl, two spinsters (Prudence and Angelina Jedson), prim and doubtful of the world, and the young man who appeared to be considerably the worse for the alcohol he had consumed.

In the beginning Ah Cum would run his glance speculatively over the assortment and select that individual who promised to be the most companionable. He was a philosopher. Usually his charges bored him with their interrogative chatter, for he knew that his information more often than not went into one ear and out of the other. To-day he selected the girl, and gave her the lead-chair. He motioned the young man to the rear chair, because at that hour the youth appeared to be a quantity close to zero. Being a Chinaman in blood and instinct, he despised all spinsters; they were parasites. A woman was born to have children, particularly male children.

Half a day had turned the corner of the hours; and Ah Cum admitted that this girl puzzled him. He dug about in his mind for a term to fit her, and he came upon the word *new*. She was new, unlike any other woman he had met in all his wide travel. He could not tell whether she was English or American. From long experience with both races he had acquired definitions, but none snugly applied to this girl. Her roving eagerness was at all times shaded with shyness, reserve, repression. Her voice was soft and singularly musical; but from time to time she uttered old-fashioned words which forced him to grope mentally. She had neither the semi-boisterousness of the average American girl nor the chilling insolence of the English.

Ah, these English! They travelled all over, up and down the world, not to acquire information but rather to leave the impress of their superiority as a race. It was most amusing. They would suffer amazing hardships to hunt the snow-leopard; but in the Temple of Five Hundred Gods they would not take the trouble to ask the name of one!

But this girl, she was alone. That added to his puzzle. At this moment she was staring ahead; and again came the opportunity to study her. Fine but strong lines marked the profile: that would speak for courage and resolution. She was as fair as the lily of the lotus. That suggested delicacy; and yet her young body was strong and vital. Whence had she come: whither was she bound?

A temporary congestion in the street held up the caravan for a spell; and Ah Cum looked backward to note if any of the party had become separated. It was then that the young man entered his thought with some permanency: because

there was no apparent reason for his joining the tour, since from the beginning he had shown no interest in anything. He never asked questions; he never addressed his companions; and frequently he took off his cap and wiped his forehead. For the first time it occurred to Ah Cum that the young man might not be quite conscious of his surroundings, that he might be moving in that comatose state which is the aftermath of a long debauch. For all that, Ah Cum was forced to admit that his charge did not look dissipated.

Ah Cum was more or less familiar with alcoholic types. In the genuinely dissipated face there was always a suggestion of slyness in ambush, peeping out of the wrinkles around the eyes and the lips. Upon this young fellow's face there were no wrinkles, only shadows, in the hollows of the cheeks and under the eyes. He was more like a man who had left his bed in the middle of convalescence.

Ah Cum's glance returned to the girl. Of course, it really signified nothing in this careless part of the world that she was travelling alone. What gave the puzzling twist to an ordinary situation was her manner: she was guileless. She reminded him of his linnet, when he gave the bird the freedom of the house: it became filled with a wild gaiety which bordered on madness. All that was needed to complete the simile was that the girl should burst into song.

But, alas! Ah Cum shrugged philosophically. His commissions this day would not fill his metal pipe with one wad of tobacco. The spinsters had purchased one grass-linen tablecloth; the girl and the young man had purchased nothing. That she had not bought one piece of linen subtly

established in Ah Cum's mind the fact that she had no home, that the instinct was not there, or she would have made some purchase against the future.

Between his lectures—and primarily he was an itinerant lecturer—he manoeuvred in vain to acquire some facts regarding the girl, who she was, whence she had come; but always she countered with: "What is that?" Guileless she might be; simple, never.

It was noon when the caravan reached the tower of the water-clock. Here they would be having lunch. Ah Cum said that it was customary to give the chair boys small money for rice. The four tourists contributed varied sums: the spinsters ten cents each, the girl a shilling, the young man a Mexican dollar. The lunches were individual affairs: sandwiches, bottled olives and jam commandeered from the Victoria.

"You are alone?" said one of the spinsters—Prudence Jedson.

"Yes," answered the girl.

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Of what?"—serenely.

"The men."

"They know."

"They know what?"

"When and when not to speak. You have only to look resolute and proceed upon your way."

Ah Cum lent an ear covertly.

"How old are you?" demanded Miss Prudence.

The spinsters offered a good example of how singular each human being is, despite the fact that in sisters the basic corpuscle is the same. Prudence was the substance

and Angelina the shadow; for Angelina never offered opinions, she only agreed with those advanced by Prudence.

"I am twenty," said the girl.

Prudence shook her head. "You must have travelled a good deal to know so much about men."

The girl smiled and began to munch a sandwich. Secretly she was gratified to be assigned to the rôle of an old traveller. Still, it was true about men. Seldom they molested a woman who appeared to know where she was going and who kept her glance resolutely to the fore.

Said Prudence, with commendable human kindness: "My sister and I are going on to Shanghai and Peking. If you are going that way, why not join us."

The girl's blood ran warmly for a minute. "That is very kind of you, but I am on my way to America. Up to dinner yesterday I did not expect to come to Canton. I was the last on board. Wasn't the river beautiful under the moonlight?"

"We did not leave our cabins. Did you bring any luggage?"

"All I own. In this part of the world it is wise never to be separated from your luggage."

The girl fished into the bottle for an olive. How clever she was, to fool everybody so easily! Not yet had any one suspected the truth: that she was, in a certain worldly sense, only four weeks old, that her every act had been written down on paper beforehand, and that her success lay in rigidly observing the rules which she herself had drafted to govern her conduct.

She finished the olive and looked up. Directly in range stood the strange young man, although he was at the far

side of the loft. He was leaning against a window frame, his hat in his hand. She noted the dank hair on his forehead, the sweat of revolting nature. What a pity! But why?

There was no way over this puzzle, nor under it, nor around it: that men should drink, knowing the inevitable payment. This young man did not drink because he sought the false happiness that lured men to the bottle. To her mind, recalling the picture of him the night before, there had been something tragic in the grim silent manner of his tippling. Peg after peg had gone down his blistered throat, but never had a smile touched his lips, never had his gaze roved inquisitively. Apparently he had projected beyond his table some hypnotic thought, for it had held him all through the dining hour.

Evidently he was gazing at the dull red roofs of the city: but was he registering what he saw? Never glance sideways at man, the old Kanaka woman had said. Yes, yes; that was all very well in ordinary cases; but yonder was a soul in travail, if ever she had seen one. Here was not the individual against whom she had been warned. He had not addressed to her even the most ordinary courtesy of fellow travellers; she doubted that he was even aware of her existence. She went further: she doubted that he was fully conscious of where he was.

Suddenly she became aware of the fact that he had brought no lunch. A little kindness would not bring the world tumbling about her ears. So she approached him with sandwiches.

"You forgot your lunch," she said. "Won't you take these?"

For a space he merely stared at her, perhaps wondering if she were real. Then a bit of colour flowed into his sunken white cheeks.

"Thank you; but I've a pocket full of water-chestnuts. I'm not hungry."

"Better eat these, even if you don't want them," she urged. "My name is Ruth Enschede."

"Mine is Howard Spurlock."

Immediately he stepped back. Instinctively she imitated this action, chilled and a little frightened at the expression of terror that confronted her. Why should he stare at her in this fashion?—for all the world as if she had pointed a pistol at his head?

CHAPTER III

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He had said it, spoken it like that ... his own name! After all these weeks of trying to obliterate even the memory of it!... to have given it to this girl without her asking!

The thought of peril cleared a space in the alcoholic fog. He saw the expression on the girl's face and understood what it signified, that it was the reflected pattern of his own. He shut his eyes and groped for the wall to steady himself, wondering if this bit of mummery would get over.

"I beg your pardon!... A bit rocky this morning.... That window there.... Cloud back of your hat!" He opened his eyes again.

"I understand," she said. The poor boy, imagining things! "That's want of substantial food. Better take these sandwiches."

"All right; and thank you. I'll eat them when we start. Just now the water-chestnuts…."

She smiled, and returned to the spinsters.

Spurlock began to munch his water-chestnuts. What he needed was not a food but a flavour; and the cocoanut taste of the chestnuts soothed his burning tongue and throat. He had let go his name so easily as that! What was the name she had given? Ruth something; he could not remember. What a frightened fool he was! If he could not remember her name, it was equally possible that already she had forgotten his. Conscience was always digging sudden pits for his feet and common sense ridiculing his fears. Mirages, over which he was constantly throwing bridges which were wasted efforts, since invariably they spanned solid ground.

But he would make it a point not to speak again to the girl. If he adhered to this policy—to keep away from her inconspicuously—she would forget the name by night, and to-morrow even the bearer of it would sink below the level of recollection. That was life. They were only passers-by.

Drink for him had a queer phase. It did not cheer or fortify him with false courage and recklessness; it simply enveloped him in a mist of unreality. A shudder rippled across his shoulders. He hated the taste of it. The first peg was torture. But for all that, it offered relief; his brain, stupefied by the fumes, grew dull, and conscience lost its edge to bite.

He wiped the sweat from his chin and forehead. His hand shook so violently that he dropped the handkerchief; and he let it lie on the floor because he dared not stoop.

Ah Cum, sensing the difficulty, approached, recovered the damp handkerchief and returned it.

"Thanks."

"Very interesting," said the Chinaman, with a wave of his tapering hand toward the roofs. "It reminds you of a red sea suddenly petrified."

"Or the flat stones in the meadows, teeming with life underneath.
Ants."

"You are from America?"

"Yes." But Spurlock put up his guard.

"I am a Yale man," said Ah Cum.

"Yale? Why, so am I." There was no danger in admitting this fact. Spurlock offered his hand, which Ah Cum accepted gravely. A broken laugh followed the action. "Yale!" Spurlock's gaze shifted to the dead hills beyond the window; when it returned to the Chinaman there was astonishment instead of interest: as if Ah Cum had been a phantom a moment since and was now actually a human being. "Yale!" A Chinaman who had gone to Yale!

"Yes. Civil engineering. Mentally but not physically competent. Had to give up the work and take to this. I'm not noble; so my honourable ancestors will not turn over in their graves."

"Graves." Spurlock pointed in the sloping fields outside the walls.
"I've counted ten coffins so far."

"Ah, yes. The land about these walls is a common graveyard. Every day in the year you will witness such scenes. There are no funerals among the poor, only burials. And many of these deaths could be avoided if it were not for superstition. Superstition is the Chinese Reaper. Rituals instead of medicines. Sometimes I try to talk. I might as well try to build a ladder to heaven. We must take the children—of any race—if we would teach knowledge. Age is set, impervious to innovations."

The Chinaman paused. He saw that his words were falling upon dull ears. He turned to observe what this object was that had so unexpectedly diverted the young man's attention. It was the girl. She was standing before a window, against the background of the rain-burdened April sky. There was enough contra-light to render her ethereal.

Spurlock was basically a poet, quick to recognize beauty, animate or inanimate, and to transcribe it in unuttered words. He was always word-building, a metaphorist, lavish with singing adjectives; but often he built in confusion because it was difficult to describe something beautiful in a new yet simple way.

He had not noticed the girl particularly when she offered the sandwiches; but in this moment he found her beautiful. Her face reminded him of a delicate unglazed porcelain cup, filled with blond wine. But there was something else; and in his befogged mental state the comparison eluded him.

Ruth broke the exquisite pose by summoning Ah Cum, who was lured into a lecture upon the water-clock. This left Spurlock alone.

He began munching his water-chestnuts—a small brown radish-shaped vegetable, with the flavour of coconut—that grow along the river brims. Below the window he saw two coolies carrying a coffin, which presently they callously dumped into a yawning pit. This made the eleventh. There were no mourners. But what did the occupant of the box care? The laugh was always with the dead: they were out of the muddle.

From the unlovely hillside his glance strayed to the several five-story towers of the pawnshops. Celestial Uncles! Spurlock chuckled, and a bit of chestnut, going down the wrong way, set him to coughing violently. When the paroxysm passed, he was forced to lean against the window-jamb for support.

"That young man had better watch his cough," said Spinster
Prudence. "He acts queerly, too."

"They always act like that after drink," said Ruth, casually.

She intercepted the glance the spinsters exchanged, and immediately sensed that she had said too much. There was no way of recalling the words; so she waited.

"Miss Enschede—such an odd name!—are you French?"

"Oh, no. Pennsylvania Dutch. But I have never seen America. I was born on an island in the South Seas. I am on my way to an aunt who lives in Hartford, Connecticut."

The spinsters nodded approvingly. Hartford had a very respectable sound.

Ruth did not consider it necessary, however, to add that she had not notified this aunt of her coming, that she did

not know whether the aunt still resided in Hartford or was underground. These two elderly ladies would call her stark mad. Perhaps she was.

"And you have seen ... drunken men?" Prudence's tones were full of suppressed horror.

"Often. A very small settlement, mostly natives. There was a trader—a man who bought copra and pearls. Not a bad man as men go, but he would sell whisky and gin. Over here men drink because they are lonely; and when they drink too hard and too long, they wind up on the beach."

The spinsters stared at her blankly.

Ruth went on to explain. "When a man reaches the lowest scale through drink, we call him a beachcomber. I suppose the phrase—the word—originally meant a man who searched for food on the beach. The poor things! Oh, it was quite dreadful. It is queer, but men of education and good birth fall swiftest and lowest."

She sent a covert glance toward the young man. She alone of them all knew that he was on the first leg of the terrible journey to the beach. Somebody ought to talk to him, warn him. He was all alone, like herself.

"What are those odd-looking things on the roofs?" she asked of Ah
Cum.

"Pigs and fish, to fend off the visitations of the devil." Ah Cum smiled. "After all, I believe we Chinese have the right idea. The devil is on top, not below. We aren't between him and heaven; he is between us and heaven."

The spinsters had no counter-philosophy to offer; so they turned to Ruth, who had singularly and unconsciously

invested herself with glamour, the glamour of adventure, which the old maids did not recognize as such because they were only tourists. This child at once alarmed and thrilled them. She had come across the wicked South Seas which were still infested with cannibals; she had seen drunkenness and called men beachcombers; who was this moment as innocent as a babe, and in the next uttered some bitter wisdom it had taken a thousand years of philosophy to evolve. And there was that dress of hers! She must be warned that she had been imposed upon.

"You'll pardon an old woman, Miss Enschede," said Sister Prudence; "but where in this world did you get that dress?"

Ruth picked up both sides of the skirt and spread it, looking down.

"Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Wrong? Why, you have been imposed upon somewhere. That dress is thirty years old, if a day."

"Oh!" Ruth laughed softly. "That is easily explained. I haven't much money; I don't know how much it is going to cost me to reach Hartford; so I fixed over a couple of my mother's dresses. It doesn't look bad, does it?"

"Mercy, no! That wasn't the thought. It was that somebody had cheated you."

The spinster did not ask if the mother lived; the question was inconsequent. No mother would have sent her daughter into the world with such a wardrobe. Straitened circumstances would not have mattered; a mother would have managed somehow. In the '80s such a dress would have indicated considerable financial means; under the sun-

helmet it was an anachronism; and yet it served only to add a quainter charm to the girl's beauty.

"Do you know what you make me think of?"

"What?"

"As if you had stepped out of some old family album."

The feminine vanities in Ruth were quiescent; nothing had ever occurred in her life to tingle them into action. She was dressed as a white woman should be; and that for the present satisfied her instincts. But she threw a verbal bombshell into the spinsters' camp.

"What is a family album?"

"You poor child, do you mean to tell me you've never seen a family album? Why, it's a book filled with the photographs of your grandmothers and grandfathers, your aunts and uncles and cousins, your mother and father when they were little."

Ruth stood with drawn brows; she was trying to recall. "No; we never had one; at least, I never saw it."

The lack of a family album for some reason put a little ache in her heart. Grandmothers and grandfathers and uncles and aunts … to love and to coddle lonely little girls.

"You poor child!" said Prudence.

"Then I am old-fashioned. Is that it? I thought this very pretty."

"So it is, child. But one changes the style of one's clothes yearly. Of course, this does not apply to uninteresting old maids," Prudence modified with a dry little smile.

"But this is good enough to travel in, isn't it?"

"To be sure it is. When you reach San Francisco, you can buy something more appropriate." It occurred to the

spinster to ask: "Have you ever seen a fashion magazine?"

"No. Sometimes we had the *Illustrated London News* and *Tit-Bits.*
Sailors would leave them at the trader's."

"Alice in Wonderland!" cried Prudence, perhaps a little enviously.

"Oh, I've read that!"

Spurlock had heard distinctly enough all of this odd conversation; but until the spinster's reference to the family album, no phrase had been sufficient in strength of attraction to break the trend of his own unhappy thoughts. Out of an old family album: here was the very comparison that had eluded him. His literary instincts began to stir. A South Sea island girl, and this was her first adventure into civilization. Here was the corner-stone of a capital story; but he knew that Howard Spurlock would never write it.

Other phrases returned now, like echoes. The beachcomber, the lowest in the human scale; and some day he would enter into this estate. Between him and the beach stood the sum of six hundred dollars.

But one thing troubled him, and because of it he might never arrive on the beach. A new inexplicable madness that urged him to shrill ironically the story of his coat—to take it off and fling it at the feet of any stranger who chanced to be nigh.

"Look at it!" he felt like screaming. "Clean and spotless, but beginning to show the wear and tear of constant use. I have worn it for weeks and weeks. I have slept with it under my pillow. Observe it—a blue-serge coat. Ever hear of the