

# THE RAGGED EDGE

*Harold MacGrath*





## **The Ragged Edge**

**Harold MacGrath**

**Published:** 1922

**Categorie(s):** Fiction, Romance

**Source:** <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/15614>

### **About MacGrath:**

Harold MacGrath (September 4, 1871 - October 30, 1932) was a bestselling American novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter. Also known occasionally as Harold McGrath, he was born in Syracuse, New York. As a young man, he worked as a reporter and columnist on the Syracuse Herald newspaper until the late 1890s when he published his first novel, a romance titled *Arms and the Woman*. According to the *New York Times*, his next book, *The Puppet Crown*, was the No.7 bestselling book in the United States for all of 1901. From that point on, MacGrath never looked back, writing novels for the mass market about love, adventure, mystery, spies, and the like at an average rate of more than one a year. He would have three more of his books that were among the top ten bestselling books of the year. At the same time, he penned a number of short stories for major American magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Red Book* magazine. Several of MacGrath's novels were serialized in these magazines and contributing to them was something he would continue to do until his death in 1932. In 1912, Harold MacGrath became one of the first nationally-known authors to write directly for the movies when he was hired by the American Film Company to do the screenplay for a short film in the Western genre titled *The Vengeance That Failed*. MacGrath had eighteen of his forty novels and three of his short stories made into films plus he wrote the story for another four motion pictures. And, three of his books were also made into Broadway plays. One of the many films made from MacGrath's writings was the 1913 serial *The Adventures of Kathlyn* starring Kathlyn Williams. While writing the thirteen episodes he simultaneously wrote the book that was published immediately after the December 29, 1913, premiere of the first episode of the serial so as to be in book stores during the screening of the entire thirteen episodes. Among MacGrath's short stories made into film was the 1920 Douglas Fairbanks Production Company's feature-length adventure film *The Mollycoddle* based on MacGrath's short story with the same title that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1913. Directed by Victor Fleming, it starred Fairbanks, Ruth Renick, and Wallace Beery and was distributed through the newly created United Artists. It is said that during this same time, a young Boris Karloff, who previously had a few uncredited film roles, chose his stage name for his first screen credit in 1920 from the MacGrath novel *The Drums of Jeopardy*, which had also been published by *The Saturday Evening Post* in January of that year and which featured a Russian mad scientist character named Boris Karlov. The name Boris Karlov was used from MacGrath's book for the 1922 Broadway play, but by 1923 with actor Boris Karloff using the similar sounding variation, the film version renamed the character Gregor Karlov. Harold MacGrath's success made him a wealthy man and, although he traveled the world extensively, Syracuse, New York, was his home, and it was there in 1912 that he built an English country-style mansion renowned for its landscaped gardens. In an article in the April 23, 1932, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* written under the title "The Short Autobiography of a Deaf Man", MacGrath told the public how he had struggled early in life as a result of a hearing impairment. At a time in history when deaf people were almost automatically considered as lacking intellectual acuity, he had hid this from his employer and others. Harold MacGrath died at his home in Syracuse a few months after the article was published.

**Also available on Feedbooks MacGrath:**

- *The Voice in the Fog* (1915)
- *A Splendid Hazard* (1910)
- *Arms and the Woman* (1899)
- *Man on the Box* (1904)
- *The Grey Cloak* (1903)
- *The Lure of the Mask* (1908)
- *The Puppet Crown* (1901)
- *The Drums of Jeopardy* (1920)

**Copyright:** This work is available for countries where copyright is Life+70 and in the USA.

**Note:** This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

# Chapter 1

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 2

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."