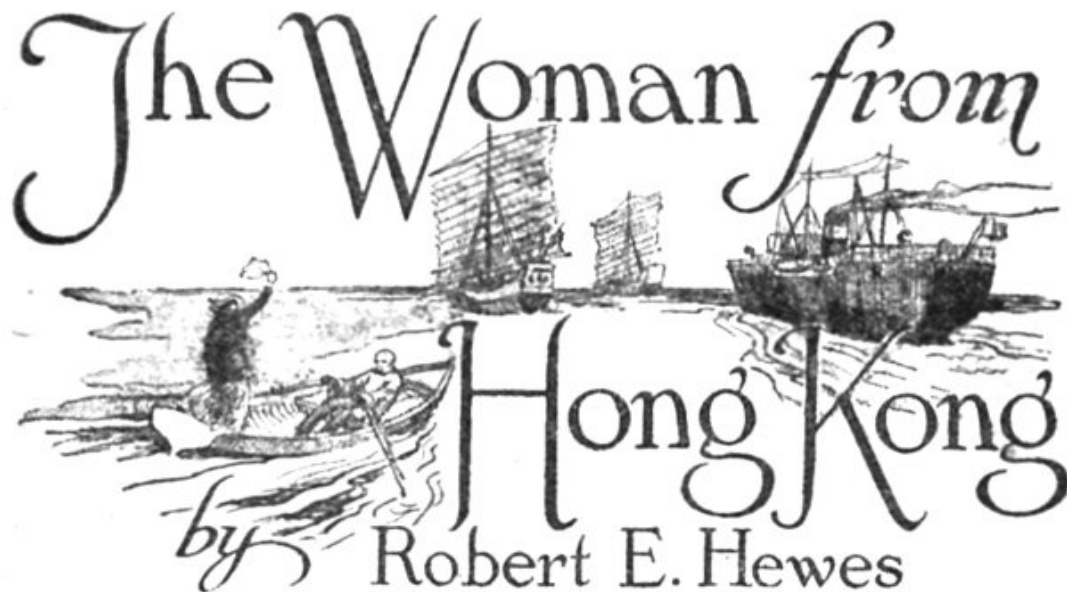


# The Woman from Hong Kong by Robert E. Hewes



CAPTAIN MEARS smiled across the table at the woman opposite.

"I'm a master-man!" he declared, "even if I do say it myself!"

His burly form, his complacent, round face fairly radiated self-sureness.

The woman did not reply; she merely smiled. That smile irritated Mears and led him to greater boasts.

"Why," he confided, "for three years I've outwitted the men paid for being the wisest in these ports!"

"That means, of course, the secret service?" She regarded him speculatively.

"Precisely! They've been after me all this while, but they haven't got me yet. No man ever put anything over on me!"

"Does the opium trade pay?"

"Ah, you know, then?"

"It is freely rumored."

"Well, yes. The fact is, my next trip will be my last. I can afford to retire."

Suddenly he leaned forward and gazed into her eyes. They were dark and deep. At times they had a look in them Mears could not fathom.

"Do you know," he said, "I have been

wondering how you came to be here, in this?" He waved his hand at the garishly lighted room with its boisterous sailors and painted girls. "You don't seem to belong—"

"I don't," she told him. "It's my first night. It's a frightful place to sing!" She threw a disdainful glance toward the musicians in one corner who were murdering a popular melody.

"You have a good voice," he commented: "you were singing as I came in."

"Very."

Again Mears fancied he saw that unfathomable look in her eyes. It baffled him.

"Why did you select me to talk to?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know," she confessed. "I saw you sitting here, and somehow I wanted to talk to you."

Mears's face beamed with gratified vanity. The woman smiled; a smile as full of some deep, inner meaning as that look in her eyes.

To Mears women had hitherto been as open books. This one puzzled him with her suggestion of that unfathomable something. It made him want her, as he had wanted no other

woman. She was rather tall, and on the brunette order. Her beauty was not striking, but it was the kind that lingers in one's memory. Her every air, her every manner proclaimed her foreign to this place she was in to-night.

The moment Mears had laid his eyes on her he had determined her fate. It should be as the fate of the women before her who had chanced his fancy: toys for a day, soon cast aside, broken butterflies.

"Listen!" His voice was modulated to just the right pitch of low confidence. "You're too good for this. I won't beat about the bush. I'm a man of action. My ship leaves to-morrow night. Come with me. You'll have the best cabin in the vessel; you'll be a distinguished passenger. The trip will do you a world of good, after this!" He waved at the room with finely pretended disgust.

"I—I'm afraid," she whispered, and glanced about nervously.

Mears seized her hands and pressed them reassuringly. He smiled in silence. Mean played his game skillfully. That reassuring way, that silent look of understanding, had ensnared women more sophisticated than this one, who shrank from a drunken sailor whirling past with a girl in his arms.

Mean did not press the matter. He was too clever for that. He rose.

"My ship the Dorphin, leaves at eight bells to-morrow evening," he told her as he left.

Captain Mears, with the annoying perspection that caused the secret service to curse him and the star he sailed by, had guessed that those cunning gentry believed he would take on his contraband under cover of night and slip out of harbor like the opium-runner he was.

Therefore he had taken on his cargo in broad daylight under pretense of loading with supplies. And with the first darkenings of the horizon rim he made ready to leave harbor,

openly flaunting side and stern lights!

Mears, smoking in his cabin, chuckled and told himself it would be a good joke on the secret service. It delighted him to trick the service. He had tricked them often during the years he had been in the opium trade. They were tricks that galled, and had spurred the service to feverish efforts.

But all their machinations and plots to bring Mears to justice had been aptly foiled, by the crafty captain. Only one man of the service had come near to outwitting him. And it had been an unlucky day for that individual when he shipped in Mears's crew in disguise as a sailor, for Mean had mistrusted the look in the man's eyes in, mid ocean, and—

Mears smiled. Who would be the wiser? Many men had fallen overboard ere now. There were none who knew of that certain dark dog-watch except the Malay mate, who was Mears's dog. Of course, the service would guess, and very likely guess right. But that was precisely what Mears desired them to do. It would teach them a lesson.

Jones had been the name the fellow had given. Mears remembered—J. Jones. He had been a queer sort of genius. He had been forever singing a fool song in a soft, womanlike voice. Mears recollected that song distinctly:

"Down went McGinty  
To the bottom of the sea."

Mears had amused himself occasionally by humming the song, substituting Jones for McGinty.

The ship's clock struck eight bells, and abruptly Mears arose and went on deck. Would she come? He answered yes. Never had a woman failed to come when Captain Mears wanted her. He stood there on the poop searching the small harbor craft with eager eyes. But he saw no sight of the boat he

sought. Reluctantly he signaled the order to weigh anchor. Mears waited not on men, much less women.

At the first creak of the chain and heave of the vessel Mears saw a boat he had not seen before. It had been hidden from his sight behind a launch. As he looked, the captain saw a woman rise in the stern and wave frantically. He smiled.

When the woman came aboard, she shrank in a shadow and gazed about half-frightened. Mears fancied she trembled. His voice had an oily, reassuring quality. "Ah! You have come. My ship and myself are at your disposal. Your cabin a ready if—"

He caught her relieved assent and led the way to her room. He left her at the door and went forward to start his native crew into action with curt orders.

As the Dorphin got under way and skimmed out of Hong-Kong, Mears stood on deck and laughed in derision at the blinking port lights fading in the offing. He had his opium and his woman, and the secret service men had a galling glimpse of his stern-light dipping over the horizon.

It was a hot night, and below decks the heat was unbearable. Mears had the supply-cases brought forward and set the crew to work separating the opium from the other goods.

In the midst of the operation he turned and found the woman at his shoulder. She was dressed in a white wrapper, and her hair was in braids. She was watching the natives interestedly.

"It was suffocating down there," she explained, "and I came up for a breath of air. Have I intruded?" She meaningly indicated the little square cases of opium.

Mears's look had flashed hard for a moment, but he quickly smiled.

"Not at all," he reassured her. "You have just seen more than any other person except myself and my crew have ever seen,

but it doesn't matter. This is my last trip."

"Aren't you nervous?" she asked.

"Not at all," he laughed. "In fact. I think this will be the luckiest voyage." He regarded her with surreptitious covetousness.

She smiled in that baffling way that puzzled Mears. The starlight was in her eyes,

And he looked into their depths curiously. For an instant he fancied he almost fathomed that look. Then she yawned and turned.

"I think I can sleep now," she said, and went below.

Morning brought a cool trade wind from the open sea, a feeling of elation to Mears, and a glow of color to the woman's cheeks. She came on deck early and disposed herself in the steamer-chair where Mean had an awning already prepared aft.

He had provided books for her, but she seemed to prefer reclining luxuriously in her chair and watching the native crew.

Mears brought tea and sat beside her, studying her carefully.

"Why do you have all natives in your crew?" she asked.

"Because," he answered, "they have just enough intelligence to do as they are told, without seeing or thinking too much."

"Have you ever had white men in your crew?"

"Sometimes," he said, and his eyes glinted for an instant.

"Your mate, there, he must have a deal of intelligence." She indicated the huge, thick-lipped Malay, bossing the crew forward.

"Some," Mears admitted. "More than the average. He has been with me ever since I started."

"He must know much, if the secret service could get him to talk."

"If?" Mears smiled tolerantly. "They won't; they're not slick enough for that. I tell you," he added, "the whole race of men can't outwit Captain Mears. The secret service—the

wisest—are fools, and the others, bah!” He snapped his fingers derisively.

“But perhaps a woman?” she suggested coquettishly.

Mears smiled. He, who baffled men, outwitted by one of the weaker sex! The thought amused him hugely. He gazed at the woman’s innocent head, and chuckled silently as he thought how little she knew about the women who had preceded her.

“But aren’t you apt to get caught in port?” She turned her eyes on Mears, and he warmed to her gaze.

“Ah,” he smiled. “I will tell you a secret. I unload on an island, and my agents attend to the rest. I go into port free of all opium. The secret service may search my ship from anchor to forepeak, for all I care.”

“But suppose you should be forced to put into port before unloading?”

“Why speculate on unpleasant things that are improbable?” he asked.

He was annoyed that he should have been led to say so much by this chit of a woman. But, he consoled himself, it was his last trip, so what matter?

That night Captain Mears received the first shock he had received in a long while; in fact, since he had been shocked by the look in a certain man’s eyes, many voyages before. That shock had subsided in the sough of a heavy splash one dark dogwatch. And it was annoying that this shock should come in the dog-watch.

From up in the rigging there came a sound that made his breath come hoarse. It was clear and distinct, just as it had sounded before—a song sung in a soft, womanlike voice:

“Down went McGinty,  
To the bottom of the sea.”

Then the sound seemed to drift away in the wind, and the night was again quiet.

Mears heard the soft patter of the watch’s feet aft. He glanced about anxiously. He saw the door of the woman’s cabin open. For a long while he stood there listening.

Finally he returned to bed. Once in his bunk, he broke out in sweat again, and his sleep was fitful. He was relieved when daylight came.

The crew was silent and sullen that morning. Mears was busy in the chart-house for a while, and when he came out the woman was on deck. She was standing aft, talking with the Malay mate. Mears came up and ordered the fellow below.

“They’re not worth wasting time on, those natives,” he told the woman.

“I thought this one interesting,” she said a little surprisedly. “He seems very superstitious.”

“They all are,” he admitted.

They sat under the awning and Mears tried to make talk. He laughed and made a pretense of gaiety. But the woman was inclined to be silent. She toyed with her hair and gazed off across the Hue-green expanse of water whipped into choppers by the trade-wind. She seemed thoughtful, and was oblivious to Mears’s talk.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” she asked suddenly.

“Of course not,” he declared irritably, adding suspiciously. “What made you ask that?”

“I—I just wondered,” she said. “I’ve heard of such things, haven’t you?” She looked at him appealingly.

“Yes; but there’s nothing in it at all.”

“I—I hope you’re right,” she said tremulously. “I’ve heard of them haunting ships.”

“Why should they haunt a ship?” He tried to conceal his interest and make the question casual.

“Oh, for all sorts of things. Sometimes a man’s sins will come back to him that way.”

Suddenly he lost his reserve and leaned forward.

“You don’t believe that?” he questioned eagerly.

“Well,” she admitted, “I believe—I know—that a man’s sins will come back to him somehow!”

“Rot!” he commented disgustedly. But none the less the woman’s words had made an impression.

For a while they were silent. Mears regarded the woman in her luxurious ease and tried to fathom the look in her eyes. But it seemed now more unfathomable than ever. It seemed to lie dormant now.

Finally she cast an apprehensive glance about and shivered slightly. That shiver was uncanny in that heat-filled sea.

“Listen!” her voice was tremulous. “I’ll tell you what made me ask that just now, about ghosts. Last night”—she shivered again at the recollection—“I was awake, when suddenly I heard a voice singing. It seemed to come from up above.” She turned and looked at Mears as though appealing for belief.

Mears leaned forward and searched her face tensely.

“Yes.” he breathed; “and you heard?”

“It was a soft voice, and it sang a song. I can remember every word. Listen—”

“Don’t! Don’t!” Mears’s cry sounded shrill and unnatural to his own ears.

The woman looked at him, startled. He jumped to his feet and hurriedly strode down the deck. The Malay mate was waiting for him, several of the crew grouped near.

“Cap’n Mears,” spoke the mate. “Ias’ night we—”

“Shut up!” bellowed the captain. “If I hear another word out of you I’ll bust your face!” The mate turned tail and left, muttering. The crew scampered away like frightened mice.

That day was both long and short for Captain Mears. When finally night came,

Mears sat on deck till late. At last he went below and turned in.

Mears could not sleep. He tried to pretend to himself that it was the heat. But he found himself listening whenever the ship’s clock struck, counting the strokes, waiting anxiously for the hour of the dogwatch.

At last it came, and Mears rose in his bed as he counted the strokes, sounding deep and sonorous as they resounded through the ship. Then he strained his ears for another sound. Even as the last stroke was dying in the heavy air, there came a sound from without. Swiftly Mears drew on his clothes and stepped to the door.

It was there! In the rigging! That same, soft voice, and it sang the song as before. The words came down to Mears, bringing a chill to his heart.

“Down went McGinty  
To the bottom of the sea.”

Mears’s flesh went creepy, his mouth was dry. He glanced toward the woman’s cabin. The door was open. He wondered why her door must always be open at this unholy hour. Fearfully, he looked up at the rigging. Startled, he fancied he saw a white form—man shaped—swaying back and forth. Then he saw that it was a sail.

Mears stepped on deck and was confronted by the Malay mate with the crew at his heels. Their faces hung sullen and determined.

“Curse you!” the captain cried. “What are you doing here? Get below, you dogs!”

They failed to move, and Mears cursed them more furiously. Then suddenly, from the rigging, there came that sound again. It brought a pallor to Mears’s face, and a glint of superstitious fear to the eyes of the natives. Soft and womanlike the voice sang:

“Down went McGinty

To the bottom of the sea.”

The Malay clutched Mears’s shoulder.

“You hear him?” he cried accusingly. “You hear him, jes’ lik’ he sing it ’fore you throwed him ofer dat night?”

“Shut up, you fool!” cried Mears. “If, you don’t like it, get off the ship!”

“Dat’s what we’s a goin’ to do; we’s a goin’ into port!”

“What!” cried Mears. “You’re crazy; we’ve opium aboard. We’ll unload on the island, then well go in port, curse you!”

“It tak’ four days to reech islan’. No, we mak’ port to-morry. We leave dis ship; him got evil spirit. Dat Jones man, he cum back!”

“You’ll do as I say!”

Mears’s words were choked off as the Malay seized him and flung him against the forecastle with a savage growl. The native stood over Mears, his face thrust out with doglike ferocity.

“We mak’ port to-morry,” he chanted; “we mak’ port to-morry!”

He turned and went below with the others, still repeating the words in a monotonous singsong.

Mears struggled to his feet, cursing with tears in his eyes. His mastery of his crew was at an end. He caught sight of the woman, just come on deck, regarding him uncertainly. The strange look was alive in her eyes, and its mystery, together with the warmth of her beauty, maddened Mears. He grasped her roughly.

“Listen!” he cried. “When I told you you were to be a passenger, I lied. You’re my woman: I’m your master!”

She gave a startled cry and shrank into the shallow. Mears could fancy the frightened look in her eyes. And it brought him a devilish sort of satisfaction to think of it beside that other look. With a desperate effort she broke loose from him and fled toward her cabin. He

did not follow.

“Time enough!” he called after her. “Time enough!”

Mears came on deck early the next morning and walked straight to the wheel. He glanced at the compass and saw the ship was deviating directly off the course he had set, heading toward Singapore.

With an oath the captain swung on the native holding the wheel. His fist shot out and the fellow crumpled to the deck. Mears whirled at the soft patter of feet behind him. He whipped a revolver from his pocket and covered the mate who was rushing him.

“I’m still captain here!” he bellowed.

Something hurtled through the air from behind and caught him on the head. The captain went to the deck, bleeding from the wound made by the marlinespike. A native who had been lurking behind the forecastle came forward grinning.

When Mears recovered consciousness he was lying in his cabin. His head ached cruelly. He felt of it and found it was roughly bandaged. He sat on the edge of his bed and looked hopefully at a chest where he had kept an extra revolver. It had been ransacked. He arose and walked toward the door.

On deck Mears found a native at the wheel, heading for Singapore, and the Malay mate standing by with Mears’s revolvers stuck in his belt.

“You see, cap’n, we mak’ port, lik’ I say,” said the mate, grinning.

“Port it is, then, you fool.” muttered Mears with an assumption at assent. “But get that opium overboard!”

The Malay shook his head obstinately.

“Nothing mus’ leeve dis ship,” he declared, “if anyting leeves—him cum bak with him song!” He indicated the rigging above.

“Curse you and your superstition!” cried Mears.

“It iss told me.” The Malay shrugged

his shoulders.

“Who told you?”

The native shrugged his shoulders again and did not reply.

Mears saw it was useless. It galled him, this being under the will of another, and a Malay in the bargain. But he consoled himself with the thought that he had not been outwitted. It had been done by brute force. He remembered the woman, and saw she was not on deck. He started toward her cabin, but the pain in his head became so great that he returned to his cabin and lay down. He was soon asleep.

When Mears awoke the ship's motion was arrested to a gentle sidewise swing. With a start the captain realized the vessel was at anchor. He hurried on deck.

There were harbor craft about, and off on the shore line Mears could see the long piers that he knew were those of Singapore. He looked over the rail and saw a small launch swinging beside the Dorphin. Voices aft drew him in that direction. And there, at the port rail, Mears saw what sent a chill of fear to his very heart.

Three men that Mears recognized as secret service agents were standing by the port rail. The big Malay mate was talking to one of them, and the man was taking something down in a little book.

But what gripped Mears most, what

sent a clutch at his breath, was the woman! She was standing there, chatting familiarly with two of the men. To have been outwitted by men would have been bitter, but a woman!

She was pointing toward the rigging, now, and the men followed her gaze. Her lips seemed to be moving, but no sound came from them. Then suddenly Mears heard what sickened him to his very soul. It was a song, and it came down from the rigging, just as it had before:

“Down went McGinty  
To the bottom of the sea.”

The men laughed, congratulatingly. One of them drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and approached the captain. The woman turned also; and with a start Mears understood the look in her eyes. It was a look of triumph born of confidence.

Even as Mears gazed at her it seemed to him all the ghosts of those other women rose up behind her. The captain drew a hand across his eyes to dispel the illusion. God! What was that she was saying?

“I was just demonstrating, captain,” she said, “my ability as a ventriloquist. The voice I imitated was that of my husband. That was a song he used to sing. Jones was the name he went under, sometimes—J. Jones!”