

The World Outside



By Harold MacGrath

The Story Thus Far.

An adventure for \$10,000—bizarre offer made to Collingswood Jeremiah Bancroft, who has just inherited his father's \$7,000,000, by a stranger who says he represents the Great Adventure company, and who is tossed into Jerry's ramshackle dwelling by a terrific storm. Jerry, sitting among his curios and the 1,200 books he is reading, at first scoffs and then ponders, recalling his father's mysterious death, yet to be solved, and his own sheltered, uneventful 24 years. He fails to notice the malevolent looks that the stranger darts at him. The man explains that he has sold many successful adventures and that Jerry's is to begin at once, provided he signs a contract to go into the great world outside and meet it.

SECOND INSTALLMENT.

A Girl in Distress.

ASK many questions as you like," said the seller of adventure in response to Bancroft's query.

"Supposing I signed a contract for an adventure," said Bancroft. "Later I fall in love. Wouldn't it be likely for me to distrust her as one of your paid puppets? How about that?"

"You read the prospectus a little hurriedly. All we offer is man-stuff. For love is not a subject of reasoning, but of feeling, and therefore there are no common principles upon which one can persuade another concerning it. So says our mutual friend Boswell. If a young and pretty woman entered the game she would enter it naturally, in the true adventurous style. And, if the right sort, your \$10,000 will have been well invested."

"You have an answer for everything."

"A man who sells anything should have. Well, I'll leave the prospectus, a photograph of George Bellman, who bought one of our adventures, together with a synopsis of what befell him. Understand, part of the adventure is ours, part of it the natural sequence of events." The adventurer placed the photograph and synopsis on the desk. "Here is our regular address."

"The Bolivia Emerald company," read Bancroft, "West Forty-second, near Broadway."

"That is the sign on our doors. We should hesitate to use the Great Adventure company, for reasons already explained. Obviously we are manipulating—not promoting—a small emerald mine from which we are really taking a quantity of marketable emeralds. These stones cover our expenses during dull times, when we find nothing but wishy-washy youth." Bancroft grinned. "If I could go on an adventure with you as a side partner, why, I don't say."

"Then it would become a Cook's tour. Still, I'm obliged for the thought," the adventurer added dryly. "We may get together. Who can say?" He strapped the portfolio and rose.

At this moment there came a tremendous rumble of thunder; forked lightning darted hither and yon; the wind rose to tempest strength, and the old house trembled. The two men stood listening, abstractedly perhaps. The adventurer turned, his eyes twinkling with fictitious merriment.

"All that is needed," he said, shifting the portfolio under his arm, "to perfect the moment is for me to vanish in a cloud of sulphurous smoke."

"I wonder if it would astonish me?" said Bancroft, laughing. Then he observed Mrs. Horne in the doorway. Her attitude was hesitant.

"Supper is on the table, sir," she announced.

"I say," said Bancroft, with that ready hospitality which is still to be found among the country folk, "have supper with me. Come along. The local hotel is pretty poor, and I can give you steak, fried potatoes, salad and some apple pie to remember. The worst of the blow will be over in an hour."

"Supper?" The adventurer's head came about with a jerk. "Supper—here?"

Another tableau, except for three roving glances; there was diffidence in old Mrs. Horne's tolerance in Bancroft's, but in the glances of the adventurer there was something akin to the look of a marauding wolf who unexpectedly finds himself caught in a trap.

"Yes, come and have supper," urged Bancroft, who wouldn't have turned forth a tramp into such a storm. Not that this charitable instinct was wholly accountable for the present invitation.

There was a sudden-born craving for company and entertainment; and this odd stranger, he would be both. "Come along. It's a quarter of a mile from here to the hotel, and the walk will be no picnic in this downpour."

Bancroft was young. He had by constant study acquired a formidable array of facts, even diested them; but as yet few of these facts had been exercised. He was, then, something like a fine book, waiting for someone to cut the leaves. Those outside forces which sharpen a man's wits and strengthen his defense had not yet touched him save in a negligible degree. His knowledge of physiognomy was at present ordinary, in no wise curious or deliberate. He had never had any cause to study the human countenance. Here, in the village, he new everybody by their acts; then faces were indicative of this or that person, not of this or that character. So then, throughout this remarkable interview he missed the cold menace which from time to time revealed itself from behind the smiling blue eyes of the unknown.

Who suddenly began to laugh.

Now, while it is true that Bancroft's eyes were untrained in the art of reading expression on human faces, his ears were sharp enough in the translation of sounds. Once more he sensed the hollowness of this laughter, the wall or dark cavern from behind which or out of which it came. There was, however, one visible point; the laughter, which began abruptly and ended abruptly, did not signal its approach by a smile nor its passing.

"You are asking me to stay to supper?"

"Sure, there's plenty."

The stranger became conscious of an unalterable face that this boy was no fool, that he was educated far beyond his years; that if he were romantic he regulated such flights by the leash of reason. He might be reckless, but he would never be absurd. Refuse the supper and the boy would forget all about the Great Adventure company. He must, then, in order to promote his sinister plans, photograph himself indelibly upon the youngster's memory. But to break bread under this roof! He flung his portfolio upon the chair. "Hang it!" he said with a gaiety which would have deceived the Cumaen Sibyl, "I'll go you. I feel that I shall be perfectly at home!"

"Another plate, Mrs. Horne."

"I put another one on, sir, not knowing—"

"Come along, then, Boswell," said Bancroft, jovially. "I say, do you drink?"

"Occasionally, but I am more or less a temperate man, Mr. Bancroft."

"The cellar is full of the stuff, though I've never opened any of it. Sometimes, in the fields during harvest, I've taken my glass of eggnogg, made with hard cider."

"Nobody in the village told me your father drank?"

"He didn't. He was a teetotaler."

"Ah! Another one of those foreclosures."

"Possibly. I'll take the candle and we'll explore. You can pick out the brand you like."

"That's royal, I must say. Lead on."

Inwardly the adventurer smiled. He reached into the other's mind and opened the nebulous idea forming there, as he might have opened a ripe plum. Get him drunk, eh, so he would babble? Decidedly the boy had an old head on his shoulders.

The whole south end of the cellar was lined with sloping racks, upon which reposed 300 or 400 bottles, covered with dust and cobwebs. The adventurer seized the candle and bent to scrutinize a bottle. Romanee Conti. So the wine was here, too? Romanee Conti, Clos de Vougeot, and Chateau Yquem! He leaned against an apple barrel and began to chuckle, unamindful that the tallo from the candle dripped upon his shoes.

"In a dead world like this!" he said. "Have you any opinion of what you have got here?"

"No."

"How long has it been here?"

"O, ever since I can remember. Pick out your bottle. The steak will be getting cold."

The adventurer returned—the candle and selected a bottle of Romanee Conti, which he wrapped in his handkerchief, careless of the dust, and tucked under his arm. He followed Bancroft into the dining room.

"You will have to drink it out of an ordinary goblet," said Bancroft. "I suppose there are some formalities, some ceremonial, in opening a bottle of this stuff; but I'm a green hand on that score."

"Will you join me?"

"Well, I don't suppose a glass will be my utter damnation."

"You never can tell."

"How much is the stuff worth?"

"Sometimes around 10,000."

Bancroft's sensation was one of indifference; and he began immediately to analyze this indifference. Not so long ago the information would have wrenched a shout of incredulity out of him, while now he accepted it as something ordinarily possible. A millionaire, why shouldn't his wine cellar be worth something?"

"I could sell it for you tomorrow," said the adventurer.

"Bootleg it?"

"Something like that, of course."

Bancroft laughed contentedly, and began to attack his steak.

But the significance of the laughter did not escape the keen ears of his guest. "There are bootleggers and bootleggers," he said gravely. "You know nothing about real wine, and I do. It will be a crime to permit this nectar eventually to turn to sediment and bitterness. Wines die, young man, the same as human beings. A certain number of years, and they reach the top of their vigor; then they begin to decline. Oh, I know what is going on in the back of your head. You have written me down some kind of a crook, and your suspicions have been confirmed by my offer to take the wine off your hands."

Bancroft was conscious of a warmth in his cheeks. "Honestly, now, can you blame me?"

"All right. We'll say no more about the Great Adventure company. Keep the prospectus and laugh over it in the days to come."

There are some retreats which surpass in advantages the most tenacious defenses. A man who had something to sell and did not care particularly whether you bought it or not. Bancroft was impressed. He eyed his goblet of wine, took a swallow and found it good. A mellow fire seemed to set about invading every vein in his body.

"Fine lot of chairs."

"What?" said Bancroft, who had been studying his sensations.

"These chairs here. A fine lot of Dutch cherry, worth about \$300 each; probably more, since the set is complete. My word, this house is like Ali Baba's cave; the further you go the more wonderful it becomes. Romanee Conti and antique Dutch!"

"And both are over my head," Bancroft confessed. "Yet I have always admired these chairs—without knowing why."

The adventurer rose and shifted the chair about in his hands, with loving tenderness. It occurred to Bancroft that a lover might thus smooth a woman's hand. He glanced at the neighboring chair, but could not see what there was to fondle.

"By the way," said the adventurer, setting down the chair. "I believe I saw a volume back there on antiques."

"The one book I never took much interest in."

"I'll get it." He was gone but a minute. It struck Bancroft as odd the ease with which the man found the book. "See?" said the guest, as he laid the open volume at the side on Bancroft's plate.

"Hang me, but here's a photograph of the identical chairs!"

"Does it say who owned them?" asked Bancroft, with an eagerness all out of proportion with his actual interest in the chairs. He had always been curious about the books, the cases and the chairs. They did not belong in a house of this ordinary quality.

"It says here that the chairs are owned by the author." The adventurer turned back to the title page. "Well, that doesn't get us anywhere. C. J. K. Of course, the publishers would know who C. J. K. is or was." The adventurer returned to his chair. "Antiques are not valuable, because they are old, but for two reasons: the artistry of the maker and the shadowy associations which cling to the objects. Take that chair there with the arms. Three hundred years old. You have imagination. Think of—conjure up—all the women who have sat in that chair, their bright faces, their lace caps . . . and some of them with a child in their arms."

To Bancroft's wonder, the smile for which he had been waiting broke. It was directed at the chair—a smile that was tender and wistful, lending a strange beauty to the harsh face. Bancroft decided that his opinion of the man must undergo considerable reconstruction. No rogue could smile like that. Still, when the face came around again there was mockery in the eyes.

"I suppose there must be a casket about filled with pearls and rubies and diamonds."

"I doubt it," said Bancroft.

"How did you two get on?"

"O, tolerably. He was not what you would call companionable; but the aloofness was serene. He left early in the morning and returned late in the day. In the summer he would sit for a while on the porch; in the winter, before the fire there. He always went to bed at half-past 8. Then I'd steal in and begin my reading. I was always a little afraid of him, though I don't know why I should have been."

"Did he ever give you any reason for living in this hole?"

"No. He never confided in me in the least. He never laughed, hummed tunes or seemed to take any interest in the actions going on about him. Though he often smiled. His attitude was always that of a man deeply absorbed in thought."

"Did he ever answer the bell?"

"No. Either I or Mrs. Horne answered the bell. He had signified that he wanted nothing to do with the villagers, who called him miser, which doubtless he was; for he had the miser's instincts of frugality. I never hated him; and now I feel sorry for him. Not a friend in the world, so far as I know."

The adventurer stared into his wine.

"Take the Merchant of Venice," went on Bancroft, defensively.

"Why does the world hate him so? They took his money and they took his daughter. What did he get out of that deal that all should detest him?"

The adventurer emptied his glass of Burgundy and refilled it. He looked inquiringly at Bancroft, who pushed his goblet toward the bottle.

"How about the time they stoned you?"

"So you heard about that? If I hate anything, it will be this town and its inhabitants. Though, I wish no harm to either."

"And you never felt the desire to clear out and see what the world was like?"

"A thousand times. But caution always held me in. Supposing I failed and had to come slinking back? It was the fear that I might fail miserably that kept me here. That sounds like timidity. Perhaps it is. I am no judge. But it will be seen that I lost nothing by having patience. The law of averages gives me plenty of time to go a-venturing. But how about you? You must have seen something of this world."

The adventurer welcomed this opening with secret satisfaction. To thrill this young mind, tantalize it, bewilder it. So he spoke of Europe, Asia, Africa, the South Seas; books, the great picture galleries, cathedrals and temples. Through it all Bancroft sipped his wine and tried to visualize these verbal enchantments. Here were the places he had dreamed of when a boy—the great and glowing world outside. A temple in the Burma dust, a smiling lagoon in the summer seas. . . .

"I am going to give you a little advice," concluded the narrator. "Go away for a few months."

"Why?"

"Because, as soon as the world learns about your riches, all manner of mendicants will be milling in your hallway. Crooks in foreign cars, charity committees, relief organizations, oil promoters, book agents, female vampires, ordinary thugs in hopes of your being fool enough to keep large sums of money about. Your mail will mount waist-high, for you will be on every sucker list in the country. There will be 10,000 ingenious plans to separate you from your money, and 9,000 of them within the law. You call the Great Adventure company preposterous; wait until you see some of the other prospects! And you will fall for some of them. Why? Because you can afford to risk a few thousands out of curiosity. Go away, and inside of six months you will have been forgotten; some other millionaire's son will be the target. Go to New York—the New Bagdad!—and take another name; learn something about human beings. Contact. All the learning there ever was is worthless without contact. What's in your head now? Lumber. Contact will turn it into polished citron."

To print his personality indelibly upon this receptive mind; he believed he had accomplished this. Now to get the boy out of these protective environs, where he could say come in or go out, where there was confidence and serenity. To get him into New York, where diffidence would jostle him on one side and confusion on the other.

The boy had a pleasant, attractive face, singularly clear in the

skin; steady, gray eyes. Some day, when these eyes began to observe and weigh humanity, they would be difficult to bemuse. He was well set-up, too. So then, to excite his imagination and lure him away from this stronghold.

The two glasses of wine had exhilarated Bancroft. He felt expansively charitable toward the future, toward the past, toward this entertaining adventurer, the most interesting man he had ever met. There was a mischievous inclination to get the 10,000, toss it beside the man's plate and demand a contract, if only to see how he would sustain the shock; but immediately he comprehended that it was the wise which was urging him to make a fool of himself. He laughed.

"What's the joke?"

"Well, nothing could be franker than that; I had proposed that we forget all about the Great Adventure company; but evidently you are still mulling it over."

"Only as a whimsical absurdity."

"Six months in a war camp has trained you in skepticism," said the adventurer, wisely shifting the subject. "Queer thing. You make no real friendships among the boys. You were a highbrow to them, and all the while you were crazy to mix in, but didn't know how. Lumber; all you had learned from books was lumber, since it hadn't taught you to be a mixer. When you went into town—the one nearest your camp—you went alone and hung around the public library. You didn't drink or shoot craps or curse the powers that be. You escaped brawls because your buddies found out at the start that you could use your fists. That's where your one-eyed pugilist came in. But you never preached and you never acted. Nobody liked you, but all respected you because you made a tiptop soldier by the time the war blew up. But you got as far as Hoboken."

"I wanted to get into it."

"A war medal to bring home and flaunt at the villagers. You didn't want mud and death; you wanted glamour, the excitement of crossing the ocean, of seeing foreign cities, the pretty girls, and all that. What this? Real apple pie, as I live, with cinnamon!"

"And a second piece, if you want it, sir," said Mrs. Horne, bustling out.

"Would you like another bottle?" asked Bancroft, with sly intent.

"Would you? No, young man, you could not get me drunk under four bottles, and by that time you would be under the table. I use my education, and it tells me 'ware of strong drink. A little exhilaration now and then will not hurt any one. But how few of us are strong enough to halt this side of the line? Would you like another bottle?"

"No," said Bancroft, readily admitting his failure, but free of chagrin.

"What are you going to do with all this money?"

Bancroft's hand went to his brow, his fingers into his thick brown hair. "I don't know. Spend some of it, give some of it away. I don't want to waste it; I want to do good with it, and I want to have a decent good time, too. But how and where to begin that's what bewilders me. With an income of 10,000 a year, I should be very happy. But more than a quarter of a million, when a \$20 bill still looks as big as all outdoors! If you had set your adventure at a million, I might have jumped at it."

"My mistake," said the other dryly. "You can still offer it, however. You are a free agent. Your father's will was without bequests or conditions."

"I can spend it like a sailor, or go on accumulating it. Did you see the will?"

"No; but I was given a gist of it."

"It's a literary curiosity; one of the shortest wills on record. Whenever I feel myself getting foggy I take out my copy and read it. Here, read it yourself, and tell me what you think of it."

He sailed the envelope across the table. The adventurer stared at it, rather stonily.

"Go on, read it," said Bancroft, impatiently. "It's worth reading."

Thus urged, the stranger drew the envelope toward him and extracted the instrument, and smoothed out upon the tablecloth.

Know All by These Presents:

Being hale and sound mentally, whatever my body may be, I leave to my son, Collingswood Jeremiah Bancroft, all my real and personal property, unconditionally, without let or hindrance. There will be no debts to pay. I had 20 odd years of intensive pleasure in gathering these funds and properties. My son, if so he pleases, may dissipate it in as many months.

Copy. SILAS BANCROFT.

(Continued on Page Seven.)