

The World Outside

(Continued From Page Three.)

By Harold MacGrath

her wonderment never ceased to grow. Her thought ran back to a story she had once read: Of a youth who always remained young, and who had acquired all the learning in the world. She found herself liking them both, unreservedly, perhaps because each was an unusual personality. Craig had attracted this liking out of her, despite her resistance; she had gone toward Bancroft, her reluctance shadowy, because of the romantic background out of which he had come. The boy was quite as distinguished as the man, and more remarkable because the distinction was purely innate and not innate and acquired, as in the man.

Craig rose from the stool, and with a serious expression put out his hand toward his young rival. "Thank you, Mr. Collingswood, for a fine idea. I'm ashamed to say that I never thought my music might be of use to any one. You were in the army?"

"On this side."

"And you know where some of these soldier hospitals are?"

"I can easily secure a list."

"Will you take lunch with me tomorrow at The Players, so we can talk it over? Twelve-thirty, Gramercy Park. Anyone will show you the way. I'm going to be very grateful. It will be a tonic; something I need rather keenly."

"I shall be happy to have lunch with you," said Bancroft, disarmed completely.

Said Craig to Nancy: "I shall telephone Sorrentino. And don't be afraid of him."

Nancy. "I shall be afraid of him, of that's very easy to say," replied herself—of everything."

"But you mustn't. You have a foothold; you're the hit of The Purple Moth. You're a celebrity."

"I wonder," said Nancy.

It was half after three when Jenny's party broke up. After he had helped Jenny and Nancy with the dishes and the general clean-up of the studio, Jerry bade them good-night at their doors and sought his own.

To find it slightly ajar. He remembered clearly of having locked it before going out. He flung it wide, reached in a hand, and turned the light button. He made two important discoveries. First, that the contract with the Great Adventure Company was no longer in the bureau drawer; second, that his trunk lock had been broken and that the prospectus, the photograph of Bellman, and the synopsis of his adventures had vanished along with the contract!

First blood, Bancroft admitted grimly. Stewart—for the purloiner could be none other—taking advantage of his regular absences at night, had struck with unexpected swiftness and from an unsuspected angle, almost as if he had been assured of his, Bancroft's intention to deposit the documents in the bank on the morrow and had anticipated the possibility of such a move. So here he was, without a line to prove that he had entered into any agreement with the Great Adventure Company, with nothing to prove that such a concern even existed. He could not appeal to Stewart in any manner, for that would be a confession of weakness. He must await events and meet them as they fell.

But one fact was now established comprehensively by this peculiar theft. Stewart dared not leave any trail behind. This was a direct admission that there was no harmless adventure toward, but a sinister business in which the liberty—perhaps the life of one Collingswood Jeremiah Bancroft was concerned. That part of the pool had clarified, and Bancroft felt considerable relief. Up to now he hadn't known what was on the knees of the gods—a jest or a portent. But the major portion of the pool was still in chaos—the why of these actions and wherein they concerned himself and his father.

Stewart must not find the copy of that affidavit in which he, Bancroft, had sworn that if he signed any document it would be through physical or moral coercion, and yet he must keep in about his person, handily. At length he found an excellent hiding place between the ribbon and the felt of his hat. He had a feeling that this document was the only trump he held. How he would come to the use of it lay in the future.

And now what to do with the wallet? After all, Bancroft concluded the seven-odd thousand and a packet of emeralds would not interest the seller of adventures; such a game wouldn't be big enough. And where could he hide the money and jewels in his room, since trunks and bureau drawers offered no security? He would have to deposit them in the bank or carry them about, and he decided upon the second procedure.

It was 4 o'clock. He took off his shoes and slipped down to the lower hall, where the telephone was. He called up the hotel where he had slept in the ambassador's suite and asked if Mr. George Bellman was in, only to be informed that Mr. Bell-

man had paid his bill and left for parts unknown. To Bancroft's mind this was the finishing touch. Bellman was no longer needed as a dummy adventurer.

Bancroft would have been equally amused and astonished if he had known that at this moment George Bellman was rolling in drugged stupor from one side of his bunk to the other, on his way to Cape Town, and was to have, before the voyage ended, the most wholesome respect for the president of the Great Adventure Company, defunct, which may not be the proper way to describe it, since there had actually never existed any such concern.

He went to bed and fell into a series of troubled dreams. Whenever his father's face intruded there was calm; whenever Stewart's, stress and storm, with Nancy's face and Jenny's and Craig's oddly cutting in.

Promptly at 2 o'clock that afternoon Nancy appeared before the door to Sorrentino's apartment. She did not press the bell at once, but stared with ironical speculation at the dark panels, as if she expected that there would appear, summoned by the sheer force of her will, some handwriting touching upon the immediate future. To be or not to be. Supposing. . . ! Supposing Jenny was right? Supposing she, Nancy Bowman, had misdirected her young energies all these years? Supposing she had wasted the playtime of her youth for a chimera?

Of what breed was she—a thoroughbred or a winner? If there was a blow in there, would she come forth standing or crushed?

The door opened. She did not remember having touched the bell.

"I am Miss Bowman," she managed to say. "I have an appointment."

The Italian manservant bowed and gestured for her to enter. He led her toward the music room, and Sorrentino met her warmly at the threshold.

"Ah! A young lady who is prompt!" he said. He spoke English fluently. His roving professional glance took in the slender but rounded body, the ruddy hair, and the golden skin, the splendid hazel eyes: a young Violetta. That she could act vivaciously, that she was lively and bewitching, he already knew. What he particularly admired was the lack of theatrical assurance. She was not flustered, but she was evidently anxious. "Where is your music—the compositions you wish to sing to me?"

"I am going to leave that to you, Signor," she answered in excellent Italian.

"Signorita, you please me," he said in his native tongue. "Come in to the piano."

The top of the piano was littered with the scores of all the famous operas, and out of this medley Sorrentino selected two songs which he was tolerably certain she would know—from Marta and Linda di Chamouni. He tried her in comedy and tragedy; he gave her voice every possible opportunity; what is more, he gave her a full hour.

"E finito!" he cried at last, dismissing the accompanist. "My friend, the Signor Craig—who should be a famous pianist—told me that you would want the truth, signorina. Do you?"

"Yes. If my endeavors are being wasted I ought to be made aware of it."

"Your voice is wonderful for the work to which you now apply it. It is clear, true, and sweet. You are a born comedienne, signorina, just as a grand opera singer is born. All the study and application in the world will not make of you what you are not. First of all, endurance, an iron body. In a little time you will be rich and famous. Make them give you light opera with real music."

"The truth, signor," she interrupted, understanding whether these compliments were leading.

But Sorrentino continued serenely. "I am giving you the benefit of my observation and experience, signorina. I repeat, in light opera you will become irresistible. You are now the lark in the meadows, wholly free. Why seek to become the nightingale and live eternally in a cage, in fear of draughts, the rain, the snow, the temperature of the rooms, the pleasant little voices of the table? To study always, to be subjected to implacable jealousies! Ah, believe me, the diva is never so happy and carefree as the sourette."

"Tell me what I lack, signor."

"Your voice is beautiful, but weak. There are many beautiful voices, but only a few throats which can meet the tremendous calls made upon them. The grand opera throat is peculiarly a gift from heaven; it cannot be fashioned by study. You might go a little way, in minor parts, but in the end your courage would ebb and your heart break. How many women are conspicuously great in grand opera? You can count them on the fingers of one hand. Five, out of an army of half a million! It is easy to lie; it is difficult to tell the truth; but I am what

I am because I have always told the truth. Had I not seen you last night I would have told you the truth after the first song, perhaps roughly. But you made me laugh last night, and I owed you something for that. But you!" he laughed pleasantly. "Ah! To sing as you do, and to make your audience laugh! What more do you wish?" Then, gravely: "Who set you upon this path? You interest me."

"My adopted father."

"He was a musician?"

"Yes; a vocal teacher."

"What other teachers?"

She named them.

"Good," he said. "You have been well instructed in the cultivation of your voice, but you have been misdirected as to its possibilities."

"All my study, all my self-denial—"

"No, no!" he interrupted, intuitively taking the word out of her mouth: "never wasted. No study is wasted; no hard work is useless. How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Only twenty, and fame and fortune within your reach! Signorina you do not realize how lucky you are. If, in your particular environment, you can make a crabbled old man like me laugh, you will make me weep if I fail to convince you of the folly of deserting the absolute for a vague possibility. The ability to make people laugh, in their minds as well as in their throats, requires a special genius, quite as great as that of Alda or Galli-Curci. Good day and good luck. I shall come to see you again some night when my nerves are all tortured, and you will make me laugh again."

Suddenly a vast indifference fell upon Nancy. "I thank you, signor, for your kindness and your patience."

He kissed her hand gallantly as he led her to the door.

Nancy went town and out into the street. For a little while the street, with its tremendous warrens and its scattering human atoms, refused to be real. The primal cause of this unreality was not that she had failed in her ambitions or that they were in a master's judgment unattainable. It lay in the fact that everybody considered her a comedienne, which in her opinion, she essentially was not. What would happen to her, now that the props had been knocked from under? What would become of her, with the spur gone that carried her through her foolery every night? A comedienne, when her background was tragic! This great maestro, telling her that she had made him laugh! O, she was mad or the world was!

She wanted Ling Foo; she wanted the dog to cuddle and cry over and hug to her empty heart. A comedienne! All at once she recalled the question she had asked herself before the maestro's door: Was she a thoroughbred or a whiner? Her chin went up and her eyes flashed. The seller of adventures, half a dozen yards behind her, noticed the sudden tilt of her head and the clenched hands, and wondered what manner of thought had assailed her. The girl who had ordered the apple. One or the other of these young women might become necessary to his plans in the near future, and it behooved him to investigate their habits against this possible need.

Bread and butter, bread and butter. The phrase began to haunt her footsteps, and the elevated took up the chant. Bread and butter, bread and butter! Could she remember all the things she did on the stage? Could she repeat her lines correctly? Supposing she faltered and forgot, struck by a passing aphasia? Her head began to race, as it naturally would with all this confusion, this groping about in the dark without feeling and substance to hold to.

That night the god of irony entered the theater with her as usual, but in a new role: Nancy was permitted to be conscious of everything she did; she was no longer an automaton.

After the first act Mannheim came to her dressing room.

"Was—was I all right?" eagerly. (Bread and butter, bread and butter)

"You were, little lady. That mechanical doll stunt has knocked them over. You're a born comedienne."

But she knew that all the rest of her stage career was going to be one constant siege of terror.

On the elevated that night—she had insisted upon going home alone—she presently became aware of an unusual interest on the part of her fellow travelers. They stared at her, some icily, some with smiles. Curious to learn the reason, as hitherto nobody had ever paid any attention to her, she opened her handbag and stole a glance into her pocket mirror. She was horrified to see that she had forgot to take off her make-up.

A week passed, another, without any notable event in the lives of the three inseparables, for Bancroft was always either with Nancy or with Jenny or with both. The three of them went to Sunday concerts, there

was generally tea at 4 in Nancy's room, and frequently he went abroad with Jenny. There were times when he had tea with Nancy alone, for Jenny could not always get away from the model shop.

So far as Bancroft was concerned, Nancy no longer troubled herself to observe convention. She had reached that point of faith in him when his presence was comforting; she liked to be with him, for he was never dull. A month gone, the thought of being alone in her room with a young man would have shocked her. Still, she made a concession to convention: The door was always ajar. (Now that it was no longer forbidden ground, Ling Foo ceased to explore the hall showing how easily a dog adopts human traits.)

They learned that they had many likes in common, the same romances, the same poets. She sang for him in the twilight, old folk-songs, old love-ballads, and there was one particularly haunting refrain:

Only come again in dreams,
And with the morning light are fled.

When she sang that he would sit with his chin in his palms and stare into the gathering shadows. What happy hours these were to him who had never known companionship!

They were sometimes joined by Craig, who was arranging for a tour in January. For he had taken seriously Bancroft's suggestion about playing to the broken soldiers. Nancy praised him generously, but she did not know that for this need of praise Craig would have gone to Dahomey and played before the savage king. But vaguely and resentfully Bancroft comprehended this fact.

One twilight Craig sat at the piano playing Chopin nocturnes. Nancy had Ling Foo in her lap. Jenny was leaning against the piano. Bancroft sat in the Morris chair, his head back, studying the patch of reflected light on the ceiling. Craig turned.

"I say, you people. Thanksgiving in three days. Come up to my home and have dinner with me. Turkey, cranberry sauce and mince pie. I'll set the hour at 5:30, so we can have about two hours before theater. My aunt will come in; she always does. What do you say?"

Jenny answered for everybody. "Well, believe me, that's the best music I ever heard! Will we go? Only a busted subway could hold us back!"

To dine in a real home, thought Nancy, with rooms and rooms to meander about in, fine rugs on the floors, paintings and tapestry on the walls, and cozy bookshelves!

"Jenny is right," she said. "That is good music to three lonesome folks who were dully planning dinner in a nearby restaurant. Of course, we'll go."

Bancroft did not particularly care for the change in the plans of festival. He would now have to share these two with Craig, and he shunted to one side. He managed however, to voice his acceptance heartily enough.

Craig departed, and Jenny sang his praises. Nancy turned on the lights and Bancroft approached a window and stared into the dim configuration of back yards. Two weeks, and beyond the purloining of the contract and prospectus material, the Great Adventure company had not stirred in his direction. Battle, murder and sudden death. . . .

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I was saying," said Jenny, "that you're booked to tote me th' rounds tonight. See you after th' show. Will you go, Nancy?"

"I shall be too tired."

Bancroft did not care to go the rounds with Jenny; he wanted to see Nancy home from the theater, but he had no good excuse to offer Jenny:

"Say, what's th' big idea?" demanded Jenny, breathlessly.

"What idea?" said Bancroft.

"This yankin' me across alleys 's if you thought a truck was comin' out."

"Did I?"

"You did, an' I felt my sleeve seams rip. It ain't only tonight; you've been doin' it right along. Some bill collector chasin' you?"

"Jenny, I'm afraid of alleys."

"Yes you are!"

"I'm not joking. My horoscope says—"

"What kind of a scope is that?"

"The things that are going to happen to you sometime in the future."

"O, you ain't tellin' me you've been visitin' mediums? I can see you with th' ouija board on your knees—nix! You're goin' to be rich some day, an' marry a lovely girl. Lived in peace an' died in grease an' buried in mutton tallow. That's what they used to say when I was a kid." She began to sing:

Some little bug is goin' to get you-u-u

Shoo-day!

He laughed. Jenny was good com-

pany. She was never still, physically or vocally, and occasionally, when something touched her heart, she was almost as beautiful as Nancy.

"I am honestly afraid of dark alleyways. Some day the little bug you speak about is going to jump out at me, and if I have time I'm going to beat it as fast as ever I can."

"Too fishy for me! Say, ain't Nancy reglar, though? You don't realize what a smash she's had. She's always been a bug on grand opera, an' old Sorrentino tells her 't forget it an' stick t' th' job she's got. Next year she'll be th' best comedienne in America. She is now, but th' public ain't wise yet. That mechanical doll stunt has got th' critics comin' back. What d' you know about that?"

The elevated, roaring above them—for they were mounting the stairs—saved him from commenting. It was a queer feeling, but he did not like to discuss Nancy with Jenny.

As they finally entered the hallway of the house in Ninth street there happened one of those tragic-comedies that are always treading upon the heels of youth. Without the least premonition of what he was going to do Bancroft threw his arms clumsily around Jenny's neck and kissed her.

Jenny stood perfectly still, the color gone from her face, her mouth partly open, and a something in her eyes as perhaps would come there had the handsome boyish face vanished, and a Japanese devil-mask replaced it.

"Jenny, Jenny! I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry! But you looked so sweet. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it!"

That was to be Jenny's tragedy, forever after. He was sorry. He hadn't meant to kiss her.

A kiss is a perfectly foolish thing. But what are you scientific old gray-beards going to do about it? There it is; dissect it, analyze it how you will, but where do you go from there? Nowhere. Who taught human beings—white human beings—to kiss one another? Nobody. It was the Beginning of Things; it is with us now; it will always be here. Bugs? Who cares?

Two pairs of lips, male and female—watch out! There it is, come and gone, hence or whence nobody knows. Damnation sometimes; always a revelation. It is often life two clouds meeting, there is thunder and lightning; again, it is as the falling leaf touching the stream, light and inconsequent. Sometimes there is the inconsequence of the leaf on one side and thunder and stark lightning on the other. Take care! A queer unnameable reaction upon the senses. The first gift we receive, and the last, with innumerable intermediate instances.

The whites alone possess it, the art of kissing. The Jap, viewing white lovers on the screen, is moved to laughter at the sight of a man putting his lips to those of a woman: The Jap does not understand what it means. Neither do we! It is the act, the desire, that is incomprehensible; but heaven help us with the aftermath, that is clear enough to us. We find ourselves trapped in the middle of all manner of emotions, good and evil, joyous and miserable, ecstatic and despairing.

Boy-and-girl—prestol they are man and woman. It is instantaneous. The bridge goes smashing down behind us, with never any going back. We are in for it, willy-nilly.

As Bancroft and Jenny were in for it. In kissing Jenny, Bancroft made the amazing discovery that he loved Nancy! All in a moment, like that; by kissing Jenny Malloy! It was ridiculous, it was inexplicable, but the fact was complete. He had begun to love Nancy that stormy night, when she had entered his house, drenched and footsore; probably immediately after that smile of hers. The discovery of her photograph in the lobby of the theater had given permanency to a feeling which otherwise might have been fleeting and in the day obliterated. Nancy Bowman, who had the town at her feet! What were seven millions? Nothing. What chance had he, a country boy, against a man of Craig's attainments? None whatever. Craig was rich, handsome, intellectual and could play the heart out of a woman if he wanted to. He understood now the episode of Jenny's party. Craig had drawn Nancy to him. He understood now his own action, that of interrupting them. Jealousy. And to lift the fog surrounding these manifestations by kissing Jenny Malloy! He felt like a manikin whose manipulating wires refuse to work.

And what of Jenny? In receiving that kiss, she, too, made a discovery; that she loved this queer boy better than life itself. Thunder and lightning! That he was as far out of her orbit as the farthest star.

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