**The Venturers**

O. Henry

Let the story wreck itself on the spreading rails of the *Non Se* *qu* *itur* Limited, if it will; first you must take your seat in the observation car “*Ra* *ison d’être* ” for one moment. It is for no longer than to consider a brief essay on the subject—let us call it: “What’s Around the Corner.”

*Omne mun* *dus in du* *as par* *tes di* *vi* *sum est*—men who wear rubbers and pay poll-taxes, and men who discover new continents. There are no more continents to discover; but by the time overshoes are out of date and the poll has developed into an income tax, the other half will be paralleling the canals of Mars with radium railways.

Fortune, Chance, and Adventure are given as synonymous in the dictionaries. To the knowing each has a different meaning. Fortune is a prize to be won. Adventure is the road to it. Chance is what may lurk in the shadows at the roadside. The face of Fortune is radiant and alluring; that of Adventure is flushed and heroic. The face of Chance is the beautiful countenance—perfect because vague and dream-born—that we see in our tea-cups at breakfast while we growl over our chops and toast.

The Venturer is one who keeps his eye on the hedgerows and wayside groves and meadows while he travels the road to Fortune. That is the difference between him and the Adventurer. Eating the forbidden fruit was the best record ever made by a Venturer. Trying to prove that it happened is the highest work of the Adventuresome. To be either is disturbing to the cosmogony of creation. So, as bracket-sawed and city-directoried citizens, let us light our pipes, chide the children and the cat, arrange ourselves in the willow rocker under the flickering gas jet at the coolest window and scan this little tale of two modern followers of Chance.

“Did you ever hear that story about the man from the West?” asked Billinger, in the little dark-oak room to your left as you penetrate the interior of the Powhatan Club.

“Doubtless,” said John Reginald Forster, rising and leaving the room.

Forster got his straw hat (straws will be in and maybe out again long before this is printed) from the checkroom boy, and walked out of the air (as Hamlet says). Billinger was used to having his stories insulted and would not mind. Forster was in his favorite mood and wanted to go away from anywhere. A man, in order to get on good terms with himself, must have his opinions corroborated and his moods matched by some one else. (I had written that “somebody"; but an A. D. T. boy who once took a telegram for me pointed out that I could save money by using the compound word. This is a vice versa case.)

Forster’s favorite mood was that of greatly desiring to be a follower of Chance. He was a Venturer by nature, but convention, birth, tradition and the narrowing influences of the tribe of Manhattan had denied him full privilege. He had trodden all the main-traveled thoroughfares and many of the side roads that are supposed to relieve the tedium of life. But none had sufficed. The reason was that he knew what was to be found at the end of every street. He knew from experience and logic almost precisely to what end each digression from routine must lead. He found a depressing monotony in all the variations that the music of his sphere had grafted upon the tune of life. He had not learned that, although the world was made round, the circle has been squared, and that it’s true interest is to be in “What’s Around the Corner.”

Forster walked abroad aimlessly from the Powhatan, trying not to tax either his judgment or his desire as to what streets he traveled. He would have been glad to lose his way if it were possible; but he had no hope of that. Adventure and Fortune move at your beck and call in the Greater City; but Chance is oriental. She is a veiled lady in a sedan chair, protected by a special traffic squad of dragonians. Crosstown, uptown, and downtown you may move without seeing her.

At the end of an hour’s stroll, Forster stood on a corner of a broad, smooth avenue, looking disconsolately across it at a picturesque old hotel softly but brilliantly lit. Disconsolately, because he knew that he must dine; and dining in that hotel was no venture. It was one of his favorite caravansaries, and so silent and swift would be the service and so delicately choice the food, that he regretted the hunger that must be appeased by the “dead perfection” of the place’s cuisine. Even the music there seemed to be always playing *da ca* *po*.

Fancy came to him that he would dine at some cheap, even dubious, restaurant lower down in the city, where the erratic chefs from all countries of the world spread their national cookery for the omnivorous American. Something might happen there out of the routine—he might come upon a subject without a predicate, a road without an end, a question without an answer, a cause without an effect, a gulf stream in life’s salt ocean. He had not dressed for evening; he wore a dark business suit that would not be questioned even where the waiters served the spaghetti in their shirt sleeves.

So John Reginald Forster began to search his clothes for money; because the more cheaply you dine, the more surely must you pay. All of the thirteen pockets, large and small, of his business suit he explored carefully and found not a penny. His bank book showed a balance of five figures to his credit in the Old Ironsides Trust Company, but—

Forster became aware of a man nearby at his left hand who was really regarding him with some amusement. He looked like any business man of thirty or so, neatly dressed and standing in the attitude of one waiting for a street car. But there was no car line on that avenue. So his proximity and unconcealed curiosity seemed to Forster to partake of the nature of a personal intrusion. But, as he was a consistent seeker after “What’s Around the Corner,” instead of manifesting resentment he only turned a half-embarrassed smile upon the other’s grin of amusement.

“All in?” asked the intruder, drawing nearer.

“Seems so,” said Forster. “Now, I thought there was a dollar in—”

“Oh, I know,” said the other man, with a laugh. “But there wasn’t. I’ve just been through the same process myself, as I was coming around the corner. I found in an upper vest pocket—I don’t know how they got there—exactly two pennies. You know what kind of a dinner exactly two pennies will buy!”

“You haven’t dined, then?” asked Forster.

“I have not. But I would like to. Now, I’ll make you a proposition. You look like a man who would take up one. Your clothes look neat and respectable. Excuse personalities. I think mine will pass the scrutiny of a head waiter, also. Suppose we go over to that hotel and dine together. We will choose from the menu like millionaires—or, if you prefer, like gentlemen in moderate circumstances dining extravagantly for once. When we have finished we will match with my two pennies to see which of us will stand the brunt of the house’s displeasure and vengeance. My name is Ives. I think we have lived in the same station of life—before our money took wings.”

“You’re on,” said Forster, joyfully.

Here was a venture at least within the borders of the mysterious country of Chance—anyhow, it promised something better than the stale infestivity of a table d’hôte.

The two were soon seated at a corner table in the hotel dining room. Ives chucked one of his pennies across the table to Forster.

“Match for which of us gives the order,” he said.

Forster lost.

Ives laughed and began to name liquids and viands to the waiter with the absorbed but calm deliberation of one who was to the menu born. Forster, listening, gave his admiring approval of the order.

“I am a man,” said Ives, during the oysters, “Who has made a lifetime search after the to-be-continued-in-our-next. I am not like the ordinary adventurer who strikes for a coveted prize. Nor yet am I like a gambler who knows he is either to win or lose a certain set stake. What I want is to encounter an adventure to which I can predict no conclusion. It is the breath of existence to me to dare Fate in its blindest manifestations. The world has come to run so much by rote and gravitation that you can enter upon hardly any footpath of chance in which you do not find signboards informing you of what you may expect at its end. I am like the clerk in the Circumlocution Office who always complained bitterly when any one came in to ask information. ‘He wanted to *know*, you know!’ was the kick he made to his fellow-clerks. Well, I don’t want to know, I don’t want to reason, I don’t want to guess—I want to bet my hand without seeing it.”

“I understand,” said Forster delightedly. “I’ve often wanted the way I feel put into words. You’ve done it. I want to take chances on what’s coming. Suppose we have a bottle of Moselle with the next course.”

“Agreed,” said Ives. “I’m glad you catch my idea. It will increase the animosity of the house toward the loser. If it does not weary you, we will pursue the theme. Only a few times have I met a true venturer—one who does not ask a schedule and map from Fate when he begins a journey. But, as the world becomes more civilized and wiser, the more difficult it is to come upon an adventure the end of which you cannot foresee. In the Elizabethan days you could assault the watch, wring knockers from doors and have a jolly set-to with the blades in any convenient angle of a wall and ‘get away with it.’ Nowadays, if you speak disrespectfully to a policeman, all that is left to the most romantic fancy is to conjecture in what particular police station he will land you.”

“I know—I know,” said Forster, nodding approval.

“I returned to New York to-day,” continued Ives, “from a three years’ ramble around the globe. Things are not much better abroad than they are at home. The whole world seems to be overrun by conclusions. The only thing that interests me greatly is a premise. I’ve tried shooting big game in Africa. I know what an express rifle will do at so many yards; and when an elephant or a rhinoceros falls to the bullet, I enjoy it about as much as I did when I was kept in after school to do a sum in long division on the blackboard.”

“I know—I know,” said Forster.

“There might be something in aeroplanes,” went on Ives, reflectively. “I’ve tried ballooning; but it seems to be merely a cut-and-dried affair of wind and ballast.”

“Women,” suggested Forster, with a smile.

“Three months ago,” said Ives. “I was pottering around in one of the bazaars in Constantinople. I noticed a lady, veiled, of course, but with a pair of especially fine eyes visible, who was examining some amber and pearl ornaments at one of the booths. With her was an attendant—a big Nubian, as black as coal. After a while the attendant drew nearer to me by degrees and slipped a scrap of paper into my hand. I looked at it when I got a chance. On it was scrawled hastily in pencil: ‘The arched gate of the Nightingale Garden at nine to-night.’ Does that appear to you to be an interesting premise, Mr. Forster?”

“I made inquiries and learned that the Nightingale Garden was the property of an old Turk—a grand vizier, or something of the sort. Of course I prospected for the arched gate and was there at nine. The same Nubian attendant opened the gate promptly on time, and I went inside and sat on a bench by a perfumed fountain with the veiled lady. We had quite an extended chat. She was Myrtle Thompson, a lady journalist, who was writing up the Turkish harems for a Chicago newspaper. She said she noticed the New York cut of my clothes in the bazaar and wondered if I couldn’t work something into the metropolitan papers about it.”

“I see,” said Forster. “I see.”

“I’ve canoed through Canada,” said Ives, “down many rapids and over many falls. But I didn’t seem to get what I wanted out of it because I knew there were only two possible outcomes—I would either go to the bottom or arrive at the sea level. I’ve played all games at cards; but the mathematicians have spoiled that sport by computing the percentages. I’ve made acquaintances on trains, I’ve answered advertisements, I’ve rung strange door-bells, I’ve taken every chance that presented itself; but there has always been the conventional ending—the logical conclusion to the premise.”

“I know,” repeated Forster. “I’ve felt it all. But I’ve had few chances to take my chance at chances. Is there any life so devoid of impossibilities as life in this city? There seems to be a myriad of opportunities for testing the undeterminable; but not one in a thousand fails to land you where you expected it to stop. I wish the subways and street cars disappointed one as seldom.”

“The sun has risen,” said Ives, “on the Arabian nights. There are no more caliphs. The fisherman’s vase is turned to a vacuum bottle, warranted to keep any genie boiling or frozen for forty-eight hours. Life moves by rote. Science has killed adventure. There are no more opportunities such as Columbus and the man who ate the first oyster had. The only certain thing is that there is nothing uncertain.”

“Well,” said Forster, “my experience has been the limited one of a city man. I haven’t seen the world as you have; but it seems that we view it with the same opinion. But, I tell you I am grateful for even this little venture of ours into the borders of the haphazard. There may be at least one breathless moment when the bill for the dinner is presented. Perhaps, after all, the pilgrims who traveled without scrip or purse found a keener taste to life than did the knights of the Round Table who rode abroad with a retinue and King Arthur’s certified checks in the lining of their helmets. And now, if you’ve finished your coffee, suppose we match one of your insufficient coins for the impending blow of Fate. What have I up?”

“Heads,” called Ives.

“Heads it is,” said Forster, lifting his hand. “I lose. We forgot to agree upon a plan for the winner to escape. I suggest that when the waiter comes you make a remark about telephoning to a friend. I will hold the fort and the dinner check long enough for you to get your hat and be off. I thank you for an evening out of the ordinary, Mr. Ives, and wish we might have others.”

“If my memory is not at fault,” said Ives, laughing, “the nearest police station is in MacDougal Street. I have enjoyed the dinner, too, let me assure you.”

Forster crooked his finger for the waiter. Victor, with a locomotive effort that seemed to owe more to pneumatics than to pedestrianism, glided to the table and laid the card, face downward, by the loser’s cup. Forster took it up and added the figures with deliberate care. Ives leaned back comfortably in his chair.

“Excuse me,” said Forster; “but I thought you were going to ring Grimes about that theatre party for Thursday night. Had you forgotten about it?”

“Oh,” said Ives, settling himself more comfortably, “I can do that later on. Get me a glass of water, waiter.”

“Want to be in at the death, do you?” asked Forster.

“I hope you don’t object,” said Ives, pleadingly. “Never in my life have I seen a gentleman arrested in a public restaurant for swindling it out of a dinner.”

“All right,” said Forster, calmly. “You are entitled to see a Christian die in the arena as your *pousse-café* .”

Victor came with the glass of water and remained, with the disengaged air of an inexorable collector.

Forster hesitated for fifteen seconds, and then took a pencil from his pocket and scribbled his name on the dinner check. The waiter bowed and took it away.

“The fact is,” said Forster, with a little embarrassed laugh, “I doubt whether I’m what they call a ‘game sport,’ which means the same as a ’soldier of Fortune.’ I’ll have to make a confession. I’ve been dining at this hotel two or three times a week for more than a year. I always sign my checks.” And then, with a note of appreciation in his voice: “It was first-rate of you to stay to see me through with it when you knew I had no money, and that you might be scooped in, too.”

“I guess I’ll confess, too,” said Ives, with a grin. “I own the hotel. I don’t run it, of course, but I always keep a suite on the third floor for my use when I happen to stray into town.”

He called a waiter and said: “Is Mr. Gilmore still behind the desk? All right. Tell him that Mr. Ives is here, and ask him to have my rooms made ready and aired.”

“Another venture cut short by the inevitable,” said Forster. “Is there a conundrum without an answer in the next number? But let’s hold to our subject just for a minute or two, if you will. It isn’t often that I meet a man who understands the flaws I pick in existence. I am engaged to be married a month from to-day.”

“I reserve comment,” said Ives.

“Right; I am going to add to the assertion. I am devotedly fond of the lady; but I can’t decide whether to show up at the church or make a sneak for Alaska. It’s the same idea, you know, that we were discussing—it does for a fellow as far as possibilities are concerned. Everybody knows the routine—you get a kiss flavored with Ceylon tea after breakfast; you go to the office; you come back home and dress for dinner—theatre twice a week—bills—moping around most evenings trying to make conversation—a little quarrel occasionally—maybe sometimes a big one, and a separation—or else a settling down into a middle-aged contentment, which is worst of all.”

“I know,” said Ives, nodding wisely.

“It’s the dead certainty of the thing,” went on Forster, “that keeps me in doubt. There’ll nevermore be anything around the corner.”

“Nothing after the ‘Little Church,’” said Ives. “I know.”

“Understand,” said Forster, “that I am in no doubt as to my feelings toward the lady. I may say that I love her truly and deeply. But there is something in the current that runs through my veins that cries out against any form of the calculable. I do not know what I want; but I know that I want it. I’m talking like an idiot, I suppose, but I’m sure of what I mean.”

“I understand you,” said Ives, with a slow smile. “Well, I think I will be going up to my rooms now. If you would dine with me here one evening soon, Mr. Forster, I’d be glad.”

“Thursday?” suggested Forster.

“At seven, if it’s convenient,” answered Ives.

“Seven goes,” assented Forster.

At half-past eight Ives got into a cab and was driven to a number in one of the correct West Seventies. His card admitted him to the reception room of an old-fashioned house into which the spirits of Fortune, Chance and Adventure had never dared to enter. On the walls were the Whistler etchings, the steel engravings by Oh—what’s-his-name?, the still-life paintings of the grapes and garden truck with the watermelon seeds spilled on the table as natural as life, and the Greuze head. It was a household. There was even brass andirons. On a table was an album, half-morocco, with oxidized-silver protections on the corners of the lids. A clock on the mantel ticked loudly, with a warning click at five minutes to nine. Ives looked at it curiously, remembering a time-piece in his grandmother’s home that gave such a warning.

And then down the stairs and into the room came Mary Marsden. She was twenty-four, and I leave her to your imagination. But I must say this much—youth and health and simplicity and courage and greenish—violet eyes are beautiful, and she had all these. She gave Ives her hand with the sweet cordiality of an old friendship.

“You can’t think what a pleasure it is,” she said, “to have you drop in once every three years or so.”

For half an hour they talked. I confess that I cannot repeat the conversation. You will find it in books in the circulating library. When that part of it was over, Mary said:

“And did you find what you wanted while you were abroad?”

“What I wanted?” said Ives.

“Yes. You know you were always queer. Even as a boy you wouldn’t play marbles or baseball or any game with rules. You wanted to dive in water where you didn’t know whether it was ten inches or ten feet deep. And when you grew up you were just the same. We’ve often talked about your peculiar ways.”

“I suppose I am an incorrigible,” said Ives. “I am opposed to the doctrine of predestination, to the rule of three, gravitation, taxation, and everything of the kind. Life has always seemed to me something like a serial story would be if they printed above each instalment a synopsis of *suc* *ce* *eding* chapters.”

Mary laughed merrily.

“Bob Ames told us once,” she said, “of a funny thing you did. It was when you and he were on a train in the South, and you got off at a town where you hadn’t intended to stop just because the brakeman hung up a sign in the end of the car with the name of the next station on it.”

“I remember,” said Ives. “That ‘next station’ has been the thing I’ve always tried to get away from.”

“I know it,” said Mary. “And you’ve been very foolish. I hope you didn’t find what you wanted not to find, or get off at the station where there wasn’t any, or whatever it was you expected wouldn’t happen to you during the three years you’ve been away.”

“There was something I wanted before I went away,” said Ives.

Mary looked in his eyes clearly, with a slight, but perfectly sweet smile.

“There was,” she said. “You wanted me. And you could have had me, as you very well know.”

Without replying, Ives let his gaze wander slowly about the room. There had been no change in it since last he had been in it, three years before. He vividly recalled the thoughts that had been in his mind then. The contents of that room were as fixed, in their way, as the everlasting hills. No change would ever come there except the inevitable ones wrought by time and decay. That silver-mounted album would occupy that corner of that table, those pictures would hang on the walls, those chairs be found in their same places every morn and noon and night while the household hung together. The brass andirons were monuments to order and stability. Here and there were relics of a hundred years ago which were still living mementos and would be for many years to come. One going from and coming back to that house would never need to forecast or doubt. He would find what he left, and leave what he found. The veiled lady, Chance, would never lift her hand to the knocker on the outer door.

And before him sat the lady who belonged in the room. Cool and sweet and unchangeable she was. She offered no surprises. If one should pass his life with her, though she might grow white-haired and wrinkled, he would never perceive the change. Three years he had been away from her, and she was still waiting for him as established and constant as the house itself. He was sure that she had once cared for him. It was the knowledge that she would always do so that had driven him away. Thus his thoughts ran.

“I am going to be married soon,” said Mary.

On the next Thursday afternoon Forster came hurriedly to Ive’s hotel.

“Old man,” said he, “we’ll have to put that dinner off for a year or so; I’m going abroad. The steamer sails at four. That was a great talk we had the other night, and it decided me. I’m going to knock around the world and get rid of that incubus that has been weighing on both you and me—the terrible dread of knowing what’s going to happen. I’ve done one thing that hurts my conscience a little; but I know it’s best for both of us. I’ve written to the lady to whom I was engaged and explained everything—told her plainly why I was leaving—that the monotony of matrimony would never do for me. Don’t you think I was right?”

“It is not for me to say,” answered Ives. “Go ahead and shoot elephants if you think it will bring the element of chance into your life. We’ve got to decide these things for ourselves. But I tell you one thing, Forster, I’ve found the way. I’ve found out the biggest hazard in the world—a game of chance that never is concluded, a venture that may end in the highest heaven or the blackest pit. It will keep a man on edge until the clods fall on his coffin, because he will never know—not until his last day, and not then will he know. It is a voyage without a rudder or compass, and you must be captain and crew and keep watch, every day and night, yourself, with no one to relieve you. I have found the Venture. Don’t bother yourself about leaving Mary Marsden, Forster. I married her yesterday at noon.”