

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

Novelized by
LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE
From the Play of the
Same Name by
WINCHELL SMITH

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Louis Joseph Vance

"Nat, I say! Where the devil are you going?"

"Over to the hotel," said Duncan. "The deuce you are! What hotel?"

"The one I'm stopping at."

"Not on your life. You're not going just yet. I haven't had half a chance to talk to you. Robbins, take Mr. Duncan's things."

Duncan, set upon by Robbins, who had been hovering round for just that purpose, lifted his shoulders in resignation, turning back into the room as Miller and Long said good night to him and left at Bartlett's heels, and smiled away in semi-humorous deprecation of the way in which he let Kellogg outmaneuver him. When it came to that it was hard to refuse Kellogg anything; he had that way with him, especially if one liked him. And how could any one help liking him?

Kellogg had him now, holding him fast by either shoulder, at arm's length, and shaking a reproving head at his friend. "You big duffer!" he said. "Did you think for a minute I'd let you throw me down like that? Have you dined?"

At this suggestion Duncan stiffened and fell back. "No, but—"

Kellogg swept the ground from under his feet. "Robbins," he told the man, "order in dinner for two from the club, and tell 'em to hurry it up."

"Yes, sir," said Robbins, and flew to obey before Duncan could get a chance to countermand his part in the order.

"And now," continued Kellogg, "we've got the whole evening before us in which to chin. Sit down." He led Duncan to an armchair and gently but firmly plumped him into its capacious depths. "We'll have a snug little dinner here and what do you say to taking in a show afterward?"

"I say no."

"You darsent, my boy. This is the night we celebrate. I'm feeling pretty good tonight."

"You ought to, Harry." Duncan struggled to rouse himself to share in the spirit of gratification with which Kellogg was bubbling. "I'm mighty glad, old man. It's a great step up for you."

"It's all of that. You could have knocked me over with a feather when Bartlett sprang it on me this morning. Of course, I was expecting something, a boost in salary, or something like that. Bartlett knew that other houses in the street had made me offers. I've been pretty lucky of late and pulled off one or two rather big deals, but a partnership with L. J. Bartlett—think of it, Nat!"

"I'm thinking of it, and it's great."

"It'll keep me mighty busy," Kellogg blundered blindly on. "It means a lot of extra work, but you know I like to work."

"That's right, you do," agreed Duncan cheerily. "It's queer to me. It must be a great thing to like to work."

"You bet it's a great thing. Why, I couldn't exist if I couldn't work. You remember that time I laid off for a month in the country for my health's sake? I'll never forget it—hanging round all the time with my hands empty—every one else with something to do. I wouldn't do go through with it again for a fortune. Never felt so useless and in the way."

"But," interrupted Duncan, knitting his brows as he grappled with this problem, "you were independent, weren't you? You had money—could pay your board?"

"Of course. Nevertheless I felt in the way."

"That's funny."

"It's straight."

"I know it is. It wouldn't be you if you didn't love work. It wouldn't be me if I did. Look here, Harry. Suppose you didn't have any money and couldn't pay your board and had nothing to do. How'd you feel in that case?"

"I don't know. Anyhow that's rot."

"No, it isn't rot. I'm trying to make you understand how I feel when—when it's that way with me, as it generally is." He raised one hand and let it fall with a gesture of despondency so eloquent that it roused Kellogg out of his own preoccupation.

"Why, Nat?" he cried, genuinely sympathetic. "I've been so taken up with myself that I forgot. I hadn't looked for you till tomorrow."

"You knew, then?"

"I met Alwater at lunch today. He told me. Said he was sorry, but—"

"Yes, everybody is always sorry, but—"

Kellogg let his hand fall on Duncan's shoulder. "I'm sorry, too, old man. But don't lose heart. I know it's pre-

ty tough on a fellow—"

"The toughest part of it is that you got the job for me, and I had to fall down."

"Don't think of that. It's not your fault."

"You're the only man who believes that, Harry."

"Buck up. I'll stumble across some better opening for you before long, and—"

"Stop right there. I'm through!"

"Don't talk that way, Nat. I'll get you in right somewhere."

"You're the best hearted man alive, Harry, but I'll see you blasted first."

"Wait." Kellogg demanded his attention. "Here's this man Burnham. You don't know him, but he's as keen as they make 'em. He's on the track of some wonderful scheme for making illuminating gas from crude oil. If it goes through, if the invention's really practicable, it's bound to work a revolution. He's down in Washington now—left this afternoon to look up the patents. Now, he needs me to get the ear of the Standard Oil people, and I'll get you in there."

"What right 've you got to do that?" demanded Duncan. "What the dickens do I know about illuminating gas or crude oil? Burnham'd never thank you for the likes of me."

"But, thunder, you can learn. All you need—"

"Now, see here, Harry!" Duncan gave him pause with a manner not to be denied. "Once and for all time understand I'm through having you recommend an incompetent just because we're friends."

"But, Harry—"

"And I'm through living on you while I'm out of a job. That's final."

"But, man, listen to me—when we were at college—"

"That was another matter."

"How many times did you pay the room rent when I was strapped? How many times did you have me pull me through when I'd have had to quit and forfeit my degree because I couldn't earn enough to keep on?"

"That's different. You earned enough finally to square up. You don't owe me anything."

"I owe you the gratitude for the friendly hand that put me in the way of earning—that kept me going when the going was rank. Besides, the conditions are just reversed now; you'll do just as I did—make good in the world, and when it's convenient, to me. As for living here, you're perfectly welcome."

"I know it—and more," Duncan assented a little wearily. "Don't think I don't appreciate all you've done for me. But I know and you must understand that I can't keep on living on you—and I won't."

For once baffled, Kellogg stared at him in consternation. Duncan met his gaze steadily, strong in the sincerity

of his attitude. At length Kellogg surrendered, accepting defeat. "Well!" He shrugged uncomfortably. "If you insist."

"I do."

"Then that's settled."

"Yes, that's settled."

"Dinner," said Robbins from the doorway, "is served."

CHAPTER III.

AFTER dinner they smoked and talked about Duncan's future.

Finally Kellogg said significantly, "Nat, if you follow my advice you can be worth a million dollars in a year!"

"Let him rave," Duncan observed enigmatically and began to smoke.

"No, I'm not dippy, and I'm perfectly serious."

"Of course. But what'd they do to me if I were caught?"

"This is not a joke. The proposition's perfectly legal. It's being done right along."

"And I could do it, Harry?"

"A man of your caliber couldn't fail."

"Would you mind ringing for Robbins?" Duncan asked abruptly.

"Certainly." Kellogg pressed a button at his elbow. "What'd you want?"

"A straitjacket and a doctor to tell which one of us needs it."

Kellogg, chagrined as he always was if joked with when expounding one of his schemes, broke into a laugh that lasted until Robbins appeared.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes. Put those decanters over here, and some glasses, please."

"Yes, sir."

The man obeyed and withdrew. Kellogg filled two glasses, handing one to Duncan.

"Now be decent and listen to me, Nat. I've thought this thing over for—oh, any amount of time. I'll bet any thing I'll work. What'd you say?"

"Would you like to try it?"

"Would I like to try it?" A conviction of Kellogg's earnestness forced itself upon Duncan's understanding. "Would I?" He lifted his glass and drained it at a gulp. "Why, that's the first laugh I've had for a month!"

"Then I'll try you!"

Duncan placed a pleading hand on his forehead.

"Don't kid me, Harry," he entreated. "Not a bit of it. This is straight goods. If you want to try it and will

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"It's wonderful to listen to you, Harry."

"I'm talking horse sense, my son. Now consider yourself—down on your luck, don't know how to earn a decent living, refusing to accept anything from your friends, ready (you say) to do almost anything to get some money. And think of the country heireses with plenty of money for two, pining away in—in innocuous destitute—hundreds of them, due, straight, good girls, girls you could easily fall in love with, sighing their lives away for the lack of the likes of you. Now, why not take one, Nat—when you come to consider it, it's your duty—marry her and her bank roll, make her happy, make yourself happy and live a contented life on the sunny side of Easy street for the rest of your natural born days? Can't you see it now?"

"Yes," Duncan admitted, half persuaded of the plausibility of the scheme. "I see, and I admire immensely the intellect that conceived the notion, Harry, but I can't help thinking there must be a catch in it somewhere."

"Not if you follow my instructions," Duncan drew a deep breath, sat back and looked Kellogg over very critically.

"If I didn't know you so well, Harry," said Duncan slowly, "I'd be certain you were mad. I'm not at all sure that I'm sane. It's ravine idiocy, and it's a pretty damned rank thing to do to start deliberately out to marry a woman for her money. But I've been through a little hell of my own in my time, and it's not alluring to contemplate a return to it. There's nothing mad enough nor bad enough to stop me. What've I got to do?"

Kellogg beamed his triumph. "You'll try it on, then?"

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