

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

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

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(Continued from last Friday.)

"Wait" Duncan touched him gently on the chest with a forefinger, at the same time catching and holding the sheriff's eye. "Are you?" he inquired quietly, "laboring under the impression that Mr. Graham is deaf?"

"What?"

Duncan turned to Sam apologetically. "He said 'what'! Did you hear it, sir?"

But by this time Pete was recovering to some degree. "What've you got to say about this?" he demanded crossly.

"I'll show you," Duncan told him in the same quiet voice. "What I've got to say is you'll just put the soft pedal on and tell me the amount of that loss."

"With interest and costs," he said less stiffly. "It figures up three hundred 'n' eighty dollars 'n' eighty-two cents."

"There's no use denying that Duncan was staggered. For the moment his police deserted him utterly. He could only repeat, as one who dreams, 'Three hundred and eighty dollars!'"

His momentary consternation afforded Pete the opening he needed. The room shook with his regained sense of prestige.

"Yes, three hundred 'n' eighty dollars 'n'— Say, you look a-her!"

Again the calm forefinger touched him and like a hypnotist's pass checked the rolling volume of noise. "Listen," begged Duncan. "If you've got anything else to tell me please retire to the opposite side of the street and whisper it. Meantime be quiet."

Duncan turned and made for the soda counter, beneath which was the till. His scanty roll of bills was in his right hand and there conformed. He stepped behind the counter, found Sam watching him with an amaze that was less absolute than Pete's, pulled out the till, bent over it with an averted air and pushed back the coin slide. Then quite naturally he produced with his right hand his four hundred and

odd dollars from the bill drawer, stood up and counted them with great deliberation—"One, two, three, four."

He smiled winningly at Pete. "Four hundred dollars, Mr. Sheriff. Now will you be good enough to hand over that note and the change and then put yourself and that pickle you're wearing to your face on the other side of the door?"

"I ain't got the note with me, Mr. Duncan."

"Then perhaps you won't mind going to the bank for it?"

Half suffocated, Pete assented. "Aw' right, I'll go and get it. Kin I have the money?"

"Certainly," Duncan extended the bills, then on second thought withheld them. "I presume you're a regular sheriff?" he inquired.

Very proudly Pete turned back the lapel of his coat and ostended the chest on which shone his nickel plated badge of office. Duncan examined it with grave admiration.

"It's beautiful," he said, with a sigh. "Here."

his valedictory. "Waal, I'll be dod-gusted!"

With a short, quiet laugh Duncan made as though to go out to the back yard, where the new stock was being delivered.

"I'm going," he said hurriedly, "to find me a hatchet and knock the stuffing out of some of those packing cases. Want to get all that truck indoors before nightfall, you know."

But old Sam wasn't to be put off by any such obvious subterfuge as that. He put himself in front of Duncan. "Nat, my boy," he said, tremulous, "I can't let this go through. I can't allow you!"

"There, now," Duncan told him unconcernedly, yet kindly, "don't say anything more. It's over and done with."

"But you mustn't. I'll turn over the store to you!"

"O Lord!" Duncan's dismay was as genuine as his desire to escape Graham's gratitude. "No—don't! Please don't do that!"

"But I must do something, my boy. I can't accept so great a kindness unless," said Graham, with a timid dash of hope, "you'll consider a partnership!"

"That's it!" cried Duncan, glad of any way out of the situation. "That's the way to do it—a partnership. No; please don't say any more about it just now. We can settle details later. We've got to get busy. Tell you what I wish you'd do while I'm bustling open those boxes. If you don't mind going down to the station to make sure that everything's—"

"Yes, I'll go; I'll go at once," Sam groped for Duncan's hand, caught and held it between both his own. "If—if fate or something hadn't brought you here today I don't know what would have happened to Betty and me."

"Never mind," Duncan tried to soothe him. "Just don't you think about it."

Graham shook his head, still bewildered. "Perhaps," he stammered, "to a gentleman of your wealth \$400 ain't much—"

"No," said Duncan gravely without the flicker of an eyelash, "nothing." He remembered well the few dollars that now represented all his worldly goods. Then he smiled cheerfully. "There, that's all right."

"To me it's meant everything. I—I only hope I'll be able to repay you some day. God bless you, my boy! God bless you!"

He managed to jam his hat awry on his white oil head and find his way out, his hands fumbling with one another, his lips moving inaudibly, perhaps in a prayer of thanksgiving.

It was perhaps within the next thirty minutes that Betty (who had been left in charge of the store while Duncan, with coat and collar off and sleeves rolled above his elbows, backed and pounded and pried and banged at the packing cases in the back yard) sought him on the scene of his labors.

"Pretty good work for a York dude—not?" he laughed.

There was a shadowy smile in her grave eyes. "It's an improvement," she said evenly.

He shot her a curious glance. "Ouch!" he said thoughtfully.

"I just came to tell you," she went on, again immobile, "you're wanted inside."

"Somebody wants to see me?" he demanded of her retreating back.

"Yes."

"But who?"

"Blinky Lockwood," she replied over her shoulder as she went into the house.

"Lockwood?" He speculated, for an instant puzzled, then suddenly "Father-in-law!" he cried. "Shivering snakes, he mustn't catch me like this—a business man!"

Hastily rolling down his shirt sleeves and shrugging himself into his coat, he made for the store, buttoning his collar and knotting his tie on the way.

He found Blinky nosing round the room, quite alone. Betty had disappeared, and the old scoundrel was having quite an enjoyable time poking into matters that did not concern him and disapproving of them on general principles. So far as the improvements concerned old Sam Graham's fortunes, Blinky would concede no health in them. But with regard to Duncan there was another story to tell. Duncan apparently controlled money to some vague extent.

"You're Mr. Duncan, ain't you?" he asked, with his leer, moving down to meet Nat.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lockwood, I believe?"

"That's me," Blinky clutched his hand in a genial claw. "I'm glad to meet you."

"Thank you," said Duncan. "Something I can do for you, sir?"

"Waal, Pete Willin' was tellin' me you'd just took up this note of Graham's?"

"Not exactly. The firm took it up." Blinky winked savagely at this.

"The firm—what firm?"

"Graham & Duncan, sir. I've been taken into partnership."

"Have, eh?" Blinky granted mysteriously and fished in his pocket for some bills and silver. "Waal, here's some change comin' to the firm, then. And here," he added, producing the document in question, "is Sam's note."

"Thank you," Duncan ceremoniously deposited both in the till, going behind the soda fountain to do so, and then waited, expectant. Blinky was granting busily in the key of one about to make an important communication.

"I'm glad you're a-comin' in here with Sam," he said at length, with an acid grimace that was meant to be a smile.

"Oh, it may be only temporary." Nat endeavored to assume a serene expression and partially succeeded.

"I'm dovetailing much of my time to my studies," he pursued primly, "but nevertheless feel I should be earning something too."

"That's right—that's the kind of spirit I like to see in a young man.

You always go to church, don't you?"

"No, sir—Sundays only."

"That's what I mean. D'you drink?"

"Oh, no, sir," Duncan parroted glibly. "Don't smoke, drink, swear, and on Sundays I go to church."

The bland smile with which he faced Lockwood's keen scrutiny disarmed suspicion.

"I'm glad to hear that," Blinky told him. "I'm at the head of the temple movement here, and I hope you'll join us and set an example to our fast young men."

"I feel sure I could do that," said Duncan meekly.

Lockwood removed his hat, exposing the cranium of a baldheaded eagle, and frowned himself. "Warm today," he observed in an endeavor to be genial that all but sprang his temperance. Indeed, so great was the strain that he waked violently.

Duncan observed this phenomenon with natural astonishment not unmixed with awe. "Yes, sir; very," he agreed, wondering what it might portend.

"I believe I'll have a glass of soda," he observed. "Certainly," Duncan, by now habituated to the formula of soda dispensing, promptly produced a bright and shining glass.

"I see you've been fixin' this place up some," he said Nat loftily. "We expect to have the best drug store in the state. What strap would you prefer?"

"Just soda," stammered Lockwood.

His spasmodic wink again spoke Duncan's understanding a mighty yard. Unable to believe his eyes, he hedged and stammered. Could it be? This from the leader of the temperance movement in Radville?

"I beg pardon?"

His denseness irritated Blinky slightly, with the result that the right side of his face again underwent an alarming convulsion. "I say," he explained carefully, "just—plain—sody."

"On the level?"

"What?" granted Blinky, and blinked again.

A smile of comprehension irradiated Nat's features. "Pardon," he said. "I'm a little new to the business."

Blinky, fanning himself industriously, glanced round the store while Duncan, turning his back, discreetly found and uncorked the whisky bottle. He poured out a liberal dose of raw red liquor. Then, with his fingers clamped tightly about the bottom of the glass, he better to conceal its contents from any casual but inquisitive passerby, he quickly filled it with soda and placed it before Blinky, accompanying the action with the sweetest of child-like smiles.

Lockwood, nodding his acknowledgments, lifted the glass to his lips. Duncan awaited developments with some apprehension. To his relief, however, Blinky, after an experimental swallow, emptied the mixture expeditiously into his system and smacked his thin lips resoundingly.

"How," he demanded, "can any one want 'intoxicatin' 'tkers when they can get such a bracin' drink as that?"

"I pass," Nat breathed, limp with admiration of such astounding hypocrisy.

Blinky reluctantly pried a nickel loose from his finances and placed it on the counter. Duncan regarded it with disdain.

"Ten cents more, please," he suggested tactfully.

"What for?"

"Plain sody." The explanation was accompanied by a very passable imitation of Blinky's blink.

CHAPTER XIII

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"Not much," said he, with his sour smile. "I guess you're jokin' about the price of that drink. Well, good luck to you, Mr. Duncan. I'd like to have you come round and see us some evenin'."

"Thank you very much, sir," Duncan accompanied Blinky to the door.

"I've already had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, sir. She's a charming girl."

"I'm real glad you think so," said Blinky, intensely gratified. "She seems to've taken a great shine to you too. Come round and get acquainted with the hull family. You're the sort of young feller I'd like her to know."

He paused and looked Nat up and down cautiously, as one might appraise the points of a horse of quality put up for sale. "Good day," said he, with the most significant of winks.

"Oh, that's all right," Nat hastened to reassure him. "I won't say a word about it."

Blinky, on the point of leaving, started to question this (to him) cryptic utterance, but luckily had the current of his thoughts diverted by the entrance of Roland Barnette in company with his friend Mr. Burnham.

Roland's consternation at this unexpected encounter was, in the mildest term, extreme. At sight of his employer he pulled up as if slapped. "Oh," he faltered, "I didn't know you was here, sir."

"No," said Blinky, with keen relish; "I guess you didn't."

"I—ah—come over to see Sam about that note," stammered Roland.

"Waal, don't you bother your head 'bout what ain't your business, Boly. Come on back to the bank."

"All right, sir," Roland grasped frantically at the opportunity to emphasize his importance. "Excuse me, Mr. Lockwood, but I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine, Mr. Burnham, from New York."

Amused, Burnham stepped into the breach. "How are you?" he said with the proper nuance of cordiality, offering his hand.

Lockwood shook it unemotionally. "How do you?" he said perfunctorily.

"I brought Mr. Burnham in to see Sam."

"Yes," Burnham interrupted Roland quickly; "Barnette's been kind enough to show me round town a bit."

"Here on business?" inquired Lockwood pointedly.

"No, not exactly," returned Burnham with practical ease; "just looking round."

"Only lookin', eh?" Blinky's countenance underwent one of its erratic quakes as he examined Burnham with his habitual intentness.

The New Yorker caught the wink and lost breath. "Ah—yes—that's all," he assented uneasily. And as he spoke another wink dumfounded him.

"Why?" he asked, with a distinct loss of assurance. "Don't you believe it?"

"Don't see no reason why I should not," grunted Blinky. "Hope you'll like what you see. Good day."

"So long, Mr. Lockwood," returned Burnham uncertainly.

Lockwood paused outside the door. "Come 'long, Roland."

"Yes, sir; right away; just a minute," Roland was lingering unwillingly, detained by Burnham's imperative hand. "What'd' you want? I got to hurry."

"What was he winking at me for?" demanded Burnham heatedly. "Have you?"

"Oh!" Roland laughed. "He wasn't winking. He can't help doing that. It's a twitchin' he's got in his eye. That's why they call him Blinky."

"Oh, that was it!" Burnham accepted the explanation with distinct relief, while Duncan, who had been an unregarded spectator, suddenly found cause to retire behind one of the showcases on important business.

So that was the explanation! After his paroxysm had subsided and he felt able to control his facial muscles Duncan emerged suave and

hesitated, with his ineradicable sense of fairness and square dealing. "Mink lin' gas from crude oil ought to—"

Duncan never heard the end of that speech. For some moments he had been listening intently, trying to recall the name of the instrument that had plucked a string on the memory of his memory. He knew he had heard it some place, some time in the past, but how or when or in respect to what he could not make up his mind. It had required Sam's reference to gas and crude oil to clear the circuit. Then he remembered. Kellogg had mentioned a man by the name of Burnham who was "on the track of" an important invention for making gas from crude oil. This must be the man Burnham, the tracker, and poor old Graham must be the tracked. Without warning Duncan ran round and made himself an uninvited third to the conference.

"Mr. Graham, one moment!" he begged excited. "Is this patent of yours on a process of making gas from crude oil?"

Burnham looked up impatiently, frowning at the interruption, but Graham was all good humor.

"Why, yes," he started to explain; "it's that burner over there that's—"

"But I wouldn't sell it just yet if I were you," said Nat. "It may be worth a good deal."

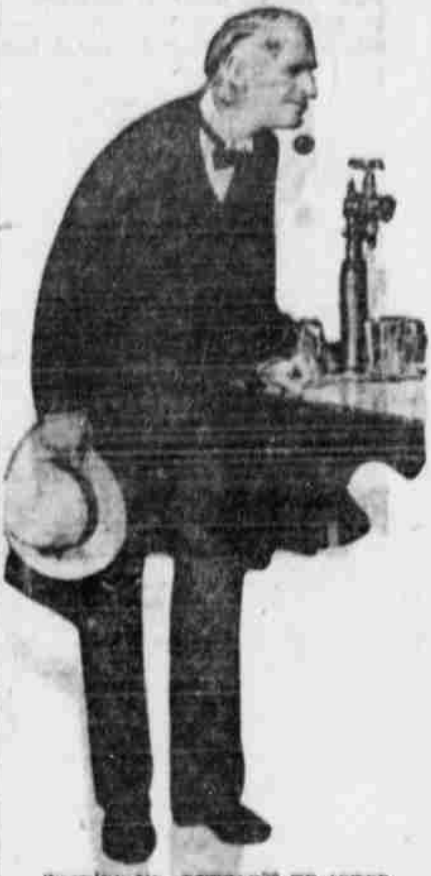
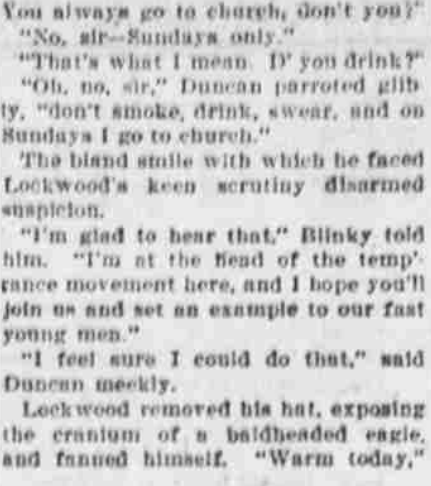
"Now, look here," Burnham got to his feet in anger. "What business have you got buttin' into this?" he demanded, putting himself between Duncan and the inventor.

"Me?" Duncan queried simply. "Only just because I'm a business man. If you don't believe it ask Mr. Graham."

"He's got a perfect right to advise me, Mr. Burnham," interposed Graham, frowning.

"Well, but—but what objection've you got to his making a little money out of this patent?" Burnham blustered.

"None, only I want to look into the



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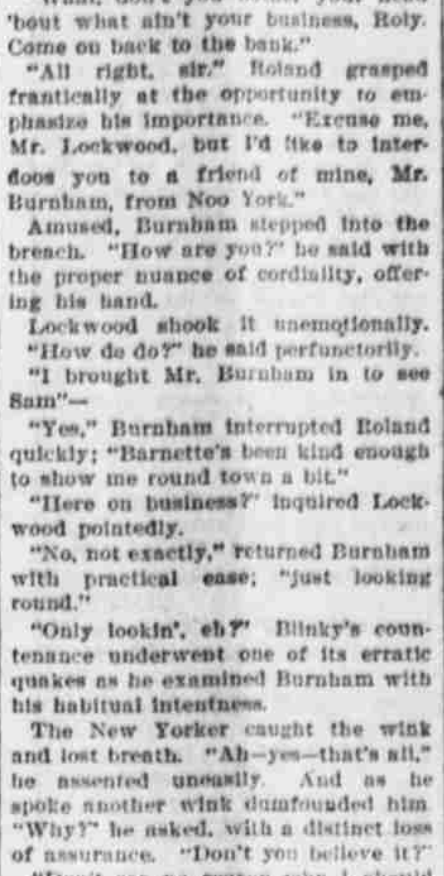
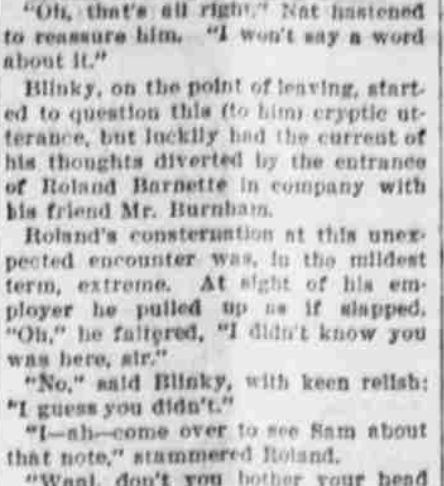
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"I WAS THINKING ABOUT IT AT DINNER"

that burner, so I made out a little bill of sale, and I says to myself, says I, 'If Graham will take \$500 for that patent I'll give him spot cash, right in his hand,' says I."

He flourished the bills under Graham's nose and waited, entirely at ease as to his answer.



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matter first. "I think it might be—advisable."

"What makes you think so?" demanded Burnham, his tone withering.

"Well," said Nat, with an effort summing his faculties to cope with a matter of strict business, "it's this way. I've got an idea," he said, poking at Burnham with the forefinger which had proved so effective with Pete Willing. "that you wouldn't offer 500 from men for this burner unless you expected to make something big out of it, and it ought to be worth just as much to Mr. Graham as to you."

"Ah, you don't know what you're talking about."

"I know that," Nat admitted simply, "but I do happen to know you're promoting a scheme for making gas from crude oil, and if Mr. Graham will listen to me you won't get his patent until I've consulted my friend Henry Kellogg."

"Kellogg?"

"Yes, you know—of L. J. Bartlett & Co." Nat's forefinger continued to do deadly work. Burnham backed away from it as from a fiery brand.

"Oh, well," he said, dashed. "If you're representing Kellogg"—and Nat took care not to refute the implication—"I—I don't want to interfere. Only, he pursued at random in his discomfiture, "I can't see why he sent you here."

"I'd be ashamed to tell you," Nat returned with an open smile. "Better ask him."

Burnham gathered his wits together for a final threat. "That's what I'll do," he threatened. "And I'll do it the minute I can see him. You can bet on that, Mr. What's-your-name?"

"No, I can't," said Nat naively. "I'm not allowed to gamble."

His ingenuous expression exasperated Burnham. The man lost control of his temper at the same moment that he acknowledged to himself his defeat. In disgust he turned away.

"Oh, there's no use talking to you"—

"That's right," Nat agreed fairly.

"But I'll see you again, Mr. Graham!"

"Not alone, if I can help it, Mr. Burnham," Duncan amended sweetly.

"But," Burnham continued, severely ignoring Nat and addressing himself squarely to Graham, "you take my tip and don't do any business with this fellow until you find out who he is. He stung himself out of the shop with a barbed 'Good day!'"

"Well, Mr. Graham?" Duncan turned a little apprehensively to the inventor.

"Margaret used to talk that way sometimes," he remarked. "She was the best woman in the world—and the wisest. She used to take care of me and protect me from my foolish impulses, just as you do, my boy."

For a space Duncan kept silent, respecting the old man's memories and a great deal humbled in spirit by the parallel Sam had drawn. Then, "I was afraid what I said would sound queer to you, sir," he ventured—"that you mightn't understand that I'm not here to do you out of your invention."

"There's nothing on earth, my boy"—Graham's hand fell on Nat's arm—"that could make me think that. But \$500, you see, would have repaid you for taking up that note, and—I could have bought Betty a new dress for the party. But I'm sure you've done what's best. You're a business man—"

"Don't!" Nat pleaded wildly. "I've been called that so much of late that it's beginning to hurt!"

The old man turned away sadly, lighted a candle and went down into the cobwebby cellar to patch a broken window.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE way he's worked!" Sam Graham said to me that night about Duncan. "You'd hardly believe it, Homer. He said he wanted to get home early so to write a letter to a friend of his in New York, a Mr. Kellogg, junior member of L. J. Bartlett & Co. about my invention. But he insisted on leaving everything to rights for business tomorrow. And just look!"

"But I thought Roland Barnette—I suggested with glee. Of course I'd heard a rumor of what had happened—almost every one in town had—and how Roland and his friend Mr. Burnham had sort of fallen out on the way from the Bigelow House to the train, but no one knew anything definite, and I wanted to get 'the rights of it,' as Radville says."

So I had dropped in at Graham's on my way home from the office, as I often do, for an evening smoke and a bit of gossip. Then I started home.

After a time I became aware that some one was overtaking me.

"Good evening, Mr. Duncan," I saluted.

He stopped short, peering through the gloom. "Good evening, but—Mr. Littlejohn? Glad to see you. Aren't you late?"

"You're out late yourself, Mr. Duncan, for one of such regular, not to say abnormal, habits—one who never misses going to church and Sunday school, no matter what the weather."

He laughed lightly. "Had a letter I wanted to catch the first morning train."

"Then you're interested in Sam's burner?"

"No, I'm not, but I hope to interest others. Oh, yes, Mr. Graham told you about it, of course. It just struck me that if a man of Burnham's stamp was willing to risk \$500 on the proposition he very likely foresaw a profit in it that might as well be Mr. Graham's. So I've sent a detailed description of the thing to a friend in New York who'll look into it for me."

He was silent for a little.

"Who's Colonel Bohun?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I saw him this evening. He was passing the store and stopped to glare in as if he hated it—stopped so long that I got nervous and asked Miss Lockwood (she'd just happened in for

a parting glass—of soda) whether he was an anarchist or a retired burglar. She told me his name, but was otherwise inhumanly reticent."

"For Josie?" I chuckled, but he didn't respond. So I took up the tale of the first family of Radville.

"The story runs," said I, "that the Bohuns were one of the F. V. V.'s; that they sickened of slavery, freed their slaves and moved north to settle in Radville. I believe they came from somewhere around Lynchburg, but that was a couple of generations ago. When the civil war broke out the old colonel up there—I ventured vaguely in the general direction of the Bohun mansion—couldn't keep out of it, and naturally he couldn't light with the

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He smiled winningly at Pete. "Four hundred dollars, Mr. Sheriff. Now will you be good enough to hand over that note and the change and then put yourself and that pickle you're wearing to your face on the other side of the door?"

"I ain't got the note with me, Mr. Duncan."

"Then perhaps you won't mind going to the bank for it?"

Half suffocated, Pete assented. "Aw' right, I'll go and get it. Kin I have the money?"

"Certainly," Duncan extended the bills, then on second thought withheld them. "I presume you're a regular sheriff?" he inquired.

Very proudly Pete turned back the lapel of his coat and ostended the chest on which shone his nickel plated badge of office. Duncan examined it with grave admiration.

"It's beautiful," he said, with a sigh. "Here."

Gingerly Pete grasped the bills, thumbed them over to make sure they were real and bolted as for his life, his contents level on the breeze. There floated back to Duncan and old Sam