

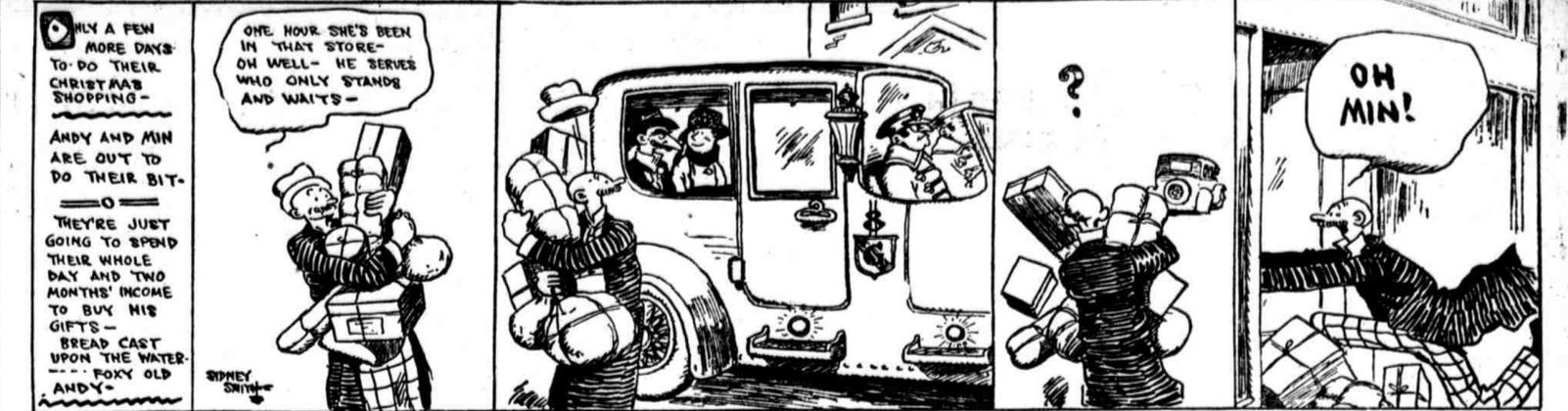
THE FORTUNE HUNTER

By RUBY M. AYRES

Author of "The Bachelor Husband," "The One Unwanted," etc. Copyright by Wheeler Syndicate, Inc.

THE Fortune Hunter sat at the top of a five-barred gate, his hat at the back of his head, idly tapping his rather shabby brown boots with a rough stick which he had pulled from a hedge. He was a light-and-twentieth birthday, and he had exactly eight-and-twenty shillings in the world. Perhaps it was this fact that was responsible for the preoccupied look on his face and the fatal oblivion to the fact that the gate was bordered with barbed wire to the exceeding danger of his already well-worn suit. It was a warm evening in early September. The trees all around were beginning to be faintly tinged with autumn coloring, and a faint glow was rising from the bed of the river which flowed by on the other side of the field to his back. Eight-and-twenty shillings. The Fortune Hunter took the coin from his pocket, looked at them, laughed, and nudged them back again. He had been in many tight corners during the last year, and his roving eye had always managed to struggle through, but today somehow his usual optimism seemed to have failed him. He found that a pessimistic mood had depressed him, for at any time he sighed—a most unusual thing for the Fortune Hunter to do—and passed a hazy gaze over the landscape. For a fortnight now he had tramped England, waiting for something to turn up, for he was a firm believer in his luck, and this was the first time he had allowed himself even to consider the possibility that it might be going to fail in after all these years. To begin with, he was hungry, and under no circumstances would he touch anything on earth; but there was a sort of unwillingness in his heart to break into that last eight-and-twenty shillings until he was absolutely forced to do so. When things were at their worst, something always turned up—or such, at least, had always been the case with him, and with the feeling that he must get away from his thoughts of shake off his growing depression, the Fortune Hunter jumped down from the gate, and started walking up the road again. He was a tall man, and he looked like a gentleman in spite of the fact that his clothes were shabby and his boots nearly bald. Yet there was an undeniable air of breeding about him, and he walked with a fine, athletic swing, despite his weariness. His hair was short-cropped, and he had a touch of gray here and there. His face was burned by exposure to sun and weather. For a fortnight he had slept in woods, barns, or out in the hedges; anything served him for a bed; he had nudged it in all four corners of the field, and never quarreled with the pillow provided by circumstance. A little further on the road forked; one way, leading straight along, was the main road, and the other, running into a narrow path, was a little ended in a shady wood. The Fortune Hunter hesitated, then turned into the wood, where neither heat nor dust had penetrated and everything was cool and fresh. He took off his hat and let the soft heat on his forehead, walking mechanically along until suddenly he tripped and almost fell over an obstacle half hidden in the thick bracken exchanging the narrow footpath. The Fortune Hunter recovered himself and swore good-naturedly, glancing down to see what had tripped him. In his face changed and he caught his breath on a muttered ejaculation as he saw the huddled form of a man lying down among the green undergrowth. "Drunk!" was his first thought, and he half made aside to pass on. Then he thought of the man's position, and stooping down, he pulled the bracken aside, peering more closely at the prostrate figure. Another second, and he was on his knees beside it, his deft brown hands flung under the coat for a heart beat, fanned face pale with horror. For the Fortune Hunter had seen death many times to be mistaken, but it was an unusual shock to have come to see it here in the heart of a shady glen. Turning the dead man gently over on his back, he looked into his face. Quite young it was and not unlike his own, he thought, sagging with its unshaven lips and smooth skin, from which even death had not been able to erase the tan. He wore a rough tweed suit that had rather Colonial in cut, and a gray hat lay a little distance off in the bracken. The Fortune Hunter rose to his feet and stood looking down at him with an air of helplessness. What ought he to do? Inform the police, he supposed, but he turned his eyes again to the prostrate figure. Whatever the cause of death, it had been peaceful enough, for the face was quite calm and unlined by pain. The lips a little parted as if in the act of some one would come along! Fortune Hunter had no idea how he was turning to retrace his steps to the main road, when he caught sight of a bulky package lying almost at his feet. He stooped and picked it up. It was a shabby leather pocketbook, held together by an elastic band and bulging with papers or letters. The Fortune Hunter turned it over and certainly; then, with a little shrug of his shoulders, he pulled out the hand and glanced through the contents. There were a lot of pencil notes that seemed to be nothing in particular, and jottings of various sums of money; a few letters, all in the same hand; an old photograph of a girl who was tumbling about her shoulders, and on the fly-leaf of the pocketbook, he evidently the name of the dead man, written in a sprawling hand: "John Smith." The Fortune Hunter smiled grimly. He had known many "John Smiths" in his wanderings, but seldom had it been the rightful name of the man who had died; and it was with the idea of finding some further means of identification that he unfolded one of the letters and glanced casually through it. It was obviously written by a woman, bore a date four months previous: "My Dear John: I know you will think that I have a long time answering your last letter, but now you will see soon how again I am beginning to be. Ten years is a long time—and I only eighteen—when you went away. Supposing you don't like me any more? Supposing I don't like you? Oh, now there has been nobody else for me since, but I am afraid all this, and now I am a woman, though I feel so very much older, except I look back on the days with you realize how far away they really are. You must be patient with me, won't you? Don't expect too great things from me at first, although in spite of my age I am longing to see you. I feel in my heart I think—I feel it will be all right—I feel I'll write again—soon will be home to you, could get another letter. So I look at you, dear.—Anne." The Fortune Hunter shrugged his

THE GUMPS—Ho! Hum!



By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Try It, It Will Make Your Heart Sing



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The Young Lady Across the Way

THE KEY TO THE JAM CLOSET

By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG



PETEY—Quite Singular

GASOLINE ALLEY—Nothing But a Merry Twinkle

By C. A. Voight

By King



GASOLINE ALLEY—Nothing But a Merry Twinkle

By King

By King

By King

By King



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