

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

By RUBY M. AYRES

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

RUBY M. AYRES' NEW LOVE STORY

It's worth watching for! The very title is fascinating—"A Man's Way."

On This Page Wednesday

"DON'T, don't! It breaks my heart! I'm not worth a tear, not worth a thought. Oh, my dear—"

"Promise me you won't go—promise me! Promise me! Stay just for tonight, just till the morning. Oh, I shall die if you leave me like this."

For a moment he made no answer; his eyes were dark with pain and his heart torn with misery. Then he raised her head and, holding her face between his hands, stooped and kissed her lips—a long kiss of farewell. If only she had known it, of passionate despair and unending love.

"I love you—I love you," he said. Her arms clung about him, her wet cheek was pressed to his.

"And you won't go—you won't leave me—"

"Anne, oh, my dear, how can I answer you? How can I stay? I've been ordered to go—and rightly. I must leave this house tonight—you know that. I shall love you as long as I live; there'll never be another woman in the world for me. There'll never be a moment when I am not thinking of you—wanting you. But I can't stay; you know that."

"Will you stay if I ask you to?" said a voice behind him, and the Fortune Hunter turned, with Anne's arms still about him, and looked into Mr. Harding's perturbed face.

"Will you stay if I ask you to?" Mr. Harding said again. "Oh, it's not, it's not changed my mind about you," he spoke out, with great bitterness, "but I love my niece; I'd give everything I own to see her happy, and I know now that she'll break her heart if you go."

He came forward a step into the room. "Stay; just for tonight," he begged slowly. "Tomorrow—perhaps things will seem more possible to-morrow."

The two men eyed one another steadily for a long moment; then the Fortune Hunter flung up his head.

"Very well—if you wish for the moment, and if he felt that he could bear no more. Tomorrow? Mr. Harding had said that tomorrow things might seem more possible; but the Fortune Hunter knew well that before tomorrow came he would be out on the road, with all this part of his life left behind him, forever.

Supper was brought in place of the long-delayed dinner, and a poor pretense of eating was made, but it was a relief to every one when it was over.

It was agony to the Fortune Hunter to see the tragedy of Anne's face; a hundred times he wished that after all he had gone away without seeing her; he was unutterably glad when she rose to say good-night. It was only 10 o'clock then, but the evening had seemed an eternity.

He followed her from the room and laid good-night to her at the foot of the stairs. He dared not offer to kiss her, and she did not seem to wish or expect it. He stood and watched her go up the staircase, but when she reached the bend, and in another second would have been hidden from him, something seemed to snap in his heart. He went up the stairs up to a time and overtook her on the landing.

"Anne!" She half-turned, the tears streaming down her face, and he caught her to his heart.

"My dear—my dear!" She clung to him desperately, and they kissed as only lovers kiss for whom the moment of eternal farewell has come.

She hardly spoke, but in broken words of endearment, until Anne said with the quietness of despair:

"If you had let me, I would have followed you to the end of the world." And then, as he made no answer, she broke out passionately: "Promise me that you will stay—promise me!"

But he only answered her with broken words and kisses, and at last, thinking she was soothed and comforted, he kissed her once and left her.

He went straight to his own room and shut and locked the door. He sat down in the darkness, his face hidden in his hands, and cried like a child for the hapless ruin he had made of his life.

For hours the Fortune Hunter sat in the darkness of his room, looking helplessly into a past and into a future which he knew there could be but one solution. He must go, he must make the only possible reparation that will lay in his power by walking out of Anne Harding's life forever.

If he had he believed there could be no happiness for either of them. After what had happened she could never really trust him again.

She had said that she loved him, but there is such a thing as a pity which is not really a near kin to love, and only a very poor distant relation.

He went back step by step, over every moment of the days he had spent with Anne since fate had brought him to Somerton, and he realized with an agony of remorse that he had done but little to repay her goodness and devotion.

It seemed to him, too, in the height of his misery, that, given the time over again, it would have been so easy to tell her the whole truth from the beginning and trust to her love for forgiveness. He felt that he had been a woman not to take Garry Cannon's advice even at the eleventh hour and play the man. But it was all so many weary days too late.

Nothing could bring back the past, with its many wasted opportunities.

And, after all, she had been married to the man whom he had found hidden in the woods that afternoon. Bitterness joined to his pain of remorse as he wondered why he had never before guessed the truth.

So many times she had said things that should have told him. Even as far back as that first morning they spent together on the island she had said:

"And if uncle asks you about our wedding what shall you tell him?"

What a callous brute she must have thought him!

And again, only two days ago, she had said bitterly: "I still have one ring of yours, which I have never dared to wear."

Even that had not told him, and lights were out and presently the curtain would be rung down between them for ever.

He sat with his head in his hands all the long night and dived away to mine's with the moonlight; then he drew up the blinds and presently the white road lay there beyond the garden, long and deserted, as if it were to be no start again on his weary tramp through life.

He had known happy days in the highways and byways—days free from all sense of responsibility, but they were days of the past, never to come again. It was to eternal bondage, not freedom that he would be returning presently when he took the road again.

He changed his clothes and put on the old worn suit in which he had come

to Somerton. Then he unlocked all the drawers and boxes that held John Smith's possessions and laid the keys on the dressing table.

Somewhere, in the house a clock struck 4. He crossed the room noiselessly, opened the door and looked out on to the landing. All was dark and still, but a faint apprehension prevented him from going out that way and reaching meeting any one, and he went back again into the room, closing the door behind him, and softly unlatched the window.

The scent of the climbing yellow rose, fading now beneath the chill breath of autumn, came to him faintly on the wind, and, with unsteady, broken steps, one of the dying blooms and put it away in his coat; then he pushed the window more widely open and swung himself out on the air.

For a moment he hesitated, his heart torn with unbearable pain and longing; then slowly he let himself down till he hung only by his hands. A moment; then he let go, and dropped noiselessly to the sloping lawn below.

He stood for a moment, hat in hand, looking up at the dark face of the house.

It was growing light very rapidly and the trees and shrubs all around were creeping out of the darkness like queer, shapeless figures; an eerie world seemed, and one which he had never before chanced upon in his wanderings. He had almost reached the garden gate when out of the shadows something stirred, and a man's hoarse cough broke the silence.

The Fortune Hunter stood still, his heartbeats quickening a little, for he knew who waited there for him, and with a morbid dread of being moved from his determination, he turned hurriedly back, skirted the boundary of the garden till he reached a low part of the wall some twenty feet from the spot where Fernie kept his patient; then he climbed it and dropped into the road below.

He was sped swiftly away toward the village then, without a backward glance, his head down, his shoulders drooping, still carrying his shabby hat, and presently the morning mist and the mist from the river together shut out Cherry Lodge as if with an obscuring veil.

In his numbed heart was a vague feeling of gratitude to Fernie that he had waited so long and patiently through the chilly autumn night to say good-by, or, perhaps, to try to persuade him not to go. It was something which he felt perhaps the old man felt a shadow of regret, even of affection.

At the end of the village a sign-post stood at cross-roads, and the Fortune Hunter glanced up at the directions mechanically.

"To London," Garry Cannon was there, and would be glad to see him, but he was in no mood for Cannon's kind sympathy, and it was deliberately that he turned and struck across the fields through which he had come to Somerton that first day.

The entrance to the woods where he had found the body of John Smith was strewn with dead and dying leaves. The footpath was almost covered with them. The tall bracken was brown and withered and helplessly bending cartilage.

It was autumn in the world, autumn in the Fortune Hunter's heart, as he went on, without glancing to the right or left, and out into the field on the other side, shut off by the five-barred gate.

It was here that he had set a little more than seven weeks ago on his eight-and-twentieth birthday, and counted his few remaining shillings. He had been happy, in a careless way, and since then he had known a far greater happiness, mingled with all the sorrow of the world. And now, that too, was ended and it seemed to the Fortune Hunter almost as if life itself must end here where it had begun.

He put his arm on the top of the gate and looked across the barren field to the wood beyond and the thin spire of Somerton Church, which was all he could see of the village. The river and Cherry Lodge were shut out by the trees, but he saw them all as faithfully as he would see them to his dying day.

And he thought of Anne, and the way she had clung to him only last night on the dark landing.

"If you had let me, I should have followed you to the end of the world. Promise me you will stay—promise me!"

How many times in the future would not her words come back to torture him with doubt. Had it been the right thing to go? Ought he to have stayed? But it was too late now; by his own action he had written the end of the story.

Established! The word seemed blazoned across the gray sky and the brown, barren field.

The first ray of morning sunshine pierced the clouds and touched the Fortune Hunter's forehead with kindly radiance. The beginning of a new day, which for him was the end of everything.

There was probably no more miserable man in Somerton that night than old Fernie, as he walked slowly away from Cherry Lodge through the darkness, his white hair and cold and deserted from between his lips, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his corduroy breeches.

He felt for the first time in his life remorse—that he had been worsted and badly worsted; for the first time in his life, too, he had awakened to the realization that he was getting an old man worse and that there was not a soul in the world who would care if he died to-morrow.

The fact that he had ever had a son he had almost forgotten until the Fortune Hunter had brought the truth home to him; but now as he walked back to Long End Cottage he was realizing that old age might not, after all, be such a bad thing, with a fine grown-up child that at his elbow had had to be reared, and had to whom he could leave his carefully hoarded wealth.

The world looked upon the Fortune Hunter as a wretch. He knew, but old Fernie felt a thrill of pride in his son's daring.

He liked to remember him as he had faced them all at Cherry Lodge; there had been no fear in his handsome face. He had refused all help—even that of his own father—and that fact hurt more than anything else.

Old Fernie stopped and looked behind him through the darkness to where the "gate" from Cherry Lodge still shone dimly through the fast thinning trees.

Should he go back and try to reason with the boy again? He took an unobtrusive step forward, then stopped. His grand would be useless, he knew—Robert had all his mother's obstinacy.

THE GUMPS—All Dolled Up



By Sidney Smith

MY NO. 2 AND MORE TO FOLLOW— THE LION OF FINANCE— THE STURDY OAK OF INDUSTRY IS A PROOPIING WILLOW IN THE PRESENCE OF THE WIDOW— THE WORDS FORM ON HIS LIPS BUT HE CANNOT UTTER THEM—

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Off for Palm Beach



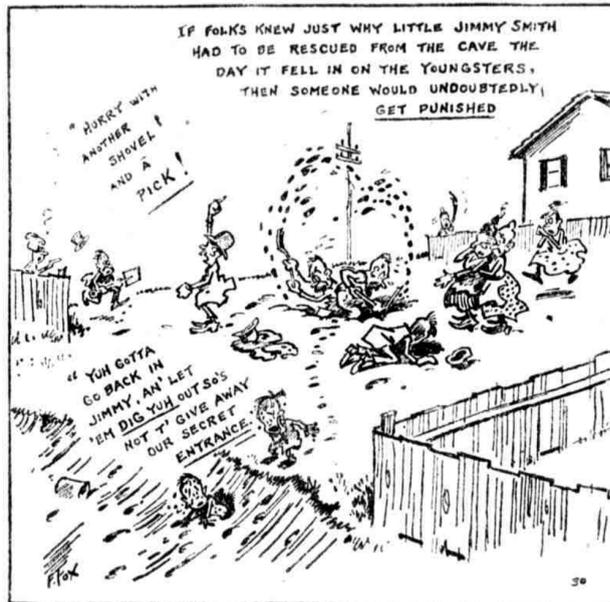
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By Howard

The Young Lady Across the Way



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