



THE FORTUNE HUNTER



NOVELIZED BY
LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE FROM THE PLAY
OF THE SAME TITLE BY
WINCHELL SMITH

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In one of Rudyard Kipling's writings he tells of "the ship that found herself," and in "The Fortune Hunter" we have the fascinating narrative of "a youth who found himself." The youth is like the ship—he had to have his career laid straight before his career began to make substantial headway. The story of Nat Duncan is one that in dramatic form, as written by Winchell Smith, has attracted the attention of thousands of playgoers throughout the country. As a novel, written by Louis Joseph Vance, it becomes a narrative of profound appeal to the young and old and especially to those of us who in our youth dwell in a rural district far enough removed from the metropolitan centers to be practically a world in itself and to itself. Usually it is the country lad who ventures into the great cities to seek fortune and fame's favor. But here we find a down to date city youth, who, a failure at everything he had undertaken, invades the rural districts to make a millionaire of himself. That which befalls him prompted a great New York newspaper editor to say, "Every American should read this great story," for "The Fortune Hunter," in spite of its enjoyable humor, subtly pointed by its talented authors, teaches the vital lesson of the need of charity and tolerance for the less fortunate of human beings.

CHAPTER I

RECEIVER at ear, Spaulding, of Messrs. Atwater & Spaulding, importers of motoring garb and accessories, listened to the switchboard operator's announcement with grave attention, acknowledging it with a toneless "All right; send him in." Then, looking up at the desk telephone, he swung round in his chair to face the door of his private office and in a brief ensuing interval precipitately fringed out of his face and attitude every indication of the frame of mind in which he awaited his caller. It was, as a matter of fact, anything but a pleasant one. He had a dismal duty to perform, but that was the last thing he designed to become evident. Like most good business men, he missed a pet superstition or two, and if the number of these the first was that he must in all his dealings present an invulnerable front, like a poker player's. Captains of industry were uniformly like that, Spaulding understood. If they entertained emotions it was strictly in private. Occasionally this attitude deceived others. Notably now it bewildered Duncan as he entered on the echo of Spaulding's name. He had apprehended the danger of a thunderstorm with a rattle of benign complaints. He encountered Spaulding as he had always seemed—a little, urbane figure with a blank face, the banker for glasses whose lenses seemed always to catch the light and glazing, mask the eyes behind them; a prosperous man of affairs, well groomed both as to body and as to mind; a machine for the transaction of business with all a machine's vivacity and temperamental responsiveness. It was just that quality in him that Duncan envied, who was warmly impressed that if he himself could be made, however minutely, the piece of a machine he might learn to use something of its efficiency and so ultimately prove himself of some worth to the world and incidentally to Nathaniel Duncan.



BETTY GRAHAM

ing down my weekly checks, bad luck to you not to have a man who could earn them." His desperate honesty touched Spaulding a trifle. At the risk of not seeming a business man to himself he inclined dubiously to relent, to give Duncan another chance. "Duncan," he said, "what's the trouble?" "I thought you know that; I thought that was why you called me in with my rifle half covered." "You mean?" "I mean I can't sell your line." "Why?" "God only knows. I want to badly enough. It's just general impotence, I presume." "What makes you think that?" Duncan stammered bitterly. "Experience," he said. "You've tried what else?" "A little of everything, all the jobs open to a man with a knowledge of Latin and Greek and the higher mathematics—shipping clerk, timekeeper, cashier, all of 'em." "And yet Kellogg believes in you." Duncan nodded dolefully. "Harry's a good friend. We roomed together at college. That's why he stands for me." "He says you only need the right opening?" And nobody knows where that is, except my fortunate employers. It's the lack door going out for nine every time. Oh, Harry's found a prince to me. He's found me four or five jobs with friends of his, like yourself. But I don't seem to last. You see, I was brought up to be ornamental and irregular rather than useful, to blow about in motors and keep a valet busy sixteen hours a day, and all that sort of thing. My father's failure— you know about that?" Spaulding nodded. Duncan went on gloomily, talking a great deal more freely than he would have talked at any other time—suffering, in fact, from that species of auto-hypnosis induced by the sound of his own voice recounting his misfortunes which seems especially to affect a man down on his luck. "That smash came when I was five years out of college—I'd never thought

of turning my hand to anything in all that time. I'd always had more coin than I could spend—never had to consider the worth of money or how hard it is to earn. My father saw to all that. It seemed not to want me to work; not that I hold that against him. He'd an idea I'd turn out a genius of some sort or other, I believe. Well, he failed and died all in a week, and I found myself left with an extensive wardrobe, expensive tastes, an impractical education—and not so much of that that you'd notice it—and not a cent. I was too proud to look to my friends for help in those days—and perhaps that was as well; I sought jobs on my own. Did you ever keep books in a fish market?" "No," Spaulding's eyes twinkled behind his large, shiny glasses. "But what's the use of my boring you?" Duncan made as if to rise, suddenly remembering himself. "You're not. Go on." "I didn't mean to. Mostly, I presume, I've been blundering round an explanation of Kellogg's kindness to me, in my usual ineffectual way, but I felt an explanation was due you, as the latest to suffer through his misplaced interest in me." "Perhaps," said Spaulding, "I am being interested. About the fish market?" "Oh, I just happened to think of it as a simple experience, and the last of that particular brand. I got \$9 a week and earned every cent of it inhaling the atmosphere. My board cost me \$6 and the other \$3 afforded me a chance to demonstrate myself a captain of finances, paying laundry bills and clothing myself, besides buying hushes and such like small matters. I did the whole thing, you know, one schooner of beer a day and made my own cigarettes. Never could make up my mind which was the worst. The hours were easy, too; didn't have to get to work until 5 in the morning. I lasted five weeks at that job before I was taken sick. Shows what a great constitution I've got."

"And then?" "Oh," Duncan roused. "Why, then I fell in with Kellogg again; he found me trying the open air cure on a bench in Washington square. Since then he's been finding me one berth after another. He's a sure enough optimist."

Spaulding shifted uneasily in his chair, stirred by an impulse whose unwisdom he could not doubt. Duncan had actually done his case no good by resting his case on his colorful yet somehow, strangely, Spaulding filed him the better for his open hearted confession. "Well," Spaulding stammered awkwardly. "Yes; of course," said Duncan promptly, rising. "Sorry if I tired you."

"What do you mean by 'Yes, of course'?" "That you called me in to fire me—and so on with 'Oh, I'd be sorry to have you sore on Kellogg for saddling me on you. You see, he believed I'd make good, and so I did in a way; at least I hoped to." "Oh, that's all right," said Spaulding uncomfortably. "The trouble is, you see, we've nothing else open just now, but if you'd really like another chance on the road I'll be glad to speak to Mr. Atwater about it."

"Don't you do it," Duncan counseled him sharply, almost. "He might say yes. And I simply couldn't accept; it wouldn't be fair to you, Kellogg or myself. It'd be charity, for I've proved I can't earn my wages, and I haven't come to that yet. No," he concluded with determination and picked up his hat. "Just a minute," Spaulding held him with a gesture. "You're forgetting something—at least I am. There's a month's pay coming to you. The cashier will hand you the check as you go out."

"A month's pay?" Duncan said blankly. "How's that? I've drawn up to the end of this week already, if you don't know it." "Of course I knew it. But we never let our men go without a month's notice or its equivalent, and—" "No," Duncan interrupted firmly—"no; but thank you just the same. I couldn't—I really couldn't. It's good of you, but—'No,' he broke off abruptly. "I've left my accounts, what there is of them, with the bookkeeping department, and the checks for my sample trunks. There'll be a few dollars coming to me on my expense account, and I'll send you my address as soon as I get one." "But, look here," Spaulding got to his feet, frowning. "No," reiterated Duncan positively, "there's no use. I'm grateful to you for your toleration of me and all that, but we can't do anything better now than call it all off. Goodby, Mr. Spaulding."



"BEH PARDON, SIR, BUT I CAN'T SEE YOU!"

He jerked viciously at an obstinate bureau drawer and, when it yielded unexpectedly with the well known impishness of the machine, he felt more as the sured of some humanity latent in his late employer. "However, goodby." "Good luck to you," ruz in his ears as the door put a period to the interview. He stopped and took up the battered suit case and rusty overcoat which he had left outside the Junior partner's office, then went on, shaking his head. "Much obliged," he said huskily to himself, "but what's the good of that. There's no room any more where for a professional failure, and that's what I am—just a no-er-do-well. I never realized what that meant

realy before, and it's certainly taken me a damn' long time to find out. But I know now, all right." Despondently he went down to the sidewalk and merged himself with the crowd, moving with it, though a thousand miles apart from it, and, presently diverging, struck across town toward the Worth street subway station. "And the worst of it is he's too sharp not to find it out—if he hasn't by this time—and too decent by far to let me know if he has. It can't go on this way with us. I can't let him. Got to break with him somehow—now—today. I won't let him think me what I've been all along to him. Bless his foolish heart!" There was no deprecation of Kellogg's goodness in his mood, simply determination no longer to be a charge upon it. To contemplate the sum total of the benefits he had received at Kellogg's hands since the day when the latter had found him ill and half starved, friendless as a stray pup, on the bench in Washington square staggered his imagination. He could never repay it, he told himself, save inadequately, little by little—mostly by gratitude and such consideration as he purposed now to exhibit by removing himself and his distresses from the other's care. Here was an end to comfort for him, an end to living in Kellogg's rooms, eating his food, busying his servants, spending his money, not so much borrowed as pressed upon him.

There crawled in his mind a clammy memory of the sort of housing he had known in past days, and he shuddered inwardly, smelling again the eddying of dank wet dirt and money carpets, of fishbills and fried ham, of old style plumbing and of \$9 a week humanity in the unwashed raw, the odor of misery that permeated the lodgings to which his lack of means had introduced him. He could see again, and with a painful vividness of mental vision, the degenerate "brownstone fronts" that mask those habits of wretchedness with their flights of crawling, brownstone steps leading up to oaken portals haggard with flaking paint, flanked by squares of solid note paper upon which inept hands had traced the warning, not "Abandon hope all ye who enter here," but "Furnished rooms to let with board."

And to this he must return, to that treadmill round of blighted days and joyless nights must set his face. Alighting at the Grand Central station, he packed the double weight of his luggage and his car's few blocks northward on Madison avenue, ere turning west toward the bachelor rooms which Kellogg had established in the roaring Forties, just the other side of the avenue—Fifth avenue. The elevator boy, knowing him of old, neglected to announce his arrival, and Duncan had his own key to the door of Kellogg's apartment. He let himself in with furtive stealth. As was quite right and proper, Kellogg's man Robbins was in attendance, a stunted little fellow, thunderstruck by the unexpected return of his master's friend and guest. "Good Lord," he cried at sight of Duncan. "Beg your pardon, sir, but—it can't be you!" "Your mistake, Robbins. Unfortunately it is," Duncan surrendered his luggage. "Mr. Kellogg in?" "No, sir. But I'm expecting him any minute. He'll be surprised to see you back."

"Think so?" said Duncan dully. "He doesn't know me if he is." "You see, sir, we thought you was out west."

"So you did," Duncan moved toward the door of his own bedroom, Robbins following. "It was only yesterday I posted a letter to you for Mr. Kellogg, sir, and the address was Omaha."

"I don't get that far. Fetch along that suit case, will you please? I want to put some clean things in it." "Then you're not staying in town overnight, Mr. Duncan?" "I don't know. I'm not staying here anyway." Duncan switched on the lights in his room. "Put it on the bed, Robbins. I'll pack as quickly as I can. I'm in a hurry." "Yes, sir; but I hope there's nothing wrong."

"Then you lose," returned Duncan grimly. "Everything's wrong." He jerked viciously at an obstinate bureau drawer and, when it yielded unexpectedly with the well known impishness of the machine, he felt more as the sured of some humanity latent in his late employer. "However, goodby." "Good luck to you," ruz in his ears as the door put a period to the interview. He stopped and took up the battered suit case and rusty overcoat which he had left outside the Junior partner's office, then went on, shaking his head. "Much obliged," he said huskily to himself, "but what's the good of that. There's no room any more where for a professional failure, and that's what I am—just a no-er-do-well. I never realized what that meant

when they had been classmates, what time Duncan shared his rooms with Kellogg, very much younger and suffering exquisitely from oversophistication. His drawl barely escaped being inimitable. His air did not escape it. "Smitten with my old trouble," Duncan appraised him—"too much money. Heaven knows I hope he never recovers!" "Yes, sir. Very good, sir." With the instinct of the well trained servant Robbins started to leave, but hesitated. He was really very much disturbed by Duncan's manner, which showed a phase of his character new in Robbins' experience of him. Ordinarily Robbins

"You may, but you lose a second time. I've just made up my mind I'm not going to hang around here any longer, that's all." "But," Robbins ventured, hovering about with expiring solicitude—"but Mr. Kellogg'd never permit you to leave in this way, sir." "Wrong again, Robbins," said Duncan shortly, annoyed. "Yes, sir. Very good, sir." With the instinct of the well trained servant Robbins started to leave, but hesitated. He was really very much disturbed by Duncan's manner, which showed a phase of his character new in Robbins' experience of him. Ordinarily Robbins

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 Atwater 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 pretty 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 Barnham. 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? Barnham'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 your money 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'd 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 warmer. "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



NATHANIEL DUNCAN

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 emphatically 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?"

Continued on Page 7.