

# THE VAGRANT DUKE

By GEORGE GIBBS

Author of "The Splendid Outcast," "The Yellow Dove," "The Secret Witness," Etc.

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## THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Peter Nicholavitch, Russian Grand Duke, driven from his home by revolutionists, works his way as a volunteer on a British ship to America; sells a valuable ruby ring to the captain, and goes ashore with a fellow-writer, a writer, do-well named Coast, who wants him to join him in an adventure against the law, but he declines. For two months he has played in hard luck and then gets a job as forestry expert in the country residence of Jonathan K. McGuire, and he starts on his journey. He is not feeling very chipper. He is thinking of the last days in Russia and of friends killed before him.

## AND HERE IT CONTINUES

Peter Nichols straightened and passed a hand across his damp forehead. Through the perspective of this modern civilization what had been passing before his vision seemed very vague, very distant, but he knew that it was not a dream.

All about him was life, progress, industry, hope—a nation in the making, proud of her brief history which had been built around an ideal. If he could bring this same ideal back to Russia! In his heart he thanked God for America—imperfect though she was, and made a vow that in the task he had set for himself he should not be found wanting.

Twice he changed trains, the second time at a small junction amid an ugliness of clay-pits and brickyards and dust and heat. There were perhaps twenty people on the platform. He walked the length of the station and as he did so a man in a gray suit disappeared around the corner of the building. But Peter Nichols did not see him, and in a moment, seated in his new train in a wooden car, which reminded him of some of the ancient rolling stock of the St. Petersburg and Moscow Railroad, he was taken hurriedly and noisily along the last stage of his journey.

With a wheeze of steam and a loud crackling of woodwork and creaking of brakes the train came to a stop and the conductor shouted the name of the station. Rather stiffly the traveler descended with his bag and stood upon the small platform looking about him curiously. The baggage man tossed out a bundle of newspapers and a pouch of mail and the train moved off. Apparently, Peter Nichols was the only passenger with Pickel River as a destination.

The station was small, of but one room and a tiny office containing, as he could see, a telegraph instrument, a broken chair with a leather cushion, a shelf and a rack containing a few faded slips of paper, but the office had no occupant and the door was locked. This perhaps explained the absence of the automobile which Mr. Sheldon had informed him would meet him in obedience to his telegram announcing the hour of his arrival. Neither within the building nor without was there any person or animate thing in sight, except some small birds fluttering and chattering along the telegraph wires.

There was but one road, a sandy one, wearing marks of travel, which emerged from the scrub oak and pine and definitely concluded at the railroad track. This, then, was his direct way, and after reassuring himself that there was no other means of egress, he took up his black suitcase and set forth into the wood, aware of a sense of beckoning adventure. The road went on and out, up and down, over what at one time must have been the floor of the ocean, which could not be far distant. Had it not been for the weight of his bag Peter would have enjoyed the experience of this complete isolation, the fragrant silences broken only by the whisper of the leaves and the scurrying of tiny wild things among the dead tree branches. But he had no means of knowing how far he would have to travel or whether, indeed, there had not been some mistake on Sheldon senior's part or his own. But the directions had been quite clear and the road must, of course, lead somewhere—to some village or settlement at least where he could get a lodging for the night.

And so he trudged on through the woods which already seemed to be partaking of some of the mystery which surrounded the person of Jonathan K. McGuire. The whole incident had been unusual and the more interesting because of the strange character of his employer and the evidence that he had of some latent evil which threatened him. But Peter Nichols had accepted his commission with a sense of profound relief at escaping the other fate that awaited him with scarcely a thought of the dangers which his acceptance might entail. He was not easily frightened and had welcomed the new adventure, dismissing the fears of Jonathan K. McGuire as imaginary, the emanations of age or of an uneasy conscience.

But as he went on, his bag became heavier and the perspiration poured down his face, so reaching a cross-path that seemed to show signs of recent travel he put the suitcase down and sat on it while he wiped his brow. The shadows were growing longer. He was beginning to believe that there was some place as Black Rock, no such person as Jonathan K. McGuire and that Sheldon, Senior, and Sheldon, Junior, were engaged in a conspiracy against his peace of mind, when above the now familiar whisperings of the forest he heard a new sound. Faintly it came at first as though from a great distance, mingling with the murmur of the sighing wind in the pine trees, a voice singing.

It seemed a child's voice—delicate, clear, true, as carefree as the note of a bird—unleashing its joy to the heavens. Peter Nichols started up, listening more intently. The sounds were coming nearer, but he couldn't tell from which direction, for every leaf seemed to be taking up the lovely melody which he could hear quite clearly now. It was an air with which he was unfamiliar, but he knew only that it was elemental in its simplicity and under these circumstances startlingly welcome. He waited a moment, listening, found the direction from which the voice was coming, and presently noted the swaying of branches and the crackling of dry twigs in the path nearby, from which, in a moment, a strange figure emerged.

At first he thought it was a boy, for it wore a pair of blue denim overalls and a wide-brimmed straw hat, from beneath which the birdlike notes were still emitted, but as the figure paused at the sight of him, the sound suddenly ceased—he saw a tumbled mass of wavy hair and a pair of startled blue eyes staring at him.

takeable terms to be both feminine and lovely.

## CHAPTER III

### The Overall Girl

They stood for a long moment regarding each other, both in curiosity; Peter because of the contrast of the girl's face and garments; the girl because of Peter's bow, which was the most extraordinary thing that had ever happened in Pickel River County. After a pause, a smile which seemed to have been hovering uncertainly around the corners of her lips broke into a frank grin, disclosing dimples and a row of white teeth, the front ones not quite together.

"Could you tell me," asked Peter very politely as he found his voice, "if this road leads to Black Rock?" She was still scrutinizing him, her head, birdlike, upon one side.

"That depends on which way you're walkin'," she said. She dropped her "g" with careless ease, but then Peter had noticed that many Americans and English people, some very nice ones, did that.

Peter glanced at the girl and then down the road in both directions. "Oh, yes, of course," he said, not sure whether she was smiling at or with him. "I came from a station called Pickel River and I wish to go to Black Rock."

"You're sure you want to go there?" "Oh, yes."

"I guess that's because you've never been to Black Rock, Mister."

"No, I haven't."

The girl picked a shrub and nibbled at it daintily.

"You'd better turn and go right back," her sentence finished in a shrug.

"What's the matter with Black Rock?" he asked curiously.

"It's just the little end of nothin'."

"That's all," she finished decisively.

The quaint expression interested him. "I must get there, nevertheless," he said; "is it far from here?"

"Depends on what you call far. Mile or so. Didn't the 'Lizzie' meet the six-thirty?"

Peter stared at her vacuously, for this was Greek to him.

"The 'Lizzie'?"

"The tin 'Lizzie'—Jim Hagerman's bus—carries the mail and papers. Sometimes he gives me a lift about here."

"No. There was no conveyance of any sort and I really expected one to get to Mr. Jonathan K. McGuire's."

"Oh!"

"The girl had been examining Peter furtively, as though trying vainly to place him definitely in her mental collection of human bipeds. Now she stared at him with interest.

"Oh, you're goin' to McGuire's!" Peter nodded. "If I can ever find the way."

"You're one of the new detectives?" "Detective?" Peter laughed. "No. Not that I'm aware, I'm the new superintendent and forester."

"Oh!"

The girl was visibly impressed, but a tiny frown puckered her brow.

"What's a forester?" she asked.

"A fellow who looks after the forests."

"The forests don't need any lookin' after out here in the barrens. They just grow."

"I'm going to teach them to grow better."

The girl looked at him for a long moment of suspicion. She had taken off her hat and the ruddy sunlight behind her made a golden halo all about her head. Her hands, he had noted, were small, the fingers slender. Her nose was well shaped, her nostrils wide, the angle of her jaw firmly modeled and her slender figure beneath the absurd garments revealed both strength and grace. But he did not dare to stare at her too hard or to question her as to her garments. For all that Peter knew it might be the custom of Burlington County for women to wear blue denim trousers.

And her next question took him off his guard.

"You city folks don't think much of yourselves, do you?"

"I don't exactly understand what you mean," said Peter politely, marking the satirical note.

"To think you can make these trees grow better," she sniffed.

"Oh, I'm just going to help them to help themselves."

"That's God's job, Mister."

Peter smiled. She wouldn't have understood, he thought, so what was the use of explaining. There must have been a superior quality in Peter's smile, for the girl put on her hat and came down into the road.

"I'm goin' to Black Rock," she said stiffly, "follow me." And she went off with a quick stride down the road.

Peter Nichols took up his bag and started with difficulty getting to a place beside her.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd much rather walk with you than behind you."

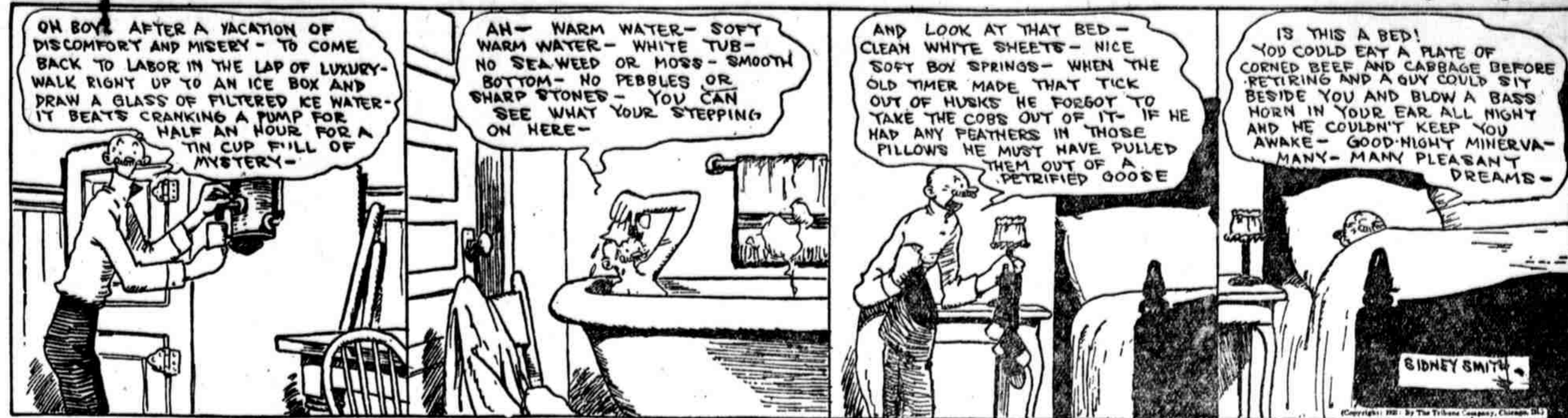
She shrugged a shoulder at him.

"Suit yourself," she said.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

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By Sidney Smith



## SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Putting the Spurs to Him

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By Hayward



## The Young Lady Across the Way

## NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS

By FONTAINE FOX

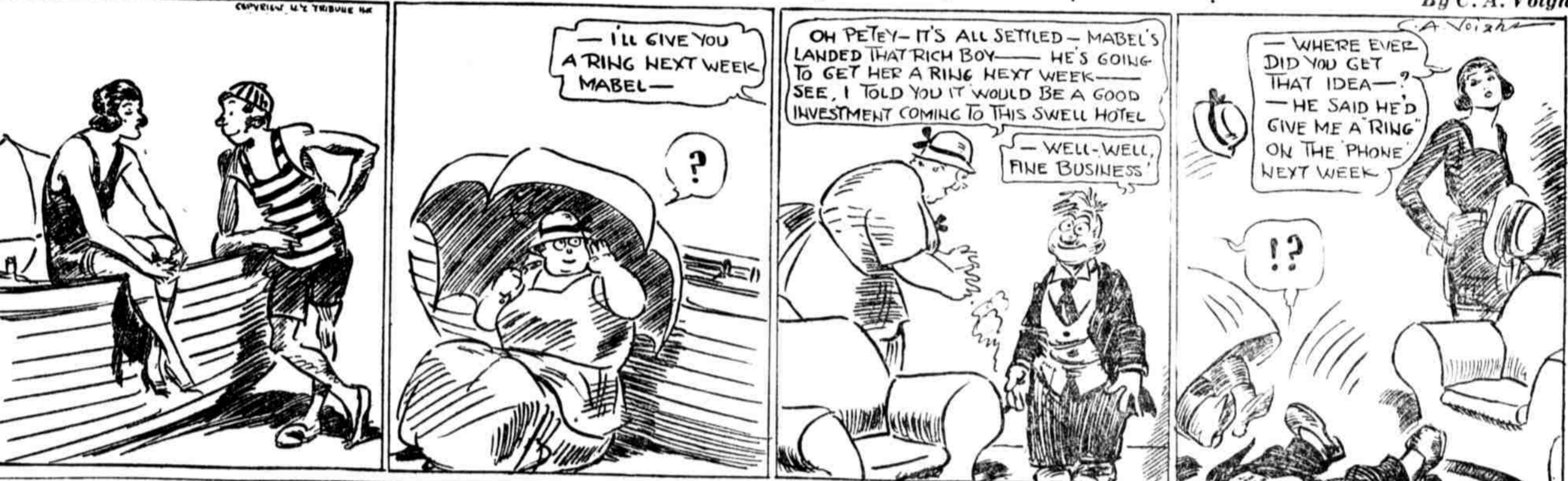
## SCHOOL DAYS

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## PETEY—Oh, the Mean Thing

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## THE CLANCY KIDS—Broke Up the Show

By Percy L. Crosby



**TIMMIE'S "SOAPWITH" PLANE**  
THE PICKLE THROG, WHICH GATHERED FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF WITNESSING THAT DARING AVIATOR, WILLIE LUCKNEAR, WEND HIS HAZARDOUS WAY ON THE WIRE HAND OVER HAND, IS SUDDENLY ENTICED BY THE SIREN OF A FIRE ENGINE.