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 Nicholaevitch, Russian Grand Duke, dispossessed by revolution, works his way to America as a waiter on a British ship, and finds a job as forester on the estate of Jonathan K. McGuire; goes to his job in Burlington County and asks a girl he sees at the station the way to Black Rock, his destination. She asks him what kind of a job he is going to have, and he says he supposes he will have to look after the preserve.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"H-M. Preserve! Sorry, Mr. what's your name——"

"Peter Nichols——" put in Peter promptly.

"Well, Mr. Peter Nichols, all I have to say is that you're apt to have a hard time."

"Yes, I'm against it!" translated Peter confidently.

The girl stopped in the middle of the road, put her hands on her hips and laughed up at the purpling sky. Her laugh was much like her singing—if angels in Paradise laugh (and why shouldn't they?). Then while he wondered what was so amusing she looked at him again.

"Up against it, you mean. You're English, aren't you?"

"Er—yes—I am."

"I thought so. There was one of you in the glass factory. He always snuffed the easy ones."

"Oh, you work in a glass factory?"

"Winters. Manufacturin' whisky and beer bottles. Now we're goin' dry, they'll be makin' pop and nursin' bottles, I guess."

"Do you help in the factory?"

"Yes, and in the office. I can shorthand and type a little."

"You must be glad when a summer comes."

"I am. In winter I can't turn around without breakin' something. They dock you for that——"

"And that's why you sing when you can't break anythin'?"

"I suppose so. I like the open. It isn't right to be cooped up."

They were getting along beautifully and Peter was even beginning to forget the weight of his heavy bag. She was a quaint creature and quite as unconscious of him as though he hadn't existed. He was just somebody to talk to. Peter ventured.

"Er—would you mind telling me your name?"

She looked at him and laughed friendly.

"You must have swallowed a catechism, Mr. Nichols. But everybody in Black Rock knows everybody else—more'n they want to, I guess. There's no reason I shouldn't tell you. I don't mind your knowin'. My name is Beth Cameron."

"Beth——?"

"Yes, Bess—the minister had a lisp."

Peter didn't lack a sense of humor. "Funny, isn't it?" she queried with a smile as he laughed, "bein' tied up for life to a name like that just because the parson couldn't talk straight."

"Beth," he repeated, "but I like it. It's like you. I hope you'll let me come to see you when I get settled."

"H-m," she said quizzically. "You don't believe in wastin' your time, do you?" And then, after a brief pause. "You know they call us Pineys back here in the barrens, but just the same we think a lot of ourselves and we're a little offish with city folks. You can't be too particular nowadays about the kind of people you go with."

Peter stared at her and grinned, his sense of the situation more keenly touched than she could be aware of.

"Particular, are you? I'm glad of that. All the more credit to me if you'll be my friend."

"I didn't say I was your friend."

"But you're going to be, aren't you? I know something about singing. I've studied music. Perhaps I could help you."

"You! You've studied? Lord of Love! You're not lyin', are you?"

He laughed. "No. I'm not lying. I was educated to be a musician."

She stared at him now with a new look in her eyes but said nothing. So Peter spoke again.

"Do you mean to say you've never thought of studying singing?"

"Oh, yes," she said slowly at last. "I've thought of it, just as I've thought of goin' in the movies and makin' a million dollars. Lots of good thinkin' does!"

"You've thought of the movies?"

"Yes, once. A girl went from the glass factory. She does extra ladies. She visited back here last winter. I didn't like what it did to her."

"Oh!" Peter was silent for a while, aware of the pellucid meaning of her "it." He was learning quite as much from what she didn't say as from what she did. But he evaded the line of thought suggested.

"You do get tired of Black Rock then?"

"I would if I had time. I'm pretty busy all day, and—see here—Mr.—er—Nichols. If I asked as many questions as you do, I'd know as much as Daniel Webster."

"I'm sorry," said Peter, "I beg your pardon."

They walked on in silence for a few moments, Peter puzzling his brain over the extraordinary creature that chance had thrown in his way. He could see that she was quite capable of looking out for herself and that if her smattering of sophistication had opened her eyes, it hadn't much harmed her.

He really wanted to ask her many more questions, but to tell the truth he was a little in awe of her dry humor which had a kind of primitive omniscience and of her laughter which he was now sure was more at, than with, him. But he had, in spite of her, peered for a moment into the hidden places of her mind and spirit.

It was this intrusion that she resented and he could hardly blame her, since they had met only eighteen minutes ago. She trotted along beside him as though quite unaware of the sudden silence or of the thoughts that might have been passing in his mind. It was Beth who broke the silence.

"Is your bag heavy?" she asked.

"Not at all," said Peter, mopping the perspiration from his forehead. "But aren't we nearly there?"

"Oh, yes. It's just a mile or so."

Peter dropped his bag.

"That's what you said it was, back there."

"Did I? Well, maybe it isn't so far as that now. Let me carry your bag a while."

Thus taunted, he rose, took the bag in his left hand and followed.

"City folks aren't much on doin' for themselves, are they? The taxi system is very poor down here yet."

Her face was expressionless, but he knew that she was laughing at him. He knew also that his bag weighed more than any army pack. It seemed, too, that she was walking much faster than he had done before—also that there was malicious humor in the smile she now turned on him.

"Seems a pity to have such a long walk—with nothin' at the end of it."

"I don't mind it in the least," gasped Peter. "And if you don't object to my asking you just one more question," he went on grimly, "I'd like you to tell me what is frightening Mr. Jonathan K. McGuire?"

"Oh, McGuire. I don't know. Nobody does. He's been here a couple of weeks now, cooped up in the big house. Never comes out. They say he sees ghosts and things."

"Ghosts!"

She nodded. "He's hired some of the men around here to keep watch for them and they say some detectives are coming. You'll help too, I guess."

"That should be easy."

"Maybe. I don't know. My aunt works there. She's housekeeper. It's spooky, she says, but she can't afford to quit."

"But they haven't seen anything?" asked Peter incredulously.

"No. Not yet. I guess it might relieve 'em some if they did. It's only the things you don't see that scare you."

"It sounds like a great deal of nonsense about nothing," muttered Peter.

"All right. Wait until you get there before you do much talkin'."

"I will, but I'm not afraid of ghosts." And then, as an afterthought, "Are you?"

"Not in daylight. But from what Aunt Tillie says, it must be something more than a ghost that's frightenin' Jonathan K. McGuire."

"What does she think it is?"

"She doesn't know. Mr. McGuire won't say. He won't allow anybody around the house without a pass. Oh, he's scared all right, and he's got most of Black Rock scared, too. He was never like this before."

"Are you scared?" asked Peter.

"No. I don't think I am really. But it's spooky, and I don't care much for shootin'."

"What makes you think there will be shooting?"

"On account of the guns and pistols. Whatever the thing is he's afraid of, he's not goin' to let it come near him if he can help it.

"Aunt Tillie says that what with loaded rifles, shotguns and pistols lyin' loose in every room in the house, it's as much as your life is worth to do a bit of dustin'. And the men—Shad Wells, Jesse Brown, they all carry automatics. First thing they know they'll be killin' somebody," she finished with conviction.

"Who is Shad Wells——?"

"My cousin, Shadrack E. Wells. He was triplets. The other two died."

"Shad," mused Peter.

"Sounds like a fish, doesn't it? But he isn't." And then more slowly, "Shad's all right. He's just a plain woodsman, but he doesn't know anything about making the trees grow," she put in with prim irony. "You'll be his boss, I guess. He won't care much about that."

"Why?"

"Because he's been runnin' things in a way. I hope you get along with him."

"So do I——"

"Because if you don't, Shad will eat you at one gobble."

"Oh!" said Peter kith a smile. "But perhaps you exaggerate. Don't you think I might take two—er—gobbles."

Beth looked him over, and then smiled encouragingly

"Maybe," she said, "but your hands don't look overstrong."

Peter looked at his right hand curiously. It was not as brown as hers, but the fingers were long and sinewy.

"They are, though. When you practice five hours a day on the piano, your hands will do almost anything you want them to."

A silence which Peter improved by shifting his suitcase. The weight of it had ceased to be amusing. And he was about to ask her how much further Black Rock was when there was a commotion down the road ahead of them, as a dark object emerged from around the bend and amid a whirl of dust an automobile appeared.

"It's the 'Lizzie,'" exclaimed Beth unemotionally.

And in a moment the taxi service of Black Rock was at Peter's disposal.

"Carburetor trouble," explained the soiled young man at the wheel briefly, without apology. And with a glance at Peter's bag——

"Are you the man for McGuire's on the 6:30?"

Peter admitted that he was and the boy swung the door of the tonneau open.

"In here with me, Beth," he said to the girl invitingly.

In a moment, the small machine was whirled around and started in the direction from which it had come, bouncing Peter from side to side and enveloping him in dust. Jim Hagerman's "Lizzie" wasted no time, once it set about doing a thing, and in a few moments from the forest they emerged into a clearing where there were cows in a meadow, and a view of houses. At the second of these, a frame house with a portico covered with vines and a small yard with a geranium bed, all inclosed in a picket fence, the "Lizzie" suddenly stopped and Beth got down.

"Much obliged, Jim," he heard her say.

Almost before Peter had swept off his hat and the girl had nodded, the "Lizzie" was off again, through the village street, and so to a wooden bridge across a tea-colored stream, up a slight grade on the other side, where Jim Hagerman stopped his machine and pointed to a road.

"That's McGuire's—in the pines. They won't let me go no further."

"How much do I owe you?" asked Peter, getting down.

"It's paid for, Mister. Slam the door, will ye?" And in another moment Peter was left alone.

It was now after sunset, and the depths of the wood were bathed in shadow.

Peter took the road indicated and in a moment reached two stone pillars where a man was standing. Beyond the man he had a glimpse of lawns, a well-kept driveway which curved toward the wood. The man at the gate was of about Peter's age, but tall and angular, well tanned by exposure and gave an appearance of intelligence and capacity.

"I came to see Mr. McGuire," said Peter, amiably.

"And what's your name?"

"Nichols. I'm the new forester from New York."

The young man at the gate smiled in a satirical way.

"Nichols. That was the name," he ruminated. And then with a shout to some one in the woods below, "Hey, Andy. Come take the gate."

All the while Peter felt the gaze of the young man going over him minutely and found himself wondering whether or not this was the person who was going to take him at a gobble.

It was. For when the other man came running Peter heard him call the gateman, "Shad."

"Are you Mr. Shad Wells?" asked Peter politely, with the pleasant air of one who has made an agreeable discovery.

"That's my name. Who told you?"

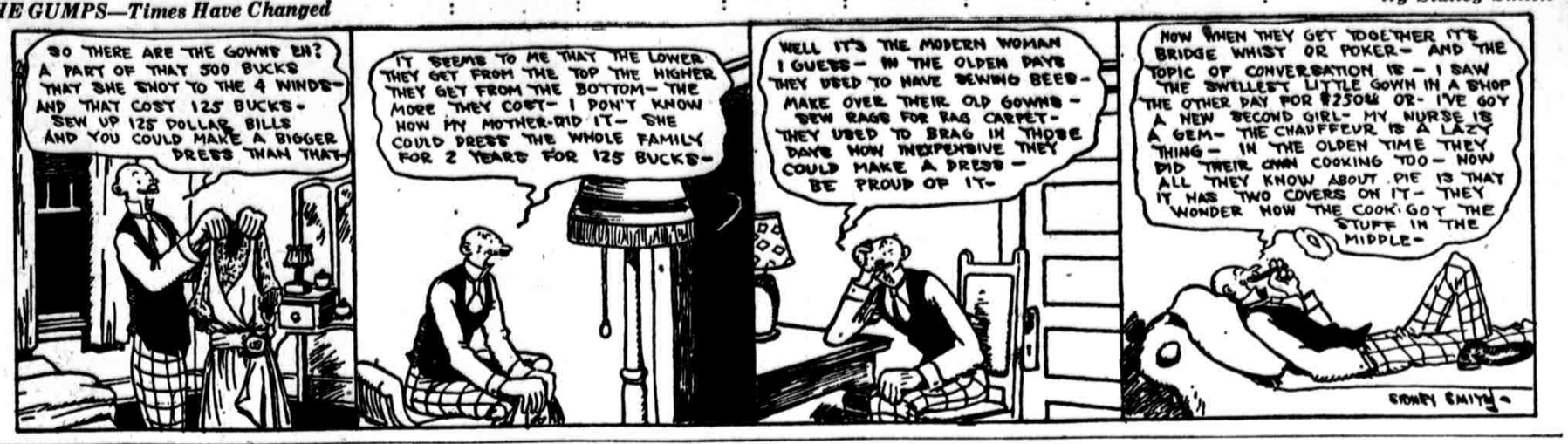
"Miss Beth Cameron," replied Peter. "We came part of the way together."

"H-m! Come," he said laconically and led the way up the road toward the house. Peter didn't think he was very polite.

CONTINUED MONDAY

THE GUMPS—Times Have Changed

By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—"We" Get Busy

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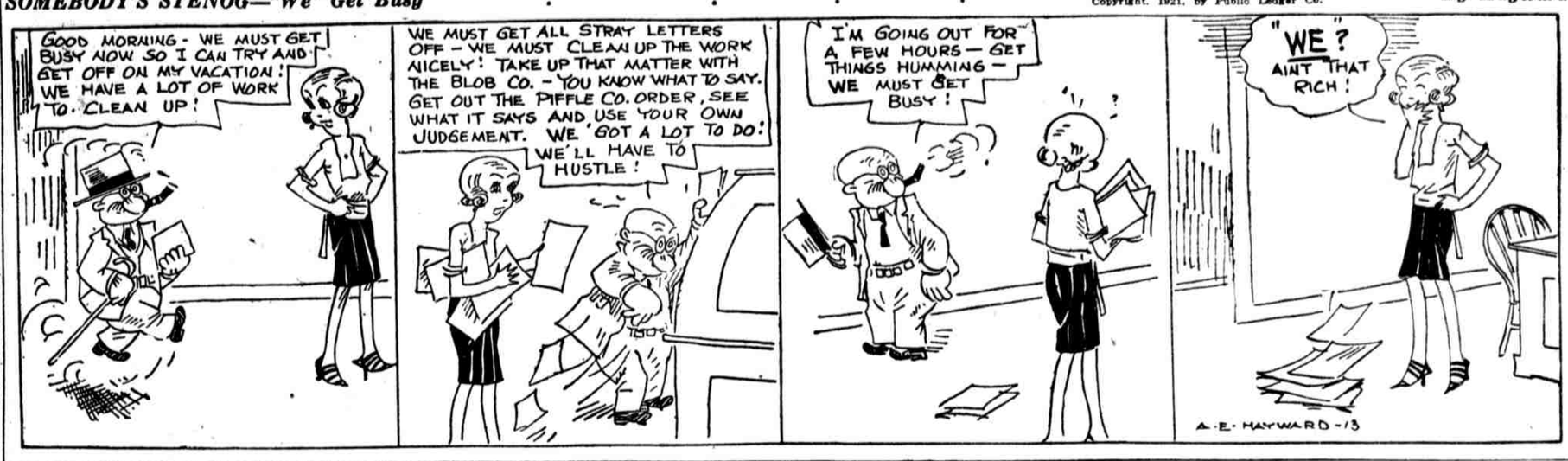
By Hayward

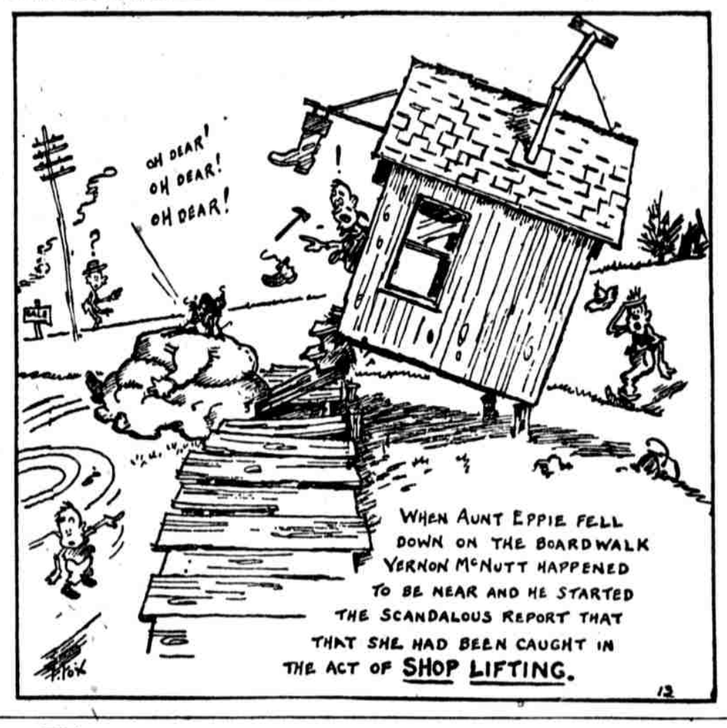


The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says the new Tax Bill aims to raise $4,000,000,000, exclusive of the postal deficit, which she supposes will bring in considerable in addition.

Aunt Epple Hogg, the Fattest Woman in Three Counties

By Fontaine Fox

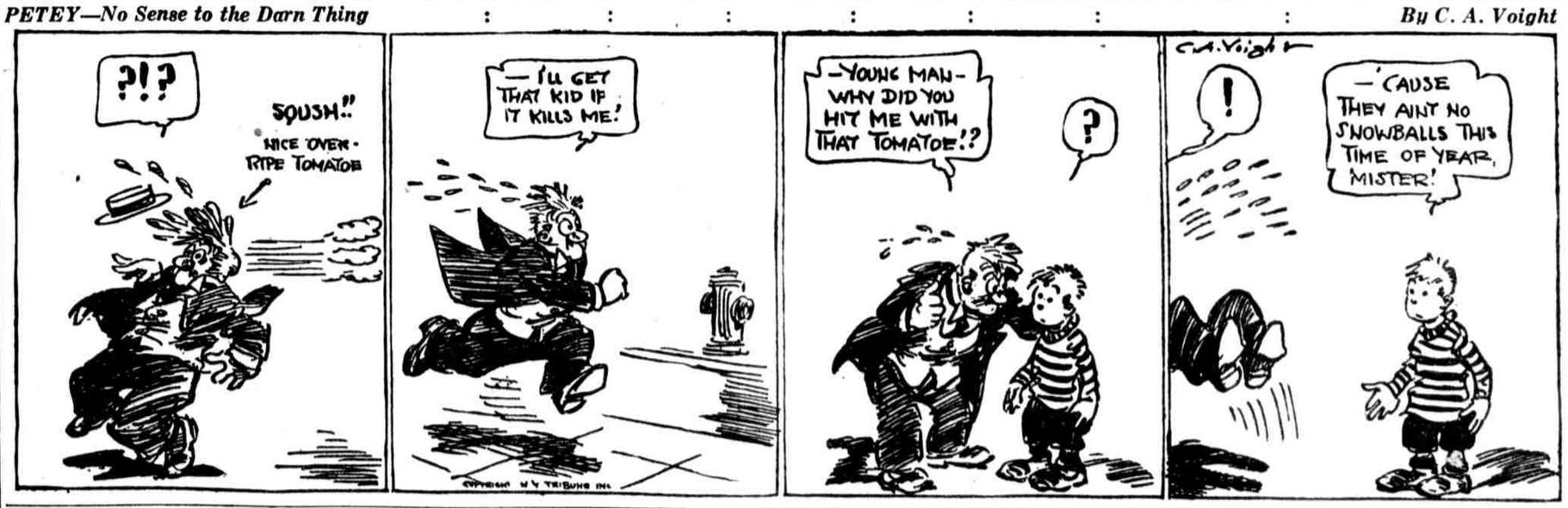


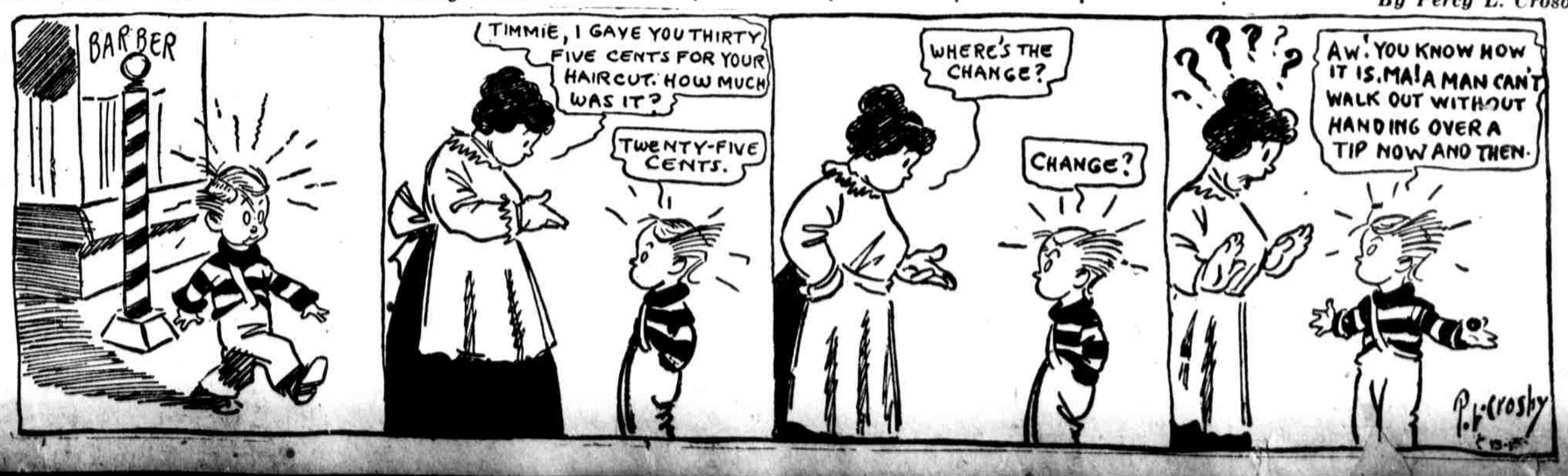
SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—No Sense to the Darn Thing

By C. A. Voight



THE CLANCY KIDS—Catch a Barber Giving it Back

By Percy L. Crosby