

# THE VAGRANT DUKE

By GEORGE GIBBS

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

## THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Peter Nicholas, a Russian Duke, driven from home by revolutionists, comes to this country as Peter Nichols and becomes forester on the estate of Jonathan K. McGuire. His job is nominally that of a forester. As a matter of fact he has charge of the house by day. There is a mystery about the house. The mystery is that the day he left New York for Black Rock, the McGuire estate, for a mysterious-looking stranger had stared at him with recognition in his eyes, though Peter was sure he had never seen him before, and it had been kept hidden by him. Beth Cameron, a neighbor, had told him. Peter occupies a cottage on the estate, and one evening he gets a telephone message from McGuire about to arrive, and inviting Peter to dinner with the suggestion that he wear evening clothes.

## AND HERE IT CONTINUES

WITH a grin, Peter hung up the receiver, recalling the soiled, perspiring, unquiet figure of his employer last night. But it seemed as though McGuire were almost as much in awe of his daughter as of the danger that threatened her, in the McGuire household, Miss Peggy, it appeared, was paramount.

Peter's bathroom was Cedar Creek. In his robe, he ran down the dusky path for a quick plunge. Then, refreshed and dressed leisurely, he had gone to pay more than a casual attention when he was aware of a feeling of uneasiness. A shadow, at the corner of the window. He waited a moment, still fingering his cravat, and then that his eyes had made no mistake, turned quickly, and a revolver in hand, rushed outside. Just as he did so a man with a startled face disappeared around the corner of the cabin. Peter rushed after him, shouting, and turned the edge just in time to see his shape leap into the bushes. "Who are you?" shouted Peter. "Halt, or I'll fire."

But the only reply was a furious crashing in the undergrowth. Peter had twice at the sound, then followed in still call.

No sound. Under the conditions a chase was hopeless, so Peter paused listening. And then, after a few moments a more distant crackling advised him that his visitor had gotten well away. And so after a while he returned to the cabin and with his wraps beside him, finished his interrupted toilet.

But his brows were in a tangle. The mystery surrounding him seemed suddenly to have deepened. For the face that he had seen at the window was that of the stranger who had stared at him so curiously the man of the soft hat and dark mustache—who had seemed so startled at seeing him in the Pennsylvania station when he was leaving New York.

CHAPTER VI  
The House of Terror

Who—what was this stranger who seemed so interested in his whereabouts? Peter was sure that he had made no mistake. It was an unusual face, swarthy, with thick brows, dark eyes, a short nose with prominent nostrils. Perhaps it would not have been so firmly impressed on his memory except for the curious look of startled recognition that Peter had surprised on it at the station in New York. This had puzzled him for some moments in the main, but had been speedily lost in the interest of his job. The man had followed him to Black Rock. But why? What did he want of Peter and why should he skulk around the cabin and risk the danger of being shot? It seemed obvious that he was here for some dishonest purpose, but what dishonest purpose could have any interest in Peter's life, if robbery, who hadn't the man chosen the time while Peter was away in the woods? Peter grinned to himself. If the man had any private source of information as to Peter's personal affairs he would have known that they consisted of a two-dollar watch and a small sum in money. If the dishonest purpose were murder or injury, why hadn't he attacked Peter while he was bathing, naked and quite defenseless, in the creek?

There seemed to be definite answers to all these questions, and Peter was sure of the fact of the man's presence, or to the fact of his wish to be unobserved. Was he a part of the same conspiracy which threatened McGuire?

Or was this a little private conspiracy arranged for Peter alone? And if so, why? So far as Peter knew he hadn't an enemy in America, and even if he had made one he hardly conceivable that any one should go to such lengths to approach an issue and then deliberately avoid it.

But this seemed no doubt that something was up, and that later more would be heard from this curious incident. It seemed equally certain that the stranger meant to shoot Peter and could easily have done so in perfect safety to himself through the window, while Peter was fastening his cravat. Reaching his revolver and slipping it into his pocket, Peter looked the cabin carefully, and after listening to the sounds of the woods for a while, made his way up the path to Black Rock House.

He had decided to say nothing about the incident, which, so far as he could see, concerned only himself, and so when the men on guard questioned him about the shots that they had heard he told them that he had been firing at a mark. This was quite true, even if the mark had been invisible. Shad Walls was off duty until midnight so Peter went the rounds, calling the men to the guardhouse and telling them of the change in the orders. They were to wait until the company upon the Jesse in communication, they were to take new stations in trees and clumps of bushes which Peter designated much dinner jacket with some curiosity and not a little awe, and Peter informed them that it was the old man's order watch from inside the house, but that a blast from a whistle would fetch him out. He also warned them that it was McGuire's wish that none of the watchmen should be aware of the watchmen and that therefore there should be no false alarms.

Curiously enough Peter found McGuire in a state very nearly bordering on collapse. He had a drink. He had not heard the shots Peter had fired, apparently had any of the regular occupants of the house. The visitors had pantry came a sound with which Peter was familiar, for Stryker was shaking the cocktails. And when the ladies came down stairs the two men on the porch came in and Peter was presented to the others of the party, Miss Delaplane, Mr. Gittings and Mr. Mordaunt. The daughter of the house examined Peter's appearance and then, having apparently revised her estimate of him,

became almost cordial, bidding him sit next Miss Delaplane at table. Mildred Delaplane was tall, handsome, dark and aquiline, and made a foil for Peggy's blond prettiness. Peter thought her a step above Peggy in the cultural sense, and only learned afterward that as she was not very well off, Peggy was using her as a rung in the social ladder. Mordaunt, Peter didn't fancy, but Gittings, who was jovial and bald, managed to inject some life into the party, which, despite the effects of the cocktails, seemed rather weary and listless.

McGuire sat rigidly at the head of the table, forcing smiles and glancing uneasily at doors and windows. Peter was worried too, not as to himself, but as to any possible connection that there might be between the man with the dark mustache and the affairs of Jonathan McGuire. Mildred Delaplane, who had traveled in Europe in interesting in Peter's fragmentary reminiscences. She knew music too, and in an unguarded moment Peter admitted that he had studied. It was difficult to lie to women, he had found.

And so, after dinner, the information having transpired, he was immediately led to the piano stool by his hostess, who was frequently biased in her social judgments by Mildred Delaplane.

Peter played Cyril Scott's "Song From the East," and then, sure of Miss Scribbins's interest, an Etude of Scribbins, and in the course of which seemed to express the mood of the moment.

And all the while he was aware of Jonathan McGuire, seated squarely in the middle of the sofa which commanded all the windows and doors, with one hand at his pocket, scowling and alert by turns, for though the night had fallen slowly, it was now pitch black outside. Peter knew that McGuire was thinking he hadn't bled his superior as a musician to entertain his daughter's guests, but that he was powerless to interfere. Nor did he wish to excite the reproach of his daughter by going up and locking himself in his room. In having finished her cigarette with Freddy on the porch, had come in again and was now leaning over the piano, her gaze fixed, like Mildred's, upon Peter's mobile fingers.

"You're really too wonderful a super-intendant to be quite true," said Peggy when Peter had finished. "But do give us a rag."

Peter shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't do ragtime."

"Quit your kidding! I want to dance."

"I'm not kidding," said Peter, laughing. "I can't play it at all—not at all."

Peggy gave him a look, shrugged and walked to the door.

"Fred called."

Peter rose from the piano-stool and crossed to McGuire. The man's cigar was unsmoked and tiny beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"I don't think you need worry, sir," whispered Peter. "The men are all around the house, but if you say, I'll go out for another look around."

"No matter. I'll stick it out for a while."

"You're better off here than anywhere, I should say. No one would dare—"

Here Freddy at the piano struck up "Mary" and further conversation was drowned in commotion. Mildred Delaplane was pre-empted by Mr. Gittings and Peggy came walking along toward Peter, arms extended, the passion for the dance outweighing other prejudices.

Peter took a turn, but four years of wear had not little to improve his step. "I'm afraid all my dancing is in my fingers," he muttered.

Suddenly, as Freddy Mordaunt paused, Peggy stopped and lowered her arms.

"Good Lord!" she gasped. "What's the matter with pop?"

McGuire had risen unsteadily and was peering out into the darkness through the window opposite him, his face pallid, his lips drawn into a thin line. Peggy ran to him and caught him by the arm.

"What is it, pop? Are you sick?"

"No matter. Just a bit upset. If you don't mind, daughter, I think I'll be going up."

"No. Stay here and enjoy yourselves. Just tell Stryker, will you, Nichols, and then come up to my room."

Peggy was regarding him anxiously as he walked to the door and intercepted Peter as he went to look for the valet.

"What is it, Mr. Nichols?" she asked, a sick look on her face, but it seems to me—"

"Did you see his eyes as he looked out of the window?"

"Judging," said Peter coolly.

"You'll see after him, won't you? And if he wants me, just call over."

"I'm sure he won't want you. A few home remedies—"

And Peter went through the door. Stryker had appeared mysteriously from somewhere and had already preceded his master up the stairs. When Peter reached the landing McGuire was standing alone in the dark, leaning against the wall, his gaze on the lighted room which the valet was carefully examining.

"What is it, sir?" asked Peter coolly.

"You thought you saw something?"

"Yes—out there—on the side portico."

"You must be mistaken—unless it was one of the watchmen—"

"No, no, no—"

"What, sir?"

"No matter. Do you think Peggy noticed?"

"Just that you didn't seem quite yourself—"

"But not that I seemed—or—"

"Alarmed? I said you weren't well."

Peter took the frightened man's arm and helped him into his room.

"I'm not, Nichols," he groaned.

"I'm not myself."

"I wouldn't worry, sir. I'd say it was physically impossible for any one to approach the house without permission. But I'll go down and have another look around."

"Do, Nichols. But come back up here. I'll want to talk to you."

So Peter went down. And, reading inquiries in the hallway, made his way out through the hall and pantry. Here a surprise awaited him, for as he opened the door there was a skurry of light footers and in a moment he was in the pantry face to face with Beth Cameron, who seemed much dismayed at being discovered.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked in amazement.

She glanced at his white shirt front and then laughed.

"I came to help Aunt Tillie dish up."

"You?" He didn't know why he should have been so amazed at finding her occupying a menial position in this household. It didn't seem to belong to the back stairs! And yet there she was in a plain blue gingham dress which made her seem much taller, and a large apron, her tawny hair curling agreeable shadows around her blue eyes, which he noticed seemed much darker by night than by day.

She noticed the inflection of his voice and laughed.

"Why not? I thought Aunt Tillie would need me—and besides I wanted to peck a little."

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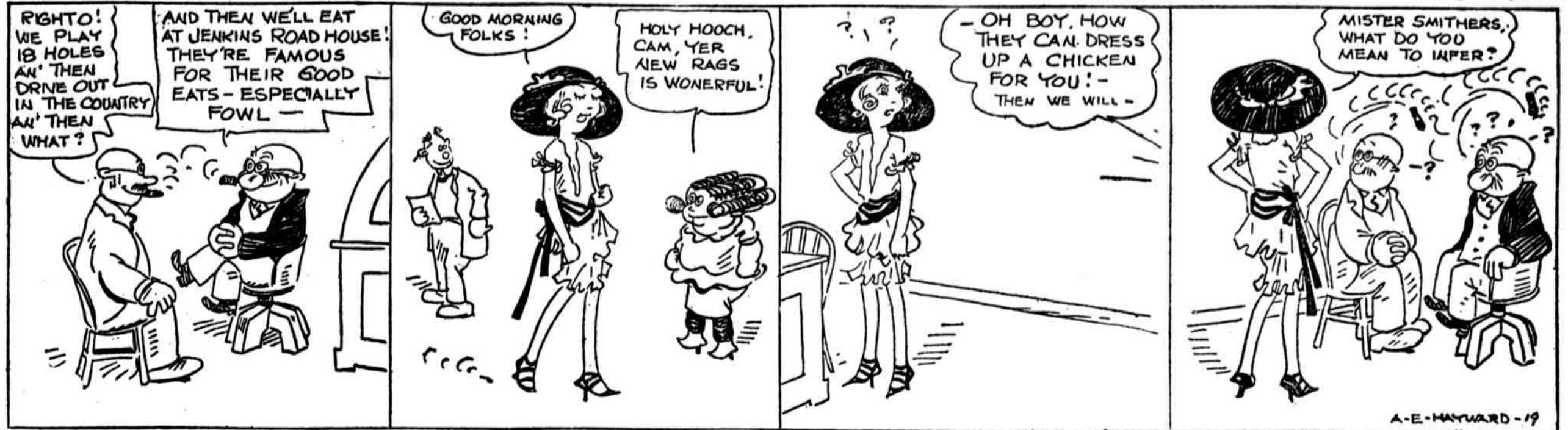
## CONTINUED TOMORROW

### THE GUMPS—A Body Blow



By Sidney Smith

### SOMEBODY'S STENOG—The Very Idea!



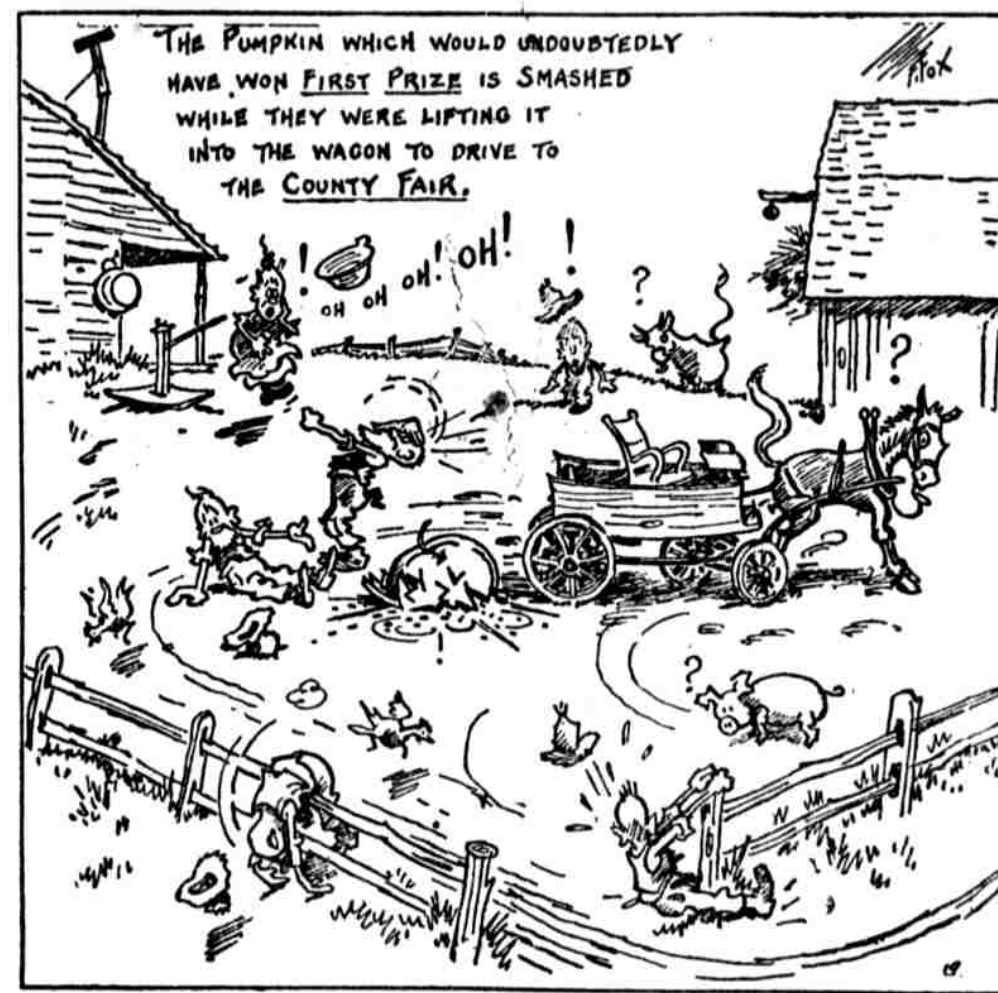
By Hayward

### The Young Lady Across the Way



We asked the young lady across the way what she thought of syncopated music and she said old-fashioned jazz was still good enough for her.

### MIGHTY GOL DING TOUGH LUCK



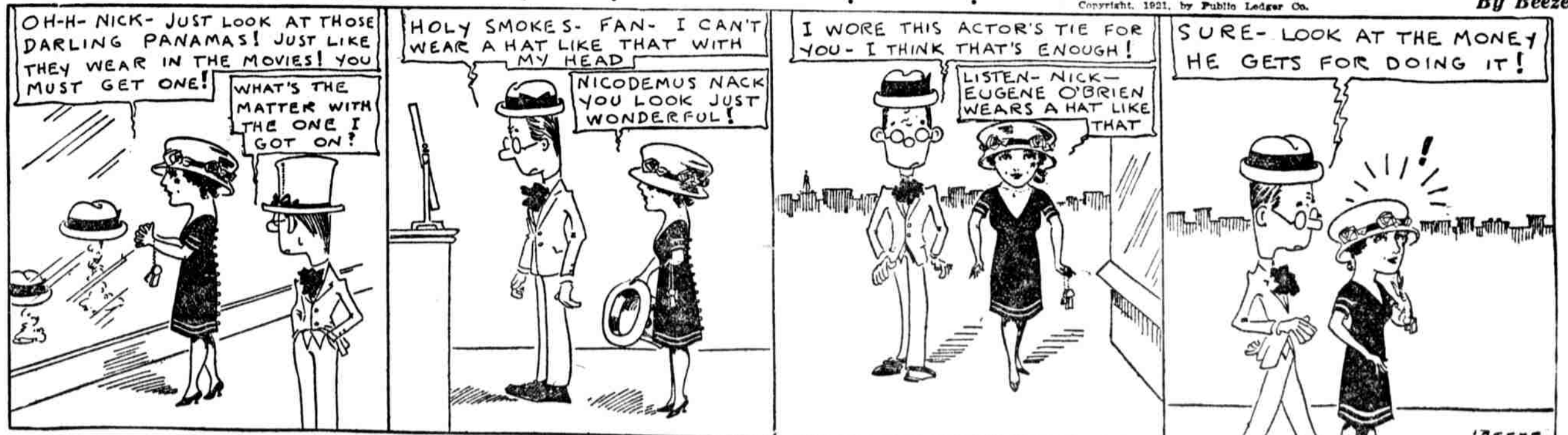
By FONTAINE FOX

### SCHOOL DAYS



By DWIG

### MOVIE FAN—That Makes a Difference



By Beeze

### PETEY—In Eight Years She'd Be a Whisper



By C. A. Voight