

THE VAGRANT DUKE

By GEORGE GIBBS
Author of "The Splendid Outcast," "The Yellow Dove," "The Secret Witness," Etc.
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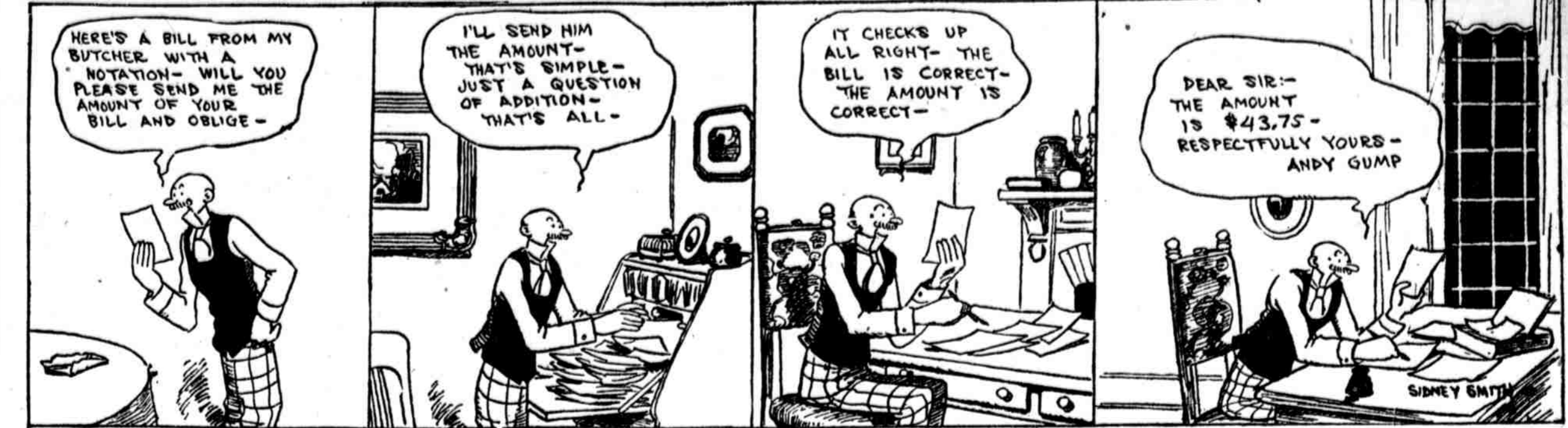
THIS BEGINS THE STORY
Peter Nikolaevitch, Russian Grand Duke, driven from home by revolutionaries, comes to this country as Peter Nichols, and goes to work on the estate of Jonathan K. McGuire, nominally as forester, but really in charge of a group of men whose duty it is to prevent strangers from reaching the house by night or by day. McGuire is desperately afraid of Peter, and Peter is equally afraid of McGuire's men. One night is called by telephone and McGuire asked to come to dinner. On his arrival he finds Beth McGuire, a neighbor, there and asks her why. She tells him she came to help her aunt, the housekeeper, and that she had a letter from McGuire which said to "peck a little."

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"H. I see. You wanted to see Miss A. Peggy's new frock through the keyhole?"
"Yes—and the other one. Aren't they pretty?"
"I suppose so. I couldn't help it." "Of listening?"
She nodded. "Oh, Mr. Nichols, but you do play the piano beautifully!"
"But not like an angel in Heaven."
"Almost—if angels play. You make me forget?"
"What there's anything in the world except beauty?"
In the drawing room Freddy, having found himself, had swept into a song of the sabbath, to which there was a "close harmony" chorus.
"There's that—," he muttered, jerking a thumb in the direction from which he had come.
But she shook her head. "No," she said. "That's different."
"How—different—unworthy—"
"As long as it comes from—"
"As she groped for and found the word he stared at her in astonishment. And in her eyes back of the joy that seemed to be always dancing when he saw the shadows of a sober thought.
"But don't you like dance music?" he asked.
"Yes, I do, but it's only for the feet. Your music is for—here." And with a quick, graceful gesture she clasped her hands upon her breast.
"I'm glad you think so, because that's where it comes from."
At this point Peter remembered his mission, which Beth's appearance had driven from his mind.
"I'll play for you some time," he said.
He went past her and out to the servants' dining room. As he entered with Beth at his heels, Mrs. Bergen, the housekeeper, turned in from the open door to the kitchen garden, clinging to the jamb, her lips trembling, as though she were continuing a conversation. But her round face, usually the color and texture of a well-risen peach, was the color of putty, and seemed suddenly to have grown old and haggard. Her eyes through her metal-rimmed spectacles seemed twice their size and stared at Peter as though he were a stranger through him and beyond. She faltered at the door-jamb and then with an effort reached a chair, into which she sank gasping.
Beth was kneeling at her side in a moment, looking up anxiously into her startled eyes.
"Why, what is it, Aunt Tillie?" she whispered quickly. "What is it? Tell me."
The coincidence was too startling. Could the same thing that had frightened McGuire have frightened the housekeeper, too? Peter rushed to her and out of the open door. It was dark outside and for a moment he could see nothing. Then objects one by one asserted themselves, the orderly rows of vegetable plants in the garden, the wood box by the door, the shrubbery at the end of the porch, the blue spruce tree opposite, the loom of the dark and non-comittal garage. He had seen that one of his men was in the trees opposite the side porch and another around the corner of the kitchen, in the hedge, but he did not want to raise a hue and cry unless it was necessary. What was this thing that created terror at sight? He peered this way and that, aware of an intense excitement, in one hand his revolver and in the other his police whistle. But he saw no object move, and the silence was absolute. In a moment—disappointed—he hurried back to the servants' dining room.

Mrs. Bergen sat dazed in her chair, while Beth, who had brought her a glass of water, was making her drink of it.
"Tell me, what is it?" Beth was insisting.
"Nothing—nothing," murmured the woman.
"But there is—"
"No, dearie—"
"Are you sick?"
"I don't feel right. Maybe—the heat—"
"But your eyes look queer—"
"Do they?" The housekeeper tried to smile.
"Like they had seen—"
A little startled as she remembered the mystery of the house, Beth cast her glance into the darkness outside the open door.
"You are frightened?" she said.
"No, no—"
"What was it you saw, Mrs. Bergen?" he asked gently.
She was not at her half arose, but at the sound of his voice she sank back in her chair.
Peter repeated his question, but she shook her head.
"Won't you tell us? What was it you saw? A man—?"
Her eyes sought Beth's and a look of tenderness came into them, banishing the vision. But she lied when she answered Peter's question.
"I saw nothing," Mr. Nichols—I think I'll go up—"
She took another swallow of the water and rose. And with her strength came a greater obduracy.
"I saw nothing," she repeated again, as if she said that he was still looking at her. "Nothing" at all.
Peter and Beth exchanged glances, and Beth, putting her hand under the housekeeper's arm, helped the woman to the back stairs.
Peter stood for a moment in the middle of the kitchen floor, his gaze on the door through which the woman had vanished. Aunt Tillie, too! She had seen some one, some thing—the same one or thing that McGuire had not believed that her eyes had not deceived them, granting that each were supernatural, what, unless it were supernatural, could have frightened McGuire and Aunt Tillie, too? Even if the old woman had been timid about staying in the house, she had surely not been so afraid of Peter as she had been. He saw no reason to disbelieve her now. She had for McGuire's alarm. And here he found her staring with the same unseeing eyes into the darkness, with the symptoms of nervous shock as McGuire had shown. What enemy or ill-proportioned fear could have caused her prostration and seal her lips to speech? Why wouldn't she have dared

THE GUMPS—The Check Will Follow Later



By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Too Warm



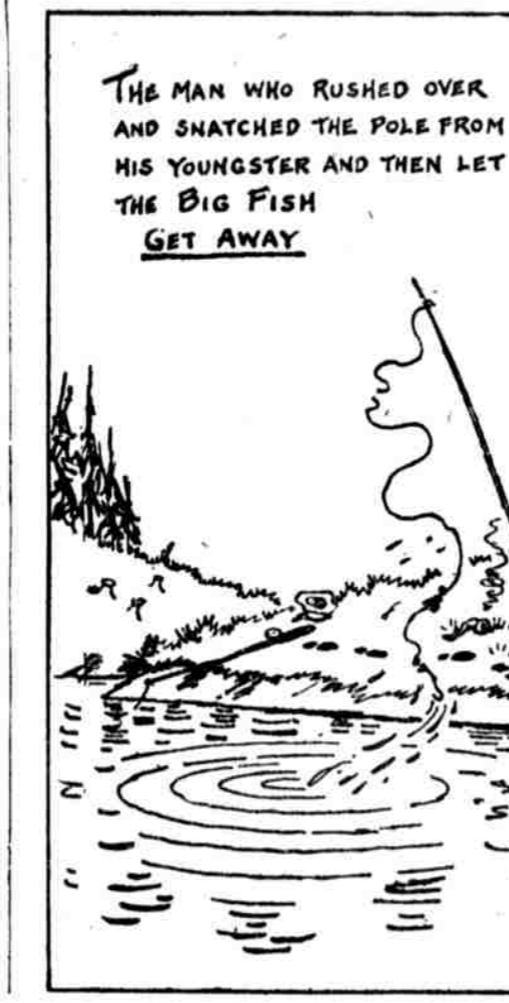
By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way



The young lady across the way says you can't tell her that this country is very hard up when it keeps offering new Treasury certificates for sale.

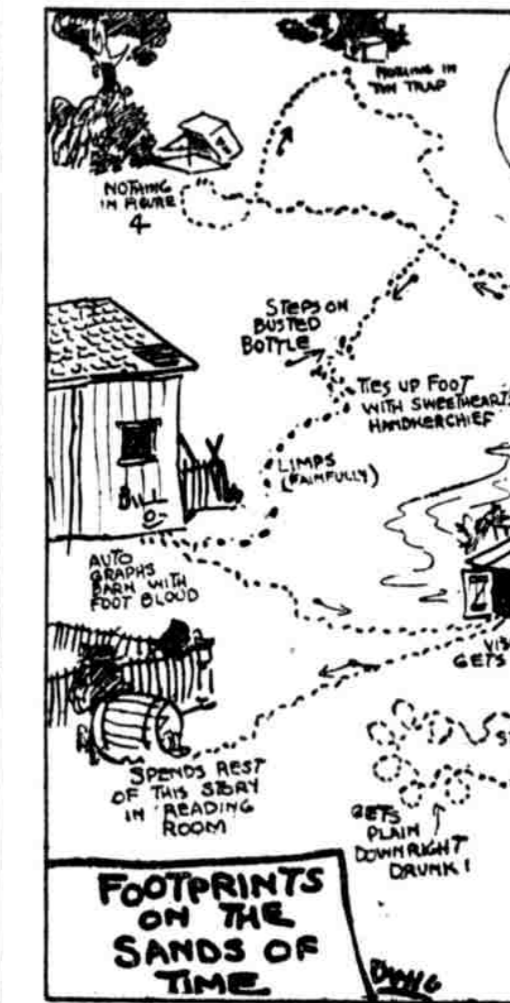
PATHETIC FIGURES



SCHOOL DAYS



MOVIE FAN—Gossip



PETEY—A Way Out



to tell Peter what she had seen? What was this secret and how could she share it with McGuire when, twenty-four hours ago, she had been in complete ignorance of the mystery? Why wouldn't she talk? Was the vision too intimate? Or too terrible?
Peter was imaginative, for he had been steeped from boyhood in the superstitions of his people. But the war had taught him that devils had legs and carried weapons. He had seen more horrible sights than most men of his years, in daylight, at dawn, or silvered with moonlight. He thought he had exhausted the possibilities for terror. But he found himself grudgingly admitting that he was at the least a little nervous—at the most, on the verge of alarm. But he put his whistle in his mouth, drew his revolver again and went forth.
First he sought out the man in the garage tree. It was Andy. He had seen no one but the people on the porch and in the windows. It was very dark, but he took an oath that no one had approached the house from his side.
"You saw no one talking with Mrs. Bergen by the kitchen door?"
"No. I can't see 't' kitchen door from here."
Peter verified. A syringe bush was just in line.
"Then you haven't moved?" asked Peter.
"No. I was afraid they'd see me."
"They've seen something—"
"I don't know. But look sharp. If anything comes out this way, take a shot at it."
"You think there's something—"
"Yes—but don't move. And keep your eyes open."
Peter went off to the man in the hedge behind the kitchen—Jesse Brown.
"Anything?" asked Peter.
"The chauffeur? but the chauffeur."
"He went up to th' house a while back—"
"Oh—how long ago?"
"Twenty minutes."
"I see." And then, "You didn't see any one come away from the kitchen door?"
"No. He's thar yet, I reckon."
Peter ran out to the garage to verify this statement. By the light of a lantern the chauffeur in his rubber boots was washing the two cars.
"Have you been up to the house lately?"
"Why, no," said the man, in surprise.
"You're sure?" asked Peter excitedly.
"Sure."
"Then come with me. There's something on."
The man dropped his sponge and followed Peter, who had run back quickly to the house.
It was now after 11. From the drawing-room came the distracting sounds from the tortured piano, but there was no one on the portico. So Peter, with Jesse, Andy and the chauffeur made a careful round of the house, examining every bush, every tree, with a glimmer into the obscurity. Of one thing Peter was now certain, that the prowler was no ghost or banshee, but a man, and that he had gone as mysteriously as he had come.
Peter knew that his employee would be anxious until he returned to him, but he hadn't quite decided to tell McGuire of the housekeeper's share in the adventure. He had a desire to verify his belief that Mrs. Bergen was frightened by the visitor for a reason of her own which had nothing to do with Jonathan McGuire. Any woman alarmed by a possible burglar or other miscreant would have come running and crying for help. Mrs. Bergen had been doggedly silent, as though, rather than utter her thoughts, she would have bitten out her tongue. It was curious. She had seemed to be talking as though to herself at the door, and then, at the sound of footsteps in the kitchen behind her, had turned and fallen limp in the nearest chair. The look in her face, as in McGuire's, was that of terror, but there was something of bewilderment in both of them. Peter was curious as to the meaning of her reappearance.
At least she had recovered the use of her tongue.
"I couldn't go to bed, just yet, Mr. Nichols," she said in reply to Peter's question. "I just couldn't."
Peter gazed at her steadily. This woman held a clue to the mystery. She glanced at him uncertainly, but she had recovered her self-possession, and her replies to his questions, if anything, were more obstinate than before.
"I saw nothin'," Mr. Nichols—nothin'— I was just a bit upset. I'm all right now. An' I want Beth to go home. That's why I came down."
"But, Aunt Tillie, if you're not well, I'm going to stay—"
"No. Ye can't stay here. I want ye to go." And then, turning excitedly to Peter, "Can't ye let somebody see her home, Mr. Nichols?"
"Of course," said Peter. "But I don't think she's in any danger."
"No, but she can't stay here. She just can't."
Beth put her arm around the old woman's shoulder.
"I'm not afraid."
Aunt Tillie was already untying Beth's apron.
"I know ye're not, dearie. But ye can't stay here. I don't want ye to. I don't want ye to."
"But, if you're afraid of something—"
"Who said I was afraid?" she asked, glaring at Peter defiantly. "I'm not. I just had a spell—all this excitement an' extra work—an' everything."
She took Peter by the hand, but he saw no object to be gained in keeping Beth in Black Rock House, so he went out cautiously and brought the chauffeur, to whom he entrusted the safety of the girl. He would have felt more comfortable if he could have escorted her himself, but he knew that his duty was at the house and that whoever the mysterious person was it was not Beth that he wanted.

CONTINUED MONDAY

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