THE VAGRANT DUKE

By GEORGE GIBBS

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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Peter Nicholaevitch, Russian Grand Duke, driven from home by revolution, comes to this country as Peter Nichols, and on the estate of Jonathan K. McGuire takes charge of them, whose duty it is to see that no nobody approaches the house. But a stranger, the man feared, breaks through the guard, and talks to the housekeeper, who evidently knows him but will not admit the fact to Peter. Peter suspects he is either the father of Beth Cameron (a beautiful girl living in the neighborhood) or a nephew of the housekeeper, but he knows nothing of what hold he has on McGuire, nor will McGuire tell him. McGuire, however, is badly shaken when Peter finds a warning to "Mike McGuire" and signed "Hawk," which says, among other things, "You know what I've got and I know what you've got. Act pronto." He speaks of coming on Friday night," says Peter to McGuire.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"YES—yes—Friday." And then, his fingers trembling along the placard, "I've got to do what he wants—this time—just this time——"

McGuire was gasping out the phrases as though each of them was wrenched from his throat. And then, with an effort at self-control:

"Sit down, Nichols," he muttered. "Since you've seen this, I—I'll have to tell you more. I—I—think—I'll need you—to help me."

Peter obeyed, flattered by his employer's manner and curious as to the imminent revelations.

"I may say that—this—this 'Hawk' is a—an enemy of mine, Nichols—a bitter enemy—unscrupulous—a man better dead than alive. I—I wish to God you'd shot him last night."

"Sorry, sir," said Peter cheerfully.

"I—I've got to do what he wants—this time. I can't have this sort of thing goin' on—with everybody in Black Rock reading these damn things. You're sure my daughter Peggy knows nothing?"

"I'd be pretty sure of that——"

"But she might—any time—if he puts up more placards. I've got to stop that, Nichols. This thing mustn't go any further."

"I think you may trust me."

"Yes. I think I can. I've got to trust you now, whether I want to or no. The man who wrote this scrawl is the man I came down here to get away from." Peter waited while McGuire paused. "You may think it's very strange. It is strange. I knew this man—called 'Hawk,' many years ago. I—I thought he was dead, but he's come back."

McGuire paused again, the placard in his hands, reading the line which so clearly announced that fact.

"He speaks of something I've got—something he's got, Nichols. It's a paper—a—er—a partnership paper we drew up years ago—out West and signed. That paper is of great value to me. As long as he holds it I——," McGuire halted to wipe the sweat from his pallid brow. "He holds it as a—well—not exactly as a threat—but as a kind of menace to my happiness and Peggy's."

"I understand, sir," put in Peter quietly. "Blackmail, in short."

"Exactly—er—blackmail. He wanted $5000—in New York. I refused him—there's no end to blackmail once you yield—and I came down here—but he followed me. But I've got to get that paper away from him."

"If you were sure he had it with him——"

"That's just it. He's too smart for that. He's got it hidden somewhere. I've got to get this money for him—from New York—I haven't got it in the house—before Friday night——"

"But blackmail——!"

"I've got to, Nichols—this time. I've got to."

"I wouldn't, sir," said Peter stoutly.

"But you don't know everything. I've only told you part," said McGuire, almost whining. "This is no ordinary case—no ordinary blackmail. I've got to be quick. I'm going to get the money—I'm going to get you to go to New York and get it."

"Me!"

"Yes. Yes. This is Wednesday. I won't take any chances of not having it here Friday. Peggy is going back this afternoon. I'll get her to drive you up. I'll phone Sheldon to expect you—he'll give you the money and you can come back tomorrow."

"But tonight——"

"He knows the danger of trying to reach me. That's why he wrote this. I won't be bothered tonight. I'll shut the house tight and put some of the men inside. If he comes we'll shoot."

"But Friday——. Do you mean, sir, that you'll got out to him with five thousand dollars and risk——"

"No, I won't. You will," said McGuire, watching Peter's face craftily.

"Oh, I see," replied Peter, aware that he was being drawn more deeply into the plot than he had wished. "You want me to meet him."

McGuire noted Peter's dubious tone and at once got up and laid his hands upon his shoulders.

"You'll do this for me, won't you, Nichols? I don't want to see this man. I can't explain. There wouldn't be any danger. He hasn't anything against you. Why should he have? I haven't any one else that I can trust—but Stryker. And Stryker—well—I'd have to tell Stryker. You know already. Don't say you refuse. It's—it's a proof of my confidence. You're just the man I want here. I'll make it worth your while to stay with me—well worth your while."

Peter was conscious of a feeling partly of pity, partly of contempt, for the cringing creature pawing at his shoulders. Peter had never liked to be pawed. It had always rubbed him the wrong way. But McGuire's need was great, and pity won.

"Oh, I'll do it if you like," he said turning aside and releasing himself from the clinging fingers, "provided I assume no responsibility——"

"That's it. No responsibility," said McGuire in a tone of relief. "You'll just take that money out—then come—away——"

"And get nothing in return?" asked Peter in surprise. "No paper—no receipt——?"

"No—just this once, Nichols. It will keep him quiet for a month or so. In the meanwhile——" The old man paused, a crafty look in his eyes. "In the meanwhile we'll have time to devise a way to meet this situation."

"Meaning—precisely what?" asked Peter keenly.

McGuire scowled at him and then turned away toward the window.

"That needn't be your affair."

"It won't be," said Peter quickly. "I'd like you to remember that I came here as a forester and superintendent. I agreed also to guard your house and yourself from intrusion, but if it comes to the point of——"

"There, there, Nichols," croaked McGuire, "don't fly off the handle. We'll just cross this bridge first. I—I won't ask you to do anything a—a gentleman shouldn't."

"Oh, well, sir," said Peter finally, "that's fair enough."

McGuire came over and faced Peter, his watery eyes seeking Peter's.

"You'll swear, Nichols, to say nothing of this to any one?"

"Yes. I'll keep silent."

"Nothing to Sheldon?"

"No."

"And you'll see this—this niece of the housekeeper's?"

"Yes."

The man gave a gasp of relief and sank into his chair.

"Now go, Nichols—and shift your clothes. Peggy's going about four. Come back here and I'll give you a letter and a check."

Peter nodded and reached the door. As he opened it Stryker straightened and bowed uncomfortably. But Peter knew that he had been listening at the keyhole.

CHAPTER IX

Shad Is Unpleasant

Peter returned from New York on Thursday night, having accomplished his curious mission. He had first intercepted Beth on her way to the kitchen and sworn her to secrecy, advising her to say nothing to Mrs. Bergen about the events of the previous night. And she had agreed to respect his wishes. On the way to New York he had sat in the rumble of the low red runabout, Miss Peggy McGuire at the wheel, driving the fashionable Freddy. Miss McGuire, after having yielded, the night before, to the musical predilections of Miss Delaplane, had apparently reconsidered Peter's social status and had waved him to the seat in the rear with a mere gesture and without apologies. And Peter, biting back a grin and touching his hat, had obeyed. The familiarities tolerable in such a wilderness as Black Rock could not, of course, be considered in the halls of the fashionable hotel where Miss Peggy lived in New York, and where, by dint of great care and exclusiveness, she had caught a hold of the fringe of society. But Peter sat up very straight, trying not to hear what was said in front. If he could only have worn his colonel's uniform and decorations, or his grand ducal coronet, and have folded his arms, the irony would have been perfection.

He had gone to Sheldon, Senior, in the morning and in return for McGuire's check had been given cash in the shape of ten virginal five-hundred-dollar bills. This money had been put into an envelope and was now folded carefully in Peter's inside pocket. Sheldon, Senior, to be sure, had asked questions, but with a good grace Peter had evaded him. Dick Sheldon was out of town, so Peter put in the remaining period before his train-time in a music store, where he spent all the money that remained of his salary on books, a few for the piano but most of them for Beth. Peter had wasted, as he had thought, two perfectly good years in trying to learn to sing. But those two years were not going to be wasted now—for Beth was to be his mouthpiece. He knew the beginnings of a training—how to give her the advantage of the instruction he had received from one of the best teachers in Milan. He was lucky enough to find books on the Italian method of voice production and on the way back to McGuire's, armed with these, he stopped off at the Bergen house in Black Rock village and returned Beth's call.

There he found Shad Wells, in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a pipe in the portico, and looking like a thunder-cloud. In response to Peter's query, he moved his right shoulder half an inch in the direction of the door, and then spat in the geranium bed. So Peter knocked at the door, softly at first, then loudly, when Beth emerged, her sleeves rolled to her shoulders and her arms covered with soapsuds.

"Why, Shad," she said witheringly, after she had greeted Peter, "you might have let me know! Come in, Mr. Nichols. Excuse my appearance. Washday," she explained, as he followed her into the dark interior.

"I can't stop," said the visitor, "I just came to bring these books——"

"For me!" she exclaimed, hurriedly wiping her arms on her apron.

"I got them in New York——"

She pulled up the shade at the side, letting in the sunlight, an act permissible in the parlors of Black Rock only on state occasions, for the sunlight (as every one knew) was not kind to plush-covered furniture.

"For me!" Beth repeated softly. "I didn't think you meant it."

"Tone production—Exercises," explained Peter, "and here's one on 'The Lives of the Great Composers.' I thought you might be interested in reading it."

"Oh, yes. I am—I will be. Thank you ever so much——"

"Of course you can't do much by yourself just yet—not without a piano—to get the pitch—the key—but I've brought a tuning fork and——"

"But I've got the harmonium——," Beth broke in excitedly. "It's a little out of tune, but——"

"The harmonium!" asked the bewildered Peter. "What's that?"

Beth proudly indicated a piece of furniture made of curly walnut which stood in the corner of the room. There were several books on the top of it—"Gospel Tunes—Moody and Sankey," a Methodist Episcopal hymn book, and a glass case containing wax flowers.

"We play it Sundays——," said Beth, "but it ought to help——"

"You play——?" he said in surprise.

"Aunt Tillie and I—oh, just hymns——." She sat, while Peter watched, began pumping vigorously with her feet and presently the instrument emitted a doleful sound. "It has notes anyhow," said Beth with a laugh.

"Splendid!" said Peter. "And when I've told you what to do you can practice here. You'll come soon?"

She nodded. "When?"

"Tomorrow—some time?" And then, "What's the matter with Wells?" he asked.

She frowned. "He just asked me to marry him. It's the twenty-seventh time."

"Oh——"

"I can't be botherin' with Shad—not on washday—or any other day," she added as though in an afterthought.

Peter laughed. He was quite sure that nobody would ever make her do anything she didn't want to do.

"He knows I was at the cabin yesterday," she said in a low voice. "He was watchin'."

Peter was silent a moment, glancing at the books he had just brought her.

"Of course if he has any claim on you, perhaps——," he began, when she broke in.

"Claim! He hasn't," she gasped. "I'll do as I please. And he'd better quit pesterin' me or I'll——"

"What?"

She laughed.

"I'll put him through the clothes-wringer."

Peter grinned. "He almost looks as though you'd done that already."

And as she followed him to the door, "I thought I ought to tell you about Shad. When he gets ugly—he's ugly an' no mistake."

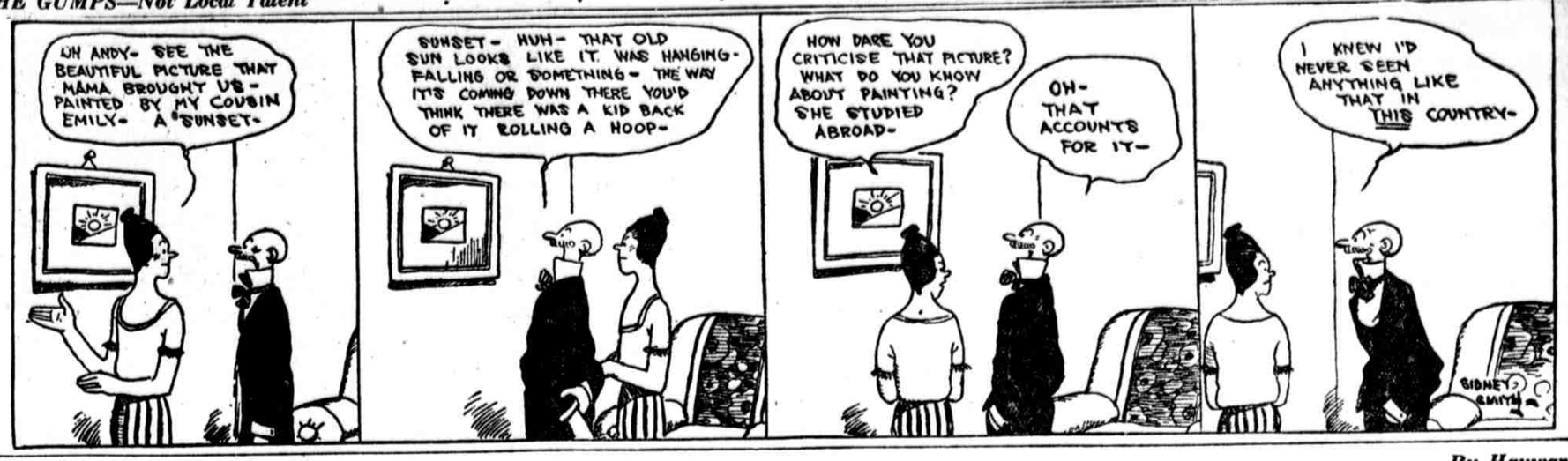
"Do you still think he'll—er—swallow me at one gobble?" he asked.

She stared at him a moment and then laughed with a full throat. "I hope he don't—at least not 'til I've had my singin' lessons."

"I think I can promise you that," said Peter.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

THE GUMPS—Not Local Talent — By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—In Which We Launch Another Mystery — By Hayward

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The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says skirts are a great hardship to a tennis player and if her mother'll let her she's going to get a pair of bicuspids.

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS — By FONTAINE FOX

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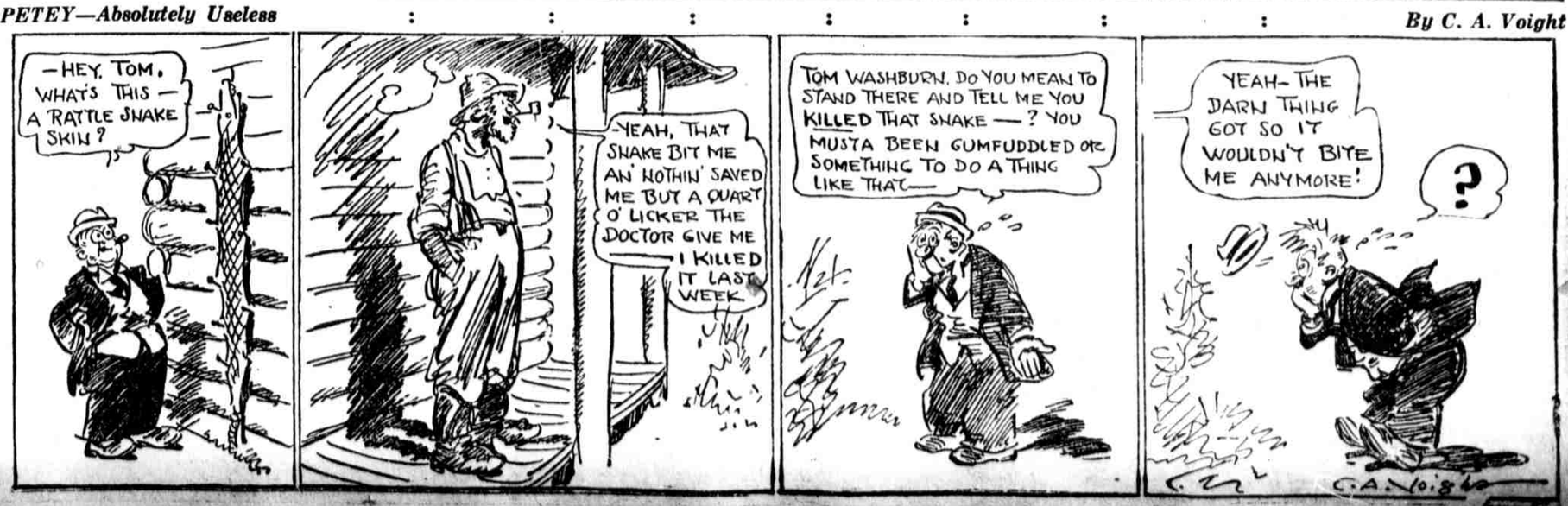
PETEY—Absolutely Useless — By C. A. Voight