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 Nicholsevitch, Russian Grand Duke, exiled by revolution, comes to this country as Peter Nichols and takes charge of a group of men on the estate of Jonathan K. McGuire. They are there to keep strangers from approaching the house, but the man McGuire fears breaks through the guard, leaves a warning and appoints a time and place of meeting. Peter meets the man for McGuire and is surprised to find that he is Jim Coast, a man of many aliases, with whom he had worked on board ship. Circumstances lead him to the belief that Coast is the father of Beth Cameron, a girl who interests him, and he goes to McGuire's housekeeper, her aunt, to get additional data.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

INSTEAD of going directly up the lawn to the house Peter went along the edge of the woods to the garage and then up the path, as Coast must have done a few nights before. The housekeeper was in the pantry and there Peter sought her out. He noted the startled look in her eyes at the moment he entered the room and then the line of resolution into which her mouth was immediately drawn. So Peter chose a roundabout way of coming to his subject.

"I wanted to talk to you about Beth, Mrs. Bergen," he began cheerfully. She offered him a chair, but Peter leaned against the windowsill looking out into the gray morning. He told her what he had discovered about her niece's voice, that he himself had been educated in music and that he thought every opportunity should be given Beth to have her voice trained.

He saw that Mrs. Bergen was disarmed for the moment as to the real purpose of his visit and he went on to tell her just what had happened at the Cabin with Shad Wells the day before, and asking her, as Beth's only guardian, for permission to carry out his plan to teach her all that he knew, after which he hoped it would be possible for her to go to New York for more advanced training.

Mrs. Bergen listened in wonder, gasping at the tale of Shad Wells' undoing, which Peter asked her to keep in confidence. From Mrs. Bergen's comments he saw that she took little stock in Shad, who had been bothering Beth for two years or more, and that her own love for the girl amounted to a blind adoration which could see no fault in anything that she might do. It was clear that she was delighted with the opportunities Peter offered, for she had always known that Beth sang "prettier than anybody in the world." As to going to the Cabin for the lessons, that was nobody's business but Beth's. She was twenty-two—and able to look out for herself.

"I'm an old woman, Mr. Nichols," she concluded timidly, "an' I've seen a lot of trouble, one kind or another, but I ain't often mistaken in my judgments. I know Beth. She ain't nobody's fool. And if she likes you, you ought to be glad of it. If she's willin' to come to your cabin, I'm willin' that she should go there—no matter who don't like it or why. She can look after herself—are, better than I can look after her." She sighed. And then with some access of spirit, "You're different from most of the folks around here, but I don't see nothin' wrong with you. If you say you want to help Beth, I'm willin' to believe you. But if I thought you meant her any harm——"

She broke off and stared at him with her mild eyes under brows meant to be severe.

"I hope you don't want to think that, Mrs. Bergen," said Peter gently.

"No. I don't want to. Beth don't take up with every Tom, Dick and Harry. And if she likes you, I reckon she knows what she's about."

"I want to help her to make something of herself," said Peter calmly. "And I know I can. Beth is a very unusual girl."

"Don't you suppose I know that? She always was. She ain't the same as the rest of us down here. She always wanted to learn. Even now when she's through school, she's always readin'—always."

"That's it. She ought to complete her education. That's what I mean. I want to help her to be a great singer. I can do it if you'll let me."

"Where's the money comin' from?" sighed Mrs. Bergen.

"No need to bother about that, yet. I can give her a beginning, if you approve. After that——" Peter paused a moment and then, "We'll see," he finished.

He was somewhat amazed at the length to which his sub-conscious thought was carrying him, for his spoken words could infer nothing less than his undertaking at his own expense the completion of the girl's education. The housekeeper's exclamation quickly brought him to a recognition of his meaning.

"You mean—that you——!" she halted and looked at him over her glasses in wonder.

"Yes," he said blandly, aware of an irrevocable step. "I do, Mrs. Bergen."

"My land!" she exclaimed. And then again as though in echo, "My land!"

"That's one of the reasons why I've come here to you today," he went on quickly. "I want to help Beth and I want to help you. I know that everything isn't going right for you at Black Rock House. I've been drawn more deeply into—into McGuire's affairs than I expected to be and I've learned a great many things that aren't any business of mine. And one of the things I've learned is that your peace of mind and Beth's happiness are threatened by the things that are happening around you."

The housekeeper had risen and stood leaning against the dresser, immediately on her guard.

"Mrs. Bergen," he went on firmly, "there's no use of trying to evade this issue—because it's here! I know more than you think I do. I'm trying to get at the root of this mystery because of Beth. You told me the other night that Beth's happiness was involved when that stranger came to the kitchen porch——"

"No, no," gasped the woman. "Don't ask me. I'll tell you nothin'."

"You saw this man—outside the kitchen door in the dark," he insisted. "You talked with him——"

"No—no. Don't ask me, Mr. Nichols."

"Won't you tell me what he said? I saw him last night—talked with him for an hour——"

"You—talked—with him!" she gasped in alarm. And then, haltingly, "What did he say to you? What did he do? Is he coming back?"

She was becoming more disturbed and nervous, so Peter brought a chair and made her sit in it.

"No. He's not coming back—not for a month or more," he replied reassuringly. "But if I'm to help you, I've got to know something more about him, and for Beth's sake you've got to help me." And then quietly, "Mrs. Bergen, was this man who came to the kitchen door Ben Cameron, Beth's father?"

"My God!" said the housekeeper faintly, putting her face in her hands.

"Won't you tell me just what happened?" Peter asked.

"I—I'm scared, Mr. Nichols," she groaned. "The whole thing has been too much for me—knowin' how scared Mr. McGuire is, too. I can't understand. I can't even—think—no more."

"Let me do your thinking for you. Tell me what happened the other night, Mrs. Bergen."

The woman raised a pallid face, her colorless eyes blinking up at him beseechingly.

"Tell me," he whispered. "It can do no possible harm."

She glanced pitifully at him once more and then haltingly told her story.

"I—I was sittin' in the kitchen there, the night of the supper party—by the door—restin' and tryin' to get cool—when—when a knock come on the doorjamb outside. It sounded queer—the door bein' open—an' my nerves bein' shook sorter with the goin's on here. But I went to the door an' leaned out. There was a man standin' in the shadow——"

Mrs. Bergen paused in a renewed difficulty of breathing.

"And then——?" Peter urged.

"He—he leaned forward toward me an' spoke rough-like. 'You're the cook, ain't you?' he says. I was that scared I—I couldn't say nothin'. An' he went on. 'You tell McGuire to meet me at the end of the lawn tomorrow night.'"

"And what did you say?"

"Nothin'. I couldn't."

"What else did he tell you?"

Mrs. Bergen bent her head, but went on with an effort.

"He says, 'Tell McGuire Ben—Ben Cameron's come back.'"

"I see. And you were more frightened than ever?"

"Yes. More frightened—terrible. I didn't know what to do. I mumbled somethin'. Then you an' Beth come in——"

"And was it Ben Cameron that you saw?"

The poor creature raised her gaze to Peter's again.

"B-Ben Cameron? Who else could it 'a' been? An' I thought he was dead, Mr. Nichols—years ago."

"You didn't recognize him, then?"

"I—I don't know. It was all so sudden—like seein' a corpse—speakin' that name."

"He wore a short beard?"

"Yes. But Ben Cameron was smooth shaved."

"Did Ben Cameron have any distinguishing mark—anything you could remember him by?"

"Yes. Ben Cameron's little finger of his left hand was missin'——. But, of course, Mr. Nichols, I couldn't see nothin' in the dark."

"No, of course," said Peter with a gasp of relief. "But his voice——?"

"It was gruff—hoarse—whisperin'-like."

"Was the Ben Cameron you knew, your brother-in-law—was he tall?"

She hesitated, her brows puckering.

"That's what bothered me some. Beth's father wasn't over tall——"

"I see," Peter broke in eagerly, "and this man was tall—about my size—with a hook nose—black eyes and——"

"Oh, I—I couldn't see his face," she muttered helplessly. "The night was too dark."

"But you wouldn't swear it was Ben Cameron?"

She looked up at him in a new bewilderment. "But who else could it 'a' been—sayin' that name—givin' that message?"

Peter rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Queer, isn't it? I don't wonder that you were alarmed—especially for Beth, knowing the kind of man he was."

"It's terrible, Mr. Nichols. A man like Ben Cameron never gets made over. He's bad clear through. If you only knew——" Mrs. Bergen's pale eyes seemed to be looking back into the past. "He means no good to Beth—that's what frightens me. He could take her away from me. She's his daughter——"

"Well—don't worry," said Peter at last. "We'll find a way to protect you." And then, "Of course you didn't take that message to McGuire?" he asked.

"Why, no—Mr. Nichols. I couldn't. I'd 'a' died first. But what does it all mean? Him bein' scared of Ben Cameron, too. I can't make it out—though I've thought and thought until I couldn't think no more."

She was on the point of tears now, so Peter soothed her gently.

"Leave this to me, Mrs. Bergen." And then, "You haven't said anything of this to any one?"

"Not a soul—I—I was hopin' it might 'a' been just a dream."

Peter was silent for a moment, gazing out of the window and thinking deeply.

"No. It wasn't a dream," he said quietly at last. "You saw a man by the kitchen door, and he gave you the message about Ben Cameron, but the man you saw wasn't Ben Cameron, Mrs. Bergen, because, unless I'm very much mistaken, Ben Cameron is dead——"

"How do you——?"

"He didn't lie when you thought he did, Mrs. Bergen—but later. I can't tell you how. It's only a guess. But I'm beginning to see a light in this affair—and I'm going to follow it until I find the truth. Good-by. Don't worry."

And Peter, with a last pat on the woman's shoulder and an encouraging smile, went out of the door and into the house.

Eagerly Peter's imagination was trying to fill the gap in Jim Coast's story, and his mind, now intent upon the solution of the mystery, groped before him up the stair. And what it saw was the burning Gila Desert * * * the mine among the rocks—"lousy" with outcroppings of ore * * * "Mike" McGuire and "Hawk" Kennedy, devious in their ways, partners in a vile conspiracy * * *

But Peter's demeanor was careless when Stryker admitted him to McGuire's room and his greeting in reply to McGuire's was casual enough to put his employer off his guard. After a moment's hesitation McGuire sent the valet out and went himself and closed and locked the door. Peter refused his cigar, lighting one of his own cigarettes, and sank into the chair his host indicated. After the first words Peter knew that his surmise had been correct and that his employer meant to deny all share in the shooting of the night before.

"Well," began the old man, with a glance at the door, "what did he say?"

Peter shook his head judicially. He had already decided on the direction which this conversation must take.

"No. It won't do, Mr. McGuire," he said calmly.

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that before we talk of what Hawk Kennedy said to me, we'll discuss your reasons for unnecessarily putting my life in danger——"

"This shooting you've spoken of——"

"This attempted murder!"

"You're dreaming."

Peter laughed at him. "You'll be telling me in a moment that you didn't hear the shots." And then, leaning forward so that he stared deep into his employer's eyes, "See here, Mr. McGuire, I'm not to be trifled with. I know too much of your affairs—more than you think I do——"

"He talked——?" McGuire's poise was slipping from him.

CONTINUED MONDAY

THE GUMPS—A Father's Advice to His Son

By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Only Collecting Evidence

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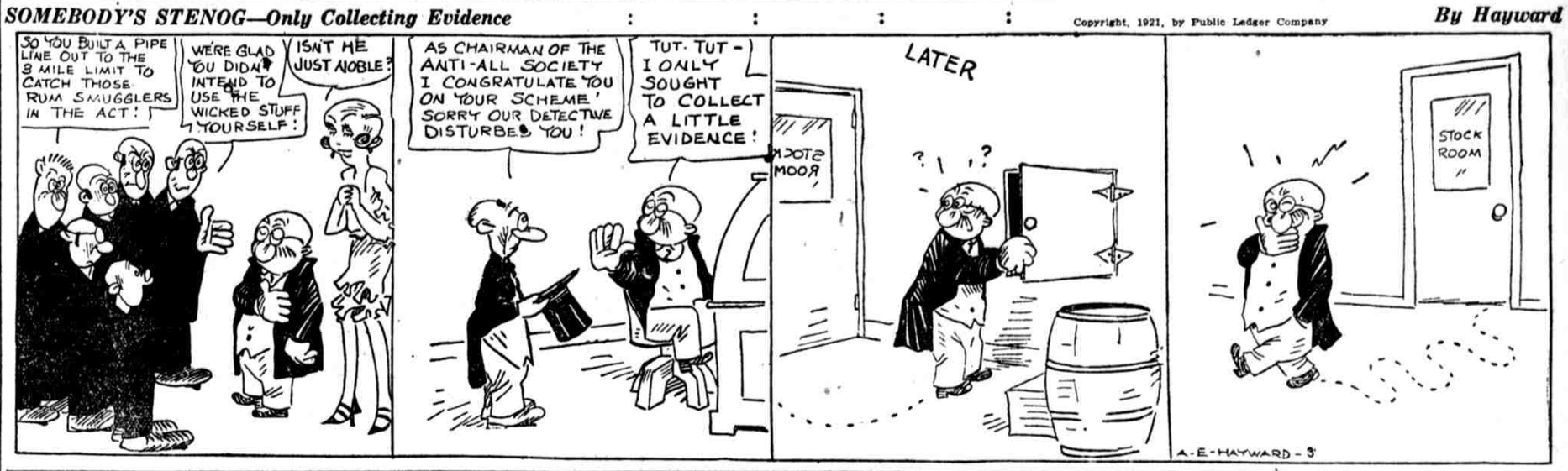
By Hayward

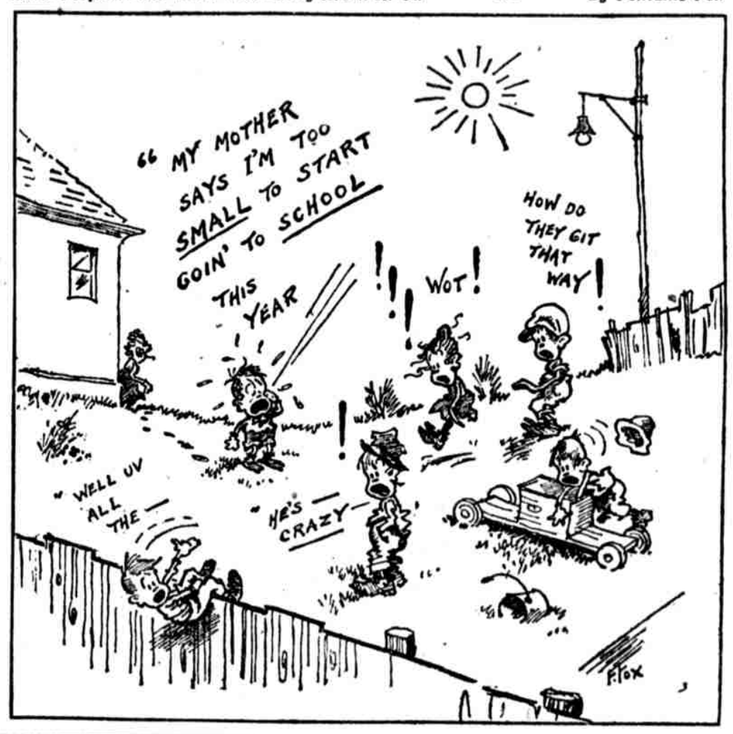


The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says the world is tired of war and will never forgive the delegates to the disarmament conference if they don't get together, adjust their differences and reach some sort of impasse.

Some People Never Know When They Are Well Off

By Fontaine Fox



SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

MOVIE FAN—Up in the Mountains—and Down Again

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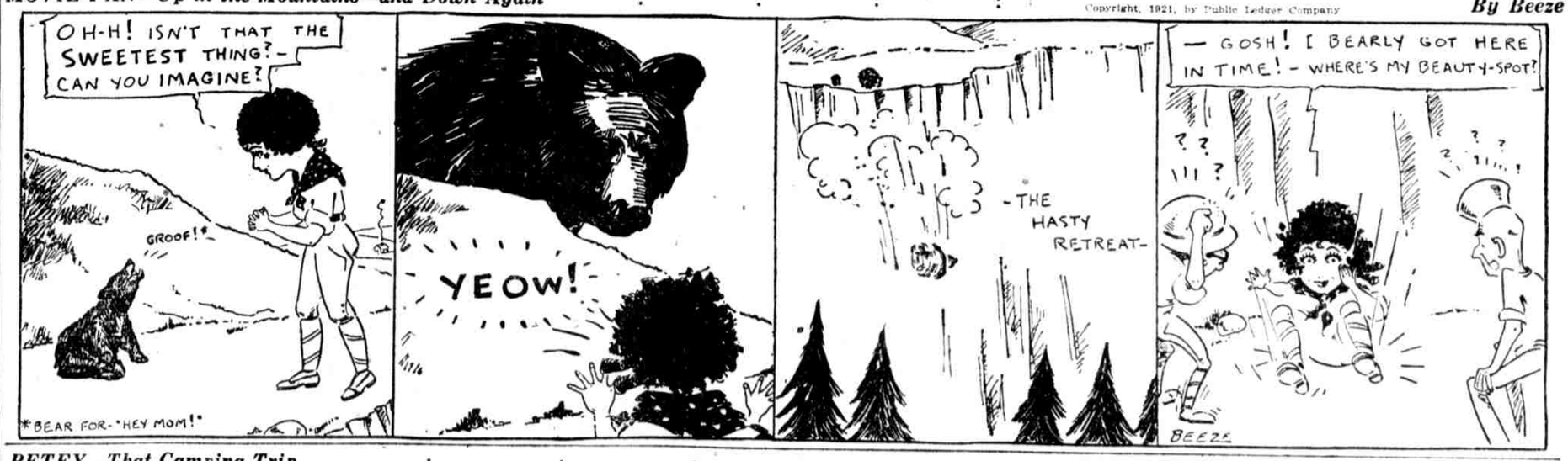
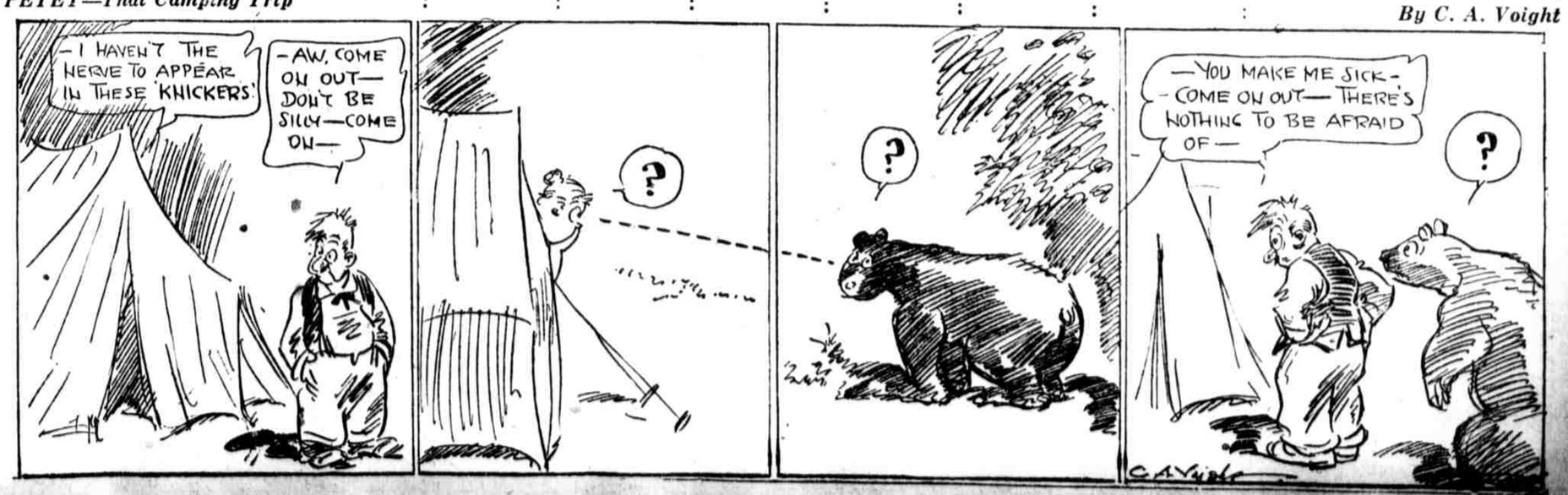
By Beeze



PETEY—That Camping Trip

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