THE VAGRANT DUKE

By GEORGE GIBBS

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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Peter Nicholaevitch, Russian Grand Duke, exiled by revolution, comes to this country as Peter Nichols, and goes to work on the estate of Jonathan K. McGuire. McGuire is being blackmailed by Hawk Kennedy, alias Jim Coast, a man with whom Peter had worked as waiter on the ship that brought them over. Coast tells Peter of a murder McGuire had committed in the West. McGuire's story made Coast the murderer. Peter believes McGuire. The victim was a man named Cameron, father of Beth Cameron, with whom Peter has fallen in love. Peter resolves to circumvent Coast and protect his employer by playing a game a little deeper than that of the blackmailer.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

OF COURSE he now had the advantage of knowing the whole of McGuire's side of the story, while Kennedy did not believe the old man would have dared to tell. And to hold these cards successfully it would be necessary to continue in Kennedy's mind the belief that Peter did not share McGuire's confidence. It would also be necessary for Peter to cast in his lot, apparently, with Kennedy against McGuire. It was a dirty business at best, but he meant to carry it through if he could, and get the signed agreement from the blackmailer.

Peter seemed to remember an old wallet that Jim Coast had always carried. He had seen it after Coast had taken slips of paper from it and showed them to Peter—newspaper clippings, notes from inamoratas and the like—but of course, never the paper now in question. And if he had carried it all these years, where was it now? In the vault of some bank or trust company, probably, and this would make Peter's task difficult, if not impossible.

Peter got up and paced the floor, thinking deeply of all these things in their relation to Beth. And then at last he went out into the night, his footsteps impelled toward the village. After all, the thoughts uppermost in his mind were of Beth herself. Whatever the cost of his pride, he would have to make his peace with her. He knew that now. Why otherwise did his restless feet lead him out into the pasture back of the little postoffice toward the rear of Mrs. Bergen's house? Yet there he found himself presently, smoking his corncob pipe for comfort, and staring at the solitary light in Tillie Bergen's parlor, which proclaimed its occupant. Mrs. Bergen's house stood at a little distance from its nearest neighbor, and Peter stole slowly through the orchard at the rear of the window. It was then that he heard the music for the first time, the "harmonium" wailing softly, while sweet and clear above the accompaniment (worked out painstakingly but lovingly by the girl herself) came Beth's voice singing the "Elegie."

Peter came closer until he was just at the edge of the shadow outside the window. He knew that her back would be turned to him and so he peered around the shutter at her unconscious back. She sang the song through until the end and then after a pause sang it again. Peter had no ear now for the phrasing, for faults in technique, or inaccuracies in enunciation. What he heard was the soul of the singer calling. All that he had taught her in the hours in the cabin was in her voice—and something more that she had learned elsewhere * * * Her voice was richer—deeper, a child's voice no longer, and he knew that she was singing of his mad moment in the woods, which had brought the end of all things that had mattered in her life. It was no girl who sang now, but a woman who had learned the meaning of the song, the plaint of birds once joyous, of woodland flowers once gay—at the memory of a spring that was no more. He had told her that she would sing that song well some day when she learned what it meant. She would never sing it again as she had sung it tonight. All the dross that Peter had worn in the world was stripped from him in that moment, all that was petty and ignoble in his heart driven forth, and he stood with bowed head, in shame for what he had been, and in gentleness for this dear creature whose idols he had cast down.

At the end of the second verse her fingers slipped from the keys and fell to her sides while she bowed her head and sat for a moment immovable. And then her shoulders moved slightly and a tiny smothered sound came from her throat. Suddenly her head bent and she fell forward on her arms upon the muted keys.

Noiselessly he passed over the low windowsill and before she even knew that he was there, fell to his knees beside her.

"Beth," he whispered. "Don't—child—don't!"

She straightened, startled and incredulous at the sight of him, and tried to move away, but he caught one of her hands and with bent head gently laid his lips upon it.

"Don't, Beth—please. I can't bear to see you cry——"

"I—I'm not crying," she stammered helplessly, while she winked back her tears, "I—I've just—just got the—the—stomachache."

She tried to laugh—failing dismally in a sob.

"Oh, Beth—don't——" he whispered.

"I—I can't help it—if I—I've got a—a pain," she evaded him.

"But I can," he murmured. "It's in your heart, Beth. I'm sorry for everything. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

"Please!"

"There's nothing to forgive," she repeated dully. But she had controlled her voice now and her fingers in his were struggling for release.

"I was a brute, Beth. I'd give everything to have those moments back. I wouldn't hurt you for the world. See—how changed I am——"

She released her fingers and turned slightly away.

"I—I'm changed, too, Mr. Nichols," she murmured.

"No. You mustn't be, Beth. And I've got to have you back. You've got to come back to me, Beth."

"Things can't be the same now."

"Yes—just the same——"

"No. Something's gone."

"But if something else has taken its place——"

"Nothing can——"

"Something greater——"

"I don't care for the sample you showed me," she returned quietly.

"I was crazy, Beth. I lost my head. It won't happen again."

"No. I know it won't——"

"You don't understand. It couldn't. I've made a fool of myself. Isn't it enough for me to admit that?"

"I knew it all the time." She was cruel, and from her cruelty he guessed the measure of her pride.

"I've done all I can to atone. I want you to know that I love you. I do, Beth. I love you——"

There was a note in his voice different from that she had heard the other day. His head was bent and he did not hear the little gasp or see the startled look in her eyes, which she controlled before he raised his head. With great deliberateness she answered him.

"Maybe you and I—have a different idea of what love ought to be," she said. But he saw that her reproof was milder.

"I know," he insisted. "You've sung it to me——"

"No—not to you—not love," she said, startled. And then, "You had no right to be listenin'." And then, with a glance at Aunt Tillie's clock, "You have no right to be here now. It's late."

"But I can't go until you understand what I want to do for you. You say that I can't know what love is. It asks nothing and only gives. I swear I wanted to give without thought of a return—until you laughed at me. And then—I wanted to punish you because you wouldn't understand——"

"Yes. You punished me——"

"Forgive me. You shouldn't have laughed at me, Beth. If you knew everything, you'd understand that I'm doing it all without a hope of payment—just because I've got to."

Her eyes grew larger. "What do you mean?"

"I can't tell you now—but something has happened that will make a great difference to you."

"What?"

"Forgive me. Come tomorrow and perhaps I'll tell you. We've already wasted two days."

"I'm not so sure they've been wasted," said Beth quietly.

"I don't care if you'll only come. Will you, Beth? Tomorrow?"

She nodded gravely at last.

"Perhaps," she said. And then, gently, "Good-night, Mr. Nichols."

So Peter kissed her fingers as though she had been his Czarina and went out.

CHAPTER XV

Superman

Of course Beth Cameron knew nothing of Russia's grand dukes. The only Duke that she had ever met was in the pages of the novel she had read in which the hero was named Algernon. That Duke was of the English variety, proud, crusty, and aged, and had only made an unpleasant impression upon her because she had liked Algernon, who had fallen in love with the daughter of the Duke, and the Duke had been very horrid to him in consequence or by reason of that mishap. When she had said to Peter that he reminded her of Algernon she had meant it, and that was really very nice of her, because she thought Algernon all that a self-respecting hero should be. It was true that Peter, though mostly an Englishman, didn't play polo and ride to hounds or swagger around a club and order people about, because he was too poor and was obliged to work for his living.

But he did remind her of Algernon somehow. He had a way with him, as though if there had been butlers and valets at Black Rock he could have swaggered and ordered them around if he'd had a mind to. He was good-looking, too. She had noted that even from the very first when she found him lugging his suitcase down on the road from Pickerel River. Then, too, he did say things to her, nicer things than any fellow had ever known how to say to her before, and he was much more polite than she had ever believed it possible for any one to be without seeming queer.

But when eavesdropping at McGuire's she had heard Peter play the piano, she felt herself conducted into a new world which had nothing at all to do with glass factories and vineyards. Even the sartorial splendor of Miss Peggy McGuire paled into insignificance beside the new visions which the music of Peter Nichols had invoked. He hadn't just lied to her. He was a musician. He could play. She had never heard anybody bring from a piano sounds like these. And he had said he wanted her to sing for him.

Beth had sung always—just as she had always breathed—but she had never heard any good music except on a talking machine at the boarding house at Glassboro—an old record of Madame Melba's that they played sometimes. But even that song from an opera ("Lay Boheem" they called it), mutilated as it was, had shown her that there was something more wonderful than the popular melodies that the other people liked. Beth's taste for good music, like her taste for nice people, was instinctive. And she had found that in her walk of life the one was about as difficult to find as the other. She had had her awakenings and her disillusionments, with women as well as men, but had emerged from her experiences of two winters in a factory town with her chin high and her heart pure—something of an achievement for one as pretty as Beth.

All in all, she had liked Shad Wells better than any of the men she had met. He was rough, but she had discovered that good manners didn't always mean good hearts or clean minds.

It was this discovery that had made her look askance at Peter Nichols when she had first met him on the road, for he was politer than anybody she had ever met. If her philosophy was to be consistent this new superintendent would need watching. But his music disarmed her and captured her imagination. And then came the incident of the jealous Shad and the extraordinary outcome of Mr. Nichols' championship of her rights. She had witnessed that fight from the shelter of the bushes. It had been dreadful but glorious. Peter's chivalry appealed to her—also his strength. From that moment he was superman.

Then had followed the long, wonderful weeks of music at the cabin, in which she had learned the beginnings of culture and training. Her musicmaster opened new and beautiful vistas for her, told her of the great musicians and singers that the world had known, described the opera houses of Europe, the brilliant audiences, the splendid ballets, the great orchestras, and promised her that if she worked hard she might one day become a part of all this. She had learned to believe him now, for she saw that as time went on he was more exacting with her work, more sparing in his praise of her, and she had worked hard—in despair at times, but with a slowly growing confidence in her star of destiny.

And all the while she was wondering why Peter Nichols was doing this for her and what the outcome of it all was to be. He spoke little of the future except to hint vaguely at lessons elsewhere when he had taught her all that he knew. The present it seemed was sufficient for them both. His moods of soberness, of joy, of enthusiasm, were all catching and she followed him blindly, aware of this great new element in her life which was to make the old life difficult, if not impossible. He treated her always with respect, not even touching her arms or waist in passing—an accepted familiarity of men by girls of her social class. Beth understood that it was a consideration due to a delicate situation, the same consideration which had impelled her always to call him Mr. Nichols.

And yet it was this very consideration of Peter's that vexed her. It wasn't an air of superiority, for she couldn't have stood that.

CONTINUED MONDAY

THE GUMPS—Sweet Land of Liberty

By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Bobbing Up and Down on the Waves

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By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says the situation in Russia has been pretty bad for a long time, but thank heaven there are some signs of returning chaos now.

THE LITTLE SCORPIONS' CLUB

By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

MOVIE FAN—Just So He'd Know

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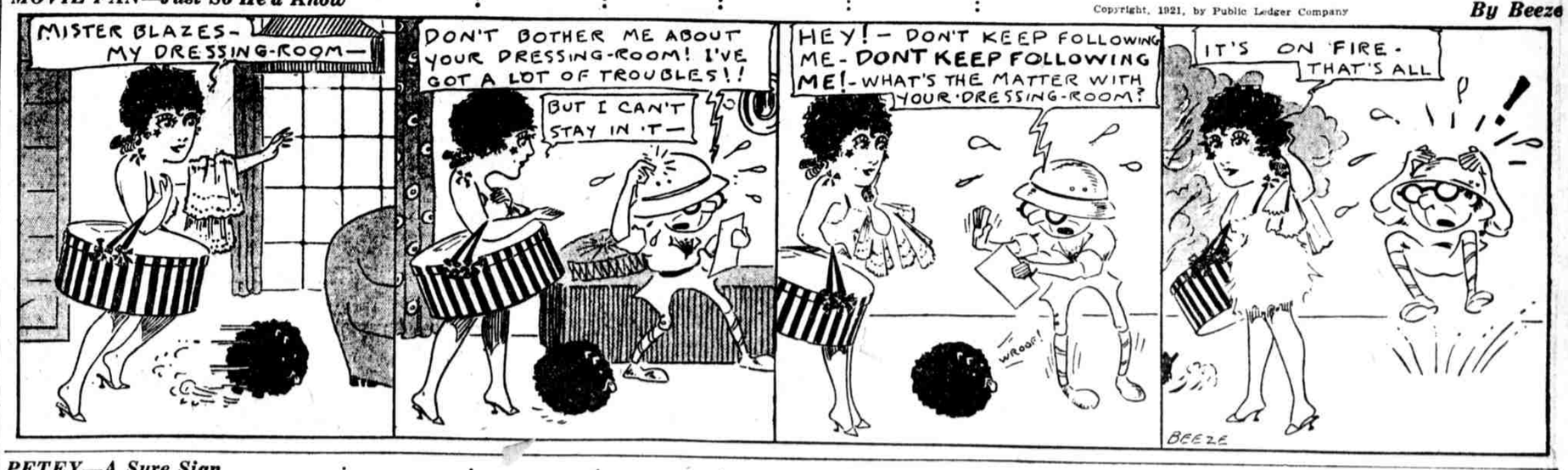
By Beeze



PETEY—A Sure Sign

By C. A. Voight