

THE VAGRANT DUKE

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CHAPTER XX The Russian Spy

WHEN Peter came back to consciousness he found himself lying in the shelter of the underbrush alone. And while he attempted to gather his scattered wits together a figure came creeping through the bushes toward him. It was Brierly, the clerk, carrying a hatful of water which he had procured from the neighboring rivulet. Brierly had a lump on his forehead about the size of a silver dollar, and his disheveled appearance gave evidence of an active part in the scene.

"What happened?" asked Peter slowly, starting up as memory came back to him.

But Brierly didn't answer at once. "Here, drink this. I don't think you're badly hurt—"

"No. Just dazed a bit," muttered Peter, and let Brierly minister to him for a moment.

"You see, there were too many for us," Brierly explained. "We made a pretty good fight of it at that, but they buried us by sheer weight of numbers. You ain't got your early in the thought—"

"You needn't bother. I'm for you. You can't let a lot of roughnecks put it over on you like this. It wouldn't be 'No—I can't—' can't," muttered Peter.

"I wish we had a bunch of the boys I was with over in France down here. There's a few up in May's Landing who'd clean this lot up in no time."

"I wish we had them," Peter straightened with some difficulty and rose to a sitting posture as the thought came to him. "I've got to get to the place Brierly."

"No. I wouldn't advise that—not here. Those roughnecks are between us and the office—in the office, too, I reckon, by this time. It wouldn't be 'Who were you going to phone to?'"

"May's Landing—the Sheriff. I'm going to see this thing through."

"Right! And I'm with you to a fare-thee-well. But it's got to be managed different. They'll beat you to death if you show up now. It was Yakimov that shot at you. He's after you. You were armed. It's a wonder you didn't shoot him down."

"Say, Mr. Nichols, you ain't really the Grand Duke Peter, are you?"

Peter smiled. "What's left of him—I am. This man Yakimov is an agent of Trotsky."

Brierly whistled softly between his teeth. "I reckon they want to get you, don't they?"

Peter nodded. "But they won't—not yet."

They held a brief council of war and in a moment on hands and knees were making their way through the underbrush in the general direction of Black Rock. Behind them they heard rough laughter and an occasional outburst of song which proclaimed that new supplies of whiskey had been unceremonied and that the anarchy which Yakimov so much desired now prevailed.

After a while Peter managed to get to his feet and moved on at a greater speed. He had been stunned by Shad's blow—a part of the force of which he had caught on his arm. The arm was still numb and his head thumped, but as he went on in the cool air his brain cleared and he found it possible to plan with some definiteness. Brierly knew the Sheriff at May's Landing. There was nothing his friends would rather do than to be sworn in as deputies for a wonder that Peter hadn't called the Sheriff in before.

"I thought I could manage the situation alone, Brierly," said Peter quietly. "But it's got the best of me."

The way was long. Black Rock—at least eight miles by the way they took—and it was almost 6 o'clock when they reached McGuire's. They knew that the outlaws in the possession of some of the ringleaders of the disturbance might have preceded them, and so they kept under cover until near the bushes, when they quickly emerged from the kitchen door, entering without knocking.

An unpleasant surprise awaited them there, for in the kitchen, securely gazed and bound to a chair, they found McGuire's valet, Stryker.

It took only a moment to release the man and to get the gag out of his mouth, when he began sputtering and pointing toward the door into the house.

"I don't know. It only happened half an hour ago. Where's Stryker?"

"He was tied to a chair in the kitchen. We let him loose. He's outside somewhere."

"And Mrs. Bergen and Sarah?"

"I don't know, sir."

Peter went to the door and called Stryker, and that bewildered person appeared at the foot of the steps with Mrs. Bergen and Sarah, who had been locked in the colored Peter called them up, and they all began screaming their tale at once. But at last Peter got at the facts. Hawk Kennedy had come suddenly into the kitchen, where the two women were, and, brandishing a revolver, commanded silence, threatening death if they made a sound. He had surprised the valet in the lower hall and had marched him back into the kitchen, where he had bound him to a chair with a clothes-line and then raged him.

McGuire waved the trio out of the room when their story was told, and signaled to Peter to close the door again, when he took up his interrupted tale.

"I was at the window, looking out, Nichols. I didn't expect him for a couple of weeks anyway. I'd just about gotten my nerve back. But he got the door open, Nichols, and ever got into the room without my hearing him! I must have been in a trance. His shoes were off. The first thing I knew is a voice close at my ear and a gun in my ribs. I put my hands up. There wasn't anything else to do. I thought I'd play for time, but he caught my glance toward the door and only laughed."

"There ain't anybody comin', Mike," he says. "It's just you an' me. I asked him what he wanted, and he grinned. You know he says. And with his left hand he brought out a rope he had stuffed in his pocket. 'I'll fix you first. Then we'll talk,' he says. He was cool, like he always was. He caught a slip noose around my wrists before I knew it, twisted the rope around me and threw me over on the floor. I tell you that the man is the devil himself!"

"He made me give up the keys to the drawers in the safe—it was open just like it is now. I wouldn't speak at first, but he kicked me and then put the gun at my head. I gave in at last. He found it. My God!"

The old man aroused himself with an effort and rose to his feet. "But we've got to catch him—just you and I. He can't have gone far. We've got the right to shoot him now—to shoot on sight."

"Yes—yes. I'm getting the Sheriff at Mays Landing now—"

"The Sheriff? The Irishman's small eyes stared and then became alive in sudden comprehension. "Not the Sheriff, Nichols. I won't have him."

"You've got to—at once." And then rapidly Peter gave an account of what had happened at the logging camp. It seemed to have no effect upon McGuire, who listened with glassy eyes. He was obsessed with the other—the graver danger.

"We'll keep this thing quiet if you like—the real meaning of this visit, and we've got to pick up his trail. But we can't let those men at the camp, the run of the place. They'll be looting this house next." And then, as McGuire seemed to agree, Peter went to the door and found Brierly still on the phone. He was talking to the Sheriff and had told the whole story. The Sheriff had already heard something about the Black Rock camp trouble and would be ready to move in an hour.

"Tell him to move fast and to come to McGuire's first," said Peter. "And you'll be here to show him the way."

Brierly nodded and finished the message while Peter returned to McGuire. "What else did Kennedy say?" Peter asked him.

"He asked a lot of questions—about you and Beth Cameron—about the money—about what I'd promised you. He's everything. He said he'd 'get' you and that he'd 'get' Beth Cameron."

Peter caught McGuire fiercely by the shoulder. "What did you say? Are you sure?"

With all of his other troubles Peter had forgotten Beth and now thought guiltily of the possible danger to which she might have been subjected.

How could Hawk have found out about Beth Cameron?

"What I told you," muttered McGuire wearily, "he said he'd 'get' her."

Sick with anxiety, Peter flung away from his protesting employer and made for the door, rushing past the astonished Brierly in the hall, down the stairs and out at a run over the bridge and through the village to the Bergen house. The door was open and he rushed in, calling Beth's name. There was no response. Now desperate and fearing the worst, he ran from room to room, downstairs and up. There were signs of her—a towel on a chair, a broom leaning against a door upstairs, the neat man's bed, the orderly kitchen, giving evidence of the morning cleaning, but no supper cooking on the stove, the fire of which had burned to cinders. She had not been here for a long while—since early morning, possibly. But where had she gone—where had Hawk Kennedy would hardly have dared to come here—to the village—hardly have succeeded in entering her room from this house, surrounded by neighbors—still less have succeeded in carrying her off without their knowledge. He rushed out into the road and questioned. No one seemed to have seen her. The urgency and suppressed anxiety of Peter's manner quickly drew a crowd which felt the contagion of his excitement.

A man joined the group. Yes. He had seen Beth in the morning early. She was hurrying down the path which led into the pines. He had not seen her since.

Peter glanced at him just once more to be sure that he was speaking the truth and then, without a thought to the impression he had created in the minds of the villagers, set off running through the path toward his cabin.

Fool that he had been! To leave Beth unguarded—unwarned even—with Hawk within a quarter of a mile of her. Why had he not seen the hand of fate in Beth's presence here at Black Rock near McGuire, the man who had wronged her father—the hand of fate, which with unerring definiteness was guiding the principals in this sordid tragedy together from the ends of the earth for a reckoning? And what was this reckoning to be? McGuire had already fallen a victim to the man's devilish skill and audacity. And Beth?—What match was she for a clever, desperate rogue who had had nothing? How had he learned of Beth's existence and how, knowing of it, had he managed to beguile her away from the village? Peter was begging to believe with McGuire that Hawk Kennedy was indeed in league with the devil.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

THE GUMPS—Civilization Backward

WELL—SHE HAD TO GO AWAY FOR A VACATION—FOR QUIET AND REST—SOOTHING CARD PARTIES—REFRESHING DANCING—RESTFUL CABARETS—NOW SHE WANTS TO STAY LONGER ON ACCOUNT OF THE HAY RACK PARTY AND BARN DANCE—THINK OF GETTING ANY COMFORT RIDING ON A HAY RACK—THINK OF ME TAKING HER TO A SHOW SOME NIGHT IN A HAY RACK—THEN AFTER THE SHOW DROPPING HER SOME NICE SWEET BARN FOR A PANCE—

MY MOTHER RAISED A FLOCK OF CHILDREN—SHE NEVER WANTED A VACATION—SHE GOT ALL HER HAPPINESS BEING WITH HER FAMILY—WHEN SHE TOOK A DAY OFF IT WAS TO A PICNIC OR A COUNTY FAIR—

GET OUT THE OLD SPRING WAGON—DAD WAS ON THE SEAT BESIDE HER—KIDS STRUNG ALONG THE BACK LIKE A BIGHT-SEEING BU'S—LEMONADE—POPCORN—THEN THEY TALK ABOUT IT FOR A MONTH—I CAN SEE NOW WHERE PA AND MA WERE ALL WRONG—THEY WERE OLD FASHIONED—

WE'VE PROGRESSED—WE'VE GONE AHEAD—WE'RE THE NEW PEOPLE—I CAN SEE THAT THAT WAS THE OLD STYLE—WE'RE THE NEW UP TO DATE FOLKS—MY DAD AND MAMMY WERE THE OLD STYLE PEOPLE—THEY WEREN'T UP TO DATE—THEY WERE FOND OF EACH OTHER'S SOCIETY—



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—The Price Is the Thing

I SURE GOT TO GET SOME CLOTHES! SOON THEY'LL BE TAKIN' ME FOR A POOR BLIND GIRL WITH A TIN CUP AND FORCING PENNIES ON ME!

LOOK AT THAT PERFECT LOVE OF A WAIST! I WISH I HAD THE MONEY. OH DEAR, ISN'T IT AWFUL WE NEVER CAN AFFORD THE REALLY PRETTY THINGS!

WEEK LATER SAME WAIST REDUCED

YOU SURE GOT TO WATCH YOUR TURNS ON THIS CHEAP COME-ON STUFF THEY SHOW YOU!

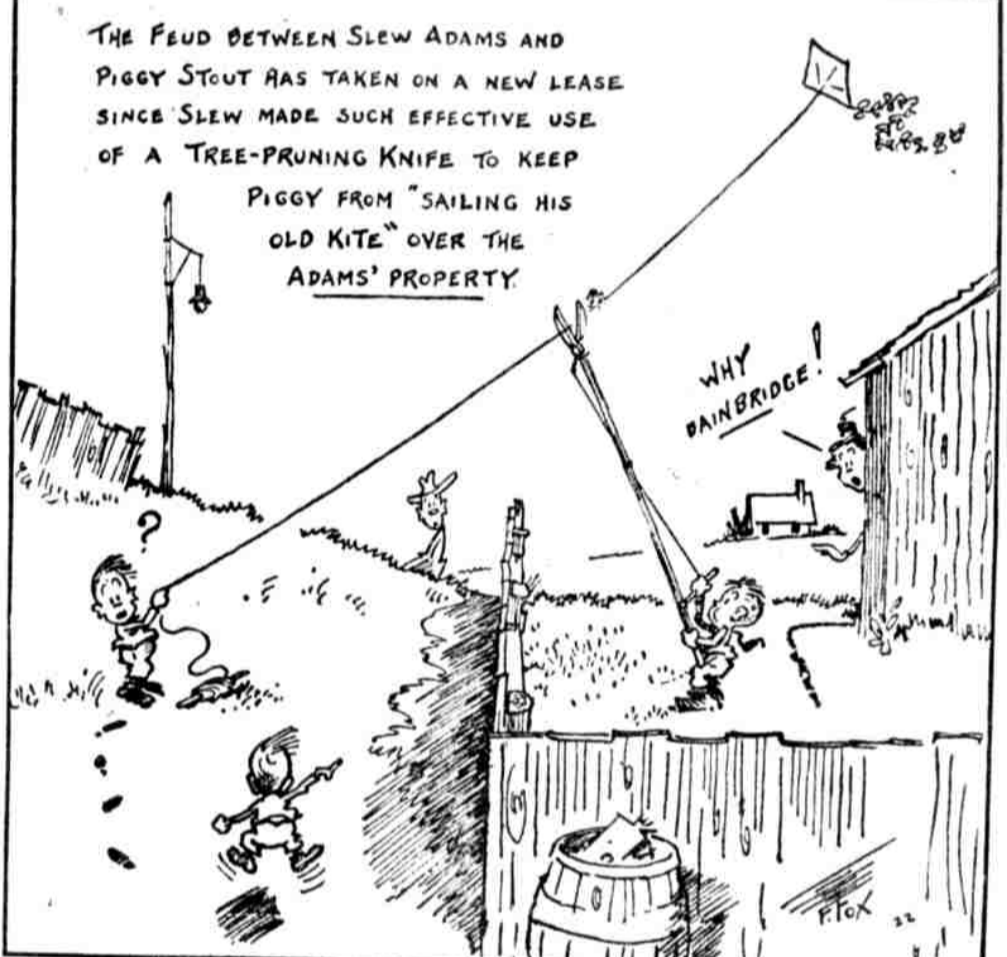


The Young Lady Across the Way



The young lady across the way says her bathing suit is a two-piece one, consisting of the regular suit and a lovely bathing cap.

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS



THE FEUD BETWEEN SLEW ADAMS AND PIGGY STOUT HAS TAKEN ON A NEW LEASE SINCE SLEW MADE SUCH EFFECTIVE USE OF A TREE-PRUNING KNIFE TO KEEP PIGGY FROM "SAILING HIS OLD KITE" OVER THE ADAMS' PROPERTY.

SCHOOL DAYS



YOU SPOT! COME BACK HERE! YUH! YUH! YUH! YUH! COME BACK HERE! SPOT! YUH YUH!

PETEY—He's a Great Help



—PETEY DEAR—I MUST GET A NEW FALL HAT—HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY?

—I SAW A PIPPIN TODAY ON A GIRL—

—SHE WAS ABOUT TWENTY-TWO OR SO—YOU OUGHT TO HAVE SEEN HER EYES—BEAUTIFULL EYES—BLUE ONES, AND SHE HAD BLONDE HAIR ABOUT THE COLOR OF GOLD—YOU KNOW, KINDER GLISTENED—AND—

—OH, I THINK IT WAS ONE OF THOSE BLACK ONES

—YES, YES, —HOW ABOUT HER HAT—??

GASOLINE ALLEY—Danger, Look Out!



I HAVEN'T SEEN A REGULAR SNAKE ON THE TRIP BUT THAT SOUND IS MIGHTY FAMILIAR!

IF IT ISN'T A RATTLER I'LL EAT MY SPARE TIRE!

YOU CAN'T FOOL ME ON THAT. I USED TO HEAR EM UP IN CROW CREEK, MONTANA.

OH! SO YOU'RE THE LITTLE RATTLER ARE YOU?