THE VAGRANT DUKE

By GEORGE GIBBS

Author of "The Splendid Outcast," "The Yellow Dove," "The Secret Witness," Etc.

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"I RECKON I could——" Shad Wells sank into a chair and bent his head. "My God, mister. If I'd only 'a' known! If you'd only let me help you —I can't stand thinkin' of anythin' happenin' to Beth—you an' me—we ain't got along, an' maybe you've got the upper hand of me, but——"

"We've got to forget that now." put in Peter quickly, and taking out his hasp knife he cut the cords that bound Shad's wrists. "Just to show you that I mean what I say." And then, soberly. "You know these woods. Help me to find Beth Cameron and I'll make no charge against you. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes, mister."

Peter glanced at his face and at the blood dripping from his finger ends. The man was suffering much pain, but he hadn't whimpered.

"All right. Take off your coat and I'll tie your arm up first."

Silently Shad rose and obeyed while Peter got water and washed the wound, a clean one right through the muscles of the forearm. But no bones were broken and Peter bandaged it skillfully. Shad clenched his jaws during the washing of the wound, but he said nothing more. Peter knew that the man still hated him, but he knew also that Shad was now powerless to do him any injury, and that there was a tie to bind them now into this strange alliance. As Peter finished the bandaging and was improvising a sling for the wounded arm, Shad crumpled side-long upon the edge of the bed, his face ghastly, and would have fallen to the floor if Peter hadn't held him upright and half carried him to the armchair. Then Peter unlocked a cupboard and brought forth whisky, giving Shad half a tumblerful, and in a moment the man began to revive. So Peter poured another glass and slowly Shad pulled himself together.

"Perhaps you're not up to it——" Peter began.

But Shad wagged his head with some determination.

"Yes, I—I'm up to it all right. I've got to go, mister. We'll find her if she's in these woods——"

"Bully for you. Feeling better now?"

Shad nodded and then raised his head, staring with a frown out of the window by the piano. Peter had been so absorbed in his task of setting the man to rights that he had not noticed the dull glow that had risen in the southern sky. And following Shad's glance he turned his head and looked out of the window. At first he thought it might be the afterglow of the sunset until a word from Shad aroused him to the real significance of the light.

"Fire!" gasped the lumberman.

"Fire!" echoed Peter, aghast.

"They've set the woods afire, mister," mutered Shad helplessly.

At the same moment the telephone from the house began jangling furiously. It was McGuire, who had made the same discovery.

"Yes," replied Peter to the hysterical questions. "It's the lumber camp. They've broken loose and set the woods afire. You've got to get all the men you can together and rush them down there. Where's Brierly? On the way? Oh, all right. Good. He'll take me down and I'll send him back. * * * Yes. I've got a clue to Hawk * * * I don't know, but I'm going to try it. I'm taking Shad Wells with me. * * * The old tool house by the cedar swamp. Brierly will know. Send the men on in relays when they come—with shovels and sacks. * * * What did you say? * * * What? * * * Oh, 'D——n the woods.' * * * All right. I'll get the paper if I can * * * Yes. It's my affair as much as yours now. * * * Yes. * * * Good-by."

Peter hung up the receiver and turned to Shad, who had risen, his arm in the sling, just as Brierly came running up the path to the door.

CHAPTER XXI

The Inferno

The way through the woods was long, but Beth stumbled on, urged by the rough tone and strong hand of her captor. She knew the woods well, better than Hawk, but she had never ventured so far into the forest as he led her. She felt very certain that he knew even less than she of the way he was taking, and that his object in avoiding the roads and paths which led to the southward was to keep her hidden from the eyes of any persons that might be met on the paths between Black Rock and the lumber camp. But after a while she began to think that he knew with more or less definiteness the general direction in which they were moving, for he stopped from time to time to look at the sun and get his bearings. And then with a gruff word he would move on again, always to the south and east, and she knew that he had already decided upon their destination. With her hands still bound behind her, progress through the underbrush was difficult, for the branches stung her like whip-lashes, and thorn bushes caught at her arms and tore her flimsy frock to shreds. The gag in her mouth made breathing painful, but Hawk seemed to be unaware of her sufferings or purposely oblivious of them, for he hardly glanced at her and said no word except to urge her on to greater exertion.

When they approached the road which he wanted to cross, he warned her with an oath to remain where he left her and went forward to investigate, after which he returned and hurried her across into the thicket upon the other side.

And it was not until they were securely hidden again far from the sight of any possible passer-by that he untied the bonds at her wrists and took the gag from her mouth. But she knew more than ever that she was completely in his power.

He was sinister. He typified terror, physical and mental—and behind the threat of his very presence lay the gruesome vision of sand and sun and the bearded man lying with the knife in his back. She tried to summon her native courage to combat her fears, to believe that the situation in which she found herself was not so evil as she imagined it—and that soon Hawk Kennedy would have a change of heart and give her a chance to speak in her own behalf. But he silenced her gruffly whenever she addressed him and she gave up at last, in fear of bringing his wrath upon her. She could see that he was deeply intent upon his object to get her away from Black Rock where none could find her. And what then?

In a wild impulse—a moment of desperation, she broke away from him and ran, but he caught her easily, for by this time she was very tired. Again, she thought of a struggle with him, hand to hand, but he read her mind and drew a pistol, pushing her on ahead of him as before, threatening bodily injury. By this time she had learned to believe him capable of any cruelty. But she thanked God that the dangers that threatened were only those which could come from a brutal enemy and in his very brutality she even found refuge from the other and more terrible alternative of his amiability. As Hawk had said, he wasn't "on that lay this trip."

But what his ultimate purpose was she had no means of determining. She knew that he was totally without scruple and had thought in her first moments of terror that he meant to take her far back into the woods—and there kill her as he had done her father, thus again destroying all claim. But as the moments passed and she saw that he had some definite objective, the feeble remnants of her courage gathered strength. Her attempt to escape had failed, of course, but his tolerance gave her a hope that he did not dare to do the dreadful violence of which she had thought.

For hours—it seemed—they went through underbrush and swamp-land, stopping from time to time at Hawk's command while he listened and got their bearings. Beth had never been in this part of the woods, but she had an idea, from the crossing of the road and the character of the trees, that they were now somewhere in the Lower Reserve and not very far from the lumber camp. It was there that Peter Nichols was. Her heart leaped at the thought of his nearness. All memory of the heliotrope envelope and of its contents seemed to have been wiped from her consciousness by the rough usage of this enemy to them both. It seemed to matter very little now who this woman was that Peter had known. She belonged to a mysterious and unhappy past—for he had hinted at that—which had nothing to do with the revelation that Beth had read in his eyes as to the meaning of the wonderful present for them both. She knew now that he could have explained, if she had given him the chance. Instead of which she had rushed heedlessly to misfortune, the victim of a childish pride, plunging them both into this disaster. That pride was a pitiful thing now, like her disordered hair and her bedraggled frock, which flapped its ribbons, soaked and muddy, about her knees.

But as long as she was still alive and in no immediate danger, she tried to hope for some incident which would send Peter back to Black Rock earlier than Hawk had expected, where, at the cabin, he would guess the truth as to her meeting with Hawk and what had followed.

But how could he guess all that? The difficulty dismayed her. He would hunt for her, of course, as soon as he learned of her disappearance, but clever as he was there seemed no way in which he could solve the mystery of her flight, still less, having guessed Hawk Kennedy's purpose, follow any trail through the wilderness by which her captor had led her.

Even in the apparent hopelessness of her situation, she had not reached the point of actual despair. Youth and her customary belief in all that was good in the world sustained her. Something would happen—something must happen * * * As she trudged along, she prayed with her whole heart, like David, to be delivered from the hand of the oppressor.

That prayer comforted her and gave her strength, and so when they came out at the edge of the swamp some moments later she obeyed his instructions more hopefully. There was a path along the edge of the water which presently led into the heart of the woods again, and there almost before she was aware of it she found herself facing a small wooden house or shanty which seemed in a fairly good state of preservation.

Silently, Hawk Kennedy unfastened the hasp which held the door, and gruffly ordered her to go inside. Wondering, she obeyed him. But her captor now acted with a celerity which, while it gave her new fears, set other fears at rest, for he took the handkerchiefs from his pockets and gagged and bound her arms and wrists again, pushing her down on a pile of sacking which had served some one for a bed, tying her feet and knees with ropes that were there so that she could neither move nor make a sound.

There for a moment he stood, staring down at her with a grim kind of humor, born of his successful flight.

"Some kid, by G——! I'm kinder sorry—d—— if I ain't. But ye hadn't any business bein' who ye are. I believe I'd rather kill ye outright than hurt ye any more—that I would. Maybe I won't have to do either. Understand? But I got somethin' to do first. It ain't any child's play an' I ain't got much time to spare. Be a good kid an' lie quiet an' go to sleep and I'll be back after a while an' set ye free. Understand?"

Beth nodded helplessly, for it was the only thing that she could do, and with relief watched his evil shape darken the doorway out of which he went, carefully closing the door and fastening the hasp on the outside. Then she heard the crunch of his footsteps in the dry leaves behind the cabin. They moved rapidly and in a few moments she heard them no more.

Lying on her side, her head pillowed on the bagging, it did not seem at first as though she were uncomfortable, and her eyes, wide open, peered around her prison. There was a small window, unglazed, and by the light which came from it she could see some axhandles piled in one corner of the hut, several cross-cut saws on a box at one side, a few picks and a shovel or two. It must be a tool house used for the storage of extra implements and she remembered dimly that Shad had once spoken of the cutting that had been begun down by the swamp and abandoned for a better location. This then was where Hawk Kennedy had taken her, and she knew that it was a spot little visited nowadays except by hunters, and at some distance from the scene of present logging operations, toward the spur of the railroad. It was here perhaps that Hawk Kennedy had hidden while making his earlier investigations of Black Rock while he ripened his plot against Mr. McGuire. There were several empty bottles on the floor, a moldy crust of bread, and a broken water-pitcher, which confirmed the surmise.

She realized that Hawk had planned well. It seemed hardly posible to hope for a chance passer-by in this deserted spot.

And even if she heard the sound of guns or even heard footsteps in the leaves, what chance had she of making known her whereabouts? But she strained her ears, listening, only to hear the twittering of the birds, the chattering of squirrels and the moaning of the wind in the tree tops. How near was freedom and yet how difficult of attainment! She wriggled gently in her bonds, but each motion seemed to make them tighter, until they began to cut more and more cruelly into her tender flesh. She tried by twisting her hands and bending her body to touch the knots at her knees, but her elbows were fastened securely and she could reach them. And at last she gave up the attempt, half stifled from her exertions and suffering acutely. Then she lay quiet, sobbing gently to herself, trying to find a comfortable posture, and wondering what was to be the end of it all.

Hours passed in which the scampering of the four-footed things grew less and less and the birds ceased their chirping. Only the moaning of the wind continued, high in the tree tops. Once or twice she thought she plainly heard footsteps near by and renewed her efforts to free herself, but desisted again when she learned that it was only the sound of the flying leaves dancing against the outside walls of her prison.

CONTINUED MONDAY

THE GUMPS—Andy and the Housemaid

By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Miss O'Flage Goes Fishing With the Boss

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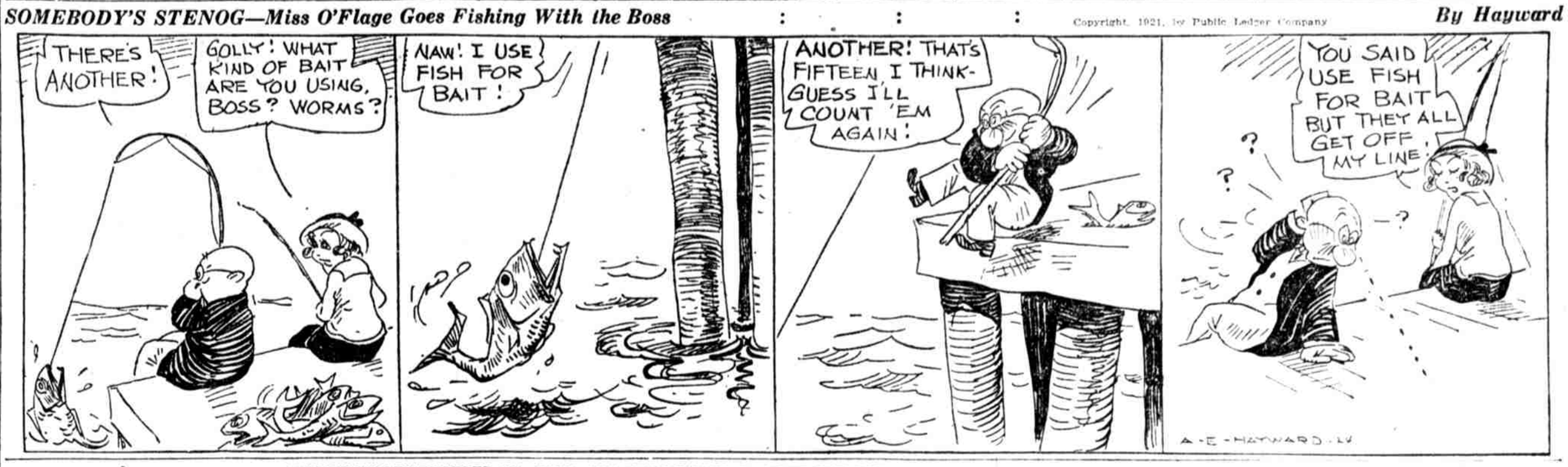
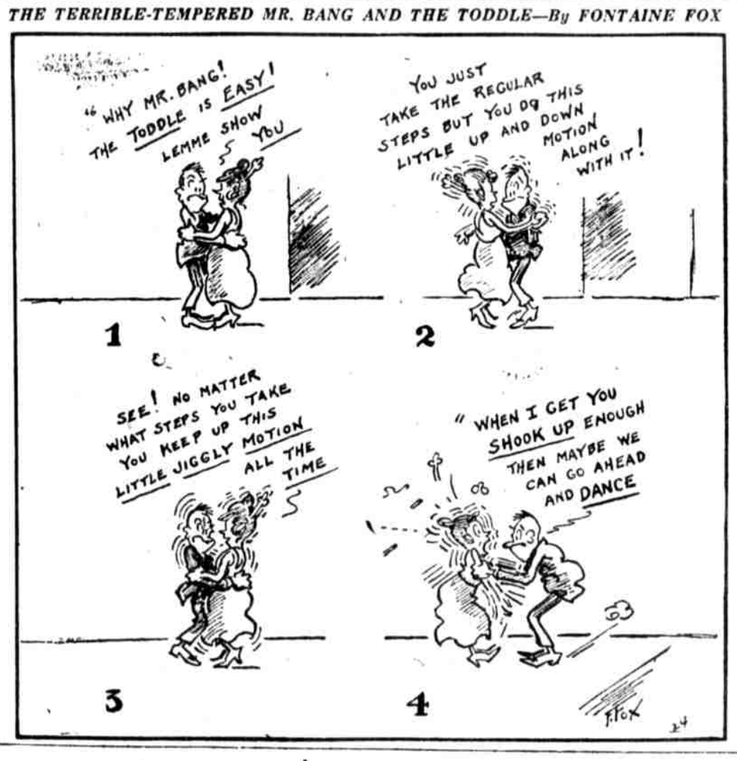
By Hayward



The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says her father is an exceptionally fine story-teller, being just full of antidotes on every occasion.

THE TERRIBLE-TEMPERED MR. BANG AND THE TODDLE—By FONTAINE FOX



SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—Water! Water!

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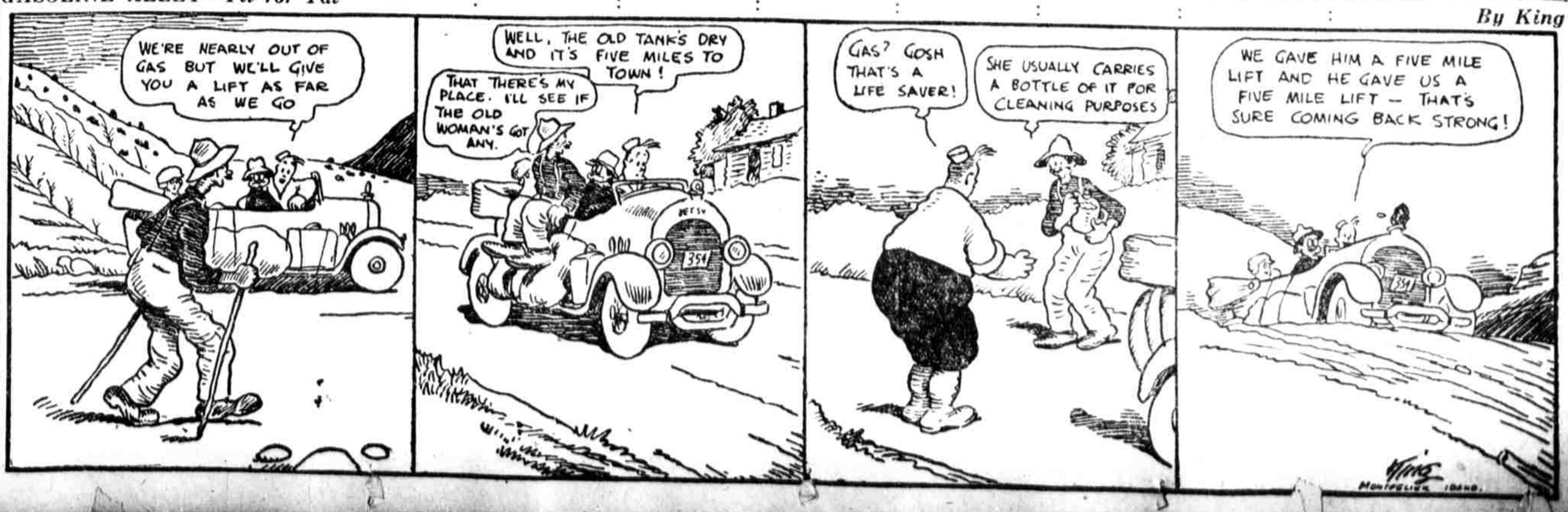
GASOLINE ALLEY—Tit for Tat

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