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PETER'S PENCE

William Wymark Jacobs
Peter's Pence

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Peter's Pence / Sailor's Knots, Part 8.:

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PETER'S PENCE

Sailormen don't bother much about their relations, as a rule, said the night-watchman; sometimes because a railway-ticket costs as much as a barrel o' beer, and they ain't got the money for both, and sometimes because most relations run away with the idea that a sailorman has been knocking about 'arf over the world just to bring them 'ome presents.

Then, agin, some relations are partikler about appearances, and they don't like it if a chap don't wear a collar and tidy 'imself up. Dress is everything nowadays; put me in a top 'at and a tail-coat, with a twopenny smoke stuck in my mouth, and who would know the difference between me and a lord? Put a bishop in my clothes, and you'd ask 'im to 'ave a 'arf-pint as soon as you would me—sooner, p'r'aps.

Talking of relations reminds me of Peter Russet's uncle. It's some years ago now, and Peter and old Sam Small and Ginger Dick 'ad just come back arter being away for nearly ten months. They 'ad all got money in their pockets, and they was just talking

about the spree they was going to have, when a letter was brought to Peter, wot had been waiting for 'im at the office.

He didn't like opening it at fust. The last letter he had 'ad kept 'im hiding indoors for a week, and then made him ship a fortnight afore 'e had meant to. He stood turning it over and over, and at last, arter Sam, wot was always a curious man, 'ad told 'im that if he didn't open it he'd do it for 'im, he tore it open and read it.

"It's from my old uncle, George Goodman," he ses, staring. "Why, I ain't seen 'im for over twenty years."

"Do you owe 'im any money?" ses Sam.

Peter shook his 'ead. "He's up in London," he ses, looking at the letter agin, "up in London for the fust time in thirty-three years, and he wants to come and stay with me so that I can show 'im about."

"Wot is he?" ses Sam.

"He's retired," ses Peter, trying not to speak proud.

"Got money?" ses Sam, with a start.

"I b'leeve so," ses Peter, in a off-hand way. "I don't s'pose 'e lives on air."

"Any wives or children?" ses Sam.

"No," ses Peter. "He 'ad a wife, but she died."

"Then you have 'im, Peter," ses Sam, wot was always looking out for money. "Don't throw away a oppertunity like that. Why, if you treat 'im well he might leave it all to you."

"No such luck," ses Peter.

"You do as Sam ses," ses Ginger. "I wish I'd got an uncle."

"We'll try and give 'im a good time," ses Sam, "and if he's anything like Peter we shall enjoy ourselves."

"Yes; but he ain't," ses Peter. "He's a very solemn, serious-minded man, and a strong teetotaller. Wot you'd call a glass o' beer he'd call pison. That's 'ow he got on. He's thought a great deal of in 'is place, I can tell you, but he ain't my sort."

"That's a bit orkard," ses Sam, scratching his 'ead. "Same time, it don't do to throw away a chance. If 'e was my uncle I should pretend to be a teetotaller while 'e was here, just to please 'im."

"And when you felt like a drink, Peter," ses Ginger, "me and Sam would look arter 'im while you slipped off to get it."

"He could 'ave the room below us," ses Sam. "It is empty."

Peter gave a sniff. "Wot about you and Ginger?" he ses.

"Wot about us?" ses Sam and Ginger, both together.

"Why, you'd 'ave to be teetotallers, too," ses Peter. "Woes the good o' me pretending to be steady if 'e sees I've got pals like you?"

Sam scratched his 'ead agin, ever so long, and at last he ses, "Well, mate," he ses, "drink don't trouble me nor Ginger. We can do without it, as far as that goes; and we must all take it in turns to keep the old gentleman busy while the others go and get wot they want. You'd better go and take the room downstairs for 'im, afore it goes."

Peter looked at 'im in surprise, but that was Sam all over. The idea o' knowing a man with money was too much for 'im, and

he sat there giving good advice to Peter about 'is behavior until Peter didn't know whether it was 'is uncle or Sam's. 'Owever, he took the room and wrote the letter, and next arternoon at three o'clock Mr. Goodman came in a four- wheel cab with a big bag and a fat umbrella. A short, stiffish-built man of about sixty he was, with 'is top lip shaved and a bit o' short gray beard. He 'ad on a top 'at and a tail-coat, black kid gloves and a little black bow, and he didn't answer the cabman back a single word.

He seemed quite pleased to see Peter, and by and by Sam, who was bursting with curiosity, came down-stairs to ask Peter to lend 'im a boot-lace, and was interduced. Then Ginger came down to look for Sam, and in a few minutes they was all talking as comfortable as possible.

"I ain't seen Peter for twenty years," ses Mr. Goodman—"twenty long years!"

Sam shook his 'ead and looked at the floor.

"I happened to go and see Peter's sister—my niece Polly," ses Mr. Goodman, "and she told me the name of 'is ship. It was quite by chance, because she told me it was the fust letter she had 'ad from him in seven years."

"I didn't think it was so long as that," ses Peter. "Time passes so quick."

His uncle nodded. "Ah, so it does," 'e ses. "It's all the same whether we spend it on the foaming ocean or pass our little lives ashore. Afore we can turn round, in a manner o' speaking, it 'as gorn."

"The main thing," ses Peter, in a good voice, "is to pass it properly."

"Then it don't matter," ses Ginger.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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