

Peter's Pence eBook

Peter's Pence by W. W. Jacobs

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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.

[Illustration: "Put a bishop in my clothes, and you'd ask 'im to 'ave a 'arf-pint as soon as you would me."]

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.”

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“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.

[Illustration: “Mr. Goodman came in a four-wheel cab with a big bag and a fat umbrella.”]

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.

“So it don’t,” ses Sam, very serious.

“I held ’im in my arms when ’e was a baby,” ses Mr. Goodman, looking at Peter.

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"Fond o' children?" ses Sam.

Mr. Goodman nodded. "Fond of everybody," he ses.

"That's 'ow Peter is," ses Ginger; "specially young——"

Peter Russet and Sam both turned and looked at 'im very sharp.

"Children," ses Ginger, remembering 'imself, "*and* teetotallers. I s'pose it is being a teetotaller 'imself."

"Is Peter a teetotaller?" ses Mr. Goodman. "I'd no idea of it. Wot a joyful thing!"

"It was your example wot put it into his 'ead fust, I b'leeve," ses Sam, looking at Peter for 'im to notice 'ow clever he was.

"And then, Sam and Ginger Dick being teetotallers too," ses Peter, "we all, natural-like, keep together."

Mr. Goodman said they was wise men, and, arter a little more talk, he said 'ow would it be if they went out and saw a little bit of the great wicked city? They all said they would, and Ginger got quite excited about it until he found that it meant London.

They got on a bus at Aldgate, and fust of all they went to the British Museum, and when Mr. Goodman was tired o' that—and long arter the others was—they went into a place and 'ad a nice strong cup of tea and a piece o' cake each. When they come out o' there they all walked about looking at the shops until they was tired out, and arter wot Mr. Goodman said was a very improving evening they all went 'ome.

Sam and Ginger went 'ome just for the look 'o the thing, and arter waiting a few minutes in their room they crept downstairs agin to spend wot was left of the evening. They went down as quiet as mice, but, for all that, just as they was passing Mr. Goodman's room the door opened, and Peter, in a polite voice, asked 'em to step inside.

"We was just thinking you'd be dull up there all alone," he ses.

Sam lost 'is presence o' mind, and afore he knew wot 'e was doing 'im and Ginger 'ad walked in and sat down. They sat there for over an hour and a 'arf talking, and then Sam, with a look at Ginger, said they must be going, because he 'ad got to call for a pair o' boots he 'ad left to be mended.

"Why, Sam, wot are you thinking of?" ses Peter, who didn't want anybody to 'ave wot he couldn't. "Why, the shop's shut."

"I don't think so," ses Sam, glaring at 'im. "Anyway, we can go and see."



Peter said he'd go with 'im, and just as they got to the door Mr. Goodman said he'd go too. O' course, the shops was shut, and arter Mr. Goodman 'ad stood on Tower Hill admiring the Tower by moonlight till Sam felt ready to drop, they all walked back. Three times Sam's boot-lace come undone, but as the ethers all stopped too to see 'im do it up it didn't do 'im much good. Wot with temper and dryness 'e could 'ardly bid Peter "Good-night."

Sam and Ginger 'ad something the next morning, but morning ain't the time for it; and arter they had 'ad dinner Mr. Goodman asked 'em to go to the Zoological Gardens with 'im. He paid for them all, and he 'ad a lot to say about kindness to animals and 'ow you could do anything with 'em a'most by kindness. He walked about the place talking like a book, and when a fat monkey, wot was pretending to be asleep, got a bit o' Sam's whisker, he said it was on'y instink, and the animal had no wish to do 'im 'arm.

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"Very likely thought it was doing you a kindness, Sam," ses Ginger.

Mr. Goodman said it was very likely, afore Sam could speak, and arter walking about and looking at the other things they come out and 'ad a nice, strong, 'ot cup o' tea, same as they 'ad the day before, and then walked about, not knowing what to do with themselves.

Sam got tired of it fust, and catching Ginger's eye said he thought it was time to get 'ome in case too much enjoyment wasn't good for 'em. His idea was to get off with Ginger and make a night of it, and when 'e found Peter and his uncle was coming too, he began to think that things was looking serious.

"I don't want to spile your evening," he says, very perlite. "I must get 'ome to mend a pair o' trowsis o' mine, but there's no need for you to come."

"I'll come and watch you," ses Peter's uncle.

"And then I'm going off to bed early," ses Sam. "Me, too," ses Ginger, and Peter said he could hardly keep 'is eyes open.

They got on a bus, and as Sam was about to foller Ginger and Peter on top, Mr. Goodman took hold of 'im by the arm and said they'd go inside. He paid two penny fares, and while Sam was wondering 'ow to tell 'im that it would be threepence each, the bus stopped to take up a passenger and he got up and moved to the door.

"They've gone up there," he ses, pointing.

Afore Sam could stop 'im he got off, and Sam, full o' surprise, got off too, and follered 'im' on to the pavement.

"Who's gone up there?" he ses, as the bus went on agin.

"Peter and Mr. Ginger Dick," ses Mr. Good-man. "But don't you trouble. You go 'ome and mend your trowsis."

"But they're on the bus," ses Sam, staring. "Dick and Peter, I mean."

Mr. Goodman shook his 'ead.

"They got off. Didn't you see 'em?" he ses. "No," ses Sam, "I'll swear they didn't."

"Well, it's my mistake, I s'pose," ses Peter's uncle. "But you get off home; I'm not tired yet, and I'll walk."

Sam said 'e wasn't very tired, and he walked along wondering whether Mr. Goodman was quite right in his 'ead. For one thing, 'e seemed upset about something or other, and kept taking little peeps at 'im in a way he couldn't understand at all.

"It was nice tea we 'ad this arternoon," ses Mr. Goodman at last.

"De-licious," ses Sam.

"Trust a teetotaller for knowing good tea," ses Mr. Goodman. "I expect Peter enjoyed it. I s'pose 'e is a very strict teetotaller?"

"Strict ain't the word for it," ses Sam, trying to do 'is duty by Peter. "We all are."

"That's right," ses Mr. Goodman, and he pushed his 'at back and looked at Sam very serious. They walked on a bit further, and then Peter's uncle stopped sudden just as they was passing a large public-'ouse and looked at Sam.

"I don't want Peter to know, 'cos it might alarm 'im," he ses, "but I've come over a bit faint. I'll go in 'ere for 'arf a minnit and sit down. You'd better wait outside."

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"I'll come in with you, in case you want help," ses Sam. "I don't mind wot people think."

Mr. Goodman tried to persuade 'im not to, but it was all no good, and at last 'e walked in and sat down on a tall stool that stood agin the bar, and put his hand to his 'ead.

"I s'pose we shall 'ave to 'ave something," he ses in a whisper to Sam; "we can't expect to come in and sit down for nothing. What'll you take?"

Sam looked at 'im, but he might just as well ha' looked at a brass door-knob.

"I—I—I'll 'ave a small ginger-beer," he ses at last, "a very small one."

"One small ginger," ses Mr. Goodman to the bar-maid, "and one special Scotch."

Sam could 'ardly believe his ears, and he stood there 'oldin' his glass o' ginger-beer and watching Peter's teetotal uncle drink whiskey, and thought 'e must be dreaming.

"I dessay it seems very shocking to you," ses Mr. Goodman, putting down 'is glass and dryin' 'is lips on each other, "but I find it useful for these attacks."

"I—I s'pose the flavor's very nasty?" ses Sam, taking a sip at 'is ginger-beer.

"Not exactly wot you could call nasty," ses Mr. Goodman, "though I dessay it would seem so to you. I don't suppose you could swallow it."

"I don't s'pose I could," ses Sam, "but I've a good mind to 'ave a try. If it's good for one teetotaller I don't see why it should hurt another."

Mr. Goodman looked at 'im very hard, and then he ordered a whiskey and stood watching while Sam, arter pretending for a minnit to look at it as though 'e didn't know wot to do with it, took a sip and let it roll round 'is mouth.

"Well?" ses Mr. Goodman, looking at 'im anxious-like.

"It ain't so 'orrid as I 'ad fancied," ses Sam, lap-ping up the rest very gentle.

[Illustration: "'It aint so 'orrid as I 'ad fancied.' ses Sam."]

"'Ave you 'ad enough to do you all the good it ought to?"

Mr. Goodman said that it was no good 'arf doing a thing, and p'r'aps he 'ad better 'ave one more; and arter Sam 'ad paid for the next two they went out arm-in-arm.

"'Ow cheerful everybody looks!" ses Mr. Good-man, smiling.

"They're going to amuse theirselves, I expect," ses Sam— "music-'alls and such-like."

Mr. Goodman shook his 'ead at 'em.

"Music-'alls ain't so bad as some people try to make out," ses Sam.

"Look 'ere; I took some drink to see what the flavor was like; suppose you go to a music-'all to see wot that's like?"

"It seems on'y fair," ses Peter's uncle, considering.

"It is fair," ses Sam, and twenty minutes arterwards they was sitting in a music-'all drinking each other's 'ealths and listening to the songs— Mr. Goodman with a big cigar in 'is mouth and his 'at cocked over one eye, and Sam beating time to the music with 'is pipe.

"Ow do you like it?" he ses.

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Mr. Goodman didn't answer 'im because 'e was joining in the chorus with one side of 'is mouth and keeping 'is cigar alight with the other. He just nodded at 'im; but 'e looked so 'appy that Sam felt it was a pleasure to sit there and look at 'im.

"I wonder wot Peter and Ginger is doin'?" he ses, when the song was finished.

"I don't know," ses Mr. Goodman, "and, wot's more, I don't care. If I'd 'ad any idea that Peter was like wot he is I should never 'ave wrote to 'im. I can't think 'ow you can stand 'im."

"He ain't so bad," ses Sam, wondering whether he ought to tell 'im 'arf of wot Peter really was like.

"Bad!" ses Mr. Goodman. "I come up to London for a 'oliday—a change, mind you—and I thought Peter and me was going to 'ave a good time. Instead o' that, he goes about with a face as long as a fiddle. He don't drink, 'e don't go to places of amusement—innercent places of amusement—and 'is idea of enjoying life is to go walking about the streets and drinking cups o' tea."

"We must try and alter 'im," ses Sam, arter doing a bit o' thinking.

"Certainly not," ses Mr. Goodman, laying his 'and on Sam's knee. "Far be it from me to interfere with a feller-creature's ideas o' wot's right. Besides, he might get writing to 'is sister agin, and she might tell my wife."

"But Peter said she was dead," ses Sam, very puzzled.

"I married agin," ses Peter's uncle, in a whisper, 'cos people was telling 'im to keep quiet, "a tartar—a perfect tartar. She's in a 'orsepittle at present, else I shouldn't be 'ere. And I shouldn't ha' been able to come if I 'adn't found five pounds wot she'd hid in a match-box up the chimbley."

"But wot'll you do when she finds it out?" ses Sam, opening 'is eyes.

"I'm going to 'ave the house cleaned and the chimbleys swept to welcome her 'ome," ses Mr. Goodman, taking a sip o' whiskey. "It'll be a little surprise for her."

They stayed till it was over, and on the bus he gave Sam some strong peppermint lozenges wot 'e always carried about with 'im, and took some 'imself. He said 'e found 'em helpful.

"What are we going to tell Peter and Ginger?" ses Sam, as they got near the 'ouse.

“Tell ’em?” ses Mr. Goodman. “Tell ’em the truth. How we follered ’em when they got off the bus, and ’ave been looking for ’em ever since. I’m not going to ’ave my ’oliday spoilt by a teetotal nevvvy, I can tell you.”

He started on Peter, wot was sitting on his bed with Ginger waiting for them, the moment he got inside, and all Ginger and Peter could say didn’t make any difference.

“Mr. Small see you as plain as what I did,” he ses.

“Plainer,” ses Sam.

“But I tell you we come straight ’ome,” ses Ginger, “and we’ve been waiting for you ’ere ever since.”

Mr. Goodman shook his ’ead at ’im. “Say no more about it,” he ses, in a kind voice. “I dessay it’s rather tiresome for young men to go about with two old ones, and in future, if you and Peter keep together, me and my friend Mr. Small will do the same.”

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Sam shook 'ands with 'im, and though Peter tried his 'ardest to make 'im alter his mind it was no good. His uncle patted 'im on the shoulder, and said they'd try it for a few days, at any rate, and Ginger, wot thought it was a very good idea, backed 'im up. Everybody seemed pleased with the idea except Peter Russet, but arter Sam 'ad told 'im in private wot a high opinion 'is uncle 'ad got of 'im, and 'ow well off he was, 'e gave way.

They all enjoyed the next evening, and Sam and Mr. Goodman got on together like twin brothers. They went to a place of amusement every night, and the on'y unpleasantness that happened was when Peter's uncle knocked a chemist's shop up at a quarter-past twelve one night to buy a penn'orth o' peppermint lozenges.

They 'ad four of the 'appiest evenings together that Sam 'ad ever known; and Mr. Goodman would 'ave been just as 'appy too if it hadn't ha' been for the thoughts o' that five pounds. The more 'e thought of it the more unlikely it seemed that 'is wife would blame it on to the sweep, and one night he took the match-box out of 'is pocket and shook his 'ead over it till Sam felt quite sorry for 'im.

"Don't take up your troubles afore they come," he ses. "Orsepittles are dangerous places."

Mr. Goodman cheered up a bit at that, but he got miserable agin the next night because 'is money was getting low and he wanted another week in London.

"I've got seven shillings and fourpence and two stamps left," he ses. "Where it's all gone to I can't think."

"Don't you worry about that," ses Sam. "I've got a pound or two left yet."

"No, I ain't going to be a burden on you," ses Mr. Goodman, "but another week I must 'ave, so I must get the money somehow. Peter can't spend much, the way he goes on."

Sam gave a little cough.

"I'll get a pound or two out of 'im," ses Mr. Goodman.

Sam coughed agin. "Won't he think it rather funny?" he ses, arter a bit.

"Not if it's managed properly," ses Mr. Good-man, thinking 'ard. "I'll tell you 'ow we'll do it. To-morrow morning, while we are eating of our breakfast, you ask me to lend you a pound or two."

Sam, what 'ad just taken up 'is glass for a drink, put it down agin and stared at 'im.

"But I don't want no money," he ses; "and, besides, you 'aven't got any."

“You do as I tell you,” ses Mr. Goodman, “and when you’ve got it, you hand it over to me, see? Ask me to lend you five pounds.”

Sam thought as ’ow the whiskey ’ad got to Mr. Goodman’s ’ead at last. ’Owever, to pacify ’im he promised to do wot ’e was told, and next morning, when they was all at breakfast, he looks over and catches Mr. Goodman’s eye.

“I wonder if I might be so bold as to ask a favor of you?” he ses.

“Certainly,” ses Peter’s uncle, “and glad I shall be to oblige you. There is no man I’ve got a greater respect for.”

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"Thankee," ses Sam. "The fact is, I've run a bit short owing to paying a man some money I owed 'im. If you could lend me five pounds, I couldn't thank you enough."

Mr. Goodman put down 'is knife and fork and wrinkled up 'is forehead.

"I'm very sorry," he ses, feeling in 'is pockets; "do you want it to-day?"

"Yes; I should like it," ses Sam.

"It's most annoying," ses Mr. Goodman, "but I was so afraid o' pickpockets that I didn't bring much away with me. If you could wait till the day arter to-morrow, when my money is sent to me, you can 'ave ten if you like."

"You're very kind," ses Sam, "but that 'ud be too late for me. I must try and get it somewhere else." Peter and Ginger went on eating their breakfast, but every time Peter looked up he caught 'is uncle looking at 'im in such a surprised and disappointed sort o' way that 'e didn't like the look of it at all.

"I could just do it for a couple o' days, Sam," he ses at last, "but it'll leave me very short."

"That's right," ses his uncle, smiling. "My nevvvy, Peter Russet, will lend it to you, Mr. Small, of 'is own free will. He 'as offered afore he was asked, and that's the proper way to do it, in my opinion."

He reached acrost the table and shook 'ands with Peter, and said that generosity ran in their family, and something seemed to tell 'im as Peter wouldn't lose by it. Everybody seemed pleased with each other, and arter Ginger Dick and Peter 'ad gone out Mr. Goodman took the five pounds off of old Sam and stowed 'em away very careful in the match-box.

[Illustration: "He reached acrost the table and shook 'ands with Peter."]

"It's nice to 'ave money agin," he ses. "There's enough for a week's enjoyment here."

"Yes," ses Sam, slow-like; "but wot I want to know is, wot about the day arter to-morrow, when Peter expects 'is money?"

Mr. Goodman patted 'im on the shoulder. "Don't you worry about Peter's troubles," he ses. "I know exactly wot to do; it's all planned out. Now I'm going to 'ave a lay down for an hour—I didn't get much sleep last night—and if you'll call me at twelve o'clock we'll go somewhere. Knock loud."

He patted 'im on the shoulder agin, and Sam, arter fidgiting about a bit, went out. The last time he ever see Peter's uncle he was laying on the bed with 'is eyes shut, smiling in his sleep. And Peter Russet didn't see Sam for eighteen months.