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Peter of the Lane

L. M. Montgomery

Illustrated by T. Victor Hall

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Judge Raymond was taking his morning constitutional in the lane. It was a fine old lane, running just back of Elmcroft, under big chestnuts, and debouching into a sunny by-street below, whereon lived people whom to know was to be unknown. None of them ever ventured into the lane, for it was part of the Elmcroft estate, and everybody in Marsden knew that the judge did not like trespassers. He had never met anyone there in his morning walks, and he had come to look upon the lane as the one place where he was perfectly safe from all interruption; consequently he carried there his griefs and anxieties and walked them off or wrestled them down, going back to the world the same suave, courtly man of iron it thought it knew so well.

This particular morning the judge especially desired to be alone; for it was the 10th of June, and he had a bitter reason for hating the date. Therefore he was surprised and displeased on coming out from the chestnut shade into the sunny space at the end of the lane to find somebody sitting on the big gray boulder by the fence.

This somebody was a small boy, most immaculately arrayed in white trousers and stiffly starched white blouse. He had his hands in his pockets, and although his face was very sober and care visible on his brow, he evidently did not realize in the least what an offense he was committing in sitting thus unconcernedly on Judge Raymond's boulder. His hat was pushed back on his head and the face beneath it, rimmed about with yellow curls, was very pink and white and wholesome—a woman would have called it “kissable,” but, of course, such a thought never entered into Judge Raymond's head. The latter stopped, folded both hands over the top of his cane and looked frowningly into the lad's blue eyes.

“Who are you?” he said stiffly.

The scowling, bushy eyebrows, before which every other small boy in Marsden would have fled aghast disturbed the serenity of this self-possessed interloper not at all. He got up briskly, with a sigh of relief, and said clearly:

“I am Peter, and I am very glad to see you because I want to ask a favor of you. Will you please come and help me get my kitten out of the well? She fell in two hours ago, and Aunt Mary Ellen is away waiting on a sick lady.”

“Bless my soul, child,” grumbled the judge, “if your cat fell into the water two hours ago it must be drowned by this time.”

“Oh, no, she's not in the water,” explained Peter cheerfully. “She fell into the water, I expect, but she climbed out of it into a little hole between the stones; I can see her eyes and hear her crying. Will you please tell me if you will help me to get her out? Because if you can't I must look for someone else. Aunt Mary Ellen told me I

mustn't associate with anybody round here, but I thought it wouldn't be any harm to ask you—you look so respectable.”

Judge Raymond, even when much younger and nimbler than he was then, had not been in the habit of rescuing cats from wells, but now he asked briefly where the well was. “Come,” said Peter with equal brevity, extending a plump little paw. The judge took it and was led to a small gap in the fence palings. Peter measured the gap and the judge ruthlessly with his eye.

“You can't go through it. You'll have to climb over.”

The judge meekly climbed over. He found himself in the trim little yard of a small brown house all grown over with vines. In the middle of the yard was the well with an old-fashioned open hood, windlass and chain. To it Peter dragged the judge and peered over.

“She's all right yet,” he announced. “There is a ladder on the kitchen roof. Will you get it, please? and I'll hold it steady while you go down the well and bring her up.”

With an effort the judge shook off the mesmeric influence which had already made him take three steps toward the ladder.

“My dear Peter,” he said firmly, “I can't with my years and—ahem—weight go down a well on a ladder after a kitten. Instead, I'll go home and send my man Jenkins over. He will do it.”

Peter thrust his hands into his pocket, threw back his head and looked scrutinizingly at the judge.

“Is your man Jenkins respectable?” he demanded.

“Very much so,” assured the judge.

“Well, I'll take your word for it,” said Peter confidently. “It's not that I'm so particular myself, but Aunt Mary Ellen is. You may send Jenkins.”

Accordingly Jenkins was sent, so dizzy with amazement over such an unheard-of order from the judge that he was barely capable of obeying Peter's concise and pointed directions. Eventually the kitten was rescued, as the judge, who was posed unseen behind the chestnut-trees, saw. Upon Jenkins' return he condescended to question him.

“Do you know who those people are, Jenkins? I thought old Mr. Morrison lived there alone.”

“He used to, sir, but he died very suddenly a month ago, and I understand, sir, that his property went to a cousin of his. She only came last week, sir. The little chap is her nephew, and a fine, manly little fellow he is.”

“Was the—ahem—the kitten uninjured, Jenkins?”

"It hadn't lost more than one of its nine lives, sir. Very wet and muddy, sir. Peter made me carry it into the kitchen and lay it on the rug, because he said his aunt had told him on no account to dirty his clean clothes, and he always obeyed her when he could because there were often times when he couldn't."

The next morning Peter was sitting on the boulder again. The judge halted before him and smiled.



"You Can't Go Through it. You'll Have to Climb Over."

Peter sighed.

"I was lonesome," he said frankly. "I've nobody to talk to, and I thought maybe you'd let me talk with you for a spell."

"Certainly, certainly. Only I've grown so unaccustomed to conversing with boys that I'm afraid you'll have to do most of the talking."

"Oh, I'm well able to do that," said Peter confidently, getting up and falling into step with the judge. "Aunt Mary Ellen says I talk a great deal too much, and sometimes when I'm very bad she punishes me by forbidding me to say a word for one hour by the clock. You've no idea how long an hour like that can be. But the time seems very long anyhow in Marsden."

"Where did you live before you came here?" asked the judge.

"In Westville."

"I hope the kitten hasn't fallen into the well again, Peter."

"Oh, no; such a thing isn't likely to happen *every* morning," said Peter, "and Aunt Mary Ellen is going to have a pump put in. She says I'll be falling into the well myself the next thing if she don't. Aunt Mary Ellen is bringing me up, you know, because my parents are dead, and she takes a great deal of trouble with me. But I came out this morning for two reasons. One was that I wanted to thank you for helping me yesterday. I'm very much obliged to you, and if you ever want *me* to do anything for *you* you've only to mention it."

"Thank you; I will," said the judge.

"What was your other reason?"

The judge frowned. He had his own reasons for disliking the name of Westville; but Peter, striding blithely along with his hands in his pockets, did not see the frown, and perhaps would not have cared in the least if he had.

“Westville’s a dandy place. I had so many friends there—one very dear friend in particular. It’s a terrible thing to part with your friends, isn’t it? It hurts your feelings so much, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it hurts them so much that they sometimes never get over it,” said the judge gruffly. Perhaps he was gruff because he was so unaccustomed to talking about his feelings. Marsden people would have said he hadn’t any to talk about.

“Will you please tell me what your name is?” said Peter. “It’s not that I care myself what it is, because I’d like you if you hadn’t any name *at all*. But Aunt Mary Ellen does. She is very particular who I associate with, as I told you. I couldn’t tell her your name yesterday, and she didn’t much like the sound of Jenkins.”

“People call me Judge Raymond.”

Peter looked up with a radiant smile.

“Oh, I’m so glad. Raymond is a fav’rite name of mine. You see”—confidentially—“it’s the name of my promised wife.”

The judge gasped.

“Your—your—well, I understand that the rising generation is very precocious, but aren’t you *rather* young to be engaged?”

“Far too young,” agreed Peter promptly. “I’m only seven. But you see I couldn’t leave her in Westville without making sure of her, ’specially when Roger Mitchell was to go on living there after I left. So I asked her to marry me, and she said she would and promised she’d never play with Roger any more. She’ll keep her word, too, for she is that sort of a girl. So I’m quite easy in my mind. Of course, we don’t intend to be married till we’re grown up.”

“Come, come; that’s a relief anyhow. What is your fair lady’s name?”

“Averil Raymond.”

The judge gave an inarticulate exclamation and stopped short. His face grew purple and his eyebrows drew down in such a black scowl that his deep-set black eyes could hardly be seen. Peter looked up in astonishment.

“What is the matter?”

“Nothing—nothing,” said the judge with an effort and walked on.

“I wouldn’t look like that over nothing,” said Peter indignantly. “You gave me a fright. I thought you were sick. I expect I look that when I take stomach cramps. Well, I was telling you about Averil. I’m so glad I’ve found somebody I can talk to about her—somebody who is sym’thetic. Aunt Mary Ellen isn’t very sym’thetic. She

liked Averil, though—everybody likes Averil. But Aunt Mary Ellen laughs at a fellow when he talks about his girl. You won't laugh, will you?"

"No, I won't laugh," promised the judge; and to do him justice he didn't look in the least like laughing.

"They lived right next door to us in Westville—Averil and her mother. Her father was dead, but they had his picture hanging in the sitting-room, and Averil said her prayers to it every night. She said her mother thought she was saying them to God, but it was her father all the time, because she felt so much better acquainted



“Peter, is This You?” Demanded the Astonished Judge”

with him. He died when Averil was four, so she remembers him. She is six now. They were dreadfully poor—poorer even than Aunt Mary Ellen and me, and goodness knows we were poor enough then. But Aunt Mary Ellen said they came of good stock, so she let me associate with them. Aunt Mary Ellen was pretty thick with Averil's mother herself. Averil's mother gave music lessons and she always looked sad and tired. But Averil didn't look sad—no, sir. She was laughing all the time. I like a girl that laughs, don't you?"

"I suppose it is pleasanter," conceded the judge.

"Averil is the prettiest girl in Westville. She has long brown curls and big brown eyes and a muscle like a Sullivan. She knocked Roger Mitchell clean over once because he tried to kiss her. But she's a very ladylike girl for all that. I tell you I felt awful bad when I came away, and so did she. But, of course, we'll write. I can't write very well yet, and Averil can only print. I wrote her yesterday and I know I spelled half the words wrong. I didn't like to ask Aunt Mary Ellen how to spell them for fear she'd laugh, because some of them were very affectionate. Look here, will you help me with my spelling when I'm writing to Averil?"

"I will if you will come and walk with me now and then in the lane," said the judge.

"Oh, I was expecting to do that, anyway," said Peter comfortably. "I'll come as often as you like. I think you are a very int'resting person. Any time I'm not here and

you want me just come to the gap and whistle and I'll come if I hear you. You can whistle, I suppose?"

"I used to be able to," said the judge, who hadn't whistled since he was ten.

The judge and Peter continued to walk in the lane for over an hour, deep in conversation. Marsden people wouldn't have believed their eyes if they had seen it. Jenkins did see it and had to seek out the housekeeper to relieve his feelings.

"Yes, Mrs. Moody, as true as I stand here, the judge is walking out there with that little fellow from across the lane—him that's never looked at a child for years. What do you think of that?"

Mrs. Moody looked sourly at Jenkins, to whom she accorded very scant approval.

"I think the judge is capable of attending to his own business; and if it pleases him to take up with strangers after the way he used his own flesh and blood I don't think it is any concern of yours or mine, Mr. Jenkins."

"It's just two years yesterday since Master Cecil died," said the unabashed Jenkins. "D'ye suppose the judge will ever make up with the widow and the little girl?"

"No, he never will," said Mrs. Moody shortly. "He's as bitter as ever against her. An angel from heaven couldn't induce him to forgive her."

Every day through that summer the judge and Peter grew better friends. The judge never missed his morning walk now. Peter was generally on the boulder or playing in the yard of the brown house. Jenkins declared that the judge was infatuated.

They had long, absorbing conversations. Peter sought the judge's aid frequently in his epistolary struggles and the judge learned more loving words than he had ever known were in the dictionary.

"Do you think 'sweetheart' or 'darling' is the tenderer word?" Peter once wanted to know.

"I should use them turn about," advised the judge gravely.

"Averil has sent you a kiss," said Peter on another day. "I wrote her about you and what good friends we were and how you helped with the spelling, and that's why she sent it. If you will stoop down I'll give it to you."

For a moment the judge looked as if he meant to refuse; then he stooped down and Peter gave him a hearty smack.

"Shall I tell Averil you sent her a kiss back?" he questioned blithely.

"No," said the judge. He said it with such a black frown that Peter looked at him curiously.

“Do you know,” he said reflectively, “there are times when it almost seems to me that you don’t like Averil. I suppose it’s a ridic’lous idea, but it *does* seem so at times.”

“How can I either like or dislike her when I’ve never seen her?” said the judge coldly.

“Well, *that’s* what I say to myself when the idea comes to me,” agreed Peter. “Of course, it’s nonsense. Nobody could help liking Averil.”

“Do you like her better than anyone else in the world?” asked the judge. An older listener might have detected a wistful note in his voice.

“Course I do. Then Aunt Mary Ellen, and then you.”

“So I must be content with the third place,” said the judge bitterly. The judge did not like third place nor second place. He wanted to be first—he had always wanted it with anybody he loved. Peter divined that the old man was hurt by his answer. He slipped his hand into the judge’s.

“You know, I think an awful lot of you,” he said, looking up with his own winsome smile. “I believe I’d like you better than Aunt Mary Ellen if it wasn’t my duty to like her best. But you can see it is my duty because she’s bringing me up and she isn’t very well off, though not so poor as she was before Cousin Mr. Morrison died. It’s very good of her to take so much trouble with me, and I’m bound to like her second best. But I do wish she’d stick to the one way of punishing me when I’m bad. She thinks out so many different ways I never know what to expect.”



“There’s Something Very Important I Want to Say to You and I Guess There Isn’t Much Time”

“Are you bad very often?” queried the judge with a twinkle.

“Quite often,” said Peter candidly. “Aunt Mary Ellen says I’m awful stubborn. Aunt Mary Ellen is stubborn, too—but *she* calls it determined—so, of course, there’s bound to be trouble when we don’t have the same opinion. But I tell you Aunt Mary Ellen is a fine woman—a very fine woman.”

One morning it rained so hard that the judge could not walk in the lane. When it cleared up in the afternoon he sallied forth, but no Peter was to be seen. The judge walked up and down the lane for some time; the blinds were down in the brown house and there was no sign of life about it except Peter’s kitten basking contentedly on the platform of the new pump. Finally the judge whistled. He whistled several times without result, and was just turning away in disappointment when—something—crept reluctantly through the gap in the fence. The judge nearly whistled again in amazement. *What* was it? *Who* was it? It had Peter’s head and face certainly, but below head and face was a blue-checked gingham dress and girl’s pinafore.

“Peter, is this you?” demanded the astonished judge.

Peter, red as a beet, nodded miserably, tried to thrust his hands into his pockets and failed, because there were no pockets.

“What has happened?”

“Aunt Mary Ellen and I had a difference of opinion this morning,” explained Peter in anguish. “It was about that porridge. I hate porridge, but Aunt Mary Ellen says I’ve got to eat it or I’ll never amount to anything. She won’t give me anything else till I’ve finished a whole plate of porridge, and there’s always so much of it that then I’m not hungry for anything more. This morning I said firmly that I wouldn’t eat it because there were sausages, and I didn’t want to be filled so full with porridge that there wouldn’t be any room for sausages. Aunt Mary Ellen was very angry, and she punished me by dressing me in some girl’s clothes that belonged to a niece of hers that visited her last summer. It’s a brand new punishment and it’s the worst yet. Just think, if Averil knew it! Aunt Mary Ellen went away this afternoon, and when she was gone I hunted for my own clothes, but she’d locked them up. I was so ashamed that I thought I couldn’t come to you when you whistled; but then I thought it was my *duty* to come, because I told you I’d always come when I heard you whistle. So I’m here,” concluded Peter, hanging his head dejectedly like one disgraced forever.

The judge looked indignant. “Come right over to Elmcroft with me,” he said peremptorily.

Peter looked scandalized.

“Not like this,” he protested.

“Nobody will see you like that except my housekeeper, and she won’t see you like that long. It’s a shame. Come, I say. There are—there ought to be some—some boy’s clothes in my house somewhere. We’ll see what can be done.”

Peter would have gone anywhere with anyone in the hope of getting rid of the shameful feminine garments. Mrs. Moody was presently amazed at the tableau which met her eye.

“Mrs. Moody,” said the judge sternly, “take this *boy* and see if you can find suitable clothes for him.”

When Mrs. Moody brought Peter back the latter held his head erect once more, but the judge looked suddenly away from him with a peculiar expression on his grim face. An old memory, once sweet, now bitter, came to him of a boy who had worn that selfsame velvet suit and lace collar long ago. That boy had not looked like the yellow-haired Peter—he had been dark and black-eyed, like the judge himself.

“I feel lots better,” announced Peter, “but I’d like to know how you came to

have a suit of clothes that fit me. Did you ever have a little boy?"

"Yes—once."

"What became of him, then?" asked Peter, picking out a very comfortable chair and depositing himself in it. In his velvet and lace, with his fair curls and rosy face, he made a bright spot in the dim, stately room. He was as much at home there and fitted as harmoniously into his surroundings as if he had been on the old boulder in the lane. The judge noticed this and felt a certain satisfaction in it.

"He grew up and broke my heart," said the latter grimly.

"How did he break your heart?"

"Listen, I will tell you," said the judge, as if he were talking to a person of his own age. "I had one son. I idolized him and lavished everything on him. I never denied him a wish. I had great hopes—great ambitions for him. He repaid me with ingratitude and disobedience. He fell in love with a girl far beneath him—a wretched little music-teacher. He married her in defiance of my wishes—my commands. I told him never to darken my doors again. He did not—I never saw him again. He was killed in a railroad accident two years ago; but he died to me on the day he disobeyed me."

"You are worse than Aunt Mary Ellen, I do believe," said Peter tranquilly. "She makes me eat porridge when I don't like it, but I'm sure she wouldn't try to prevent me from marrying anybody I wanted if I was old enough. I think that you did very wrong. Did your son have any little boys?"

"No. He left a daughter, I believe. I don't know anything about her—at least, I mean—I've never seen her or her mother, and I never want to. I hate them both."

The judge thumped his cane savagely on the floor.

"I'm sorry for that little girl if you hate her, because she has missed a splendid grandfather," said Peter. "You *would* make a splendid grandfather, you know, if you had a little practice."

"How would you like to have me for your grandfather?" asked the judge.

"I think I'd like it very much, but it can't be. Grandfathers have to be born."

"They might be adopted, mightn't they?" queried the judge. "I wish you would adopt me as a grandfather. Wouldn't you like to come here and live? I would get you a pony and a St. Bernard and everything you wanted."

"I think I'd like it," Peter said cautiously, "but I don't know what Aunt Mary Ellen would say. Maybe she'd think with such a good aunt as her I didn't need a grandfather. But she says I'm a terrible responsibility, so perhaps she'll be glad to get clear of me."

"I'll have a talk with your aunt about it some of these days," said the judge,

looking at Peter with affectionate pride.

But the judge's plans were upset—not by Aunt Mary Ellen, but by Peter himself. The next day Peter sat on the boulder and looked disapprovingly at the judge.

“What is the matter?” inquired the latter anxiously. Peter's good opinion had come to be very precious to him.

“Matter enough.” Peter's eyes and voice were reproachful. “I think you might have told me that Averil was your granddaughter.”

“Who told you?” asked the judge angrily.

“Aunt Mary Ellen. She only found out lately. I don't think you've been fair at all. You let me talk about Averil and I let you help me with my letters. Do you suppose I'd have done that if I'd known you were hating her all the time?”

“I'm sorry,” said the judge humbly. “Can't you forgive me?”

“Yes, I can forgive you because I think so much of you. But I can never talk about Averil to you again and you needn't expect me to. And another thing—you needn't speak to Aunt Mary Ellen about that matter we were 'scussing. I can't adopt you for a grandfather because it wouldn't be fair to Averil. You ought to be *her* grandfather and it's my duty to think of her rights. Of course, if you feel like being grandfather to us *both*——”

“Never!” interrupted the judge, scowling blackly. “I'll never have anything to do with that woman or her child. Peter, you don't understand—you *can't* understand.”

“Well, it isn't a nice subject,” conceded Peter, “but I'll keep on feeling that way.”

“We'll see what difference a year or two will make,” the judge said to himself. But he did not have to wait so long. One September afternoon when the judge came in from a drive, Jenkins met him with a very sober face.

“There's trouble at the little house, sir. The boy has been badly hurt—he was run over by young Blair's automobile and he's been asking for you.”

Without a word the judge went down the lane to the little brown house. He met the doctor at the door.

“How is he?” whispered the judge. The doctor looked at him curiously. He had never seen Judge Raymond so moved before.

“There's no hope,” he said. “It's only a question of a very short time. I always knew that drunken Blair would wind up by killing somebody. But the boy is quite conscious and wants to see you.”

He ushered the judge into the spotless little bedroom. A tall, plain-faced woman with deep, kindly eyes was bending over the bed where the little fellow lay. The pink was all gone from Peter's face, but the big, bright eyes looked out undauntedly.

“My boy,” said the judge, his voice breaking in a sob. Peter smiled gallantly.

“I’m glad you’ve come,” he said faintly. “There’s something very important I want to say to you, and I guess there isn’t much time. I wanted to see you about Averil. Aunt Mary Ellen says it’s such a hard world for women. You see, Averil’s my promised wife and when I’m dead she’ll be my promised widow, and I feel that it’s my duty to provide for her. Won’t you be her grandfather, sir—just as much her grandfather as you’d have been mine?”

The thing he had never dreamed of saying came willingly—even eagerly—from the old man’s lips.

“Yes—yes—I’ll look after Averil—and her mother, too. They shall come and live with me.”

“And you’ll love her, won’t you?” persisted Peter, “because it wouldn’t—be much—use—to do things—for her—if you didn’t—love her.”

“I’ll give her the love I would have given you, Peter.”

“It’s a promise—isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is a promise,” said the judge. And whatever might have been said of Judge Raymond, his worst enemy could not have said that he ever broke a promise.

“I’m so glad. It’s a great—weight—off my mind. Don’t cry—dear Aunt Mary Ellen. You’ve been—very good to me—and I’m sorry—I was ever naughty—about the porridge. Please be good—to my kitten—and tell Averil—tell Averil——”

But the little knight’s message to his lady went with him into the shadow.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

Some photographs have been enhanced to be more legible.

[The end of *Peter of the Lane* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]