Mr. Pete & Co.

by

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MR. PETE & CO.

By the Same Author

THE BUFFER

MRS. WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH.

MISS MINK'S SOLDIER & OTHER STORIES

CALVARY ALLEY

CAPTAIN JUNE

LOVEY MARY

MR. OPP

SANDY

QUIN

A ROMANCE OF BILLY-GOAT HILL

THE HONORABLE PERCIVAL

And with Cale Young Rice

WINNERS AND LOSERS

TURN ABOUT TALES

TO

CALE YOUNG RICE

BUT FOR WHOSE SUSTAINING HAND

MR. PETE WOULD NEVER HAVE

WANDERED THROUGH THESE

PAGES

MR. PETE & CO.

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CHAPTER ONE

AS THE south-bound train rounded a sharp turn, Mr. Pete, crouching on the floor behind the curtain of his berth, felt some one in the aisle lurch violently against him, and heard an irate voice inquiring what the devil he was doing down there, anyhow.

"Sorry, sir," said Mr. Pete, emerging contritely. He could not tell the glowering person above him that he had been saying his prayers, so he stood on one leg, like a disheveled stork, and rubbed his ankle, while he continued to apologize.

When his toilet was finished he collected his possessions and deposited them neatly on the opposite seat. His chief concern seemed to be to take up as little room, give as little trouble, and attract as little attention as possible, an ambition destined to be thwarted by the grotesqueness of his person and the strangeness of his attire.

Mr. Pete looked as if Nature had spoiled him in the making and cast him aside as a second. He was a slight man of about forty-five, with sloping shoulders, and knees a trifle bent. His head began rather nobly at the

temples, but dwindled down to a pointed chin that was apt to quiver under emotional stress. Across his brow hung a straight bang of gray hair under which one eye was hidden by a permanently drooped lid, and the other regarded the world with an expression of childlike faith, inspired more by hope than by experience.

From his costume and baggage it was evident that he had traveled far. His wrinkled suit of Japanese pongee, his shoes of British bluntness, his white cork helmet perched on top of a bulging Japanese *kori,* indicated that he might have come from anywhere, just as he might be going anywhere.

But such was not the case. Marmaduke Petree, or Mr. Pete as he had come to be known by his acquaintances, was conscious in his every fiber that after being buffeted by waves of misfortune and carried hither and yon by the currents of chance, he was at last nearing the harbor of home.

His absence had not been voluntary. Fifteen years before, he had been banished with a small allowance and instructions not to return until he was summoned. His crime consisted of a drug habit contracted in childhood, when he was fed on laudanum for sinus trouble. At maturity the disease and the habit had become chronic; he was pronounced a disgrace to the family and requested to remove himself as far as possible from its path of progress.

Not having any objective, Mr. Pete drifted first to San Francisco, where he lay ill for many months; then

to Hawaii, where he picked up small jobs wherever he could find them; later to Japan, where for two years of the World War he was an orderly in the United States Naval Hospital. After that he collected and sold curios, in China, in India, and once shipped as under steward on a freighter plying along the coast of Burma.

It had all been like a long restless dream until a month ago, in Port Saïd, when a letter had come from his half-brother, Ed Petree, saying that their father was dead and that he was free to return and claim his inheritance. From that time until the present Mr. Pete's one good eye had never shifted from one point on the horizon.

It was not the inheritance that drew him, in spite of the fact that it was his first one. His mother had died at his birth, and all she had left him was an inferiority complex, a delicate constitution, and some blue if impoverished blood. What Mr. Pete was aching for was home and kindred. During all those years of absence he had never ceased to be homesick for a place that had never been home to him, for a family tie he had never known.

As he gazed through the car window, eager for his first glimpse of Kentucky, every root of his being reached out for its native soil. He wondered if Ed had changed much; if Ed's wife Clara would be kinder to him than she used to be; if the children, Benny and the little Irene whom he had never known, would be glad to see him. It would be strange, he thought, without

Pa. An image of Pa, whisky glass in hand, thundering invectives against him for his weakness, flashed before him but was quickly banished.

Poor Pa! Mr. Pete wished he could have known about the intensely personal religious experience that had changed his son's life. But that son had never had the courage to tell him. Pa would never have understood about Captain Bean and the Salvation Army. He was a hard-shell Baptist and he took his religion like his liquor, straight.

Mr. Pete's thoughts traveled back to those early days in San Francisco when the zealous Captain had routed him out of an opium den into a hospital, where an operation on his head had left him with a drooping eyelid and comparative relief from the pain that demanded narcotics.

He thought of the death that had overtaken the Captain in the midst of his kindly ministrations, and how with his last breath he had promised to stand by his convert, and to come back whenever summoned to lend assistance in hours of weakness. And he had kept his promise. Many a time Mr. Pete had sent an S.O.S. call into Infinity, and instantly he would feel a pair of fanatical, imperious eyes fixed upon him, a strong, sustaining hand grip him, and a voice vibrant with courage ringing in his ears:

"We'll fight until we die!
We'll fight until we die!
The battle now is raging,
But the victory is nigh!"

The victory had been achieved, but the memory of all that led up to it was bitter enough, and Mr. Pete was brought back to the present only when he saw below him the yellow waters of the Ohio, and beyond, under the clarity of early morning, the bluffs of the Kentucky shore.

With eager interest he recognized each landmark— Towhead Island, the fleet of shanty-boats in the Chute, and above them on the river bank the familiar outlines of the old Petree house which his grandfather had built and where he had spent the only happy years of his childhood.

His heart pounded under his pongee coat as the train slowed into the station and he got himself, with his luggage, out on the platform and looked eagerly about for a familiar face. Of course, he told himself, it was early for any one to meet him, but after an absence of fifteen years— Could those children waving their hands be Benny and Irene? But no, he had forgotten how grown-up they would be by now.

Seeing no one he knew, he deposited his big straw suitcase on the platform and made his way back to the baggage-car, where the welcome he had missed from his family was made up for by a big copper-colored pup that greeted him with transports of joy. In answer to the baggageman's inquiry as to what kind of a cur she was anyhow, he answered proudly that she was a chow, a thoroughbred Manchu lady, and that she had traveled half-way around the world. Leading her on a leash, with his suitcase bumping against his legs, he

made his way out of the station to a waiting street-car, and with considerable difficulty got himself and his impedimenta on the platform, when he was told that he could not remain unless he had a permit for the dog.

"I guess we'll have to walk," he said to Mimi. "It's not so far."

But it was farther than he thought, and he was hot and exhausted by the time he reached his brother's house in what he remembered as Gorman's Lane, but which a lamp-post now informed him was Oakwood Crescent. Ed, in one of his infrequent letters, had mentioned "doing over the place," but the doing was so complete that Mr. Pete had difficulty in recognizing it. The plain two-story brick house had sprouted a bay-window and an ornate iron piazza. At the rear was a garage, and in the front yard a bird-bath, a sun-dial, a huge silver reflecting ball, and two white china rabbits that stood in such lifelike pose that the chow immediately became unmanageable.

"Easy there, Mimi! easy!" implored Mr. Pete, trying to extricate his left leg from the leash. "You got to behave when I introduce you to my folks. Stop that barking! Stop it this minute!"

But Mimi was not to be restrained. The white rabbits had gone to her head and she went at theirs. In the next moment the Petrees' tidy lawn was the scene of a riot, in which Mimi and Mr. Pete took an active part, and the suitcase and the white rabbits a passive, while the leash firmly attached at both ends was the tie that bound.

In the midst of the hubbub a pajama-clad figure appeared at an upper window and surveyed the scene with dismay. The entire contents of the straw receptacle were strewn over the lawn, the mangled remains of two china rabbits lay on the pavement, and a small man and a dog were indulging in a heroic tug of war one at each end of a rope.

"Get him onto the pavement!" shouted the man at the window. "Don't let him tear up our lawn like that!"

"She'll be all right in a minute!" shouted Mr. Pete, trying to quiet the now infuriated animal. "She's just hungry and excited like. How are you, Ed? I certainly am glad to see you!"

"Get that dog to the garage, and tell the darky to lock it up," Ed answered, too perturbed for amenities. "I don't want it around when the children come down."

"Why, she wouldn't hurt them for anything," Mr. Pete assured him. "But I'll take her round back and lock her up, then come back for my things."

Five minutes later, when he had repaired the damage as best he could, he sat on the front porch nursing his refilled suitcase and waited for his brother to get dressed. He was not only greatly chagrined at what had happened, but hot and disheveled, and he wished very much that he could get to a bathroom to tidy up a bit.

As he sat there, a handsome brown-eyed boy of about sixteen opened the front door and looked at him with suspicion.

"Why didn't you go to the rear?" he demanded. "Mother doesn't allow peddlers at the front door."

"Are . . . are you Benny?" stammered Mr. Pete, his chin shaking. "You don't know me, do you, son?"

"Never laid eyes on you," said the youth.

"Why, I'm your Uncle Marmaduke, who used to make you paper boats and tell you stories, when you were little."

Ben took this dubiously. "Do they know you are here?" he asked.

"Well, your pa does. He'll be down in a minute. But if you could take me somewhere and let me wash up a bit—"

Ben hesitated, then he led the way out to the kitchen sink, where Mr. Pete made what toilet he could with a piece of lye soap and a paper towel.

"Is that a tattoo on your arm?" asked Ben, showing his first sign of interest.

Mr. Pete hastily pulled down his sleeve. "Yes, a small one," he admitted, somewhat ashamed of the skull and crossbones that adorned his skinny forearm.

"Who is that man?" said a homely small girl, appearing in the doorway and viewing with disfavor his soapy countenance.

"He's your uncle," announced Ben, with ill-concealed glee.

"Whose uncle?" demanded the girl, indignantly.

"He's Uncle Marmaduke; you know, the one that's been out in Japan. The one that . . . you know."

"Does Mother know he's here?" asked the girl, and for the second time Clara's approaching shadow fell across Mr. Pete's spirit.

But it was quickly banished by his happiness in seeing Ed's children. He had almost made friends of them by the time they entered the dining-room where Ed Petree was already looking at the morning paper.

"Well, Pete, how are you?" he said with forced heartiness. "I see you still wear your hair banged. Except for your eye, though, you don't look much different."

Mr. Pete's free hand instinctively covered the afflicted member; but his sensitive lips continued to smile. It was not the smile of one who found the world amusing but rather of one who felt friendly toward it and sought in some dumb way to propitiate it.

"I guess I look kinder mussed up," he said apologetically. "But I only landed in New York on Tuesday and I took the first train for home."

"You must have been away ten or eleven years."

"Fifteen," corrected Mr. Pete; "fifteen the seventeenth day of last January."

"Well, here comes the wife," said Ed. "I guess we can have some food now."

A voluminous figure in a flowered negligée came heavily down the stairs and paused at sight of the visitor.

"Howdy, Clara," said Mr. Pete, rising nervously and coming forward. "Why, you are prettier and plumper than when I went away!"

Clara stiffened visibly, if anything so hopelessly gelatinous can be said to stiffen.

"Why didn't you telegraph us you were coming?"

she asked, extending three fingers to her brother-in-law.

"Well, I didn't think it was of enough importance. I wrote Ed from London that I'd get here to-day."

"You certainly made enough commotion when you did arrive. What on earth was the matter?"

In order to postpone the hour of reckoning, Ed cut short Mr. Pete's apologies and demanded breakfast.

The meal was difficult in spite of the host's efforts to make up in cordiality for the coldness of the hostess. Ben and Irene indulged in sly looks and giggles, and Mimi, in the garage, was still telling the world she could lick her weight in china rabbits any time.

"Whose dog is that?" asked Clara.

"She's mine," said Mr. Pete, proudly. "I brought her all the way from Soochow, Clara."

"Well, I wish you had left her there," said Clara, peevishly. "I don't allow dogs around here, on account of my front yard."

Ed Petree, evidently anxious to get his brother off the firing-line, took him into the parlor and began at once to explain about their father's will.

"There's no hurry about that, Ed," said Mr. Pete, lighting his pipe and settling himself for a good talk. "I want to know first how you all are, and how everything's going with you. You certainly got a lovely pair of youngsters! And everything's so nice and fine. You just can't think how glad I am to be home again!"

"I should think you would be, after bumming around all these years," said Ed; then, glancing back to see that