

Peter Progresses

Peter was tired of life. For two months of miserable days and of still more miserable nights, he had known no happiness. If he could have stopped thinking about the past, if he could have stopped longing for the one thing in life which he knew should never be his, he might have had peace; but Peter was not likely to do either. When once Peter had given his love, he could not recall it. It mattered nothing to him that the girl whom he loved had shown, conclusively enough, that she cared very little for him. Peter's love was too deep to die a sudden death. Instead of forgetting her, and finding his happiness through some other means, Peter made himself wretched for forever dwelling upon the joys which had been his once upon a time. He had been happy once; he never expected to be happy again.

Peter was wrong, of course. In the first place, he should never have loved so deeply. There are limits in love, just as there are limits in everything else. In the second place, although it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, nevertheless, it is the part of wisdom, having lost, to bear your loss with some sort of equanimity. As a matter of fact, Peter himself thought that he bore up very well under his particular loss.

"You don't understand me," he was saying to his friend, Jerry, as they plodded through the slush. "It isn't the girl who makes me the way I am. It isn't that at all. It's just that I'm beginning to wake up. You'll wake up, too, some time."

Jerry had his own opinion on that, but he did not care to start an argument on Christmas Eve.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose I will wake up some time. But when I do wake up, I'm not going to go around acting

like a morgue. You say that there's nothing good in the world. Remember you're only young yet. You had better wait until you see the world before you judge it."

"I've seen enough of it. I don't like it. There's nothing much good in it, anyway."

"Not a thing!" Jerry agreed. He was beginning to lose his temper. Let's drop the whole subject. Let's talk about women."

"Let's", said Peter.

"No, I don't think that we'd better," objected Jerry, who knew pretty well what was coming.

"That's right," said Peter. "They aren't fit to talk about."

Jerry lost his temper.

"Shut up!" he roared. "You make me sick?"

"Thanks!"

Then they both shut up.

Jerry was too good a friend to Peter to be made sick by anything that Peter might say; but there were times, it must be admitted, when Peter's cynicism taxed Jerry's patience. Jerry knew that the cause for Peter's altered outlook on life was the girl whom Peter had loved. If Peter himself had been willing to admit this, Jerry might have been able to help him; but Peter was stubborn. Jerry had almost given up hope. Peter was so absolutely happy in his misery that Jerry felt that the best thing to do was to let him go on enjoying it.

They walked several blocks in silence. Finally Jerry spoke.

"Where are you going to buy those Christmas seals?"

"I don't know. Where's a good place?"

"Any stationery store will have them. I'll tell you what we'll do. You go to the stationery store, and get your seals. I've got to get some candy for my mother. I'll go up-town and get my candy. We'll meet each other in front of the library, after we're through."

"That's good enough for me," Peter agreed. "It won't take me long. About half an hour, I guess."

Jerry went up-town to get his candy. Peter continued on his way. He finally entered a small book-store which advertised Christmas seals for sale.

He had bought his seals, and was just about to leave the place when he saw her. In a minute, Peter's whole equanimity, or cynicism, or whatever you may wish to call it, was gone. He knew very well that he had loved her; that he loved her more, in fact, than ever before. Her back was turned to him, but he knew her. Peter could have picked her out from a million. She was buying books, or intending to buy them, at the other end of the store.

Peter watched her for a short while. She was very wonderful to him, more wonderful than anything else in life. His whole being yearned to speak to her, to beg her pardon, to ask her to come for a short walk, to talk about Christmas and gifts and everything else. It would be a glorious thing, thought Peter, if they could make up. And then—Peter did the most courageous thing in his whole career. Forgetting his pride, remembering only his great love for her, he walked up to her and tipped his hat.

She said nothing, but her look was enough for Peter. He flushed, and bit his lip. Mumbling a few words of apology, he beat a hasty retreat. He cursed himself over and over for ever having approached her, for ever having given her the opportunity to snub him, to laugh at him.

"Damn!" he said to himself.

And then, Peter made his discovery.

He discovered suddenly that he was really happy. For a few minutes he could not understand his happiness. It was strange that he should be happy; very strange, after going through that terrible ordeal. It was strange. Then it came upon Peter like a flash; he was no longer in love.

Until to-night, Peter had never known exactly how little

or how much the girl whom he loved had cared for him. He knew that she cared very little. That made no difference to Peter. So long as she did not hate him, he was perfectly content to continue loving her. Peter's love was very unselfish. So long as she did not hate him, all was well. She meant so much to Peter, that he would have loved her even at risk of his soul. So long, then, as she did not hate him, Peter would go on loving her.

He had found out to-night that she hated him. It was not wholly instinct which gave him this information. Peter was not blind. He knew very little about hate, since he was much more interested in love; but Peter knew enough about hate to be able pretty confidently to judge when he was hated. He knew that the girl to whom he had attempted to speak to-night, hated him. Right away, Peter's love perished.

When Jerry met him, in front of the library, about twenty minutes later, he could not understand this new Peter.

"Man alive!" he exclaimed. "What's got into you? You're all changed. What happened?"

"Nothing," Peter lied. "Only I guess that there's more good in the world than I thought. It's a great night, isn't it?"

"It is *not*!" said Jerry. "It's the meanest Christmas Eve ever. Look at the slush. I bet it will be raining before to-morrow."

"You're a pessimist," Peter charged.

"A pessimist?" questioned Jerry. "My heavens, man, what's come over you?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Peter lied again. "I'm happy, that's all."

Jerry thought a while.

"Oh!" he said, at length. "I know now. You've made up."

"Made up?" repeated Peter. "Never!"

"Well, I give up," was all that Jerry could say, "I'm glad, though, that you've changed. It's about time."

"Changed?" Peter asked. "I'm not changed. I've

always been happy."

"Oh!"

"There's no use in being unhappy. This world's a good place, after all."

Jerry was too happy in Peter's happiness to say anything sarcastic. Peter was a queer person, anyway.

"I guess we'd better go to bed," he suggested. "Tomorrow's Christmas."

"That's so," said Peter. "I'll meet you to-morrow, after church."

And then they parted.

Peter was still happy, when he entered his house. He was still happy, when he undressed for bed. And he was still happy, when, after saying his prayers, he prepared to go to sleep. For the first night in two months, he was to get some sleep. This was a great Christmas Eve. For the first night in two months, he was to know what rest meant.

The odd thing about it was, that he couldn't go to sleep. He was so happy, at the first, that his happiness kept him awake. Then when he had calmed down a bit, he began to think. And when Peter began to think he never got to sleep. For a long while he lay there, tossing about, thinking, thinking, thinking. Suddenly he heard the bells outside ring midnight. For the second time that night, he made a discovery. It was a terrible discovery to make. For a few minutes, Peter did not dare to face it. It was connected with the girl, of course. That accounted for Peter's bitterness. It was a queer, queer world.

Peter lay there, praying for tears. He was heart-broken. He still loved her.