

ME - AND PETER

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Me - and Peter by Robert Watson

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ROBERT WATSON

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BY
ROBERT WATSON

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"MY BRAVE AND GALLANT GENTLEMAN"
"GORDON OF THE LOST LAGOON"
"STRONGER THAN HIS SEA"
ETC., ETC.

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FOREWORD

THE unnamed "Me" in this unusual memoir is one whom I knew even better than I knew Peter. After many years of separation, during which I had almost forgotten of his existence he came to me in my little cabin as I idled a few glorious summer months by the sea, in an almost unknown inlet of the Gulf of Georgia, in the Far West.

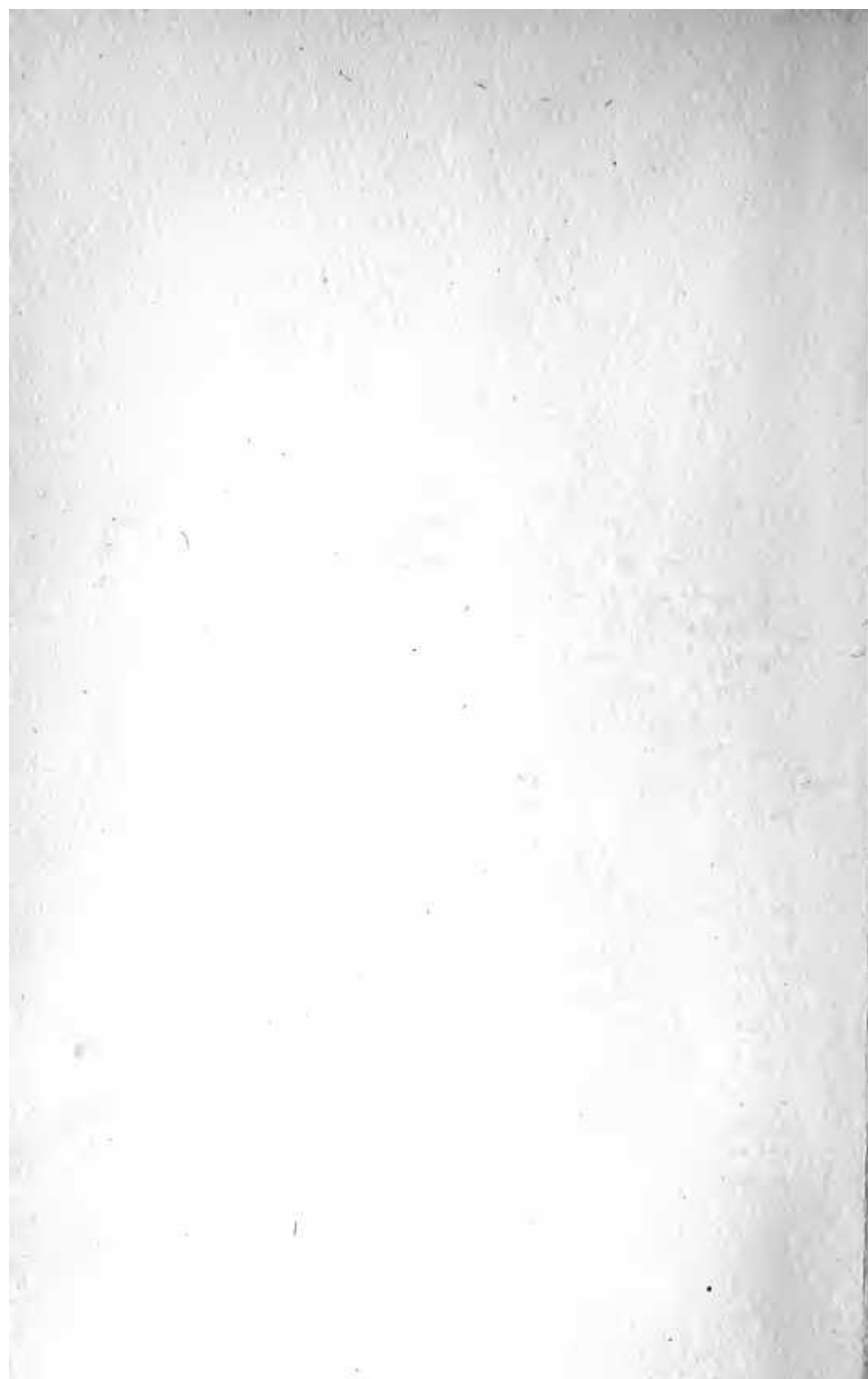
At the end of a long conversation on *the days of auld lang syne*, he rose and placed a manuscript in my hand.

"You remember Peter," he said, "and you learned to love him. But, with the days of our boyhood, Peter is gone. Read this over at your leisure, and, afterwards, do what you will with it."

I read it, and read it again. I have smiled, I have laughed, and I have wept; not so much at what I found in it, as at the recollections it brought back to me: what it made me remember of the things I had long, long given up thinking of—some pleasant, a few sad, but all mellowed by the passing years.

Maybe you, too, will remember Peter—sometimes real, sometimes the spirit of him only—who comes into all our lives and leaves us the better for having been with us.

ROBERT WATSON.



ME—AND PETER

CHAPTER ONE

I

AN odour or a perfume has always had the effect of rousing in me somnolent memories.

The pungent smell of cheap soap-suds never fails to visualise in my mind a little figure standing up to the knees in a bath tub which rested on a rag mat before the kitchen fire, a busy hand grasping an all too wet sponge and, above it, a pale, tender face with dark brown, loving eyes, surmounted by an abundance of glossy, jet black hair.

There was always an aftermath to that nightly tubbing, an aftermath which I dreaded always, fearing it would surely cut me off from life before I had got properly started.

The trust and confidence which I reposed in my mother never seemed to be quite sufficient to dispel the terrors of the smothering feeling which I experienced when she drew my little, tight-fitting, woollen semet over my head and I had to work my arms through the sleeves. In that brief moment, which seemed an eternity, I used to go through all the horrors of being strangled, smothered, and buried alive. What a relief it was when the struggle was over and my head emerged safely through the aperture, conveying, as it did, the

comforting assurance that I had won a respite from death for another twenty-four hours!

II

I was the last offspring of a large family. Some of my sisters and one brother had died before I was born, leaving ten of us, besides my father and mother, in what must have been a rather overcrowded home in the heart of the great seaport city of Glasgow.

My only remaining brother, who apparently had merely been waiting for a reasonable excuse, got married shortly after I was born and so passed out of my life for many years.

With the discovery of my ability to use my limbs, came to me the awful horror of inaction, which I have never yet been able to overcome. To sit idle was a penance, and my continual cry, "What shall I do next? What shall I do next?" must have taxed my mother's patience greatly, as it surely did her ingenuity in finding employment for me suitable to my juvenile tastes.

As she busied herself about her work, she would find me a bag of old buttons to sort out on the kitchen table, showing me how to arrange them according to their respective kinds; trouser buttons, shirt buttons, coat buttons, glove buttons and many other kinds; and how to string them together for future use.

Another favourite pastime which she contrived for me was the emptying out of the sawdust vitals of her pin cushion and the picking out of the needles and pins which had trespassed therein. So often did I have those tasks to do that I strongly suspect now that my mother jumbled the button-bag and pushed a few pins and needles into the cushion's inwards every night after she

put me to bed, all in anticipation of my entertainment on the morrow.

The first real serious event in my life took place about this time. I was the unfortunate party to an accident which brought down Nemesis, in the shape of the hand of an angry father, upon a sensitive part of me, which has left in me still a grudge against all fathers in general and one in particular.

Clad only in a little short shirt, I was executing a military route march through the house, with a broom held high, business end in the air, unheeding of the repeated warnings that my belligerence would end in disaster, as belligerence always does.

My father was an ardent bird fancier, and brass-wired, glass-fronted cages were none too good for his feathered songsters. One of these cages suddenly rushed out from nowhere and came violently in contact with my broom—and down came cage, canary and all. The crash of broken glass brought my father in at a run from his workshop. He picked up the little, fluffy, yellow, dead thing from out the broken glass and twisted wires and, with his temper at boiling point, he thrashed me until I thought I should surely be as dead as the canary.

It was a dreadful experience for one so young, but through a sea of tears and a tumult of howls I spluttered back to life's shore and was able to take my next meal as heartily as if I had never been anywhere near the gates of Eternity.

I was learning fast; more ways than one.

The development of singing powers, or maybe some higher motive, prompted my elder sisters—all of whom were Sunday school teachers—to take me to church with them on Sunday afternoons, with the result that I learned to sing "Joy Bells Ringing, Children Singing" as lustily as any coal pedlar long before I could