

LUCAS MALET



# LITTLE PETER

MUSAICUM CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

**Lucas Malet**

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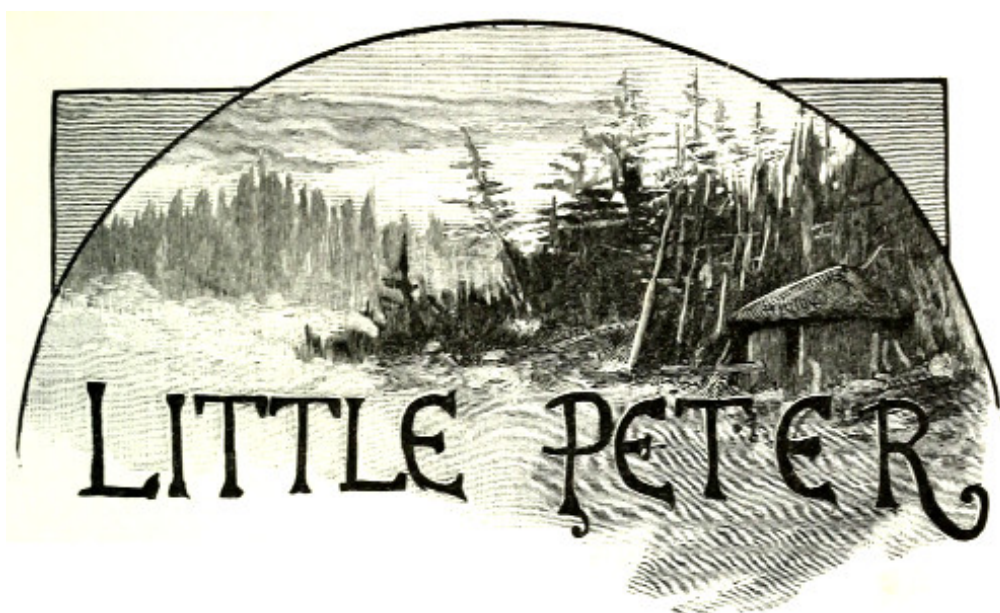
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'Remember my ears are so quick I can hear the grass grow'









LITTLE PETER.

# **Chapter I.**

## **Which Deals With the Opinions of a Cat, and the Sorrows of a Charcoal Burner**

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The pine forest is a wonderful place. The pine-trees stand in ranks like the soldiers of some vast army, side by side, mile after mile, in companies and regiments and battalions, all clothed in a sober uniform of green and grey. But they are unlike soldiers in this, that they are of all ages and sizes; some so small that the rabbits easily jump over them in their play, and some so tall and stately that the fall of them is like the falling of a high tower. And the pine-trees are put to many different uses. They are made into masts for the gallant ships that sail out and away to distant ports across the great ocean. Others are sawn into planks, and used for the building of sheds; for the rafters and flooring, and clapboards and woodwork of our houses; for railway-sleepers, and scaffoldings, and hoardings. Others are polished and fashioned into articles of furniture. Turpentine comes from them, which the artist uses with his colours, and the doctor in his medicines; which is used, too, in the cleaning of stuffs and in a hundred different ways. While the pine-cones, and broken branches and waste wood, make bright crackling fires by which to warm ourselves on a winter's day.

But there is something more than just this I should like you to think about in connection with the pine forest; for it, like everything else that is fair and noble in nature, has a strange and precious secret of its own.



You may learn the many uses of the trees in your school books, when men have cut them down or grubbed them up, or poked holes in their poor sides to let the turpentine run out. But you can only learn the secret of the forest itself by listening humbly and reverently for it to speak to you. For Nature is a very great lady, grander and more magnificent than all the queens who have lived in sumptuous palaces and reigned over famous kingdoms since the world began; and though she will be very kind and gracious to children who come and ask her questions modestly and prettily, and will show them the most lovely sights and tell them the most delicious fairy tales that ever were seen or heard, she makes very short work with conceited and impudent persons. She covers their eyes and stops their ears, so that they can never see her wonderful treasures or hear her charming stories, but live, all their lives long, shut up in the dark fusty cupboard of their own ignorance, and stupid self-love, and self-satisfaction, thinking they know all about everything as well as if they had made it themselves, when they do not really know anything at all. And because you and I dislike fusty cupboards, and because we want to know anything and everything that Nature is condescending enough to teach us, we will listen, to begin with, to what the pine forest has to tell.

When the rough winds are up and at play, and the pine-trees shout and sing together in a mighty chorus, while the hoarse voice of them is like the roar of the sea upon a rocky coast, then you may learn the secret of the forest. It sings first of the winged seed; and then of the birth of the tiny tree; of sunrise and sunset, and the tranquil warmth of

noon-day, and of the soft, refreshing rain, and the kindly, nourishing earth, and of the white moonlight, and pale, moist garments of the mist, all helping the tree to grow up tall and straight, to strike root deep and spread wide its green branches. It sings, too, of the biting frost, and the still, dumb snow, and the hurrying storm, all trying and testing the tree, to prove if it can stand firm and show a brave face in time of danger and trouble. Then it sings of the happy spring-time, when the forest is girdled about with a band of flowers; while the birds build and call to each other among the high branches; and the squirrel helps his wife to make her snug nest for the little, brown squirrel-babies that are to be; and the dormice wake up from their long winter sleep, and sit in the sunshine and comb their whiskers with their dainty, little paws. And then the forest sings of man—how he comes with axe and saw, and hammer and iron wedges, and lays low the tallest of its children, and binds them with ropes and chains, and hauls them away to be his bond-servants and slaves. And, last of all, it sings slowly and very gently of old age and decay and death; of the seed that falls on hard, dry places and never springs up; of the tree that is broken by the tempest or scathed by the lightning flash, and stands bare and barren and unsightly; sings how, in the end, all things shrink and crumble, and how the dust of them returns and is mingled with the fruitful soil from which at first they came.

This is the song of the pine forest, and from it you may learn this lesson: that the life of the tree and of beast and bird are subject to the same three great laws as the life of man—the law of growth, of obedience, and of self-sacrifice.

And perhaps, when you are older, if you take care to avoid that spirit of conceit and impudence which, as we have already said, gets people into such trouble with Nature, you may come to see that these three laws are after all but one, bound for ever together by the golden cord of love.

Once upon a time, just on the edge of the pine forest, there lived a little boy. He lived in a big, brown, wooden house, with overhanging eaves and a very deep roof to it, which swept down from the high middle gable like the wings of a hen covering her chickens. The wood-sheds, and hay-barn, and the stable where the brown-eyed, sweet-breathed cows lay at night, and the clean, cool dairy, and the cheese-room with its heavy presses were all under this same wide sheltering roof. Before the house a meadow of rich grass stretched down to a stream, that hurried along over rocky limestone ledges, or slipped away over flat sandy places where you might see the little fishes playing at hide-and-seek or puss in the corner among the bright pebbles at the bottom. While on the shallow, marshy puddles by the stream side, where the forget-me-not and brook-lime and rushes grow, the water-spiders would dance quadrilles and jigs and reels all day long in the sunshine, and the frogs would croak by hundreds in the still spring evenings, when the sunset was red behind the pine-trees to the west. And in this pleasant place little Peter lived, as I say, once upon a time, with his father and mother, and his two brothers, and Eliza the servant-maid, and Gustavus the cowherd.

He was the youngest of the children by a number of years, and was such a small fellow that Susan Lepage, his mother, could make him quite a smart blouse and pair of

trousers out of Antony's cast-off garments, even when all the patches and thin places had been cut out. He had a black, curly head, and very round eyes—for many things surprised him, and surprise makes the eyes grow round as everybody knows—and a dear, little, red mouth, that was sweet to kiss, and nice, fat cheeks, which began to look rather cold and blue, by the way, as he stood on the threshold one evening about Christmas time, with Cincinnatus, the old, tabby tom-cat, under his arm. He was waiting for his brother Antony to come home from the neighbouring market-town of Nullepart. It was growing dusk, yet the sky was very clear. The sound of the wind in the pine branches and of the chattering stream was strange in the frosty evening air; so that little Peter felt rather creepy, as the saying is, and held on very tight to Cincinnatus for fear of—he didn't quite know what.

'Come in, little man, come in,' cried his mother, as she moved to and fro in the ruddy firelight, helping Eliza to get ready the supper. 'You will be frozen standing there outside; and we shall be frozen, too, sitting here with the door open. Antony will get home none the quicker for your watching. That which is looked for hardest, they say, comes last.'

But Peter only hugged Cincinnatus a little closer—thereby making that long-suffering animal kick spasmodically with his hind legs, as a rabbit does when you hold it up by the ears—and looked more earnestly than ever down the forest path into the dimness of the pines.

Just then John Paqualin, the charcoal-burner, came up to the open door, with a couple of empty sacks across his shoulders. Now the charcoal-burner was a great friend of