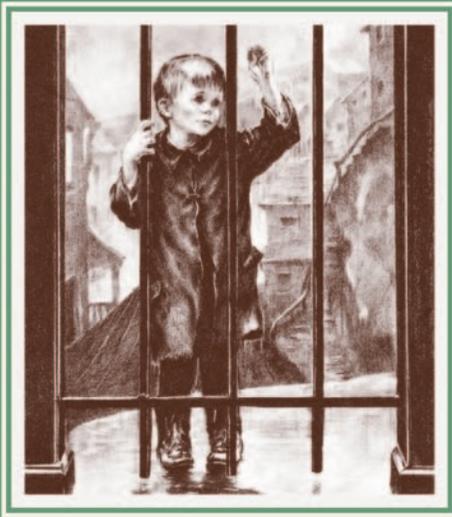


A TREE for PETER

SEREDY

A TREE for PETER



"A small blond boy is seen clinging to a rusty iron fence against a rain-drenched backdrop of any 'shanty town'—and *A Tree for Peter* happens. From such small sparks were all my books written. I never really know what the story is going to be; soon after I start writing, the very people I am writing about take over and tell me what they want to do."
—Kate Seredy

No one had ever seen big Peter before, and no one ever saw him again, and no one ever saw him at all but small Peter who lived in dingy, squalid old Shantytown.

Yet it was big Peter's gift to small Peter—a shiny toy spade with a red handle, and a small green tree lighted with tiny candles—that caused Shantytown people to have hope again. And with new hope the grass grew, and there were gardens, and the junk heaps were cleaned up and the sagging doors were put back on their hinges.

This is a modern miracle, through which sad and beaten houses became white and neat and shining, and desolate, hopeless people found that love and hope can still move mountains. There are no saints and angels; just a tramp, an Irish cop, a small boy, and City Hall, but Shantytown becomes Peter's Landing and faith was reborn.



KATE SEREDY

Purple House Press



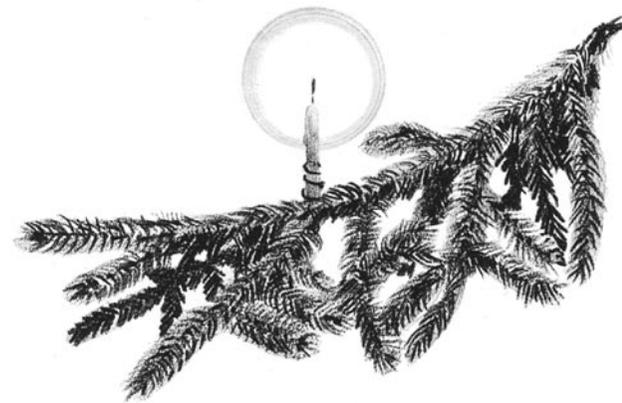
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A TREE FOR PETER

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Kate Seredy



Purple House Press

Kentucky

To Nicholas;
to the magic light of
the tiny Christmas candle
in his hands
and the one who keeps it burning:
Anne Carroll Moore

The Boy in Shantytown

Published by
Purple House Press
PO Box 787, Cynthiana, Kentucky 41031
Classic Books for Kids and Young Adults
purplehousepress.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Seredy, Kate.

A tree for Peter / written and illustrated by Kate Seredy.—1st ed.
102 p. : ill.; 25 cm.

Summary: When Peter, a fatherless lame boy living in Shantytown, meets Peter King, a mysterious, wandering stranger, his lonely life becomes filled with hope, friendship, and even miracles.

ISBN 978-1-930900-80-6 (pbk.)

[1. Poor—Fiction. 2. People with physical disabilities—Fiction. 3. Dwellings—Maintenance and repair—Fiction. 4. Neighborliness—Fiction. 5. Hope—Fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.S48Tr 2004 [Fic]—dc22 2004004793



Tommy was six years old when he first saw Shantytown. He had never before seen anything so sad and ugly. He saw it through a train window on a rainy afternoon. The rain ran like rivulets of tears off the half-blind old windows of the crooked old houses and off their crooked old roofs that looked like shapeless hats. The houses in Shantytown were sort of huddled together around a taller one that looked like a church. It had a small steeple and a tall, broad doorway that gaped wide open. But it had no glass in its windows and there were no lights inside. There were no lights in any of the houses. The train was going very slowly and Tommy could have seen right through the windows, had there been lights inside. But all the windows were dull with dirt and dark. Many of them were stuffed with rags and papers where the glass had broken.

Beyond the crooked old houses Tommy could see a rust-eaten iron fence and below that, deep down below, ran the river the train had followed all afternoon. There was another fence, a tall, new, black-painted iron fence close to the railroad tracks. The train had stopped and then Tommy saw the boy. He stood by the new fence, looking at the train. He was very thin and pale. His clothes were barely more than rags, and they too were dripping with rain. His blond hair was streaming and big drops were running down his face as if he were crying. But he wasn't. Tommy pressed closer to the window and saw that the boy was looking right at him and smiling just a little. He smiled back and waved. Then he said: "Go home, boy. You will catch cold without your rubbers on."

Tommy's father looked up from the newspaper he was reading. "Whom are you talking to, Tommy?"

"The nice boy," said Tommy. "He is very wet."

Tommy's mother came across the aisle. "What a dreadful place!" she exclaimed. "Do people live here?"

"Tramps, bums, and derelicts," said Tommy's father, with a shrug. "Every big city has a dump like this, a Shantytown."

The train began to move again and the boy took a few steps along the fence, still looking at Tommy. Tommy saw that he was limping. "He is lame!" he exclaimed.

"Who is lame, Tommy?" asked his father.

"The nice boy. He is all alone and he is wet and lame. But he is not a bum," he added defensively.

His father glanced out, but by that time the train had moved away. "I didn't see anyone. Come, Tommy, look out on the other side. You can see the skyscrapers and the bay with the lighted ships."

Tommy turned and looked out of the window on the other side of the train. There was the big city, spread out before him, rows upon rows upon rows of lighted windows shining in the dark gray afternoon. Lights danced on the wet pavements below and lights shone from thousands of windows high above. Skyscrapers outlined in lights like diamonds against the dark gray sky and great ships outlined in many-colored lights against the stormy gray water in the bay. Here was the magic city, the city of lights, just as his father said it would be. It was so beautiful that in a little while Tommy forgot the lame boy who was alone in dark, sad Shantytown. He didn't remember him again for a long, long time, because the big city was so full of fun and excitement. When the time came to go home to the small town where they lived, they went a different way. So Tommy didn't see Shantytown again.

But he didn't really forget the boy in Shantytown. The boy was always there, deep inside Tommy's heart, standing alone in the rain, smiling a little smile. For years and years the boy and the dark, ugly houses behind him were merely silent pictures in Tommy's heart. Then one day he knew that all the time they were trying to say something to him. It was the day when Tommy was graduated from high school. His friends were discussing what they

were going to do, now that school was over. Some were going to college, others wanted to learn a trade; there were some who were to be farmers and some who couldn't decide.

"And you, Tommy?" They asked him about his plans. Tommy was silent for a little while because he was listening to voices inside him. The lonely boy was there and he seemed to say: "I am cold and alone. I want a home . . . a house, a friendly house. But I am poor and there is no room for me in a friendly house. . . ." And the dark old houses seemed to say: "We are sad and lonely. We want happy children to live in our rooms, children who laugh and play, and then run home to us when they are tired. But we are ugly and old and only those who have no place to go come to live where we are. . . ."

Tommy was silent for so long that one of his friends shook him, laughing. "Tommy! Have you gone to sleep? We asked you what you were going to do?" And Tommy said: "I was . . . I was just remembering that . . . that I want to be a builder."

More years went by while Tommy grew to be a man, while he worked and learned to be a builder. He was so busy, he all but forgot about the lonely boy in Shantytown.

Then one day he was on the train again, going, for the second time in his life, to the big city. He was a grown man now and his name had grown up too. In his home town people knew him as Mr. Thomas Crandon, the builder. He was on his way to meet another builder, whose name was Peter Marsh. Peter Marsh was

famous. He had done what Thomas Crandon wanted to do: he had built hundreds of houses, whole big blocks full of honest, tight, good little houses. They were all built for poor people. Thomas Crandon wanted to talk to him; to find out how to build good, friendly houses for little money. He wanted poor people in his own home town to have the best houses he could build for them.

Some time in the afternoon the train found the river again and from then on they ran a race toward the big city. Thomas Crandon folded his newspaper and sat close to the window. He watched the race between the river and the train, just as he had done when he was six-year-old Tommy. He remembered every bend and curve; the place where the river widened and put two arms around a small green island and the tiny stations the train whistled at and left behind without stopping. Then the train slowed down and there was the tall, new, black-painted iron fence close to the tracks. Thomas Crandon pressed his face to the windowpane because he suddenly remembered again, for the first time in many years, the little lame boy who stood alone in sad, old Shantytown.

But where was Shantytown? Here was the strip of land between the tracks and the steep riverbank; here was the cluster of houses around the tiny church. But they were brave and gay with fresh white paint. Their windows, clean and whole, were like shining eyes through which he could see friendly rooms. Each house stood on a gay carpet of garden and beyond, the rusty fence was gone. Broad white steps wound down along the bank to a boat-landing,

where rowboats and canoes tugged at their ropes. And everywhere were children, shouting, laughing, racing across the lawns, and none of them was lame.

There was a new round clock in the steeple of the church, its hands straight up and down, saying just six o'clock. Above the clock a golden bell began to ring, twinkling in and out of its own little house. A straight, tall pine stood guard on the lawn in front of the church door, its slim top reaching almost as high as the steeple.

"But where is Shantytown?" asked Thomas Crandon, speaking aloud in surprise.

"You are looking at it, Mister—or what *was* Shantytown," said the porter behind him. "Now it's called Peter's Landing, for Mr. Peter Marsh."

"Peter Marsh!" exclaimed Thomas Crandon, turning around quickly. But there was no time for all the questions he wanted to ask because the conductor called: "Last stop. Central Terminal." The train slid into a tunnel and in a few minutes Thomas Crandon was walking toward his hotel in the big city.

"Tomorrow," he said to himself, "tomorrow I am going to ask Peter Marsh just what magic he used to change sad, ugly Shantytown into beautiful Peter's Landing."

Next day he went to see Peter Marsh. From the moment the two men shook hands, they talked and felt as if they had been friends for a long, long time. By late afternoon the large desk between them and the floor around were littered with plans, blueprints, and pic-

tures of small, good little houses. They had finished with business and now they were just talking like the old friends both felt they were. Thomas Crandon was telling about his first trip to the city, when he was six-year-old Tommy; about the rainy afternoon when he saw the lame boy who stood in the rain and smiled.

"And you know," he said, "I didn't know then, but I do know now that I have become a builder because"—he hesitated—"well, because I felt so sorry for those old crooked houses and the lonely boy. And today," he said, smiling, "I want to know just what magic you have used to change that dreary place into the smiling spot now called Peter's Landing . . . for you, as I heard on the train."

Peter Marsh looked at him intently and for a moment he didn't answer. Then he said slowly: "Magic. Yes, it was magic that made Peter's Landing. But the magic was not of my making and it is not called Peter's Landing for me. I named it for a friend, whose name was also Peter. King Peter. He held the magic wand. It was . . . it was a spade," he added with a chuckle.

"A . . . a . . . spade?" asked Thomas Crandon in wonder. "And King Peter . . . ! It sounds like a story."

"A spade. A little toy spade with a red handle from the five-and-ten-cent store," said Peter Marsh quietly. "It is a story. A long one. About a lame boy, a little red spade, a tiny Christmas tree, and a . . . a man nobody knew. Want to hear it?"

"Please."

Peter Marsh leaned back in his chair. The desk was a pool of

light under the green-shaded lamp but beyond it the room was growing dark. The voice of Peter Marsh came from the shadows of the darkening room and as he began his story, Thomas Crandon felt that he was six-year-old Tommy again, seeing for the first time sad old Shantytown.

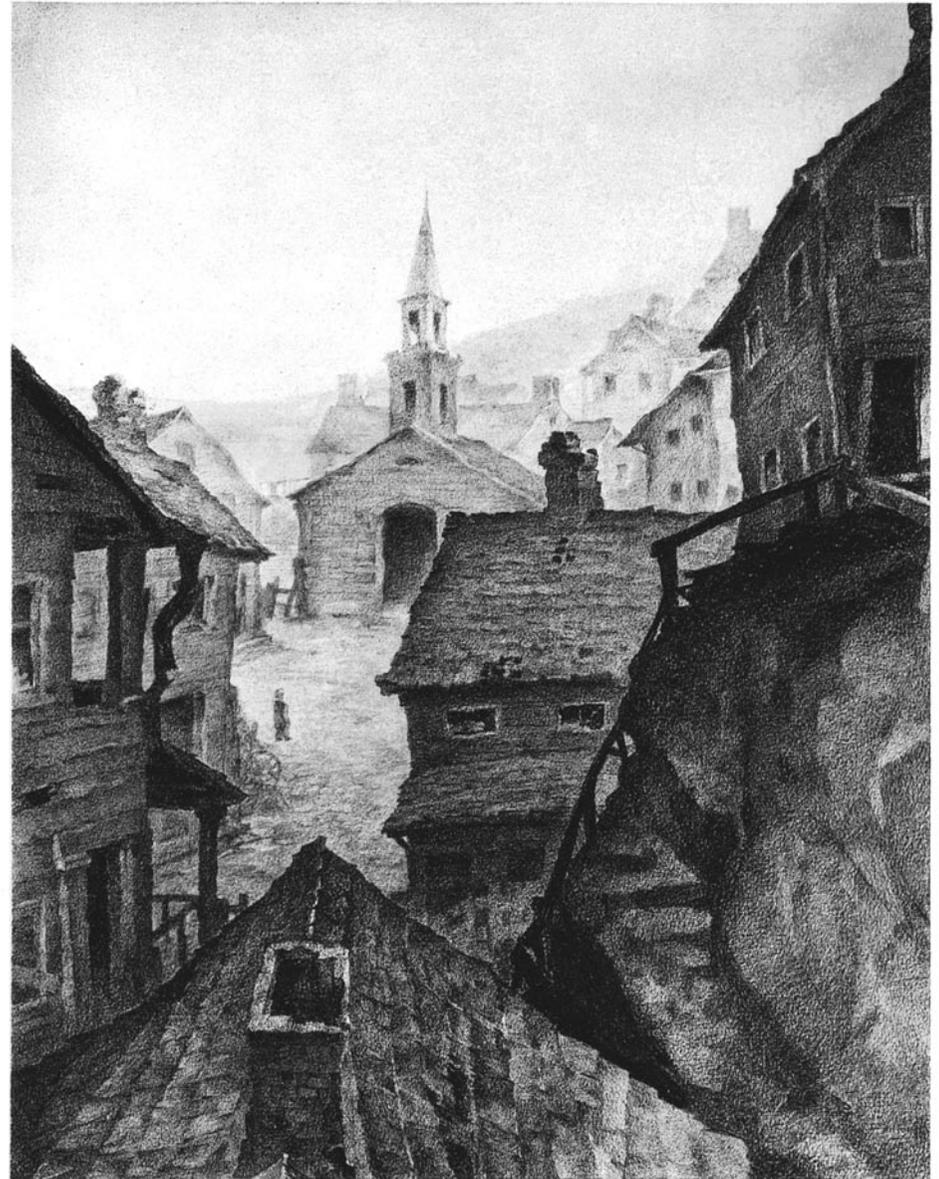
A Friend for Peter





On a narrow strip of land between the river and the railroad tracks stood the old house where small Peter lived. It did not stand alone, for, if it had, the winds would have blown it down long ago. It was one of a cluster of forlorn houses huddled together around a taller one that once had been a church. Between them was a yard so full of rubbish that not even a blade of grass could grow among the junk. The houses were nobody's houses. No one remembered the people who had built them and no one cared. No one ever claimed rent from those who came to take shelter under their leaking roofs.

Along the riverbank ran a rust-eaten fence. It may have been a garden fence, but now there was no garden left to guard; only a dump where people threw the things they could no longer use. It was a silent place, that poor, dreadful yard. People who lived around it lived behind closed shutters and shades tightly drawn. They were trying to hide, even from one another, how very poor they were. Close neighbors though they were, not one of them knew or cared what ill luck had forced the rest to live around a dump. They were too poor to care for anything but daily bread. They had nothing to share, not even hope for better days to come.



Each dawn they left for the city, in search of work. They always went alone, one by one, silent, lone shadows drifting across the tracks. At night they drifted back, one by one, clutching small parcels of food or cast-off clothing, but often they came with empty hands.

Small Peter's mother was one of them. She was a sad, tired woman who seldom smiled. Small Peter knew she worked in a laundry. Her hands were dry and wrinkled and she always smelled of soap. On weekdays he hardly saw her; she left at daybreak while he was still asleep. At night she was so tired she often fell asleep over their meager meal. Sundays were different. On warm Sunday afternoons they walked away from Shantytown, along the rusty fence, hand in hand. They sat on the high riverbank in the sun. Then she would hold him close and tell him stories. She talked of many things.

She told him of the house where they used to live before his father died. A white house surrounded by a garden all fresh and green under the friendly trees. Of kittens romping on the lawn and a brown, silky dog who wagged his tail. But mostly she talked of the strong, kindly man she called Daddy and whom Peter remembered as someone in a dream. Her stories were all like dreams to Peter. He always sat very still to make them last. He didn't want Sunday to end, because then Monday would come and he would be alone again and afraid.

