

Bonded Prisoner

Penrod and Sam's Thrilling Exploits in the Neighborhood War Game

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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During the daylight hours of several autumn Saturdays there had been severe outbreaks of cavalry in the Schofield neighborhood. The sabers were of wood; the steeds were imaginary, and both were employed in a game called "bonded prisoner" by its inventors. Masters Penrod Schofield and Samuel Williams. The pastime was not intricate. When two enemies met, they fenced spectacularly until the person of one or the other was touched by the opposing weapon; then, when the ensuing claims of foul play had been disallowed and the subsequent argument settled, the combatant touched was considered to be a prisoner until such time as he might be touched by the hilt of a sword belonging to one of his own party, which affected his release and restored to him the full enjoyment of hostile activity. Pending such rescue, however, he was obliged to accompany the forces of his captor whithersoever their strategical necessities led them, which included many strange places. For

and I guess you'll see whether you feel it or not! There! Now, I guess you—"

"Aw, squash!" Strangely enough, the undoubted champion proved to be the youngest and darkest of all the combatants, one Verman, colored, brother to Herman, and substantially under the size to which his nine years entitled him. Verman was unfortunately tongue-tied, but he was valiant beyond all others, and, in spite of every handicap, he became at once the chief support of his own party and the despair of the opposition.

On the third Saturday this opposition had been worn down by the successive captures of Maurice Levy and Georgie Bassett until it consisted of only Sam Williams and Penrod. Hence, it behooved these two to be wary, lest they be wiped out altogether; and Sam was dismayed, indeed, upon cautiously scouting round a corner of his own stable, to find himself face to face with the valorous and skillful Verman, who was acting

Now, in the arguing part of the game, Verman's impediment cooperated with a native amiability to render him far less effective than in the actual combat. He chuckled, and ceded the point.

"Aw wi," he said, and cheerfully followed his captor to a hidden place among some bushes in the front yard, where Penrod lurked.

"Looky what I got!" Sam said importantly, pushing his captive into this retreat. "Now, I guess you won't say I'm not so much use any more! Squat down, Verman, so's they can't see you if they're huntin' for us. That's one o' the rules—honest. You got to squat when we tell you to."

Verman was agreeable. He squatted, and then began to laugh uproariously.

"Stop that noise!" Penrod commanded. "You want to betray us? What you laughin' at?"

"Ep mack im mimmup," Verman giggled.

"What's he mean?" asked Sam. Penrod was more familiar with Verman's utterance, and he interpreted.

"He says they'll get him back in a minute."

"No, they won't. I'd just like to see—"

"Yes, they will, too," said Penrod. "They'll get him back for the main and simple reason we can't stay here all day, can we? And they'd find us anyhow, if we tried to. There's so they can run in and touch him soon many of 'em against just us two, as they get up to us—and then he'll be after us again and—"

"Listen here!" Sam interrupted. "Why can't we put some real bonds on him? We could put bonds on his wrists and around his legs—we could put 'em all over him, easy as nothin'. Then we could gag him—"

"No, we can't," said Penrod. "We can't, for the main and simple reason we haven't got any rope or anything to make the bonds with, have we?"

I wish we had some o' that stuff they give sick people. Then, I bet they wouldn't get him back so soon!"

"Sick people?" Sam repeated, not comprehending.

"It makes 'em go to sleep, no matter what you do to 'em," Penrod explained. "That's the main and simple reason they can't wake up, and you can cut off their whole legs—or their arms, or anything you want to."

"Hoy!" exclaimed Verman, in a serious tone. His laughter ceased instantly, and he began to utter a protest sufficiently intelligible.

"You needn't worry," Penrod said gloomily. "We haven't got any o' that stuff; so we can't do it."

"Well, we got to do sumthing," said Sam.

His comrade agreed, and there was a thoughtful silence, but presently Penrod's countenance brightened.

"I know!" he exclaimed. "I know what we'll do with him. Why, I thought of it just as easy! I can most always think of things like that, for the main and simple reason—well, I thought of it just as soon—"

"Well, what is it?" Sam demanded crossly. Penrod's reiteration of his new-found phrase, "for the main and simple reason," had been growing more and more irksome to his friend all day, though Sam was not definitely aware that the phrase was the cause of his annoyance. "What are we goin' to do with him, you know so much?"

Penrod rose and peered over the tops of the bushes, shading his eyes with his hand, a gesture which was unnecessary but had a good appearance. He looked all round about him in this manner, finally vouchsafing a report to the impatient Sam.

"No enemies in sight—just for the main and simple reason I expect they're all in the alley and in Georgie Bassett's back yard."

"I bet they're not!" Sam said scornfully, his irritation much increased.

"How do you know so much about it?"

"Just for the main and simple reason," Penrod replied, with dignified finality.

And at that, Sam felt a powerful impulse to do violence upon the person of his comrade-in-arms. The emotion which prompted this impulse was so primitive and straightforward that it almost resulted in action, but Sam had a vague sense that he must control it as long as he could.

"Bugs!" he said.

Penrod was sensitive, and this cold word hurt him. However, he was under the domination of his strategic idea, and he subordinated private grievance to the common weal. "Get up!" he commanded. "You get up, too, Verman. You got to—it's the rule. Now here—I'll show you what we're goin' to do. Stoop over, and both o' you do just exactly like I do. You watch me, because this biz'nuss has got to be done right!"

Sam muttered something; he was becoming more insurgent every moment, but he obeyed. Likewise, Verman rose to his feet, ducked his head between his shoulders, and trotted out to the sidewalk at Sam's heels, both following Penrod and assuming a stooping position in imitation of him. Verman was delighted with this phase of the game, and, also, he was profoundly amused by Penrod's pomposity. Something dim and deep within him perceived it to be cause for such merriment that he had ado to master himself, and was forced to bottle and cork his laughter with both hands. They proved insufficient; sputterings burst forth between his fingers.

"You stop that!" said Penrod, looking back darkly upon the prisoner.

Verman endeavored to oblige, though giggles continued to leak from him at intervals, and the three boys stole along the fence in single file, proceeding in this fashion until they

(Continued next week.)



"Ep mack im mimmup."

the game was exciting, and, at its highest pitch, would sweep out of an alley into a stable, out of that stable and into a yard, out of that yard and into a house, and through that house with the sound (and effect upon furniture) of trampling herds. In fact, this very similarity must have been in the mind of the distressed colored woman in Mrs. Williams' kitchen, when she declared she might "jes' as well try to cook right spang in the middle o' the stock yards."

All up and down the neighborhood the campaigns were waged, accompanied by the martial clashing of wood and by many clamorous arguments.

"You're a pris'ner, Roddy Bitts!"

"I am not!"

"You are, too! I touched you."

"Where, I'd like to know!"

"On the sleeve."

"You did not! I never felt it. I guess I'd 'a' felt it, wouldn't I?"

"What if you didn't? I touched you, and you're bonded. I leave it to Sam Williams."

"Yas! Course you would! He's on your side! I leave it to Herman."

"No, you won't! If you can't show any sense about it, we'll do it over,

as an outpost, or picket, of the enemy. Verman immediately fell upon Sam, horse and foot, and Sam would have fled but dared not, for fear he might be touched from the rear. Therefore, he defended himself as best he could, and there followed a lusty whacking, in the course of which Verman's hat, a relic and too large, fell from his head, touching Sam's weapon in falling.

"There!" panted Sam, desisting immediately. "That counts! You're bonded, Verman."

"Aim meewer!" Verman protested. Interpreting this as "Aain't neither," Sam invented a law to suit the occasion. "Yes, you are; that's the rule, Verman. I touched your hat with my sword, and your hat's just the same as you."

"Imm mop!" Verman insisted.

"Yes, it is," said Sam, already warmly convinced (by his own statement) that he was in the right. "Listen here! If I hit you on the shoe, it would be the same as hitting you, wouldn't it? I guess it'd count if I hit you on the shoe, wouldn't it? Well, a hat's just the same as shoes. Honest, that's the rule, Verman, and you're a pris'ner."

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