

Bonded Prisoner

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

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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READ THIS FIRST.

PENROD SCHOFIELD and Sam Williams having captured Verman, one of their playmates in a game of "Bonded Prisoner," were leading him to the Schofield home for safe keeping at the suggestion of Penrod, who explained he thought this was the proper thing to do "Just for the main and simple reason." The expression Penrod used was annoying Sam Williams to the amusement of Verman. Penrod ordered Verman to stop giggling and march quietly to his prison.

Now to our story—
"Well," said Sam impatiently, "I guess I'm not goin' to stand around here all day, I guess! You got anything you want to do, why'n't you go on and do it?"

Penrod's brow was already contorted to present the appearance of detached and lofty concentration—a histrionic failure, since it did not deceive the audience. He raised a hushing hand.

"Sh!" he murmured. "I got to think."

"Bugs!" said the impolite Mr. Williams again.

Verman bent double, squealing and sputtering; indeed, he was ultimately forced to sit upon the ground, so exhausting was the mirth to which he now gave way. Penrod's composure was somewhat affected, and he showed annoyance.

"Oh, I guess you won't laugh quite so much about a minute from now, ole Mister Verman!" he said severely. "You get up from there and do like I tell you."

"Well, why'n't you tell him why he won't laugh so much, then?" Sam demanded, as Verman rose. "Why'n't you do something and quit talkin' so much about it?"

Penrod haughtily led the way into the yard.

"You follow me," he said, "and I guess you'll learn a little sense!"

Then, abandoning his hauteur for an air of mystery equally irritating to Sam, he stole up the steps of the porch, and after a moment's manipulation of the knob of the big front door, contrived to operate the fastenings, and pushed the door open.

"Come on," he whispered, beckoning. And the three boys mounted the stairs to the floor above in silence—save for a belated giggle on the part of Verman, which was restrained upon a terrible gesture from Penrod. Verman buried his mouth as deeply as possible in a ragged sleeve, and confined his demonstrations to a heaving of the stomach and diaphragm.

Penrod led the way into the dainty room of his nineteen-year-old sister, Margaret, and closed the door.

"There," he said, in a low and husky voice, "I expect you'll see what I'm goin' to do now!"

"Well, what?" asked the skeptical Sam. "If we stay here very long your mother'll come and send us downstairs. What's the good of—"

"Wait, can't you?" Penrod wailed, in a whisper. "My goodness!" And going to an inner door, he threw it open, disclosing a clothes-closet hung with pretty garments of many kinds, hile upon its floor were two rows of shoes and slippers of great variety and charm.

A significant thing is to be remarked concerning the door of this somewhat intimate treasury; there was no knob or latch upon the inner side, so that, when the door was closed, it could be opened only from the outside.

"There!" said Penrod. "You get in there, Verman, and I'll bet they won't get to touch you back out o' bein' our pris'ner very soon, now! Oh, I guess not!"

"Pshaw!" said Sam. "Is that all you were goin' to do? Why, your mother'll come and make him get out the first—"

"No, she won't. She and Margaret have gone to my aunt's in the country, and aren't goin' to be back till dark. And even if he made a lot o' noise, it's kind of hard to hear anything from in there, anyway, when the door's shut. Besides, he's got to keep quiet—that's the rule, Verman. You're a pris'ner, and it's the rule you can't holler or nothin'. You understand that, Verman?"

"Aw wi," said Verman.

"Then go on in there. Hurry!"

The obedient Verman marched into the closet and sat down among the shoes and slippers, where he presented an interesting effect of contrast. He was still subject to hilarity—though endeavoring to suppress it

by means of a patent-leather slipper—when Penrod closed the door.

"There!" said Penrod, leading the way from the room. "I guess now you see!"

Sam said nothing, and they came out in the open air, and reached their retreat in the Williams' yard again, without his having acknowledged Penrod's service to their mutual cause.

"I thought of that just as easy!" Penrod remarked, probably prompted to this odious bit of complacency by Sam's withholding the praise which might naturally have been expected. And he was moved to add, "I guess we'd had to wait for you to think of sumpting as good as that, Sam."

"Why would it?" Sam asked. "Why would it of been such a long while?" "Oh," responded Penrod, airily, "just for the main and simple reason!"



"Oh, You Will, Will You?"

Sam could bear it no longer. "Oh, hush up!" he shouted. Penrod was stung. "Do you mean me?" he demanded. "Yes, I do!" replied the goaded Sam.

"Did you tell me to hush up?" "Yes, I did!"

"I guess I just better show you who you're talkin' to like that. I guess you need a little sumpting, for the main and simple—"

Sam uttered an uncontrollable howl and sprang upon Penrod, catching him round the waist. Simultaneously with this impact, the wooden swords spun through the air, and were presently trodden underfoot as the two boys wrestled to and fro.

Penrod was not altogether surprised by the onset of his friend. He had been aware of Sam's increasing irritation (though neither boy could have clearly stated its cause), and that very irritation produced a corresponding emotion in the bosom of the irritator. Mentally, Penrod was quite ready for the conflict—nay, he welcomed it—though, for the first few moments, Sam had the physical advantage.

However, it is proper that a neat distinction be drawn here. This was a conflict, but neither technically nor in the intention of the contestants was it a fight. Penrod and Sam were both in a state of high exasperation, and there was great bitterness; but no blows fell and no tears. They strained, they wrenched, they twisted, and they panted, and muttered: "Oh, no, you don't!" "Oh, I guess I do!" "Oh, you will, will you?" "You'll see

what you get in about a minute" "I guess you'll learn some sense this time!"

Streaks and blotches began to appear upon the two faces, where color had been heightened by the ardent application of a cloth sleeve or shoulder, while ankles and insteps were scraped and toes were trampled. Turf and shrubberies suffered, also, as the struggle went on, until finally the wrestlers pitched headlong into a young lilac bush, and came to earth together, among its crushed and sprawling branches.

"Ooch!" and "Wuf!" were the two exclamations which marked this episode, and then, with no further comment, the struggle was energetically continued upon a horizontal plane. Now Penrod was on top, now Sam; they rolled, they squirmed, they suffered. And this contest endured. It went on and on, and it was impossible to imagine its coming to a definite termination. It went on so long that, to both the participants, it seemed to be a permanent thing, a condition which had always existed and which must always exist perpetually.

And thus they were discovered by a foray of the hostile party, headed by Roddy Bitts and Herman (older brother to Verman) and followed by the bonded prisoners, Maurice Levy and George Bassett. These and others caught sight of the writhing figures, and charged down upon them with loud cries of triumph.

"Pris'ner! Pris'ner! Bonded pris'ner!" shrieked Roddy Bitts, and touched Penrod and Sam, each in turn, with his saber. Then, seeing that they paid no attention and that they were at his mercy, he recalled the fact that several times, during earlier stages of the game, both of them had been unnecessarily vigorous in "touching" his own rather plump person. Therefore, the opportunity being excellent, he raised his weapon again, and, repeating the words "bonded pris'ner" as ample ex-

planation of his deed, brought into play the full strength of his good right arm. He used the flat of the saber.

Whack! Whack! Roddy was perfectly impartial. It was a cold-blooded performance and even more effective than he anticipated. For one thing, it ended the civil war instantly. Sam and Penrod leaped to their feet, shrieking and bloodthirsty, while Maurice Levy capered with joy, Herman was so overcome that he rolled upon the ground, and Georgie Bassett remarked virtuously:

"It serves them right for fighting." But Roddy Bitts foresaw that something not within the rules of the game was about to happen.

"Here! You keep away from me!" he quavered, retreating. "I was just takin' you pris'ners. I guess I had a right to touch you, didn't I?"

Alas! Neither Sam nor Penrod was able to see the matter in that light. They had retrieved their own weapons, and they advanced upon Roddy, with a purposefulness that seemed horrible to him.

"Here! You keep away from me!" he said, in great alarm. "I'm goin' to give up this ole game and go home."

He did go home—but only subsequently. What took place before his departure had the singular solidity and completeness of systematic violence; also, it bore the moral beauty of all actions which lead to peace and friendship, for, when it was over, and the final vocalizations of Roderick Magsworth Bitts, Jr., were growing faint with increasing distance, Sam and Penrod had forgotten their differences and felt well disposed toward each other once more. All their animosity was exhausted, and they were in a glow of good feeling, though probably they were not conscious of any direct gratitude to Roddy, whose thoughtful opportunism was really the cause of this happy result.

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