

PENROD

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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It was Penrod's turn. He stepped back from his chair, the table between him and the audience, and began in a high, breathless monotone:

"I, Sir Lancelot du Lake, the Child, Gentlehearted, meek and mild. What though I'm but a little child, Gentlehearted, meek and mild, I do my share, though, but—though but—"

Penrod paused and gulped. The voice of Mrs. Lora Revbush was heard from the wings, prompting irritably, and the Child Sir Lancelot repeated: "I do my share, though, but—though but—"

"I pray you, Sir Lancelot!"

This also met the royal favor, and Penrod was bidden to join Sir Galahad at the throne. As he crossed the stage Mrs. Schofield whispered to Margaret:

"That boy! He's unspun his mantle and—fixed it to cover his whole costume. After we worked so hard to make it becoming!"

"Never mind. He'll have to take the cape off in a minute," returned Margaret. She leaned forward suddenly, narrowing her eyes to see the better. "What is that thing hanging about his left ankle?" she whispered uneasily. "How queer! He must have got tangled in something."

"Where?" asked Mrs. Schofield in alarm.

"His left foot. It makes him stumble. Don't you see? It looks—it looks like an elephant's foot!"

The Child Sir Lancelot and the Child Sir Galahad clasped hands before their child king. Penrod was conscious of a great uplift, in a moment he would have to throw aside his mantle, but even so he was protected and sheltered in the human garment of a man. His stage fright had passed, for the audience was but an indistinguishable blur of darkness beyond the dazzling lights. His most repulsive speech (that in which he proclaimed himself a "foe") was over and done with, and now at last the small, moist hand of the Child Sir Galahad lay within his own. Suddenly his brown fingers stole from Margaret's palm to the wrist. The two boys declaimed in concert:

"We are two children of the Tabul Round, Strengthened and good deeds striving ever for the best."

May our little efforts e'er be blest, Two little hearts we offer, See, United in love, faith, hope and cheer—Ow!"

The conclusion of the duet was marred. The Child Sir Galahad suddenly stiffened and, uttering an irrepressible shriek of anguish, gave a brief exhibition of the contortionist's art. ("He's twisted!" my wrist! Dear you, leggo!")

The voice of Mrs. Lora Revbush was again heard from the wings. It sounded bloodthirsty. Penrod released his victim, and the Child King Arthur, somewhat disconcerted, extended his scepter and, with the assistance of the enraged prompter, said:

"Sweet child friends of the Tabul Round, In brotherly love and kindness abound, Sir Lancelot, you have spoken well, Sir Galahad, too, as clear as bell. So now pray drop your mantles gay, You shall be knighted this very day."

And Penrod doffed his mantle. Simultaneously a thick and vasty gasp came from the audience, as from 500 banners in a wholly unexpected surf. This gasp was punctuated irregularly over the auditorium by imperfectly subdued screams both of dismay and incredulous joy and by two dismal shrieks. Altogether it was an extraordinary sound, a sound never to be forgotten by any one who heard it. It was almost as unforgettable as the sight which caused it, the word "sight" being here used in its vernacular sense, for Penrod, standing unattended and unaided in all the medieval and antique glory of the jousting blue overalls, falls within its meaning.

The teacher was a heavy man, and his overalls upon Penrod were merely comic. The boy was at once swaddled and lost within their blue girths and waist strings, and the left leg too hastily rolled up, had descended with a distinctively elephantine effect, as Margaret had observed. Certainly the Child Sir Lancelot was at least a sight.

It is probable that a great many in that hall would have had, even then, a consciousness that they were looking on at history in the making. A supreme act is recognizable at sight. It bears the birthmark of immortality. But Penrod, that marvelous boy, had begun to decline, and with the gesture of flinging off his mantle for the occasion:

"I first, the Child Sir Lancelot du Lake, Will volunteer to knight you take. And kneeling here before your throne I vow to—"

He finished his speech unheard. The audience had recovered breath, but had lost self-control, and there ensued something later described by a participant as a sort of cultured riot.

The actors in the "pageant" were not so dumfounded by Penrod's costume as might have been expected. A few

precocious geniuses perceived that the overalls were the Child Lancelot's own comment on maternal intentions, and these were profoundly impressed. They regarded him with the grisly admiration of young and ambitious criminals for a jail mate about to be distinguished by hanging. But most of the children simply took it to be the case (a little strange, but startling) that Penrod's mother had dressed him like that—which is pathetic. They tried to go on with the "pageant."

They made a brief, manful effort. But the irrepressible outbursts from the audience bewildered them. Every time Sir Lancelot du Lake the Child opened his mouth the great shadowy house fell into an uproar and the children into confusion. Strong women and brave girls in the audience went out into the lobby, shrieking and clinging to one another. Others remained, rocking in their seats, helpless and spent. The neighborhood of Mrs. Schofield and Margaret became tactfully a desert. Friends of the author went behind the scenes and encountered a hitherto unknown phase of Mrs. Lora Revbush. They said afterward that she hardly seemed to know what she was doing. She begged to be left alone somewhere with Penrod Schofield, for just a little while.

They led her away.

CHAPTER IV.

Evening.

THE sun was setting behind the back fence (though at a considerable distance) as Penrod Schofield approached the fence and looked thoughtfully up at the top of it, apparently having in mind some purpose to climb up and sit there. Deftly, he passed his fingers gently up and down the backs of his legs, and then something seemed to decide him not to sit anywhere. He leaned against the fence, sighed profoundly and gazed at Duke's wistful dog.

The sigh was reminiscent. Episodes of simple paths were passing before his inward eye. About the most painful was the vision of lovely Marjorie Jones, weeping with rage as the Child Sir Lancelot was dragged, insatiate, from the prostrate and howling Child Sir Galahad, after an onslaught delivered the precise instant the curtain began to fall upon the demoralized "pageant." And then—oh, pangs! oh, woe!—she slapped at the ruffian's cheek, as he was led past her by a resentful janitor, and turning, flung her arms round the Child Sir Galahad's neck.

"Penrod Schofield, don't you dare ever speak to me again as long as you live!" Maurice's little white boots and gold tassels had done their work.

At home the late Child Sir Lancelot was consigned to a locked clothes closet pending the arrival of his father. Mr. Schofield came, and shortly after there was put into practice an old patriarchal custom. It is a custom of inconceivable antiquity—probably primordial, certainly prehistoric, but still in vogue in some remaining citadels of the ancient simplicities of the republic.

And now, therefore, in the dusk, Penrod leaned against the fence and sighed.

His case is comparable to that of an adult who could have survived a similar experience. Looking back to the saddest hour, fancy pictures this could have been a serious and inventive parody engaged in congenial literary activities in a private retreat. We see this period marked by the creation of some of the most virile passages of a work dealing exclusively in red corpses and huge primal impulses. We see this thoughtful man dragged from his calm seclusion to a horrifying publicity; forced to adopt the stage and, himself a writer, compelled to exploit the repulsive sentiments of an author not only personally distasteful to him, but whose whole method and school in belles-lettres he despises.

We see him reduced by desperation and modesty to stealing a pair of overalls. We conceive him to have ruined, then, his own reputation and to have utterly disgraced his family; next, to have engaged in the duello and to have been spurned by his ladylove, thus lost to him according to her own declaration forever. Finally, we must behold imprisonment by the authorities, the third degree and flagellation.

We conceive our man deciding that his career had been perhaps too eventful. Yet Penrod had condensed all of it into eight hours.

It appears that he had at least some shadowy perception of a recent fullness of life, for as he leaned against the fence gazing upon his wistful Duke, he sighed again and murmured aloud:

"Well, hasn't this been a day?"

But in a little while a star came out, freshly lighted, from the highest part of the sky, and Penrod, looking up, noticed it casually and a little drowsily. He yawned. Then he sighed once more, but not reminiscently. Evening had come; the day was over.

Next day Penrod acquired a dime by a simple and antique process which was without doubt sometimes practiced by the boys of Babylon. When the teacher of his class in Sunday school requested the weekly contribution Penrod, fumbling honestly (at first) in the wrong pockets, managed to look so embarrassed that the gentle lady told him not to mind and said she was often forgetful herself. She was so sweet about it that, looking into the future, Penrod began to feel confident of a small but regular income.

At the close of the afternoon services he did not go home, but proceeded to squander the funds just withheld from China upon an orgy of the most pungently forbidden description. In a drug emporium near the church he purchased a five-cent sack of candy consisting of the most potent of the heavily flavored hoofs of horned cat-

tle, but undeniably substantial, and so generously capable of resisting solution that the purchaser must needs be avaricious beyond reason who did not realize his money's worth.

Equipped with this collation Penrod contributed his remaining nickel to a picture show, contemplated upon the seventh day by the legal but not the moral authorities. Here, in cozy darkness, he placidly insulated his liver with jawbreaker upon jawbreaker from the paper sack and in a surfeit of content watched the silent actors on the screen.

One film made a lasting impression upon him. It depicted with relentless pathos the drunkard's progress, beginning with his conversion to beer in the company of loose traveling men, pursuing him through an insupportable lapse into evening clothes and the society of some remarkably painful ladies. Next, exhibiting the effects of alcohol on the victim's domestic disposition, the unfortunate man was seen in the act of striking his wife and, subsequently, his pleading baby daughter with an abnormally heavy walking stick. Their flight through the snow to seek the protection of a

