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PENROD



CHAPTER VII.

Fidelity of a Little Dog.

THE returning students that afternoon observed that Penrod's desk was vacant, and nothing could have been more impressive than that sinister mere emptiness. The accepted theory was that Penrod had been arrested. How breath taking then the sensation when at the beginning of the second hour he strolled in with intimate carelessness and, rubbing his eyes, somewhat noticeably in the manner of one who has snatched an hour of much needed sleep, took his place as if nothing in particular had happened. This at first supposed to be a superhuman exhibition of sheer audacity, became but the more dumfounding when Miss Spence, looking from her desk, greeted him with a pleasant little nod. Even after school Penrod gave numerous maddened investigators no relief. All he would consent to say was:

"Oh, I just talked to her."

A mystification not entirely unconnected with the one thus produced was manifested at his own family dinner table the following evening. Aunt Clara had been out rather late and came to the table after the rest were seated. She wore a puzzled expression.

"Do you ever see Mary Spence nowadays?" she inquired, as she unfolded her napkin, addressing Mrs. Schofield. Penrod abruptly set down his soup spoon and gazed at his aunt with flattering attention.

"Yes, sometimes," said Mrs. Schofield. "She's Penrod's teacher."

"Is she?" said Mrs. Farry. "Do you?"

"She paused. 'Do people think her a little queer these days?'"

"Why, no," returned her sister. "What makes you say that?"

"She has acquired a very odd manner," said Mrs. Farry decidedly. "At least, she seemed odd to me. I met her at the corner just before I got to the house a few minutes ago, and after we'd said howdy do to each other she kept hold of my hand and looked as though she was going to cry. She seemed to be trying to say something and choking."

"But I don't think that's so very queer, Clara. She knew you in school, didn't she?"

"Yes, but—"

"And she hadn't seen you for so many years I think it's perfectly natural she—"

"Wait! She stood there squeezing my hand and struggling to get her voice, and I got really embarrassed, and then finally she said in a kind of fearful whisper: 'Be of good cheer. This trial will pass.'"

"How queer!" exclaimed Margaret. Penrod sighed and returned somewhat absently to his soup.

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Schofield thoughtfully. "Of course she's heard about the outbreak of measles in Dayton, since they had to close the schools, and she knows you live there—"

"But doesn't it seem a very exaggerated way," suggested Margaret, "to talk about measles?"

"Wait," begged Aunt Clara. "After she said that she said something even queerer and then put her handkerchief to her eyes and hurried away."

Penrod laid down his spoon again and moved his chair slightly back from the table. A spirit of prophecy was upon him. He knew that some one was going to ask a question which he felt might better remain unspoken.

"What was the other thing she said?" Mr. Schofield inquired, thus immediately fulfilling his son's premonition.

"She said," returned Mrs. Farry slowly, looking about the table; "she said, 'I know that Penrod is a great, great comfort to you.'"

There was a general exclamation of surprise. It was a singular thing, and in no manner may it be considered complimentary to Penrod that this speech of Miss Spence's should have immediately confirmed Mrs. Farry's doubts about her in the minds of all his family.

Mr. Schofield shook his head pityingly.

"I'm afraid she's a goner," he went so far as to say.

"Of all the weird ideas!" cried Margaret.

"I never heard anything like it in my life!" Mrs. Schofield exclaimed. "Was

Children Cry FOR FLETCHER'S CASTORIA

The Same Yesterday
Today and Forever



startlingly, stooping to look under the piano. A statement that he had suddenly remembered his son's presence would be lacking in accuracy, for the highly sensitized Penrod was, in fact, no longer present. No more was Duke, his faithful dog.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he returned, striding to the open window and looking out.

"Go on."

"Oh!" she moaned. "It must be kept from Clara. And I'll never hold up my head again if John Farry ever hears of it!"

"Hears of what?"

"Well, I just couldn't stand it. I got so curious. And I thought, of course, if Miss Spence had become a little unbalanced it was my duty to know it as Penrod's mother and she his teacher. So I thought I would just call on her at her apartment after school and have a chat and see. And I did, and—oh—"

"Well?"

"I've just come from there, and she told me—she told me! Oh, I've never known anything like this!"

"What did she tell you?"

Mrs. Schofield, making a great effort, managed to assume a temporary appearance of calm. "Henry," she said solemnly, "bear this in mind, whatever you do to Penrod it must be done in some place when Clara won't hear it. But the first thing to do is to find him."

Within view of the window from which Mr. Schofield was gazing was the closed door of the storeroom in the stable, and just outside this door Duke was performing a most engaging trick.

His young master had taught Duke to "sit up and beg" when he wanted anything, and if that didn't get it to "speak." Duke was facing the closed door and sitting up and begging, and now he also spoke—in a loud, clear bark.

There was an open transom over the door, and from this descended—buried by an unseen agency—a can half filled with old paint.

It caught the small besieger of the door on his thoroughly surprised right ear, encouraged him to some remarkable acrobatics and turned large portions of him a dull blue. Allowing only a moment to perplexity and deciding after a single and evidently unappetizing experiment not to cleanse himself of paint, the loyal animal resumed his quaint, upright posture.

Mr. Schofield seated himself on the window sill, whence he could keep in view that pathetic picture of unrequited love.

"Go on with your story, mamma," he said. "I think I can find Penrod when we want him."

And a few minutes later he added, "And I think I know the place to do it in."

Again the faithful voice of Duke was heard pleading outside the bolted door.

Penrod entered the schoolroom Monday morning picturesquely leaning upon a man's cane, shortened to support a cripple approaching the age of twelve. He arrived about twenty minutes late, limping deeply, his brave

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young mouth drawn with pain, and the sensation he created must have been a solace to him, the only possible criticism of this entrance being that it was just a shade too heroic. Perhaps for that reason it failed to stagger Miss Spence, a woman so saturated with suspicion that she penalized Penrod for tardiness as promptly and as coldly as if he had been a mere, ordinary, unutilized boy. Nor would she entertain any discussion of the justice of her ruling. It seemed almost that she feared to argue with him.

However, the distinction of cane and limp remained to him, consolations which he protracted far into the week—until Thursday evening, in fact, when Mr. Schofield, observing from a window his son's pursuit of Duke round and round the back yard, confiscated the cane, with the promise that it should not remain idle if he saw Penrod limping again. Thus, succeeding a depressing Friday, another Saturday brought the necessity for new inventions.

It was a scented morning in apple blossom time. At about ten of the clock Penrod emerged hastily from the kitchen door. His pockets bulged abnormally, so did his cheeks, and he swallowed with difficulty. A threatening mop, wielded by a cooklike arm in a checkered sleeve, followed him through the doorway, and he was preceded by a small, hurried, wistful dog with a warm doughnut in his mouth. The kitchen door slammed petulantly, enclosing the sore voice of Della, whereupon Penrod and Duke seated themselves upon the pleasant sward and immediately consumed the spoils of their raid.

From the cross street which formed the side boundary of the Schofields' ample yard came a jingle of harness and the cadenced clatter of a pair of trotting horses, and Penrod, looking up, beheld the passing of a fat acquaintance, torpid amid the conservative splendors of a rather old-fashioned victoria. This was Roderick Magsworth Bitts, Jr., a fellow sufferer at the Friday afternoon dancing class, but otherwise not often a companion; a home sheltered lad, tutored privately and preserved against the consoling influences of rule, comradeship and misadventure. Information, heavily overgrown in all physical dimensions, virtuous and placid, this clouded mutton was wholly uninteresting to Penrod Schofield. Nevertheless, Roderick Magsworth Bitts, Jr., was a personage on account of the importance of the Magsworth Bitts family, and it was Penrod's destiny to increase Roderick's celebrity far, far beyond its present aristocratic limitations.

The Magsworth Bittses were important because they were impressive. There was no other reason. And they were impressive because they believed themselves important. The adults of the family were impeccably formal. They dressed with reticent elegance and wore the same nose and the same expression—an expression which indicated that they knew something exquisite and sacred which other people could never know. Other people in their presence were apt to feel mysteriously ignoble and to become secretly uneasy about ancestors, gloves and pronunciation.

The Magsworth Bitts manner was withholding and reserve though sometimes gracious granting small smiles as great favors and giving out a chilling kind of precociousness. Naturally when any citizen of the community did anything unconventional or improper or made a mistake or had a relative who went wrong that citizen's first and worst fear was that the Magsworth Bittses would hear of it. In fact, this painful family had for years terrorized the community, though the community had never realized that it was terrorized and invariably spoke of the family as the "most charming circle in town." By common consent Mrs. Roderick Magsworth Bitts officiated as the supreme model as well as critic in chief of morals and deportment for all the unlucky people prosperous enough to be elevated to her acquaintance.

Magsworth was the important part of the name. Mrs. Roderick Magsworth Bitts was a Magsworth born herself, and the Magsworth crest decorated not only Mrs. Magsworth Bitts' note paper, but was on the china, on the table linen, on the chimney pieces, on the opaque glass of the front door, on the victoria and on the harness, though omitted from the garden hose and the lawn mower.

Naturally no sensible person dreamed of connecting that illustrious crest with the unfortunate and notorious Rena Magsworth, whose name had grown week by week into larger and larger type upon the front pages of newspapers owing to the gradually increasing public and official belief that she had poisoned a family of eight. However, the statement that no sensible person could have connected the Magsworth Bitts family with the arse-nical Rena takes no account of Penrod Schofield.

(To be continued next week)

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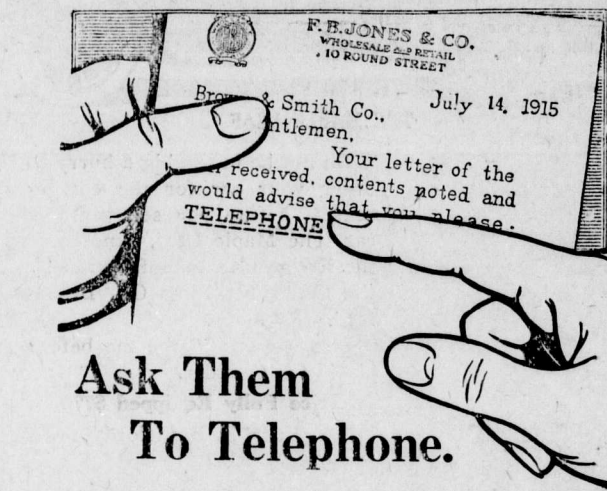
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