
The Sad Tale of Tomsky Sawyerovich

by William M. Fiegenbaum

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In Mark Twain's immortal story of boy life, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn undertake to release the escaped slave, "Nigger Jim," from durance vile. Jim had been arrested in Arkansas and he was being kept a prisoner in a little hut on the plantation, with a light chain around his leg, the other end fastened to the bed.

This was Tom's first real chance of romantic adventure, and he did it up brown. Everything he had read in Dumas was brought into play. Poor old illiterate Jim had to raise a plant in his hut and water it with his tears; he had to keep a diary on the bosom of a shirt written in blood; he had to scratch a last message to his jailers on a millstone; he had to saw the leg of his bed and eat the sawdust, so that at the appointed time he could kick the bed off the chain, sneak out through a tunnel under the cabin, and escape from fleeing bloodhounds.

Tom and Huck had an amazing good time doing it all, including the eating of the sawdust — by Jim — until they got to the millstone. They couldn't get it in, so Jim lifted the bed, slipped off the chain, wrapped it around his neck, went out of the hut in the dead of night, rolled the stone in, slipped the chain back on the bed, and continued the elaborate preparations for the noble getaway. And whenever Huck remonstrated with Tom for overdoing the thing, Tom would look in unutterable contempt at his comrade and ask him if he didn't know anything at all, and didn't he know that that was the way it was done in all the books and by all the authorities, and that nobody of any consequence would ever dream of doing it any other way?

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That was a long time ago, and boys aren't helping runaway slaves to escape by means of formulas from Dumas. But there is another crop of children running around loose who are playing another game; it is more elaborate, more costly, a little sillier, and the children who are playing it are a little older and they ought to be able to have something more serious to do with their time, but they're also having an amazing good time about it in spite of it all.

The grown up adolescents have organized a "party," and they are playing at politics. Now, they have read somewhere that once upon a time there was a country called Russia ruled by a tsar, where even to talk about organizing a political party was against the law, so all their activities had to be "illegal." They organized societies that were "legal," and did whatever work they legally could, but since there was a tsar, and since it was a crime to teach their principles openly, the "legal" party had to be controlled by the "illegal" one in every one of its actions.

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These childish romanticists in the United States, having read about the fun they used to have in Russia, proceeded to do the same thing here. Now, there is a job to be done here, a "Nigger Jim" to be rescued, and there are lots of good ways to get ready to do the job. For example, it isn't against the law here to organize a political party; it isn't against the law to teach political principles. It isn't against the law to publish newspa-

pers that openly proclaim what one believes — even though those laws may have lately been more honored in the breach than in the observance.

But these later day Tom Sawyers won't have it that way. Lawsy, man, aren't there authorities till you can't rest that show that you must do things just the way it used to be done? Suppose it is all right and lawful to make open speeches for nationalization of coal mines? Don't all the best authorities prove that you have got to write a diary on a shirt front? Suppose it is all right to make speeches on the street corner? Doesn't Dumas show that you have got to eat the sawdust and do everything just the way old Monte Cristo did it?

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And so these Tom Sawyers to ahead and do what is written in the books: they have their “legal” party that is, oh, so desperate that it fearlessly demands a soldier bonus! Did you ever see anything so bloodcurdling as that? But when they go ahead and demand that bonus, they can't come right out about it. They have got to have the password and all the rest of it, and the secret illegal “party” must meet in the woods — just like it is written in Stepniak † — and tell them (ssshhhhh!! — the cops are coming!) and tell them to demand a soldier bonus!

And when a couple of Huck Finns in the “legal” “party” though that the game was getting a little too elaborate for them and asked the Toms weren't they overdoing it a bit, they were met with cold, scornful eyes that said, “Huck Finn, I never saw anything so ignorant as you. Whey, the best authorities prove that

you can't do it any other way. And so for daring to doubt the wisdom of the way the authorities laid down, the Huck Finns were punished by not being permitted to be around when the whole Pirate's gang met in the woods and got their orders from a secret emissary who told the “legal” “party” to go ahead and demand a soldier bonus.‡

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And, gee, wouldn't Tom's eyes have popped out if old Dumas himself had been with him when he told “Nigger Jim” what to do! Well, these fellows had their teacher, himself, and they were proud and happy and they met in the pitch dark with burning pine knots for illumination, and the police knew all about it all the time, and everybody was laughing their heads off about it, except the great Detecatiff [William J.] Burns; and the Huck Finns, who weren't allowed to play, sat around and sulked and were so mad that they almost felt like saying the whole game was a fraud.

And the fellows who are tending to their business and really working their heads off to get “Nigger Jim” freed without any nonsense and Ku Kluxism§ — well, you see, they refuse to play the game the way Stepniak and the rest of the Russians had to play it in the good old days of Tsarism in Russia, and so Tom Sawyer (and Huck Finn, if he's over his sulks) have got to “unmask” them as agents of the bourgeoisie and as counterrevolutionists, and as a lot of other funny things because they have a sense of humor, and because they have managed to learn, in some round about way, that this is the United States.

†- “Stepniak” was the pseudonym of Sergei Mikhailovich Kravchinskii, a Russian populist who edited the paper *Zemlia i volia* [Land and Liberty]. In 1888, Harper & Bros. published an translation of a book by Kravchinskii under the title *The Russian Peasantry: Their Agrarian Condition, Social Life and Religion* — one of the first English language titles on the contemporary secret revolutionary movement in Russia.

‡- Reference is to the August 1922 convention of the underground Communist Party of America held near Bridgman, Michigan. The meeting was attended by Comintern Representative Henryk Walecki [Valetskii] as well as two others with close Comintern ties — the Hungarian revolutionary leader Jozsef Pogany [“John Pepper”] and former Buffalo, NY druggist and SLP member Boris Reinstein.

§- That is, without ritualistic secret meetings of the initiated.

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