

Pages for All Ages:

Wear It as Long as You Can

by Eleanor Dart

Some words and phrases to know before you read

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|--------------------------|------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| • historians,
history | • nobleman | • outraged | • weak heart |
| • fiction | • pacifist | • cut him dead | • integrity |
| • England,
Ireland | • weapon | • loud and clear | • burden |
| | • puzzled | • hypocrite | • promptings
of the Spirit |
| | • disgrace | • unpatriotic | |

Editor's note: Quakers like to tell this story about George Fox and William Penn. Historians know that Fox and Penn spent time together, but nobody knows exactly what they said to each other. The story here is "historical fiction." That means that even though the story is pretend, it tells about real people and how they lived in the past.

William Penn grew up in the late 1600s in a wealthy English family. He grew up wanting to be like his father – a nobleman who fought in wars for the

King. Penn's father was one of the King's favorite soldiers, and the whole family was quite proud of it.

In those days, a sword was a part of the normal outfit of an English nobleman. William Penn starts wearing his sword when he is sixteen. He always wears it when he goes out in public. But then something strange happens to William Penn. He becomes a Quaker.

Most of the Quakers Penn knows are pacifists. They believe that all wars are wrong. Before he became a Quaker, Penn went to war and fought in Ireland. But now that he is a Quaker, Penn has to think about if he believes in war or not.

He starts feeling uncomfortable wearing his sword all the time. After all, it isn't just a decoration. It's a weapon of war.

Penn asks his friend George Fox, "Should I stop wearing my sword?" Fox won't tell Penn what to do. Instead, he says, "Wear it as long as you can."

Penn is puzzled. He figures Fox means he should keep wearing his sword, so he does. But he feels more and more uncomfortable about it.

Penn talks to his family about this problem. His father blows up and yells that if his son stops wearing his sword, it will disgrace the entire family. "You'd be letting down King and country," he bellows.





Penn's mother says "If you *must* behave badly, couldn't you at *least* wait until after Christmas?"

Penn's wife worries, "What will the neighbors think?" and "What if a burglar comes?" She mentions how handsome he is wearing his sword, how that was partly why she fell in love with him in the first place. She cries.

His oldest son, a teenager, feels so outraged and embarrassed at the very *idea* of his father going out in public without a sword that he buys a sword of his own and leaves home to join the navy.

Penn talks with his oldest and closest friends, who are not Quakers. One of the soldiers who fought at Penn's side in Ireland says that he'll cut Penn dead if he gives up his sword. Other buddies agree and tell Penn all sorts of reasons why he should keep on wearing it.

It's all very hard to take. Penn's new Quaker friends won't tell him what to do. But everyone else is telling him loud and clear. Penn becomes more and more uncomfortable wearing his sword, to the point that he doesn't even like leaving the house. And when Penn wears his sword during Quaker meeting for worship, he feels like a hypocrite.

Finally, he can't take it any more. He can't keep wearing his sword. He takes it off and puts it away forever.

Penn feels naked at first, when he goes outside without his sword.

His father is furious, storms about swearing, and accuses Penn of being disobedient and unpatriotic. His mother complains, "How could you *do* this to your father? You *know* he has a weak heart." His



old friends turn their backs on him when they see him in the street.

But Penn's wife realizes that one of the things she has always loved most about him is his integrity. She tells him so, and they are joyful together. His Quaker friends smile.

George Fox, next time they meet, nods to Penn and says, "I see you couldn't wear it any more."

None of this matters to Penn, compared to how he feels inside his soul. He feels released. He feels like he has put down a heavy burden. He understands that he has stopped fighting with a voice inside telling him to let the sword go. Now that voice is quiet. He feels immense relief. He feels open to new promptings of the Spirit. He listens. He is ready to step forward into the next part of his life. ♣

- What are some things that "all the kids" at your school "need" to have, or they won't fit in?
- What is it like when you think everybody else is wrong, and everybody else thinks you're wrong?
- How can one person help others see in a new way?

The portrait of William Penn as a young man in 1666 is probably by Sir Peter Lely. The paintings of 17th-century clothing are by Albert Kretschmer. All images are in the public domain.

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