

"Outwitting the Hun"

By Lieutenant Pat O'Brien

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Stilts Would Be Easy
 Another plan that seemed half way reasonable was to build a pair of stilts about twelve or fourteen feet high and walk over the barriers one by one. As a youngster I had acquired considerable skill in stilt-walking and I have no doubt that with the proper equipment it would have been quite feasible to have walked out of Belgium as possible in that way, but whether or not I was going to have

a chance to construct the necessary stilts remained to be seen. There were a good many bicycles in use by the German soldiers in Belgium and it had often occurred to me that if I could have stolen one, the wires would have made excellent gloves and insulated coverings for my feet in case it was necessary for me to attempt to climb over the electric fence bodily. But as I had never been able to steal a bicycle this avenue of escape was closed to me.

I decided to wait until I arrived at the barrier and then make up my mind how to proceed. To find a decent place to creep that night, I crawled under a barbed wire fence, thinking it led into some field. As I passed under, one of the bars caught in my coat and in trying to pull myself free I shook the fence for several yards.

Commanded to "Halt!" Instantly there came out of the night the nerve-racking command, "Halt!" Again I feared I was done for. I crouched close down on the ground in the darkness, not knowing whether to take to my legs and trust to the Hun missing me in the darkness if he fired or stay where I was. It was foggy as well as dark, and although I know the sentry was only a few feet away from me, I decided to stand, or rather lie pat. I think

my heart made almost as much noise as the rattling of the wire in the first place, and it was a tense few moments to me.

I heard the German say a few words to himself, but didn't understand them, of course, and then he made a sound as if to call a dog, and I realized that his theory of the noise he had heard was that a dog had made its way through the fence. For perhaps five minutes I didn't stir, and then figuring that the German had probably continued on his beat, I crept quietly under the wire again, this time being mighty careful to hug the ground so close that I wouldn't touch the wire, and made off in a different direction. Evidently the barbed wire fence had been thrown around an ammunition depot or something of the kind, and it was not a field at all that I had tried to get into.

I figured that other sentries were probably in the neighborhood, and I proceeded very gingerly.

A Belgian Lady's Gift
 After I had got about a mile away from this spot I came to an humble Belgian house and I knocked at the door and applied for food in my usual way, pointing to my mouth to indicate I was hungry and to my ears and mouth to imply that I was deaf and dumb. The Belgian woman who lived in the house brought me a piece of bread and two cold potatoes and as I sat there eating them she eyed me keenly.

I haven't the slightest doubt that she realized that I was a fugitive. She lived so near the border that it was for that reason I appreciated more fully the extent of the risk she ran, for no doubt the Germans were constantly watching the conduct of these Belgians who lived near the line. My theory that she realized that I was not a Belgian at all, but probably some English fugitive, was confirmed a moment later, when, as I made ready to go, she touched me on the arm and indicated that I was to wait a moment. She went to a bureau and brought out two pieces of fancy Belgian lace which she insisted upon my taking away, although at that particular moment I had as much use for Belgian lace as an elephant for a safety razor, but I was touched with her thoughtfulness and pressed her hand to show my gratitude. She would not accept the money I offered her.

Kept Lace For His Mother
 I carried that lace through my subsequent experiences, feeling that it would be a fine souvenir for my mother, although as a mater of fact if I had known that it was going to delay my final escape for a single moment, as it did, I am quite sure she would rather I had never seen it. On one piece of lace was the Flemish word "Charite," and on the other the word "Esperage." At the time I took these words to mean "Charity" and "Experience," and all I hoped for was that I would get as much of the one as I was getting of the other before I finally got through. I learned subsequently that what the words really stood for were "Charity" and "Hope," and then I was sure that my kind Belgian friend had indeed realized my plight and that her thoughtful souvenir was intended to encourage me in the trials she must have known were before me.

I didn't let the old Belgian lady know, because I did not want to alarm her unnecessarily, but that night I slept in her back yard, leaving early in the morning before it became light. Later in the day I applied at another house for food. It was occupied by a father and mother and three children. I hesitated to ask for food without offering to pay for it, as I realized what a task it must have been for them to support themselves without having to feed a hungry man. Accordingly I gave the man a mark and then indicated that I wanted something to eat.

Shares a Family Meal
 They were just about to eat themselves, apparently and they let me partake of their meal, which consisted of a huge bowl of some kind of soup which I was unable to identify and which they served in ordinary wash basins. I don't know that they ever used the basins to wash in as well but whether they did or not did not worry me very much. The soup was good and I enjoyed it very much.

All I think I was there I could see the father and the eldest son, a boy about seventeen were extremely nervous. I had indicated to them that I was deaf and dumb, but if they believed me it didn't seem to make them any more comfortable. I lingered at the house for about an hour after the meal and during that time a young man came to call on the eldest daughter, a young woman of perhaps eighteen. The caller eyed me very suspiciously, although I must have resembled anything but a British officer. They spoke in Flemish and I did not understand a word they said, but I think they were discussing my probable identity. During their conversation, I had a chance to look around the rooms. There were three altogether, two fairly large and one somewhat smaller, about fourteen feet long and six deep. In this smaller room there were two double-decked beds, which were apparently intended to house the whole family, although how the whole twelve of them could sleep in that one room will ever remain a mystery to me.

From the kitchen you could walk directly into the cow barn, where two cows were kept, and this, as I have pointed out before, is the usual construction of the poorer Belgian houses. **Caller's Suspicion Aroused**
 I could not make out why the caller seemed to be so antagonistic to me, and yet I am sure he was arguing with the family against me. Perhaps the fact that I wasn't wearing wooden shoes—I doubt whether I could have obtained a pair big enough for me—had convinced him that I was not really a Belgian, because there was nothing about me otherwise which could have given him that idea.

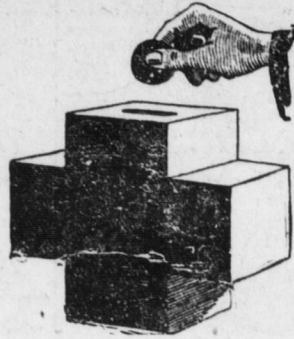
At that time, and I suppose it is true to-day, about ninety per cent. of the people in Belgium were wearing wooden shoes. Among the peasants I don't believe I ever saw any other kind of footwear and they are more common there than they are in Holland. The Dutch wear them more as a matter of lack of leather. I was told that during the coming year practically all the peasants and poorer people in Germany, too, will adopt wooden shoes for farm work, as that is one direction in which wood can be substituted for leather without much loss.

When the young man left I left shortly afterward, as I was not at all comfortable about what his intentions were regarding me. For all I knew he might have gone to notify the German authorities that there was a strange man in the vicinity—more perhaps to protect his friends from suspicion of having aided me than to injure me. At any rate, I was not going to take any chances and I got out of that neighborhood as rapidly as I could. That night found me right on the frontier of Holland.

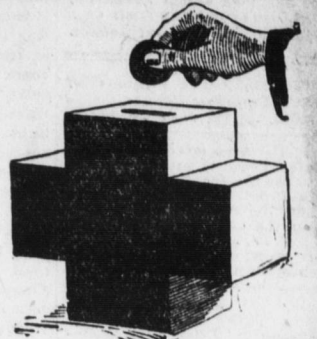
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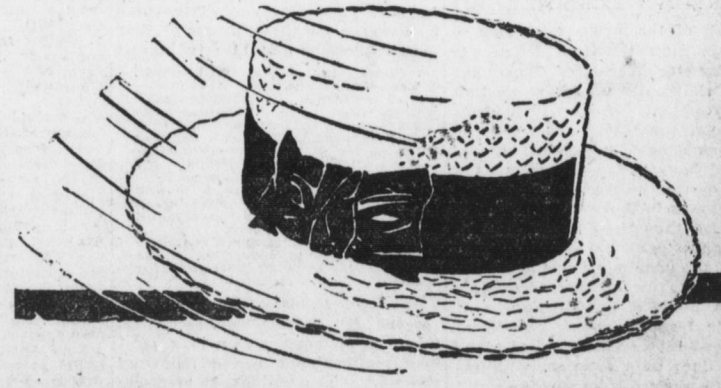
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