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The Western Home Monthly
WINNIPEG



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Back Door Exits from Germany

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Aubrey Fulkerton

PRIVATE A. NELSON, of Manitoba, was taken prisoner at Ypres in 1915. For two years he endured an irksome captivity, but could never reconcile himself to the fact, let alone the methods, of a German prison camp. The greater part of his time was served at Munster, and it was there, in due course, that he made a break for liberty.

Early last August two Scottish comrades in misery joined with him in a deep-laid scheme to be done with German captivity. They were working at the time with a large party of British and Canadian prisoners, in a stone quarry at Munster, and the three of them, with many a careful watching for their chance, wandered away in the dusk one night when the rest were being rounded up for the return to camp. They had planned this thing for days, and in preparation had stunted themselves of their rations that they might have some food to take with them. It was eighty miles to the Dutch frontier, and all they could carry was in their pockets.

After the get-away there followed a cross-country journey that was accomplished with great difficulty and at such risk as to make the escape itself seem only a bit of play. By day they hid themselves under hedges or in ditches, and travelled only at night, even then avoiding villages and public highways. "Many times," said Nelson afterwards, "German women working in the fields passed so close we could hear them talk. We had to guess the direction in the dark, but were always lucky, and I think we made almost a straight line, without being stopped once. Dogs running out at us gave us the most worry."

It took eight days to reach the border of Holland, and at Rotterdam the British consul gave them each an outfit of civilian clothing. By the middle of the month they were in England, and ready for service again.

Without a fair sprinkling of jail-escape stories like this, the history of the war can never be quite complete. There are lots of them, differing in detail, but agreeing absolutely on one main point. To have been in a German prison, and then to have got away, on the testimony of men who have done it, is like passing out of abysmal darkness into glorious sunshine.

Sergeant Joseph Turcotte was another Canadian prisoner at Munster, where he was taken on Christmas Eve, 1915. During the winter he attempted to escape, but was caught in the act and suitably punished. In April he made a second attempt, failed again, and was removed to another and still worse prison at Riga.

When, some time in the summer, he was ordered to take charge of a prison gang on a piece of fortification work, Turcotte refused. He was then returned to Munster, and subjected to stricter surveillance than ever. Early in November he made a third break, and this time he succeeded. Then came two weeks of hide-and-seek travelling across country, with turnips and cabbages picked from the fields as almost his only food. Eventually he reached the seaboard, and crossed to London.

An old theatre in Dulmen, Westphalia, was the place of durance vile in which Private John Vaughan, of Halifax, was quartered in 1916, along with a number of other prisoners of war. Vaughan's mate was Private Pollet, of Winnipeg, and together they schemed an escape. Fortune favored them by the very meagreness of the prison service, which left them the more largely to themselves. Every sixth day each man received a loaf of bread for his week's supply, and in addition they were given black coffee in the morning and some meatless soup through the day.

A number of Belgians, who had been deported and were allowed to go at liberty, were in another apartment of the theatre-prison, and it was with their connivance that the two Canadians finally got out.

Vaughan and Pollet, in some mysterious way, possessed themselves of a saw, and with it, after weeks of careful and tedious work, they cut a hole through the ceiling into the room occupied by some of the Belgians. Their fellow prisoners, willing to help in the plot, kept up a stream of chatter and song to distract the guards while the sawing was going on, and when the two jail-breakers finally got through to the upper room the Belgians rigged them out in disguises like themselves, and so let them down a back stairway to the street.

They carried with them a little food, a railroad map which they had stolen, and a cheap compass, and with this slight provision for their journey they set out for Holland. After four nights of hard travelling and four days of hiding along the way, they reached the Dutch border, only to find impassable wire entanglements blocking their further progress. There was no other course for them but to keep on to the north, and in this direction they came at last to a place where, according to the story sent home to Canada, "the frontier was guarded with sentries only, the sentry boxes being about two hundred yards apart. They lay all day not far from these sentries, praying for a dark night. The moon rose clear and bright, and they did not dare make a start. About two o'clock a mist came up, and taking advantage of it, they crawled from their hiding place, and succeeded in crossing the border. They were not long in finding a military camp, where they gave themselves up, and were sent to Rotterdam by the British consul."

One of the most stirring stories of war-time escape from Germany is that of Major Pete Anderson, of Edmonton, who made a hairbreadth get-away and a consequent chase for liberty across six hundred miles of enemy country. Anderson and his company were fighting in advance of the British firing line at Ypres, when they were taken prisoners. The major himself was interned in a large concentration camp at Bischofswerda, one hundred miles south of Berlin. He wrote home that he had as good a time there, through the summer of 1915, as he could have expected under the circumstances, but after five months he got tired of it. Right at that point he began to think of breaking loose.

When one is seriously planning a get-away of that kind, the first step is to gather up something to eat, and for several days Anderson saved out portions of his meal allowances and secreted them in the sand close to an old well. That well had already been sized up as a strategic point. Another was an empty barn just inside the prison-camp enclosure and so close to the well as to be really inviting. To complete his arrangements, Anderson made a rope ladder, very much on the quiet, of course, and perhaps as much because it seemed the right thing to do as because he had any clear idea how he should use it. So far, the plot was developing nicely, and quite according to rule of book.

Then one evening in September, as the prisoners were about to be shut up for the night, the liberty-loving Major crawled out to his well, lifted its loose wooden cover, crept under it, and drew it after him over the mouth of the well. A prison guard on his night beat came uncomfortably close to the hiding-place, but after an hour or so Anderson began to push the well-cover back, very gradually, till there was room for him to get out; and then, when the guard was at the farthest point of his beat, he made a sudden spring, lifted the knapsack of food from the sand, and jumped like a cat into the barn.

There were more guards and a wire fence on the other side of the barn, and no exit but a high window. He watched his chance, lowered the rope ladder which he had brought with him, climbed down on it, and when the guards were again farthest away from him he dashed off across the open—having previously muffled his feet—and was quickly over the fence.

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Under cover of the night he made off fast toward Switzerland, the border country of which was not far away. But for some reason—perhaps because the Danish blood in him drew him to Scandinavian territory—he changed his mind and headed for the Baltic coast, by way of farm-fields and forest. On the second day, having meanwhile disguised himself as well as possible, he ventured into a small town and bought a raincoat, a chart and compass, and a newspaper. In the paper was some prison camp news, including the discovery of his own escape, from which he learned that he was supposed to have gone in the direction of the Swiss border, where the war dogs had already set out after him. This tickled him immensely. To have his pursuit headed just the opposite way from himself was exactly what he wanted.

Emboldened by this pleasant news, and wishing to see the Kaiser's big city before quitting Germany, he went into Berlin, and mixed with the crowds, which is a very good way of covering one's tracks. He even treated himself to a taxi ride. But he was still, as he very well knew, on dangerous ground, and to make a better disguise he assumed the role of a bricklayer, with such credentials as a slouch cap, a stubby beard, and a familiar acquaintance with bricks. In that guise he bought a railway ticket in the direction of Denmark.

What happened along the way, through Schleswig-Holstein, was uneventful in comparison with his adventures on reaching the border. The scrutiny of all travellers was naturally much more strict there than in the interior, and Anderson found it as difficult to get past as it had been to get away from the prison camp. One gendarme in particular was so persistent that he found it necessary to head him into a hotel and treat him till he was drunk. Eventually, however, he got into Denmark, which meant just then the best kind of Easy street he ever had been on. His chase across Germany had taken a week and a half. In due time he crossed over to England, and there reported to the War Office.

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