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"Englander Schwein"

By George Eustace Pearson in the Saturday Evening Post
(Concluded from Last Week)

On the evening of this day we walked out to the edge of the wood we were in, and stood there sizing up the nearby village. It was about seven o'clock and waited about an hour to darkness and our usual time for hitting the trail. Without any warning a burly farmer confronted us. He was as badly startled as we were. Our remnants of painted uniforms, our ragged, soaked and generally filthy condition no doubt added to our terrible appearance. We had long since lost our caps and our hair was matted like a dog's. The German was armed, however, with a double-barrelled shotgun and at his heels a powerful looking dog showed his teeth to us, so that I marked the red of his tongue. If he raised the alarm we were done for. We still had our cudgels.

I do not know whose was the offensive. But I do know that the three of us came together with one accord in a wild and terrible medley of oaths in two languages and of murderous blows that beat like flails at a thrashing. Simonds and I struggled for the gun which he tried so hard to turn on us, the dog meanwhile sinking its teeth deep in our unprotected legs and leaping vainly at our throats while we felt with clutching fingers for his master's, intent only that he should not shout.

In those mad moments there sped through our brains the reel of that whole horrid film of fifteen months' torture of mind and body; the pale, blood-covered faces of our murdered comrades of the regiment, the cries of those patient Russians behind the trees and our own slow and deadly starvation and planned mistreatment. All these, and God only knows what else, would be ours again if we should be recaptured.

Nearing the Border

We were near to Holland. In fancy and by contrast we saw the fair English fields and the rolling beauty that is Ontario's, and we heard the good English tongue and saw the dear faces of our own folk. We bore the farmer no ill will. And his dog was to this last a very faithful animal, as our clothes and limbs bore true witness. We had no ropes. And we were two very desperate men badly put upon.

We dropped his gun in the bushes and passed on. It had not been fired and we had no desire to have the charge of carrying firearms added to the others against us if, in spite of all, we should be so unfortunate as to be recaptured.

"September 8: Lovely weather today. Good going last night in small swamp. Good cover in a forest on the banks of the Elms. We will try to cross tonight. Meals: potatoes and mangels. Our final try for liberty. Feel good for it."

We had arrived at the river at two o'clock that morning, too played out to attempt the crossing then. We retraced our steps to a potato field, dug some of the tubers and, when daylight came, lit a fire and roasted them. We were in a dense forest of young trees. By lighting the fire before the mist lifted the latter hid our smoke. We remained unperceived, though we could hear voices and footsteps on every side.

We went down to the river shortly before dusk to survey it and found it both broad and swift. We went back again and tore a gate from its hinges, carried it the 500 yards down to the river and then stripped for the crossing. The gate was not big enough to carry us but answered for our clothes. Simonds swam ahead, guiding it while I shoved from behind. We made the crossing without mishap and straightway fell into one of the worst experiences of the trip. We plunged into a swamp which took us five hours to get through. There were moments when we all but gave up. We thought we should never get out. At times we sank in it up to our waists, particularly after leaping at the numerous tufts of grass that seemed to promise a footing which they never realized and which sometimes sent us in to the armpits so

that we were sure we were doomed to be sucked down for good in the filthy mess. And the fearful odor that our plunging round stirred up naturally aided our nervous imaginings.

A dull anger took possession of us at the thought of so inglorious an end, after all that we had suffered to attain our freedom.

We soon discovered an apple orchard in which the fruit was ripe. All the apples we had had up to date had been of the small green variety. And even they, with the occasional milk, represented our all of luxury, so that these seemed the food of the gods. So we proceeded to fill up. After eating all that we thought we could we filled our pockets until they bulged and started off, each carrying an armful of the fruit. At every step we dropped some. We stopped again and ate our surplus to make room. We refused to lose any of them. We came to a river, stripped, tied our clothes up in a bundle and proceeded to swim across, shoving the clothes ahead. I lost control of mine and they sank. I dived repeatedly in the darkness before I found them. The cargo of apples in the pockets made a bad matter worse. I should rather have drowned than lose my apples. The possible loss of the clothes worried us very little. We had already decided in that event to waylay some German Michael rather than go naked into Holland. However, by alternately dragging the bundle behind and swimming on our backs with it held high on the chest with one hand, we made the crossing, apples and all.

We were sitting in the shadow deciding what next to do and wondering whether we were really over the border and if we could safely walk abroad, when we heard men walking toward us. We knew them to be Germans by the clank of the hobnailed boots which all our guards had worn. We had not a stitch on. The patrol of six men stopped within five yards of us. Our hearts were in our mouths. They passed on, within five feet and did not see us. We dressed quickly and went on, only to find a canal, for which we had to strip again.

Safe Across the Border

Arriving at the other side we dressed in the shadow of the bank. We crawled to the top and plunged through the heather on to a road which we had almost crossed when there came a cry of "Halt!" The patrol must have been standing in the trees where we had broken out from the heather, and very quietly too, for we had lain for five minutes to make certain that all was safe. Evidently we were on or near the border if the number of patrols was any indication. We were not certain whether these were Hollanders or Germans. We made one big back jump. "Fire, Gridley, when ready!" I left the entire knee of one trousers leg on a clutching thorn. But the patrol did not fire.

And then another canal. "I'm fed up with swimming tonight."

"So am I," agreed Simonds. "There are houses over there. There must be a bridge."

We slunk along the bank and to our joy found a small bridge. We dashed across it and debouched safely into a tiny village. Here we saw a difference, especially in the houses and the roadway. It was in the very atmosphere, a result no doubt of instincts made keen by the hunted lives we had led. On either side the fields stretched out, crisscrossed by a perfect network of small canals and ditches, which also served as fences.

We knew we were in Holland. We deemed it unwise to show ourselves as yet, distrusting the sympathies of the Hollanders and fearful that they might give us up. However, we took a chance and stuck to the road, a treat indeed after our weeks of travelling across country. This enabled us to shove thirty miles between us and Germany by morning.

It was not quite daylight when we