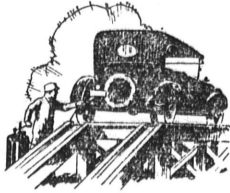


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BILLY WHISKERS

By FRANCES MONTGOMERY

Billy had come back to the castle and discovered the German officers sitting on the lawn.

"I'll creep up close to them and see if I can't hear what they are saying. It might come in handy some day. They will never suspect a goat can understand what they say and they will think I belong to the goats and sheep that are grazing quite near."

Billy found a good place to listen, for there was a clump of big, thick growing bushes just behind the table where the Prince and his staff were sitting, and Billy, walking along nibbling the grass as he went, was soon hidden from their view, though he could distinctly hear every word they said.

"This Captain seems to be a very brave man," said one of the officers. "And I admire his pluck." "You do, do you?" sneered another. "Well, yes, he is brave, and for fear he may give us the slip I am going to have him shot at sunrise tomorrow."

Of course the officers were too afraid of displeasing their superior officer to say a word, for he had such an angry temper that he might order them shot simply for disagreeing with him.

Dinner Ready "Here comes an orderly to tell us dinner is served, and I am awfully glad of it, for I am hungry as a wolf."

"Yes, but I would like to be a wolf and chew you into bits," thought Billy to himself.

When the German officers had disappeared inside the castle Billy went again to see if he could not discover his master at the window. But he was not there.

"I would be afraid they had killed my master while I was gone if I had not just heard them say he was to be shot at sunrise," thought Billy. "My, what a racket that dog is making!" and around a corner of the castle came a dog chasing a rat.

The rat, reaching the castle wall, ran in a hole in the very tower that imprisoned Billy's master.

This infuriated the dog, so he began to scratch the hole longer, to get at the rat. He dug and dug until the hole was large enough for him to crawl in, when all of a sudden the dirt around the hole fell in, disclosing a small, square iron door, rusty with age and hanging by one hinge. The dog was nearly buried under the dirt, so Billy hurried to the spot and began digging him out.

"Thank you, thank you, stranger! If you had not come to the rescue I should have been smothered in another three minutes. Hope I shall have a chance to do you a good turn some day."

"You can right now, by watching and barking when you see anyone coming. For I want to see what is behind that iron door, and I don't want anyone to see me doing it."

"All right. Go ahead—I'll watch." "I can't understand why you want to look in the ash pit to a chimney," said the dog. "That iron door is the opening to the chimney that runs up into the prisoner's room. When there is a fire in that grate, they simply push the ashes down the chimney and then come and open this door and take them out. But it hasn't been used for years, as you can see by the pile of dirt that hid it until I unearthed it by scratching to get at my rat."

Uses His Head "Just the same, I am going to see what is behind it," declared Billy.

This was easy to do, for all Billy had to do was to rattle the door with his horns until the one hinge that held it broke and let the door fall. It made such a clatter on the stones that both Billy and the dog stood still and looked in every direction, expecting that the noise would attract some one. But no one appeared, so Billy stuck his head through the opening, and what should he see instead of an ash pit but a very narrow pair of secret stairs that ran up to the rooms in the tower above!

"Come here quickly and see what I have discovered!" called Billy, and the dog ran to the opening and stuck in his head.

"Well! Well! Well! This is a find! We have stumbled onto one of the many secret stairs and passages they say this castle possesses. I have heard my master say that there are more than a hundred hidden stairs, passages, rooms, dungeons and sliding panels in this castle. For you know a robber baron lived here once and he used to hide his plunder in these secret places, as well as his prisoners, and even himself when he was pursued. This was long, long ago, my master said, in the time of the Crusaders."

"That is all very interesting, as in America we don't have any old castles with secret stairs and rooms. We are too new a country. If I can squeeze myself through this door I am going up those steps and see where they lead!" "You better let me go up first, as I am smaller. Besides, my feet won't make as much noise as yours, for you have hoofs. And you don't want anyone that might be in the rooms to hear you."

"Make a Plan" "That's a good idea," agreed Billy. "You go up and explore and I'll stay here and watch so that if anyone comes along and tries to shut the door I'll jump out and butt their heads off."

Stealthily and cautiously the dog crept up the stairs. He made little noise, and had anyone heard him they would have thought it was only rats in the chimney flue.

On the first landing Billy saw the dog stop and turn his head, as if listening intently to something. Presently he stopped listening and came creeping down the stairs again, excitement written on his face.

"What is it? What is it?" asked Billy.

"You go up and listen," he cried. "For the German officers are in that room and they are planning to hang the man imprisoned in the tower in room at midnight instead of at sunrise. The minute he is dead they are going to leave the castle, riding to their new headquarters, as this will be too near the battle front by day after tomorrow, for the battle is slowly but surely making this way. At this moment they are consulting maps and plans for the movement of their troops on the West front."

"Did you hear all this?" "Yes!"

Quick Action "Then I will be just in time to save my master's life once more again, for if he is to be hanged at midnight it will be impossible for my General to reach here to save him, as he has to go many, many miles to reach a bridge so he can cross the river."

"I am going up now, and you stay here and give me a signal if anyone comes and tries to shut the door. But if they just pass by or look in, don't bark. I'll trust to not being seen."

Up the stairs went Billy, one step at a time so that his footsteps would be light and that he would be sure not to knock any plaster from the side walls that would rattle down the steps.

When Billy reached the landing where the dog had stopped to listen he found he was right back of a large open fireplace. If he chose, he could have butted down the little door and rushed into the room where the officers were still talking. But he did not stop to hear what they were saying, for the dog had told him enough to let him know that time was precious. So he climbed on up the stairs, but just as he put his foot on the lowest step to mount he heard some one in the room say:

"What is that noise I hear?" "Oh, only the rats in the chimney."

Captain Warned Billy hurried as fast as he could. Just the steps were so narrow and steep it was almost like climbing a ladder. At last he reached another landing, which he thought must be the one where the chimney opened into the room in which his master was locked. So as not to startle him, he made a scratching sound with his horns on the wall, so that his master would hear that first and think it was rats. Then he gave a tiny little low baa.

"What—who is there?" asked his master.

Then he heard Captain Strongheart give a faint laugh and say to himself: "I must be losing my mind from loss of sleep and lack of food to think I heard my Billy—the my dear old Billy—bawling in a chimney up several flights of stairs!"

"Baa!" said Billy again, and began to push on the secret door that opened into the room where his master was. As Billy's head appeared in the door his master held out both arms to him, as if he were a human being, exclaiming as he did so:

"Billy! Billy! Is it really you or only your ghost?" And Billy bowed again to let him know it was really and truly Billy Whiskers in the flesh, and not a phantom goat, that he saw.

In a second Billy's master took

in the whole situation, and saw his chance to escape. But he saw it none too soon, for as he put his head through the secret door to see where Billy had come from, he heard voices as some one came up the stairs to his room. Quickly stepping inside the chimney, he pulled shut the secret door and held it close, putting his ear to the door so he could hear what whoever was coming would say when they found him gone and the door locked as they had left it, and no rope, ladder, or other means of escape.

He heard loud laughter outside and the jingling of keys. Then the door squeaked on its hinges and an officer entered.

"Gott in Himmel! The man is gone! Some one has let him out! I'll have the head of whoever has helped him escape!" he stormed.

He issued orders fast and furiously that soldiers be sent out to try to recapture the prisoner. The officer walked to the one window and looked down on the peaceful valley, but all he saw was the sparkling river and a cloud of dust as three automobiles came tearing along the road. He paid little attention to them, for he thought they were German machines. Had he known that they were French cars filled with officers coming to capture him, dead or alive, he would have stopped his ravings at his officers and tried to make his own escape. Luckily for the French, he did not know of a single secret stairway, room or panel in the old castle, else he and his officers could have hidden themselves and made good their get-away through one of the many secret tunnels that led to the bank of the river.

As Billy and his master made their way down the stairs Billy was nearly petrified with fright when he saw his master stop at the landing opposite the room where the officers had their papers and, pushing the little secret door open, boldly walk in, swiftly gather up all the papers and maps on the table, and hurry back to the chimney.

"Don't you hope that they will escape?"

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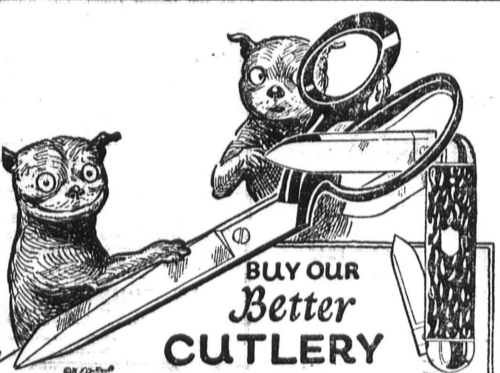
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