

# **The Belgian Twins**

Lucy Fitch Perkins

## Table of Contents

<b><u>The Belgian Twins</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Lucy Fitch Perkins</u> .....	1
<u>PREFACE</u> .....	1
<u>I. THE HARVEST-FIELD</u> .....	1
<u>II. THE RUMORS</u> .....	4
<u>III. THE ALARM</u> .....	6
<u>IV. "FOR KING, FOR LAW AND LIBERTY"</u> .....	7
<u>V. DOING A MAN'S WORK</u> .....	8

# The Belgian Twins

Lucy Fitch Perkins

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- PREFACE
  - I. THE HARVEST-FIELD
  - II. THE RUMORS
  - III. THE ALARM
  - IV. "FOR KING, FOR LAW AND LIBERTY"
  - V. DOING A MAN'S WORK
  - VI. AT THE CHURCH
  - VII. THE TIDAL WAVE OF GERMANS
  - VIII. GRANNY AND THE EELS
  - IX. OFF FOR ANTWERP
  - X. ON THE TOW-PATH
  - XI. THE ATTACK
  - XII. THE ZEPPELIN RAID
  - XIII. REFUGEES
  - XIV. THE MOST WONDERFUL PART
- 

Produced by Lynn Hill  
hill\_lynn@hotmail.com

To the friends of Belgian Children --

## PREFACE

In this sad hour of the world's history, when so many homes have been broken up, and so many hearts burdened with heavy sorrows, it is comforting to think of the many heroic souls who, throughout the struggle, have gone about their daily tasks with unflinching courage and cheerfulness, and by so doing have helped to carry the burdens of the world, and to sustain other hearts as heavy as their own.

It is comforting, also, to know that there are many instances of happy reunions after long and unspeakable anxieties, adventures, and trials.

This story of two little Belgian refugees is based upon the actual experience of two Belgian children, and the incident of the locket is quite true.

The characters of the eel-woman and the mother of the Twins have also their living originals, from whose courage and devotion the author has received much inspiration.

## I. THE HARVEST-FIELD

It was late in the afternoon of a long summer's day in Belgium. Father Van Hove was still at work in the harvest-field, though the sun hung so low in the west that his shadow, stretching far across the level, green plain,

## The Belgian Twins

reached almost to the little red-roofed house on the edge of the village which was its home. Another shadow, not so long, and quite a little broader, stretched itself beside his, for Mother Van Hove was also in the field, helping her husband to load the golden sheaves upon an old blue farm-cart which stood near by.

Them were also two short, fat shadows which bobbed briskly about over the green meadow as their owners danced among the wheat-sheaves or carried handfuls of fresh grass to Pier, the patient white farm-horse, hitched to the cart. These gay shadows belonged to Jan and Marie, sometimes called by their parents Janke and Mie, for short. Jan and Marie were the twin son and daughter of Father and Mother Van Hove, and though they were but eight years old, they were already quite used to helping their father and mother with the work of their little farm.

They knew how to feed the chickens and hunt the eggs and lead Pier to water and pull weeds in the garden. In the spring they had even helped sow the wheat and barley, and now in the late summer they were helping to harvest the grain.

The children had been in the field since sunrise, but not all of the long bright day had been given to labor. Early in the morning their father's pitchfork had uncovered a nest of field mice, and the Twins had made another nest, as much like the first as possible, to put the homeless field babies in, hoping that their mother would find them again and resume her interrupted housekeeping.

Then they had played for a long time in the tiny canal which separated the wheat-field from the meadow, where Bel, their black and white cow, was pastured. There was also Fidel, the dog, their faithful companion and friend. The children had followed him on many an excursion among the willows along the river-bank, for Fidel might at any moment come upon the rabbit or water rat which he was always seeking, and what a pity it would be for Jan and Marie to miss a sight like that!

When the sun was high overhead, the whole family, and Fidel also, had rested under a tree by the little river, and Jan and Marie had shared with their father and mother the bread and cheese which had been brought from home for their noon meal. Then they had taken a nap in the shade, for it is a long day that begins and ends with the midsummer sun. The bees hummed so drowsily in the clover that Mother Van Hove also took forty winks, while Father Van Hove led Pier to the river for a drink; and tied him where he could enjoy the rich meadow grass for a while.

And now the long day was nearly over. The last level rays of the disappearing sun glistened on the red roofs of the village, and the windows of the little houses gave back an answering flash of light. On the steeple of the tiny church the gilded cross shone like fire against the gray of the eastern sky.

The village clock struck seven and was answered faintly by the sound of distant chimes from the Cathedral of Malines, miles away across the plain.

For some time Father Van Hove had been standing on top of the load, catching the sheaves which Mother Van Hove tossed up to him, and stowing them away in the farm-wagon, which was already heaped high with the golden grain. As the clock struck, he paused in his labor, took off his hat, and wiped his brow. He listened for a moment to the music of the bells, glanced at the western sky, already rosy with promise of the sunset, and at the weather-cock above the cross on the church-steeple. Then he looked down at the sheaves of wheat, still standing like tiny tents across the field.

"It's no use, Mother," he said at last; "we cannot put it all in to-night, but the sky gives promise of a fair day to-morrow, and the weather-cock, also, points east. We can finish in one more load; let us go home now."

"The clock struck seven," cried Jan. "I counted the strokes."

## The Belgian Twins

"What a scholar is our Janke!" laughed his mother, as she lifted the last sheaf of wheat on her fork and tossed it at Father Van Hove's feet. "He can count seven when it is supper-time! As for me, I do not need a clock; I can tell the time of day by the ache in my bones; and, besides that, there is Bel at the pasture bars waiting to be milked and bellowing to call me."

"I don't need a clock either," chimed in Marie, patting her apron tenderly; "I can tell time by my stomach. It's a hundred years since we ate our lunch; I know it is."

"Come, then, my starvelings," said Mother Van Hove, pinching Marie's fat cheek, "and you shall save your strength by riding home on the load! Here, Ma mie, up you go!"

She swung Marie into the air as she spoke. Father Van Hove reached down from his perch on top of the load, caught her in his arms, and enthroned her upon the fragrant grain.

"And now it is your turn, my Janke!" cried Mother Van Hove, "and you shall ride on the back of old Pier like a soldier going to the wars!" She lifted Jan to the horse's back, while Father Van Hove climbed down to earth once more and took up the reins.

Fidel came back dripping wet from the river, shook himself, and fell in behind the wagon. "U – U!" cried Father Van Hove to old Pier, and the little procession moved slowly up the cart-path toward the shining windows of their red-roofed house.

The home of the Van Hoves lay on the very outskirts of the little hamlet of Meer. Beside it ran a yellow ribbon of road which stretched across the green plain clear to the city of Malines. As they turned from the cart-path into the road, the old blue cart became part of a little profession of similar wagons, for the other men of Meer were also late in coming home to the village from their outlying farms.

"Good-evening, neighbor," cried Father Van Hove to Father Maes, whose home lay beyond his in the village. "How are your crops coming on?"

"Never better," answered Father Maes; "I have more wheat to the acre than ever before."

"So have I, thanks be to the good God;" answered Father Van Hove. "The winter will find our barns full this year."

"Yes," replied Father Maes a little sadly; "that is, if we have no bad luck, but Jules Verhulst was in the city yesterday and heard rumors of a German army on our borders. It is very likely only an idle tale to frighten the women and children, but Jules says there are men also who believe it."

"I shall believe nothing of the sort," said Father Van Hove stoutly. "Are we not safe under the protection of our treaty? No, no, neighbor, there's nothing to fear! Belgium is neutral ground."

"I hope you may be right," answered Father Maes, cracking his whip, and the cart moved on.

Mother Van Hove, meanwhile, had hastened ahead of the cart to stir up the kitchen fire and put the kettle on before the others should reach home, and when Father Van Hove at last drove into the farmyard, she was already on the way to the pasture bars with her milk-pail on her arm. "Set the table for supper, ma Mie," she called back, "and do not let the pot boil over! Jan, you may shut up the fowls; they have already gone to roost."

"And what shall I do, Mother?" laughed Father Van Hove.

## The Belgian Twins

"You," she called back, "you may unharness Pier and turn him out in the pasture for the night! And I'll wager I shall be back with a full milk-pail before you've even so much as fed the pig, let alone the other chores—men are so slow!" She waved her hand gayly and disappeared behind the pasture bars, as she spoke.

"Hurry, now, my man," said Father Van Hove to Jan. "We must not let Mother beat us! We will let the cart stand right there near the barn, and to-morrow we can store the grain away to make room for a new load. I will let you lead Pier to the pasture, while I feed the pig myself; by her squeals she is hungry enough to eat you up in one mouthful."

## II. THE RUMORS

When Mother Van Hove returned from the pasture, fifteen minutes later, her orders had all been carried out. Pier was in the pasture, the hens were shut up for the night, and the pig, which had been squealing with hunger, was now grunting with satisfaction over her evening meal; Fidel was gnawing a bone, and Father Van Hove was already washing his hands at the pump, beside the kitchen door.

"You are all good children," said the mother as she set down her brimming pail and took her turn at the wash-basin and the soap. "Jan and Marie, have you washed your hands?"

"I have," called Marie from the kitchen, and supper is ready and the table set."

"I washed my hands in the canal this morning," pleaded Jan. "Won't that do?"

"You ate your lunch this noon, too," answered his mother promptly. "Won't that do? Why do you need to eat again when you have already eaten twice today?"

"Because I am hungry again," answered Jan.

"Well, you are also dirty again," said his mother, as she put the soap in his hands and wiped her own on the clean towel which Marie handed her from the door. She cleaned her wooden shoes on the bundle of straw which lay for the purpose beside the kitchen door; then she went inside and took her place opposite Father Van Hove at the little round oaken table by the window.

Marie was already in her chair, and in a moment Jan joined them with a beaming smile and a face which, though clean in the middle, showed a gray border from ear to ear.

"If you don't believe I'm clean, look at the towel!" he said, holding it up.

"Oh, my heart!" cried his mother, throwing up her hands. "I declare there's but one creature in all God's world that cares nothing for cleanliness! Even a pig has some manners if given half a chance, but boys!" She seized the grimy towel and held it up despairingly for Father Van Hove to see. "He's just wet his face and wiped all the dirt off on the towel. The Devil himself is not more afraid of holy water than Jan Van Hove is of water of any kind!" she cried.

"Go and wash yourself properly, Janke," said his father sternly, and Jan disappeared through the kitchen door. Sounds of vigorous pumping and splashing without were heard in the kitchen, and when Jan appeared once more, he was allowed to take his place at the supper-table with the family.

Father Van Hove bowed his head, and the Twins and their mother made the sign of the cross with him, as he began their grace before meat. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen," prayed

## The Belgian Twins

Father Van Hove. "Hail, Mary, full of Grace." Then, as the prayer continued, the mother and children with folded hands and bowed heads joined in the petition: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death, Amen." A clatter of spoons followed the grace, and Mother Van Hove's good buttermilk pap was not long in disappearing down their four hungry throats.

The long day in the open air had made the children so sleepy they could scarcely keep their eyes open through the meal. "Come, my children," said their mother briskly, as she rose from the table, "pop into bed, both of you, as fast as you can go. You are already half asleep! Father, you help them with their buttons, and hear them say their prayers, while I wash up these dishes and take care of the milk." She took a candle from the chimney-piece as she spoke, and started down cellar with the skimmer. When she came back into the kitchen once more, the children were safely tucked in bed, and her husband was seated by the kitchen door with his chair tipped back against the wall, smoking his evening pipe. Mother Van Hove cleared the table, washed the dishes, and brushed the crumbs from the tiled floor. Then she spread the white sand once more under the table and in a wide border around the edge of the room, and hung the brush outside the kitchen door.

Father Van Hove smoked in silence as she moved about the room. At last he said to her, "Leonie, did you hear what our neighbor Maes said to-night as we were talking in the road?"

"No," said his wife, "I was hurrying home to get supper."

"Maes said there are rumors of a German army on our frontier," said Father Van Hove.

His wife paused in front of him with her hands on her hips. "Who brought that story to town?" she demanded.

"Jules Verhulst," answered her husband.

"Jules Verhulst!" sniffed Mother Van Hove with disdain. "He knows more things that aren't so than any man in this village. I wouldn't believe anything on his say-so! Besides, the whole world knows that all the Powers have agreed that Belgium shall be neutral ground, and have bound themselves solemnly to protect that neutrality. I learned that in school, and so did you."

"Yes," sighed Father Van Hove. "I learned it too, and surely no nation can have anything against us! We have given no one cause for complaint that I know of."

"It's nonsense," said his wife with decision. "Belgium is safe enough so far as that goes, but one certainly has to work hard here just to make ends meet and get food for all the hungry mouths! They say it is different in America; there you work less and get more, and are farther away from meddlesome neighboring countries besides. I sometimes wish we had gone there with my sister. She and her husband started with no more than we have, and now they are rich—at least they were when I last heard from them; but that was a long time ago," she finished.

"Well," said Father Van Hove, as he stood up and knocked the ashes from his pipe, "it may be that they have more money and less work, but I've lived here in this spot ever since I was born, and my father before me. Somehow I feel I could never take root in any other soil. I'm content with things as they are."

"So am I, for the matter of that," said Mother Van Hove cheerfully, as she put Fidel outside and shut the door for the night. Then, taking the candle from the chimney-piece once more, she led the way to the inner room, where the twins were already soundly sleeping.

### III. THE ALARM

For some time the little village of Meer slept quietly in the moonlight. There was not a sound to break the stillness, except once when Mother Van Hove's old rooster caught a glimpse of the waning moon through the window of the chicken-house, and crowed lustily, thinking it was the sun. The other roosters of the village, wiser than he, made no response to his call, and in a moment he, too, returned to his interrupted slumbers. But though there was as yet no sound to tell of their approach, the moon looked down upon three horsemen galloping over the yellow ribbon of road from Malines toward the little village. Soon the sound of the horses' hoofs beating upon the hardened earth throbbed through the village itself, and Fidel sat up on the kitchen doorstep, pricked up his ears, and listened. He heard the hoof-beats and awakened the echoes with a sharp bark.

Mother Van Hove sat up in bed and listened; another dog barked, and another, and now she, too, heard the hoof-beats. Nearer they came, and nearer, and now she could hear a voice shouting. She shook her husband. "Wake up!" she whispered in his ear, "something is wrong! Fidel barks, and I hear strange noises about. Wake up!"

"Fidel is crazy," said Father Van Hove sleepily. "He thinks some weasel is after the chickens very likely. Fidel will attend to it. Go to sleep."

He sank back again upon his pillows, but his wife seized his arm and pulled him up.

"Listen!" she said. "Oh, listen! Weasels do not ride on horseback! There are hoof-beats on the road!"

"Some neighbor returning late from Malines," said Father Van Hove, yawning. "It does not concern us."

But his wife was already out of bed, and at the window. The horsemen were now plainly visible, riding like the wind, and as they whirled by the houses their shout thrilled through the quiet streets of the village: "Burghers, awake! Awake! Awake!"

Wide awake at last, Father Van Hove sprang out of bed and hastily began putting down his clothes. His wife was already nearly dressed, and had lighted a candle. Other lights sparkled from the windows of other houses. Suddenly the bell in the church-steeple began to ring wildly, as though it, too, were shaken with a sudden terror. "It must be a fire," said Father Van Hove.

Still fastening her clothing, his wife ran out of the door and looked about in every direction. "I see no fire," she said, "but the village street is full of people running to the square! Hurry! Hurry! We must take the children with us; they must not be left here alone."

She ran to wake the children, as she spoke, and, helped by her trembling fingers, they, too, were soon dressed, and the four ran together up the road toward the village church. The bell still clanged madly from the steeple, and the vibrations seemed to shake the very flesh of the trembling children as they clung to their mother's hands and tried to keep up with their father's rapid strides.

They found all the village gathered in front of the little town-hall. On its steps stood the Burgomeister and the village priest, and near them, still sitting astride his foam-flecked steed, was one of the soldiers who had brought the alarm. His two companions were already far beyond Meer, flying over the road to arouse the villages which lay farther to the east. The church-bell suddenly ceased its metallic clatter, and while its deep tones still throbbed through the night air, the wondering and frightened people crowded about the steps in breathless suspense.

The Burgomeister raised his hand. Even in the moonlight it could be seen that he was pale. He spoke quickly.



## The Belgian Twins

"Neighbors," he said, "there is bad news! the German army is on our borders! It is necessary for every man of military age and training to join the colors at once in case the army is needed for defense. There is not a moment to lose. This messenger is from headquarters. He will tell you what you are to do."

The soldier now spoke for the first time. "Men of Belgium," he cried, "your services are needed for your country and your King! The men of Meer are to report at once to the army headquarters at Malines. Do not stop even to change your clothing! We are not yet at war, and our good King Albert still hopes to avert it by an armed peace, but the neutrality of Belgium is at stake, and we must be ready to protect it at any cost, and at an instant's notice. Go at once to the Brussels gate of Malines. An officer will meet you there and tell you what to do. I must ride on to carry the alarm to Putte." He wheeled his horse as he spoke, and, turning in his saddle, lifted his sword and cried, "Vive le Roi!"

"Vive le Roi! Vive la Belgique!" came in an answering shout from the people of Meer, and he was gone.

There was a moment of stunned silence as he rode away; then a sound of women weeping. The Burgomeister came down from the steps of the town-hall, said farewell to his wife and children, and took his place at the head of the little group of men which was already beginning form in marching order. The priest moved about among his people with words of comfort.

Father Van Hove turned to his wife, and to Jan and Marie, who were clinging to her skirts. "It is only a bad dream, my little ones," he said, patting their heads tenderly; "we shall wake up some day. And you, my wife, do not despair! I shall soon return, no doubt! Our good King will yet save us from war. You must finish the harvest alone—but—" "Fall in!" cried the voice of the Burgomeister, and Father Van Hove kissed his wife and children and stepped forward.

Mother Van Hove bravely checked her rising sobs. "We shall go with you to Malines, at any rate," she said firmly. And as the little group of men started forward along the yellow road, she and many more women and children of the village marched, away with them in the gray twilight which precedes the coming of the dawn. The priest went with his people, praying for them as he walked, in a voice that shook with feeling.

The sky was red in the east and the larks were already singing over the quiet fields when the men of Meer, followed by their wives and children, presented themselves at the Brussels gate of the city.

### **IV. "FOR KING, FOR LAW AND LIBERTY"**

At the gate they were met by an officer, who at once took command of the company. There was only a moment for hasty good-byes before the order to march was given, and the women and children watched the little column stride bravely away up the street toward the armory, where the uniforms and arms were kept. They followed at a little distance and took up their station across the street from the great doors through which the men had disappeared. There was little talking among them. Only the voice of the priest could be heard now and then, as he said a few words to one and another of the waiting women. It was still so early in the morning that the streets of the city were not yet filled with people going to work. Only those, like themselves, concerned with the sad business of war were abroad.

To Jan and Marie the long wait seemed endless, but at last the doors of the armory sprang open; there was a burst of martial music, and a band playing the national hymn appeared. "For King, for law and liberty!" thrilled the bugles, and amidst the waving of flags, and the cheers of the people, who had now begun to fill the streets, a regiment of soldiers marched away toward the north. Jan and Marie stood with their mother on the edge of the sidewalk, eagerly scanning every face as the soldiers passed, and at last Jan shouted, "I see Father! I see Father!"

## The Belgian Twins

Mother Van Hove lifted her two children high in her arms for him to see, but Father Van Hove could only smile a brave good-bye as he marched swiftly past.

"No tears, my children!" cried the priest; "let them see no tears! Send them away with a smile!" And, standing on the edge of the sidewalk, he made the sign of the cross and raised his hand in blessing, as the troops went by.

For a time Mother Van Hove and the children ran along the sidewalk, trying to keep pace with the soldiers, but their quick strides were too much for the Twins, and it was not long before Marie said, breathlessly, "My legs are too short! I can't run so fast!"

"I can't too!" gasped Jan. Mother Van Hove stopped short at once, and the three stood still, hand in hand, and watched the soldiers until they turned a corner and disappeared from sight through the Antwerp gate of the city.

They were quite alone, for the other women and children had gone no farther than the armory, and were already on their homeward way to Meer. Now for the first time Mother Van Hove gave way to grief, and Jan and Marie wept with her; but it was only for a moment. Then she wiped her eyes, and the Twins' too, on her apron, and said firmly: "Come, my lambs! Tears will not bring him back! We must go home now as fast as we can. There is need there for all that we can do! You must be the man of the house now, my Janke, and help me take your father's place on the farm; and Marie must be our little house-mother. We must be as brave as soldiers, even though we cannot fight."

"I think I could be braver if I had some breakfast," sobbed Janke.

Mother Van Hove struck her hands together in dismay. "I never once thought of food!" she cried, "and I haven't a red cent with me! We cannot buy a breakfast! We must just go hungry until we get home! But soldiers must often go hungry, my little ones. We must be as brave as they. Come, now. I will be the captain! Forward march!"

Jan and Marie stiffened their little backs, as she gave the word of command, and, shoulder to shoulder, they marched down the street toward the city gate to the martial refrain, "Le Roi, la loi, la liberte," which Mother Van Hove hummed for them under her breath.

It was a long way back to the little farm-house, and when at last the three weary pilgrims reached it, they were met by an indignant chorus of protests from all the creatures which had been left behind. Bel was lowing at the pasture bars, the pig was squealing angrily in her pen, the rooster had crowed himself hoarse, and Fidel, patient Fidel, was sitting on guard at the back door.

Mother Van Hove flew into the kitchen the moment she reached the house, and in two minutes Jan and Marie were seated before a breakfast of bread and milk. Then she fed the pig, let out the hens, and gave Fidel a bone which she had saved for him from the soup. Last of all, she milked the cow, and when this was done, and she had had a cup of coffee herself, the clock in the steeple struck twelve.

Even Mother Van Hove's strength was not equal to work in the harvest-field that day, but she stowed the load of wheat which had been brought home the night before in the barn, and, after the chores were done at night, she and the Twins went straight to bed and slept as only the very weary can, until the sun streamed into their windows in the morning.

## V. DOING A MAN'S WORK

When Jan and Marie awoke, their mother's bed was empty. "She's gone to milk the cow," cried Marie. "Come, Jan, we will surprise her! When she comes back from the pasture, we will have breakfast all ready."

## The Belgian Twins

"You can," said Jan, as he struggled into his clothes, and twisted himself nearly in two trying to do up the buttons in the back; "you can, but I must do a man's work! I will go out and feed the pig and catch old Pier and hitch him to the cart," he said importantly. "I must finish the wheat harvest to-day."

"Ho!" said Marie. "You will spill the pig-feed all over yourself! You are such a messy boy!"

"I guess I can do it just as well as you can make coffee," said Jan with spirit. "You've never made coffee in your life!"

"I've watched Mother do it lots of times," said Marie. "I'm sure I can do it just the same way."

"All right, let's see you do it, then," said Jan. And he strode out of the room with his hands in his pockets, taking as long steps as his short legs would permit.

When she was dressed and washed, Marie ran to the pump and filled the kettle. Then she stirred the embers of the fire in the kitchen and put on fresh coal. She set the kettle on to boil and only slopped a little water on her apron in doing so. Then she put the dishes on the table.

Meanwhile she heard no sound from Jan. She went to the kitchen door and looked out. Jan had already let out the fowls, and was just in the act of feeding the pig. He had climbed up on the fence around the pig-pen, and by dint of great effort had succeeded in lifting the heavy pail of feed to the top of it. He was now trying to let it down on the other side and pour the contents into the trough, but the pig was greedy, and the moment the pail came within reach, she stuck her nose and her fore feet into it. This added weight was too much for poor Jan; down went the pail with a crash into the trough, and Jan himself tumbled suddenly forward, his feet flew out behind, and he was left hanging head down, like a jack knife, over the fence!

It was just at this moment t