Peace Manoeuvres

By
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The scout stood where three roads cut three green tunnels in the pine woods, and met at his feet. Above his head an aged sign-post pointed impartially to East Carver, South Carver, and Carver Centre, and left the choice to him.

The scout scowled and bit nervously at his gauntlet. The choice was difficult, and there was no one with whom he could take counsel. The three sun-shot roads lay empty, and the other scouts, who, with him, had left the main column at sunrise, he had ordered back. They were to report that on the right flank, so far, at least, as Middleboro, there was no sign of the enemy. What lay beyond, it now was his duty to discover. The three empty roads spread before him like a picture puzzle, smiling at his predicament. Whichever one he followed left two unguarded. Should he creep upon for choice Carver Centre, the enemy, masked by a mile of fir trees, might advance from Carver or South Carver, and obviously he could not follow three roads at the same time. He considered the better strategy would be to wait where he was, where the three roads met, and allow the enemy himself to disclose his position. To the scout this course was most distasteful. He assured himself that this was so because, while it were the safer course, it wasted time and lacked initiative. But in his heart he knew that was not the reason, and to his heart his head answered that when one's country is at war, when fields and fire-sides are trampled by the iron heels of the invader, a scout should act not according to the dictates of his heart, but in the service of his native land. In the case of this particular patriot, the man and scout were at odds. As one of the Bicycle Squad of the Boston Corps of Cadets, the scout knew what, at this momentous crisis in her history, the

commonwealth of Massachusetts demanded of him. It was that he sit tight and wait for the hated foreigners from New York City, New Jersey, and Connecticut to show themselves. But the man knew, and had known for several years, that on the road to Carver was the summer home of one Beatrice Farrar. As Private Lathrop it was no part of his duty to know that. As a man and a lover, and a rejected lover at that, he could not think of anything else. Struggling between love and duty the scout basely decided to leave the momentous question to chance. In the front tire of his bicycle was a puncture, temporarily effaced by a plug. Laying the bicycle on the ground, Lathrop spun the front wheel swiftly.

"If," he decided, "the wheel stops with the puncture pointing at Carver Centre, I'll advance upon Carver Centre. Should it point to either of the two other villages, I'll stop here.

"It's a two to one shot against me, any way," he growled.

Kneeling in the road he spun the wheel, and as intently as at Monte Carlo and Palm Beach he had waited for other wheels to determine his fortune, he watched it come to rest. It stopped with the plug pointing back to Middleboro.

The scout told himself he was entitled to another trial. Again he spun the wheel. Again the spokes flashed in the sun. Again the puncture rested on the road to Middleboro.

"If it does that once more," thought the scout, "it's a warning that there is trouble ahead for me at Carver, and all the little Carvers."

For the third time the wheel flashed, but as he waited for the impetus to die, the sound of galloping hoofs broke sharply on the silence. The scout threw himself and his bicycle over the nearest stone wall, and, unlimbering his rifle, pointed it down the road.

He saw approaching a small boy, in a white apron, seated in a white wagon, on which was painted, "Pies and Pastry. East Wareham." The boy dragged his horse to an abrupt halt.

"Don't point that at me!" shouted the boy.

"Where do you come from?" demanded the scout.

"Wareham," said the baker.

"Are you carrying any one concealed in that wagon?"

As though to make sure the baker's boy glanced apprehensively into the depths

of his cart, and then answered that in the wagon he carried nothing but fresh-baked bread. To the trained nostrils of the scout this already was evident. Before sunrise he had breakfasted on hard tack and muddy coffee, and the odor of crullers and mince pie, still warm, assailed him cruelly. He assumed a fierce and terrible aspect.

"Where are you going?" he challenged.

"To Carver Centre," said the boy.

To chance Lathrop had left the decision. He believed the fates had answered.

Dragging his bicycle over the stone wall, he fell into the road.

"Go on," he commanded. "I'll use your cart for a screen. I'll creep behind the enemy before he sees me."

The baker's boy frowned unhappily.

"But supposing," he argued, "they see you first, will they shoot?"

The scout waved his hand carelessly.

"Of course," he cried.

"Then," said the baker, "my horse will run away!"

"What of it?" demanded the scout. "Are Middleboro, South Middleboro, Rock, Brockton, and Boston to fall? Are they to be captured because you're afraid of your own horse? They won't shoot REAL bullets! This is not a real war. Don't you know that?"

The baker's boy flushed with indignation.

"Sure, I know that," he protested; "but my horse HE don't know that!"

Lathrop slung his rifle over his shoulder and his leg over his bicycle.

"If the Reds catch you," he warned, in parting, "they'll take everything you've got."

"The Blues have took most of it already," wailed the boy. "And just as they were paying me the battle begun, and this horse run away, and I couldn't get him to come back for my money."

"War," exclaimed Lathrop morosely, "is always cruel to the innocent." He sped toward Carver Centre. In his motor car, he had travelled the road many times, and as always his goal had been the home of Miss Beatrice Farrar, he had

covered it at a speed unrecognized by law. But now he advanced with stealth and caution. In every clump of bushes he saw an ambush. Behind each rock he beheld the enemy.

In a clearing was a group of Portuguese cranberry pickers, dressed as though for a holiday. When they saw the man in uniform, one of the women hailed him anxiously.

"Is the parade coming?" she called.

"Have you seen any of the Reds?" Lathrop returned.

"No," complained the woman. "And we been waiting all morning. When will the parade come?"

"It's not a parade," said Lathrop, severely. "It's a war!"

The summer home of Miss Farrar stood close to the road. It had been so placed by the farmer who built it, in order that the women folk might sit at the window and watch the passing of the stage-coach and the peddler. Great elms hung over it, and a white fence separated the road from the narrow lawn. At a distance of a hundred yards a turn brought the house into view, and at this turn, as had been his manoeuvre at every other possible ambush, Lathrop dismounted and advanced on foot. Up to this moment the road had been empty, but now, in front of the Farrar cottage, it was blocked by a touring-car and a station wagon. In the occupants of the car he recognized all the members of the Farrar family, except Miss Farrar. In the station wagon were all of the Farrar servants. Miss Farrar herself was leaning upon the gate and waving them a farewell. The touring-car moved off down the road; the station wagon followed; Miss Farrar was alone. Lathrop scorched toward her, and when he was opposite the gate, dug his toes in the dust and halted. When he lifted his broad-brimmed campaign hat, Miss Farrar exclaimed both with surprise and displeasure. Drawing back from the gate she held herself erect. Her attitude was that of one prepared for instant retreat. When she spoke it was in tones of extreme disapproval.

"You promised," said the girl, "you would not come to see me."

Lathrop, straddling his bicycle, peered anxiously down the road.

"This is not a social call," he said. "I'm on duty. Have you seen the Reds?"

His tone was brisk and alert, his manner preoccupied. The ungraciousness of his reception did not seem in the least to disconcert him.

But Miss Farrar was not deceived. She knew him, not only as a persistent and

irrepressible lover, but as one full of guile, adroit in tricks, fertile in expedients. He was one who could not take "No" for an answer at least not from her. When she repulsed him she seemed to grow in his eyes only the more attractive.

"It is not the lover who comes to woo," he was constantly explaining, "but the lover's WAY of wooing."

Miss Farrar had assured him she did not like his way. She objected to being regarded and treated as a castle that could be taken only by assault. Whether she wished time to consider, or whether he and his proposal were really obnoxious to her, he could not find out. His policy of campaign was that she, also, should not have time to find out. Again and again she had agreed to see him only on the condition that he would not make love to her. He had promised again and again, and had failed to keep that promise. Only a week before he had been banished from her presence, to remain an exile until she gave him permission to see her at her home in New York. It was not her purpose to return there for two weeks, and yet here he was, a beggar at her gate. It might be that he was there, as he said, "on duty," but her knowledge of him and of the doctrine of chances caused her to doubt it.

"Mr. Lathrop!" she began, severely.

As though to see to whom she had spoken Lathrop glanced anxiously over his shoulder. Apparently pained and surprised to find that it was to him she had addressed herself, he regarded her with deep reproach. His eyes were very beautiful. It was a fact which had often caused Miss Farrar extreme annoyance.

He shook his head sadly.

"'Mr. Lathrop?'" he protested. "You know that to you I am always 'Charles Charles the Bold,' because I am bold to love you; but never 'Mr. Lathrop,' unless," he went on briskly, "you are referring to a future state, when, as Mrs. Lathrop, you will make me "

Miss Farrar had turned her back on him, and was walking rapidly up the path.

"Beatrice," he called. "I am coming after you!"

Miss Farrar instantly returned and placed both hands firmly upon the gate.

"I cannot understand you!" she said. "Don't you see that when you act as you do now, I can't even respect you? How do you think I could ever care, when you offend me so? You jest at what you pretend is the most serious thing in your life. You play with it laugh at it!"

The young man interrupted her sharply.

"It's like this," he said. "When I am with you I am so happy I can't be serious. When I am NOT with you, it is SO serious that I am utterly and completely wretched. You say my love offends you, bores you! I am sorry, but what, in heaven's name, do you think your NOT loving me is doing to ME? I am a wreck! I am a skeleton! Look at me!"

He let his bicycle fall, and stood with his hands open at his sides, as though inviting her to gaze upon the ruin she had caused.

Four days of sun and rain, astride of a bicycle, without food or sleep, had drawn his face into fine, hard lines, had bronzed it with a healthy tan. His uniform, made by the same tailor that fitted him with polo breeches, clung to him like a jersey. The spectacle he presented was that of an extremely picturesque, handsome, manly youth, and of that fact no one was better aware than himself.

"Look at me," he begged, sadly.

Miss Farrar was entirely unimpressed.

"I am!" she returned, coldly. "I never saw you looking so well and you know it." She gave a gasp of comprehension. "You came here because you knew your uniform was becoming!"

Lathrop regarded himself complacently.

"Yes, isn't it?" he assented. "I brought on this war in order to wear it. If you don't mind," he added, "I think I'll accept your invitation and come inside. I've had nothing to eat in four days."

Miss Farrar's eyes flashed indignantly.

"You're NOT coming inside," she declared; "but if you'll only promise to go away at once, I'll bring you everything in the house."

"In that house," exclaimed Lathrop, dramatically, "there's only one thing that I desire, and I want that so badly that 'life holds no charm without you.'"

Miss Farrar regarded him steadily.

"Do you intend to drive me away from my own door, or will you go?"

Lathrop picked his wheel out of the dust.

"Good-by," he said. "I'll come back when you have made up your mind."

In vexation Miss Farrar stamped her foot upon the path.

"I HAVE made up my mind!" she protested.

"Then," returned Lathrop, "I'll come back when you have changed it."

He made a movement as though to ride away, but much to Miss Farrar's dismay, hastily dismounted. "On second thoughts," he said, "it isn't right for me to leave you. The woods are full of tramps and hangers-on of the army. You're not safe. I can watch this road from here as well as from anywhere else, and at the same time I can guard you."

To the consternation of Miss Farrar he placed his bicycle against the fence, and, as though preparing for a visit, leaned his elbows upon it.

"I do not wish to be rude," said Miss Farrar, "but you are annoying me. I have spent fifteen summers in Massachusetts, and I have never seen a tramp. I need no one to guard me."

"If not you," said Lathrop easily, "then the family silver. And think of your jewels, and your mother's jewels. Think of yourself in a house filled with jewels, and entirely surrounded by hostile armies! My duty is to remain with you."

Miss Farrar was so long in answering, that Lathrop lifted his head and turned to look. He found her frowning and gazing intently into the shadow of the woods, across the road. When she felt his eyes upon her she turned her own guiltily upon him. Her cheeks were flushed and her face glowed with some unusual excitement.

"I wish," she exclaimed breathlessly "I wish," she repeated, "the Reds would take you prisoner!"

"Take me where?" asked Lathrop.

"Take you anywhere!" cried Miss Farrar. "You should be ashamed to talk to me when you should be looking for the enemy!"

"I am WAITING for the enemy," explained Lathrop. "It's the same thing."

Miss Farrar smiled vindictively. Her eyes shone. "You need not wait long," she said. There was a crash of a falling stone wall, and of parting bushes, but not in time to give Lathrop warning. As though from the branches of the trees opposite two soldiers fell into the road; around his hat each wore the red band of the invader; each pointed his rifle at Lathrop.

"Hands up!" shouted one. "You're my prisoner!" cried the other.

Mechanically Lathrop raised his hands, but his eyes turned to Miss Farrar.

"Did you know?" he asked.

"I have been watching them," she said, "creeping up on you for the last ten minutes."

Lathrop turned to the two soldiers, and made an effort to smile.

"That was very clever," he said, "but I have twenty men up the road, and behind them a regiment. You had better get away while you can."

The two Reds laughed derisively. One, who wore the stripes of a sergeant, answered: "That won't do! We been a mile up the road, and you and us are the only soldiers on it. Gimme the gun!"

Lathrop knew he had no right to refuse. He had been fairly surprised, but he hesitated. When Miss Farrar was not in his mind his amateur soldiering was to him a most serious proposition. The war game was a serious proposition, and that, through his failure for ten minutes to regard it seriously, he had been made a prisoner, mortified him keenly. That his humiliation had taken place in the presence of Beatrice Farrar did not lessen his discomfort, nor did the explanation he must later make to his captain afford him any satisfaction. Already he saw himself playing the star part in a court-martial. He shrugged his shoulders and surrendered his gun.

As he did so he gloomily scrutinized the insignia of his captors.

"Who took me?" he asked.

"WE took you," exclaimed the sergeant.

"What regiment?" demanded Lathrop, sharply. "I have to report who took me; and you probably don't know it, but your collar ornaments are upside down." With genuine exasperation he turned to Miss Farrar.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, "isn't it bad enough to be taken prisoner, without being taken by raw recruits that can't put on their uniforms?"

The Reds flushed, and the younger, a sandy-haired, rat-faced youth, retorted angrily: "Mebbe we ain't strong on uniforms, beau," he snarled, "but you've got nothing on us yet, that I can see. You look pretty with your hands in the air, don't you?"

"Shut up," commanded the other Red. He was the older man, heavily built, with a strong, hard mouth and chin, on which latter sprouted a three days' iron-gray beard. "Don't you see he's an officer? Officers don't like being took by

two-spot privates."

Lathrop gave a sudden start. "Why," he laughed, incredulously, "don't you know " He stopped, and his eyes glanced quickly up and down the road.

"Don't we know what?" demanded the older Red, suspiciously.

"I forgot," said Lathrop. "I I must not give information to the enemy "

For an instant there was a pause, while the two Reds stood irresolute. Then the older nodded the other to the side of the road, and in whispers they consulted eagerly.

Miss Farrar laughed, and Lathrop moved toward her.

"I deserve worse than being laughed at," he said. "I made a strategic mistake. I should not have tried to capture you and an army corps at the same time."

"You," she taunted, "who were always so keen on soldiering, to be taken prisoner," she lowered her voice, "and by men like that! Aren't they funny?" she whispered, "and East Side and Tenderloin! It made me homesick to hear them! I think when not in uniform the little one drives a taxicab, and the big one is a guard on the elevated."

"They certainly are very 'New York,'" assented Lathrop, "and very tough."

"I thought," whispered Miss Farrar, "those from New York with the Red Army were picked men."

"What does it matter?" exclaimed Lathrop. "It's just as humiliating to be captured by a ballroom boy as by a mere millionaire! I can't insist on the invading army being entirely recruited from Harvard graduates."

The two Reds either had reached a decision, or agreed that they could not agree, for they ceased whispering, and crossed to where Lathrop stood.

"We been talking over your case," explained the sergeant, "and we see we are in wrong. We see we made a mistake in taking you prisoner. We had ought to shot you dead. So now we're going to shoot you dead."

"You can't!" objected Lathrop. "It's too late. You should have thought of that sooner."

"I know," admitted the sergeant, "but a prisoner is a hell of a nuisance. If you got a prisoner to look after you can't do your own work; you got to keep tabs on him. And there ain't nothing in it for the prisoner, neither. If we take you, you'll have to tramp all the way to our army, and all the way back. But, if

you're dead, how different! You ain't no bother to anybody. You got a half holiday all to yourself, and you can loaf around the camp, so dead that they can't make you work, but not so dead you can't smoke or eat." The sergeant smiled ingratiatingly. In a tempting manner he exhibited his rifle. "Better be dead," he urged.

"I'd like to oblige you," said Lathrop, "but it's against the rules. You CAN'T shoot a prisoner."

The rat-faced soldier uttered an angry exclamation. "To hell with the rules!" he cried. "We can't waste time on him. Turn him loose!"

The older man rounded on the little one savagely. The tone in which he addressed him was cold, menacing, sinister. His words were simple, but his eyes and face were heavy with warning.

"Who is running this?" he asked.

The little soldier muttered, and shuffled away. From under the brim of his campaign hat, his eyes cast furtive glances up and down the road. As though anxious to wipe out the effect of his comrade's words, the sergeant addressed Lathrop suavely and in a tone of conciliation.

"You see," he explained, "him and me are scouts. We're not supposed to waste time taking prisoners. So, we'll set you free." He waved his hand invitingly toward the bicycle. "You can go!" he said.

To Miss Farrar's indignation Lathrop, instead of accepting his freedom, remained motionless.

"I can't!" he said. "I'm on post. My captain ordered me to stay in front of this house until I was relieved."

Miss Farrar, amazed at such duplicity, exclaimed aloud:

"He is NOT on post!" she protested. "He's a scout! He wants to stop here, because because he's hungry. I wouldn't have let you take him prisoner, if I had not thought you would take him away with you." She appealed to the sergeant. "PLEASE take him away," she begged.

The sergeant turned sharply upon his prisoner.

"Why don't you do what the lady wants?" he demanded.

"Because I've got to do what my captain wants," returned Lathrop, "and he put me on sentry-go, in front of this house."

With the back of his hand, the sergeant fretfully scraped the three days' growth on his chin. "There's nothing to it," he exclaimed, "but for to take him with us. When we meet some more Reds we'll turn him over. Fall in!" he commanded.

"No!" protested Lathrop. "I don't want to be turned over. I've got a much better plan. YOU don't want to be bothered with a prisoner. I don't want to be a prisoner. As you say, I am better dead. You can't shoot a prisoner, but if he tries to escape you can. I'll try to escape. You shoot me. Then I return to my own army, and report myself dead. That ends your difficulty and saves me from a court-martial. They can't court-martial a corpse."

The face of the sergeant flashed with relief and satisfaction. In his anxiety to rid himself of his prisoner, he lifted the bicycle into the road and held it in readiness.

"You're all right!" he said, heartily. "You can make your getaway as quick as you like."

But to the conspiracy Miss Farrar refused to lend herself.

"How do you know," she demanded, "that he will keep his promise? He may not go back to his own army. He can be just as dead on my lawn as anywhere else!"

Lathrop shook his head at her sadly.

"How you wrong me!" he protested. "How dare you doubt the promise of a dying man? These are really my last words, and I wish I could think of something to say suited to the occasion, but the presence of strangers prevents."

He mounted his bicycle. "'If I had a thousand lives to give,'" he quoted with fervor, "'I'd give them all to '" he hesitated, and smiled mournfully on Miss Farrar. Seeing her flushed and indignant countenance, he added, with haste, "to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!"

As he started on his wheel slowly down the path, he turned to the sergeant.

"I'm escaping," he explained. The Reds, with an enthusiasm undoubtedly genuine, raised their rifles, and the calm of the Indian summer was shattered by two sharp reports. Lathrop, looking back over his shoulder, waved one hand reassuringly.

"Death was instantaneous," he called. He bent his body over the handle-bar, and they watched him disappear rapidly around the turn in the road.

Miss Farrar sighed with relief.

"Thank you very much," she said.

As though signifying that to oblige a woman he would shoot any number of prisoners, the sergeant raised his hat.

"Don't mention it, lady," he said. "I seen he was annoying you, and that's why I got rid of him. Some of them amateur soldiers, as soon as they get into uniform, are too fresh. He took advantage of you because your folks were away from home. But don't you worry about that. I'll guard this house until your folks get back."

Miss Farrar protested warmly.

"Really!" she exclaimed; "I need no one to guard me."

But the soldier was obdurate. He motioned his comrade down the road.

"Watch at the turn," he ordered; "he may come back or send some of the Blues to take us. I'll stay here and protect the lady."

Again Miss Farrar protested, but the sergeant, in a benign and fatherly manner, smiled approvingly. Seating himself on the grass outside the fence, he leaned his back against the gatepost, apparently settling himself for conversation.

"Now, how long might it have been," he asked, "before we showed up, that you seen us?"

"I saw you," Miss Farrar said, "when Mr. when that bicycle scout was talking to me. I saw the red bands on your hats among the bushes."

The sergeant appeared interested.

"But why didn't you let on to him?"

Miss Farrar laughed evasively.

"Maybe because I am from New York, too," she said. "Perhaps I wanted to see soldiers from my city take a prisoner."

They were interrupted by the sudden appearance of the smaller soldier. On his rat-like countenance was written deep concern.

"When I got to the turn," he began, breathlessly, "I couldn't see him. Where did he go? Did he double back through the woods, or did he have time to ride out of sight before I got there?"

The reappearance of his comrade affected the sergeant strangely. He sprang to his feet, his under jaw protruding truculently, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Get back," he snarled. "Do what I told you!"

Under his breath he muttered words that, to Miss Farrar, were unintelligible. The little rat-like man nodded, and ran from them down the road. The sergeant made an awkward gesture of apology.

"Excuse me, lady," he begged, "but it makes me hot when them rookies won't obey orders. You see," he ran on glibly, "I'm a reg'lar; served three years in the Philippines, and I can't get used to not having my men do what I say."

Miss Farrar nodded, and started toward the house. The sergeant sprang quickly across the road.

"Have you ever been in the Philippines, Miss?" he called. "It's a great country."

Miss Farrar halted and shook her head. She was considering how far politeness required of her to entertain unshaven militiamen, who insisted on making sentries of themselves at her front gate.

The sergeant had plunged garrulously into a confusing description of the Far East. He was clasping the pickets of the fence with his hands, and his eyes were fastened on hers. He lacked neither confidence nor vocabulary, and not for an instant did his tongue hesitate or his eyes wander, and yet in his manner there was nothing at which she could take offence. He appeared only amiably vain that he had seen much of the world, and anxious to impress that fact upon another. Miss Farrar was bored, but the man gave her no opportunity to escape. In consequence she was relieved when the noisy approach of an automobile brought him to an abrupt pause. Coming rapidly down the road was a large touring-car, filled with men in khaki. The sergeant gave one glance at it, and leaped across the road, taking cover behind the stone wall. Instantly he raised his head above it and shook his fist at Miss Farrar.

"Don't tell," he commanded. "They're Blues in that car! Don't tell!" Again he sank from sight.

Miss Farrar now was more than bored, she was annoyed. Why grown men should play at war so seriously she could not understand. It was absurd! She no longer would remain a party to it; and, lest the men in the car might involve her still further, she retreated hastily toward the house. As she opened the door the car halted at the gate, and voices called to her, but she pretended not to hear them, and continued up the stairs. Behind her the car passed noisily on its

way.

She mounted the stairs, and crossing a landing moved down a long hall, at the further end of which was her bedroom. The hall was uncarpeted, but the tennis shoes she wore made no sound, nor did the door of her bedroom when she pushed it open.

On the threshold Miss Farrar stood quite still. A swift, sinking nausea held her in a vice. Her instinct was to scream and run, but her throat had tightened and gone dry, and her limbs trembled. Opposite the door was her dressing-table, and reflected in its mirror were the features and figure of the rat-like soldier. His back was toward her. With one hand he swept the dressing-table. The other, hanging at his side, held a revolver.

In a moment the panic into which Miss Farrar had been thrown passed. Her breath and blood returned, and, intent only on flight, she softly turned. On the instant the rat-faced one raised his eyes, saw her reflected in the mirror, and with an oath, swung toward her. He drew the revolver close to his cheek, and looked at her down the barrel. "Don't move!" he whispered; "don't scream! Where are the jewels?"

Miss Farrar was not afraid of the revolver or of the man. She did not believe either would do her harm. The idea of both the presence of the man in her room, and that any one should dare to threaten her was what filled her with repugnance. As the warm blood flowed again through her body her spirit returned. She was no longer afraid. She was, instead, indignant, furious.

With one step she was in the room, leaving the road to the door open.

"Get out of here," she commanded.

The little man snarled, and stamped the floor. He shoved the gun nearer to her.

"The jewels, damn you!" he whispered. "Do you want me to blow your fool head off? Where are the jewels?"

"Jewels?" repeated Miss Farrar. "I have no jewels!"

"You lie!" shrieked the little man. "He said the house was full of jewels. We heard him. He said he would stay to guard the jewels."

Miss Farrar recognized his error. She remembered Lathrop's jest, and that it had been made while the two men were within hearing, behind the stone wall.

"It was a joke!" she cried. "Leave at once!" She backed swiftly toward the open window that looked upon the road. "Or I'll call your sergeant!"

"If you go near that window or scream," whispered the rat-like one, "I'll shoot!"

A heavy voice, speaking suddenly from the doorway, shook Miss Farrar's jangled nerves into fresh panic.

"She won't scream," said the voice.

In the door Miss Farrar saw the bulky form of the sergeant, blocking her escape.

Without shifting his eyes from Miss Farrar, the man with the gun cursed breathlessly at the other. "Why didn't you keep her away?" he panted.

"An automobile stopped in front of the gate," explained the sergeant. "Have you got them?" he demanded.

"No!" returned the other. "Nothing! She won't tell where they are."

The older man laughed. "Oh, yes, she'll tell," he whispered. His voice was still low and suave, but it carried with it the weight of a threat, and the threat, although unspoken, filled Miss Farrar with alarm. Her eyes, wide with concern, turned fearfully from one man to the other.

The sergeant stretched his hands toward her, the fingers working and making clutches in the air. The look in his eyes was quite terrifying.

"If you don't tell," he said slowly, "I'll choke it out of you!"

If his intention was to frighten the girl, he succeeded admirably. With her hands clasped to her throat, Miss Farrar sank against the wall. She saw no chance of escape.

The way to the door was barred, and should she drop to the garden below, from the window, before she could reach the road the men would overtake her. Even should she reach the road, the house nearest was a half mile distant.

The sergeant came close, his fingers opening and closing in front of her eyes. He raised his voice to a harsh, bellowing roar. "I'm going to make you tell!" he shouted. "I'm going to choke it out of you!"

Although she was alone in the house, although on every side the pine woods encompassed her, Miss Farrar threw all her strength into one long, piercing cry for help. And upon the instant it was answered.

From the hall came the swift rush of feet. The rat-like one swung toward it. From his revolver came a report that shook the room, a flash and a burst of

smoke, and through it Miss Farrar saw Lathrop hurl himself.

He dived at the rat-like one, and as on the foot-ball field he had been taught to stop a runner, flung his arms around the other's knees. The legs of the man shot from under him, his body cut a half circle through the air, and the part of his anatomy to first touch the floor was his head.

The floor was of oak, and the impact gave forth a crash like the smash of a base-ball bat, when it drives the ball to centre field. The man did not move. He did not even groan. In his relaxed fingers the revolver lay, within reach of Lathrop's hand. He fell upon it and, still on his knees, pointed it at the sergeant.

"You're MY prisoner, now!" he shouted cheerfully. "Hands up!"

The man raised his arms slowly, as if he were lifting heavy dumb-bells.

"The lady called for help," he said. "I came to help her."

"No! No!" protested the girl. "He did NOT help me! He said he would choke me if I didn't "

"He said he would what!" bellowed Lathrop. He leaped to his feet, and sent the gun spinning through the window.

He stepped toward the man gingerly, on the balls of his feet, like one walking on ice. The man seemed to know what that form of approach threatened, for he threw his arms into a position of defence.

"You bully!" whispered Lathrop. "You coward! You choke women, do you?"

He shifted from one foot to the other, his body balancing forward, his arms swinging limply in front of him. With his eyes, he seemed to undress the man, as though choosing a place to strike.

"I made the same mistake you did," he taunted. "I should have killed you first. Now I am going to do it!"

He sprang at the man, his chin still sunk on his chest, but with his arms swinging like the spokes of a wheel. His opponent struck back heavily, violently, but each move of his arm seemed only to open up some vulnerable spot. Blows beat upon his chin, upon his nose, his eyes; blows jabbed him in the ribs, drove his breath from his stomach, ground his teeth together, cut the flesh from his cheeks. He sank to his knees, with his arms clasping his head.

"Get up!" roared Lathrop. "Stand up to it, you coward!"

But the man had no idea of standing up to it. Howling with pain, he scrambled toward the door, and fled staggering down the hall.

At the same moment the automobile that a few minutes before had passed up the road came limping to the gate, and a half-dozen men in uniform sprang out of it. From the window Lathrop saw them spread across the lawn and surround the house.

"They've got him!" he said. He pointed to the prostrate figure on the floor. "He and the other one," he explained, breathlessly, "are New York crooks! They have been looting in the wake of the Reds, disguised as soldiers.

I knew they weren't even amateur soldiers by the mistakes in their make-up, and I made that bluff of riding away so as to give them time to show what the game was. Then, that provost guard in the motor car stopped me, and when they said who they were after, I ordered them back here. But they had a flat tire, and my bicycle beat them."In his excitement he did not notice that the girl was not listening, that she was very pale, that she was breathing quickly, and trembling. "I'll go tell them," he added, "that the other one they want is up here."

Miss Farrar's strength instantly returned. With a look of terror at the now groaning figure on the floor, she sprang toward Lathrop, with both hands clutching him by his sleeves.

"You will NOT!" she commanded. "You will not leave me alone!"Appealingly she raised her face to his startled countenance. With a burst of tears she threw herself into his arms. "I'm afraid!" she sobbed.

"Don't leave me. Please, no matter what I say, never leave me again!" Between bewilderment and joy, the face of Lathrop was unrecognizable. As her words reached him, as he felt the touch of her body in his arms, and her warm, wet cheek against his own, he drew a deep sigh of content, and then, fearfully and tenderly, held her close.After a pause, in which peace came to all the world, he raised his head.

"Don't worry!" he said. "You can BET I won't leave you!"