

"The Major and the officers are going downstairs for a few moments, but you are to allow nobody to pass. I have chosen you because you are a stranger in the company and it will be less difficult to withstand their persuasions than it would be for anyone else."

"But supposing they force themselves past me?" I asked, not at all liking the duty thrust upon me.

"What is your bayonet for?" enquired the Major sharply, impatient at the delay.

I had some notion of answering that it was usually for sticking in the floor, but, having no desire to spend the remainder of the night in a guardhouse, I kept silence. The officers went downstairs, and, as soon as they were gone, a number of the boys got round me, their spokesman persuasively urging me to allow them to pass.

"It is absurd," he said with some truth, "that the officers should go down to guzzle at the Hutchinson House bar while the company is compelled to remain thirsty upstairs in the ballroom, an aristocratic state of things not to be permitted in a democratic country."

"I can't help it," I answered. "You cannot pass until Captain Day gives permission."

"Oh, that's nonsense. He only put you here to please the Major. The Major is not our officer, and Day won't say anything. Anyhow, we'll all be back before they return."

"I'm sorry, but I can't allow it," I persisted.

This brought forth many pertinent remarks pertaining to my personal appearance and character, then finally one said:

"Let's rush him. He can't stop us."

There seemed to be an inclination to follow this advice, and I cried out seriously:

"You can, of course, rush past me, that is all but two, and those two will be dead, one with the bayonet, the other with a bullet."

They drew apart into a group and consulted in whispers. I was relieved to hear one say:

"I really believe the cuss means it," for I *did* mean it, and was not feeling at all happy that such was the case. Finally, the chief spokesman detached himself from the group and approached me, while I, fearing some trick, kept my level bayonet pointed towards him.

"It's all right," he said soothingly, "we're not going to attempt any shenanagen, but look here. Let me go downstairs alone. I'm going to bring up a pail of beer. I'll keep clear of the officers and nobody will know anything about it. I shan't get the beer here at all, but up the street."

"I can't do it," I said stubbornly.

"There's no use in being a hog," he suggested with rising anger.

"Perhaps not, but it's root hog or die with me, while I'm in the hog business."

What the outcome would have been I do not know, but some one shouted: "It's all right; leave him alone!"

The company massed themselves at the other end of the room. I saw there was some excitement, but could not make out what was going on. I was left alone by the guarded door, like the boy standing on the burning deck, overcome with a feeling of remorse at the necessary meanness I had been compelled to exhibit towards my comrades, and yet not seeing any way out of it; angry also, that they could not be made to understand that I was simply endeavouring to perform my duty. The crowd at the end of the hall seemed to be diminishing, the cause of which depletion I could not guess, but I was soon to be enlightened. Up the stair, two steps at a time, in a towering rage, sprang the Major, followed by the officers.

"How dared you allow the men to pass?" he shrieked at me.

"No one passed down these stairs," I said.

"That is not true; half the company are down at the bar."

Before I could reply, the Captain spoke up:

"I see how it is; they have gone down in the dumb waiter," which was indeed the case. The dumb waiter, which consisted of a sort of hand elevator with two shelves, for bringing refreshments up to the ballroom, had been discovered by the boys, and they had carefully lowered two at a time, who had doubled themselves up on the shelves. Thus, already half the company had descended, and two stalwart fellows were at that moment gently lowering a couple more. The Major acted like a flash before any one could stop him, scattered the group at the other end of the room, and either cut the ropes or thrust the men aside; anyhow, there was an appalling crash and a wild yell. The officers stood by the door for a moment, too astonished at this rough reprisal to speak. After the yell, a dead silence pervaded the large room, then a hollow voice came up a flue saying:

"If you fellows think there is anything funny in doing a thing like that, you're mistaken, and I'll lick the man who did it. I believe you've killed Sam Peters on the lower shelf."

As a matter of fact, Sam was not much hurt, although he was knocked speechless for the time being, and the elevator was wrecked. The officers of the company went quickly downstairs to learn the fate of the fallen soldiers, and there were low growls from the boys as the tyrannical Major strode away from the dumb waiter to follow, but no one raised a hand against him, although it was easy to see that if any had made a hostile motion there would have ensued a general scuffle, out of which the Major would have emerged somewhat shopworn. He was evidently a man of violent temper, quickly roused and quickly over, for his face was pale as he approached me, and I imagine

he was already regretting his rashness. As he went to go downstairs I presented the bayonet point to his breast.

"You cannot pass," I said.

"What!" he cried, all his colour coming back. "None of your insolence, sir. I have you punished for presenting your gun at your officer."

"You are no officer of mine. I am under Captain Day's orders, and he said, 'Let no one pass.'"

"You can't be such a fool as you look," replied the angry man. "You know very well that does not apply to me."

"It does while I am here. You advance another step and I'll show you."

Now look you how uncertain a thing popularity is. The Volunteers, who but a moment before had been cursing me, actually raised a cheer and cordially invited the hesitating Major to advance. What might have happened the God of War only knows, but, providentially, Captain Day came up at that juncture and relieved me of my guard duty.

By one of those curious coincidences that a man would not dare use in a novel, but which often happens in real life, I met the Major a few years ago on the coast of Norway, a little, old, weazened half-pay officer, retired; as mild as new milk. It is only fair to him to say that he utterly denied having struck me, said he would have been court-martialed for doing such a thing, which is probably true if I had belonged to the Regulars, but nevertheless the incident happened just as I have related it. However, the little man and I spent some most companionable hours together in the smoking room, neither of us holding any grudge against the other for what had happened many years ago in Canada, when the Militia and I were co-operating together.



"I believe you've killed Sam Peters."