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No. 372

THE KNITTING GIRLS COUNT ONE

A PATRIOTIC PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY
ELISE WEST QUAIFE

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THE KNITTING GIRLS COUNT ONE

Nearly all the incidents in this play have actually occurred during the present great war.
September, 1918.

NOTE: If those taking part do not care to sing, the songs can be omitted without affecting the sense of the dialogue.

CHARACTERS

MRS. MILDRED THAYER, *A Young Widow.*

HELEN HARTLEY, *20 years old, President of the Red Cross of Balmville.*

KATHLEEN NORRIS, *17 years old.*

JANET HALE, *18 years old.*

NORA RYAN, *Mrs. Thayer's maid, 22 years old.*

RODELLE SAUNDERS, *19 years old.*

The Knitting Girls Count One

SCENE: MRS. THAYER'S living room in Balmville, a small village where conventions prevail. It is a simple, pleasant room, with a good sized round table on which are scattered books and magazines; several easy chairs, a comfortable lounge, and a piano. (The piano need not be on stage).

DISCOVERED: MRS. THAYER, a sweet-faced young woman, is seated by the table, at left of room, knitting a soldier's sock. On the table, near her, is a work-basket, containing another sock, only partly completed. HELEN, a brisk, bright young woman, very much up-to-date as to clothes, is erect at one end of the lounge, knitting a soldier's sweater, while at the other end, curled up, with her feet under her, idly observing the other two, is KATHLEEN, a very pretty, fair-haired girl, dressed like a doll. The center of the stage is open, but there are doors at right and left, and a window wherever convenient. As curtain rises, HELEN drops her knitting for one moment, and looks indignantly at KATHLEEN, who, in abstracted fashion, is playing with the ball of yarn. HELEN reaches across the lounge, takes the yarn out of KATHLEEN'S hand, and continues her argument.

HELEN. It's not the ability that is lacking in your case, Kathleen. It's the inclination.

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KATHLEEN. But, Helen, there are some things one simply cannot do. I can't knit any more than I can drive a car—I'm too nervous.

HELEN. (*Briskly*) Nonsense. Any girl can drive a car if she makes up her mind to learn. When Martin tried to teach me to run our Packard, I looked at the steering wheel, and thought of the hills, and was terrified. And after I had backed down into a ditch twice, and run over a chicken once, the car seemed a bloody monster, eager for my gore. But Martin was drafted this Spring, and it was either run the car or walk two miles to the postoffice every day. I ran the car!

MILDRED. (*Smiling*) Why go to the postoffice every day?

HELEN. You, a widow, to ask a girl that question, when the postoffice is our only means of communication with the masculine sex.

KATHLEEN. (*Leans forward, hand around her knees*) Yes, isn't it awful! We were at Lime Rock Hotel all summer, and I only had two flirtations, and those were with boys with flat feet and sore eyes.

HELEN. (*Sings*)

“When you're off on your vacation,
If you want to serve your nation,
Believe me, you should be,
Making love to a knitting girl.”

Which brings us back to our mittens. If you refuse to make socks, will you come to the Red Cross rooms once a week and make pajamas?

KATHLEEN. I tell you I can't sew.

HELEN. Then you can pull basting threads. I pull them,—by the hundred yards. It is not inspiring work, therefore the other girls leave it to me.

KATHLEEN. (*Rather cross*) But it's so stupid,

spending one's perfectly good time, *sewing!* (*She rises, wanders over to a mirror, and strikes an attitude*) If I could pose for the movies, and make a lot of money for the soldiers, I would do it in a minute, but *sewing!* Ugh! It gives me a headache to sit still and poke a needle through sticky old flannel. (*She arranges a rebellious lock of hair*)

MILDRED. (*Gravely*) Better you should have a headache, than that some wounded soldier in the hospital should be without covering.

KATHLEEN. (*Swings round from the mirror, comes leans on table*) Oh, I had a letter from Billy yesterday. He says three of the boys, who were sleeping in the trench with him—only on the north side—had their heads blown straight off in the night. He was on the south side and wasn't hurt a bit.

(MILDRED *lays aside the sock she has been knitting, takes the unfinished one from the workbag, and quietly knits several stitches, after which she returns it to the bag, and goes on with her former work.*)

HELEN. (*Indignant*) And yet you refuse to work for the Red Cross. It's outrageous. You're a slacker, that's what you are.

KATHLEEN. (*Angry*) Don't you call me that name.

HELEN. It's the kindest thing I can say of you.

MILDRED. Quarrelling will not help our soldiers. That is one thing we women have to learn; this is no time for personalities. Each of us must decide for herself what her bit is, and then go at it with all her might, but she must not fuss if her neighbor's bit happens to be different.

HELEN. (*Warmly*) You do everything well, Mildred. It is a nine days' wonder how you ever

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managed that knitting machine as you did, when you had never seen one before.

KATHLEEN. (*Coming back to lounge*) A girl at the hotel gave lessons on the knitting machine, at two dollars and a half an hour.

MILDRED. I hope she turned the money she made into wool for the soldiers.

KATHLEEN. She didn't. She bought candy with it. How did you learn Mildred?

MILDRED. Our machine arrived at nine o'clock in the morning of what I later found out was the warmest day in ten years. I took it to the Red Cross rooms, unpacked it, found the directions of how to set it up, and went to work. I am not mechanical——

HELEN. You are a genius.

MILDRED. So I had my troubles. Every now and then someone would wander into the rooms and say: "Isn't it sweltering?" and I would dab the perspiration out of my eyes, and say: "Is it?" and forge ahead. I forgot about luncheon, but by two o'clock I had the machine adjusted and then I got busy discovering how to knit with it. Luckily the directions were very clear, and when I came home for dinner I bore my first sock proudly aloft. I had to finish up the toe and top by hand, but I had conquered the mechanics of the middle, and now I can knit a sock in twenty minutes.

KATHLEEN. (*Takes a wee powder puff from her cuff, and powders her nose*) Billy says the boys would rather have chocolate than socks. I sent him a dozen big bars.

HELEN. (*Snorts indignantly*) How much did you send your other relations?

KATHLEEN. What other relations?

HELEN. Those of the blood tie.

KATHLEEN. Tell me?

HELEN. If in the days of decadent Rome you

had been flung to the wild beasts, and some man had leaped in between them and you, and saved your life at the risk of his own, would you have felt he had a claim on you?

KATHLEEN. Certainly.

HELEN. That is what the boys in the trenches are doing—everyone of them. They are standing between the women and children of America and the beasts unleashed by war. They are related to us by their blood, and when we pray God to protect our brothers, we ought to pray harder that he will protect our brave protectors and bring them safely home.

MILDRED. (*Applauds softly*) That's good, Helen.

HELEN. I met a man from Belgium the other day; poor chap, he was only twenty-one, but terribly crippled. They had sent him over here for treatment. He said: "Everywhere I see the French flag, and that is right; France is a brave, a great nation, but where is the flag of Belgium, the country that gave her women to protect yours? I have had only one letter from my home in four years, and it contained only four words: 'They killed your sister!'"

MILDRED. Plucky Belgium!

KATHLEEN. (*Restlessly*) Yes, of course that's all true, but you can't expect me to care as much for the whole allied army as I do for my only brother.

HELEN. You should care as much.

KATHLEEN. Well I don't. I shouldn't care a mite if they put some of the good for nothings of this town in the range of the German guns. That Austin Wood, for instance.

HELEN. He is sort of spineless, but they say he makes a good soldier.

KATHLEEN. (*In disgust*) He never amounted

to a row of pins, yet the Government has gone and made him a Lieutenant, right over Billy's head.

MILDRED. (*Gently*) The *Government* does not do things without reason.

KATHLEEN. (*Again rises, goes to table, takes a flower from vase on same, and twists it in her fingers as she talks*) Oh well, Austin had been to a military boarding school, and knew how to give orders.

MILDRED. Then he was of service as an officer.

KATHLEEN. (*Hotly*) He was no good as a citizen. Never did a day's work in his life, just hung around, and spent his mother's money—

HELEN. She had plenty for him to spend, and she made a galley slave of the boy—never let him stir out of her sight when she could help it.

KATHLEEN. (*With deep scorn*) He tried to write plays! As if he could!

MILDRED. "A prophet in his own country," dear.

KATHLEEN. Anyway, they had no right to advance him as they did. Billy was an expert dentist,—graduated with the highest honors the year before the war broke out, and we thought of course they would put him in charge of a base hospital—

HELEN. (*With sarcasm*) To fill the teeth of the nurses?

KATHLEEN. (*Too absorbed to be offended*) But here he is just a common soldier, obliged to take orders from that lazy Austin Wood.

MILDRED. Our Lord was a common soldier, dear, obliged to be at the beck and call of the world.

KATHLEEN. (*With a toss of her head*) You wait till Austin Wood comes home! I heard he might be one of the boys chosen to come back and sell Liberty bonds, he is a good talker—that is all he can do. Won't I lead him a merry whirl! (*She sticks the flower coquettishly in her hair*) I will

puff him up until he feels like a balloon at a Fourth of July celebration, and then I will turn him down so hard he will feel like a cold storage egg fried on both sides.

HELEN. (*Laughs*) Rough treatment for a hero.

KATHLEEN. No rougher than Billy gets at his hands every day. (*Paces the floor, with hands clenched, and shakes her head at the coming soldier*) Oh, he'll get his little dose when he comes back!

MILDRED. "When he comes back!" We use that phrase repeatedly, never thinking *He* may come back utterly changed. War is a furnace that either burns a man's soul to ashes or purifies and splendidly transforms it. Perhaps Austin Wood will come back worthy of your admiration.

KATHLEEN. (*Through clenched teeth*) Not much!

MILDRED. He may—in very truth—be your hero.

HELEN. (*Teasingly, rises, takes KATHLEEN around the waist*) And we'll dance at your wedding—(*Whirls KATHLEEN, sings*) "Present your arms! Don't be slow! Hold the fort!"

KATHLEEN. (*Pulls away*) Let me go!

HELEN. (*Delighted*) Perfect! Those are the exact words of the song.

(KATHLEEN, with two bright spots of crimson in her cheeks, takes up her hat and coat, and is pulling them on fiercely. MILDRED goes to her, takes the wraps gently from her, and bringing her back to the table, puts both hands on the girl's shoulders, and gently forcing her down on a low stool, sits looking into her eyes.)

MILDRED. That is precisely what I did.

(KATHLEEN is still sulky, but HELEN comes near,

and completes the group of three, with Mildred as its center.)

HELEN. You?

MILDRED. Yes. You know me only as the widow of a man who painted several very famous pictures, but at the time of the Spanish war I was a concert singer in New York.

(KATHLEEN, whose one ambition is to go on the stage, forgets her anger.)

KATHLEEN. *(Breathlessly)* Hall, or legitimate?

MILDRED. *(Laughs)* Neither. I was not on the stage. I had a church position and I gave Recitals. I made much money, and had considerable of a following.

HELEN. I never heard you sing.

MILDRED. I have not sung a note since I lost Mr. Thayer. I can't. Something chokes me—here. *(Hand at throat)*

KATHLEEN. *(Fervently)* It must be just heavenly to love to distraction!

MILDRED. It is Heaven—or Hell. I met Mr. Thayer at the home of a friend; from the beginning he was fond of me.

KATHLEEN. *(Clasping her hands)* Love at first sight!

MILDRED. *(Slowly)* I almost despised him.

KATHLEEN. *(Disappointed)* Oh!

MILDRED. He could not sell his pictures, and, at that time, I thought the test of an artist was his bank account.

HELEN. It isn't.

MILDRED. Certainly not, but my shibboleth was, "If you give the world something worth while, the world will pay the price," and, in a sense that is true, as the sequel proved. What I failed to realize

was that an artist might have within him tremendous undeveloped possibilities, which only a crisis could bring out.

KATHLEEN. (*Absorbed by the romance*) Did Mr. Thayer propose to you at once?

MILDRED. (*Laughs*) Mercy no! He was the most reserved of lovers. Came to the studio at hours when I was likely to be alone, and took me to art exhibits when I was tired; that was all.

KATHLEEN. Queer he should take you out when you were tired.

MILDRED. That was the only time I would go with him. When I was rested I was prancing about with a lot of silly fools who told me I would become a second Mary Garden.

KATHLEEN. Marvellous!

MILDRED. One evening, after our first regiments had started for Cuba, Mr. Thayer came to me boiling with suppressed indignation. It was long before I could induce him to talk, but when he started, it was with such a furious denunciation of militant methods that I gasped. He had, that day, tried to enlist as a private, and been refused. He then told me how, during a revolution in Brazil, he had taken command of a handful of soldiers, and saved the city and its inhabitants from destruction. Here is his photograph in Brazilian uniform. (*She takes it from a drawer in the table, and goes behind the lounge to show it to the girls. She remains standing*)

KATHLEEN. (*With conviction*) He is simply stunning!

MILDRED. He had other similar experiences. Once, in the Argentine, he quelled a riot at the mines. He knew his gun as he knew his palette. But he was a fighter only when occasion demanded that he be, and now, when he would go armed against the Spaniard, he could not go in the uniform

of his own country. (*She returns the photo, and impersonates what follows*) He was, as a Greek warrior of old, poised for flight on the fields of glory, but the wings were lacking. I said, "Why do you not go as a free lance?" Dropping into a chair he covered his face, and the tears dripped through his fingers. "I haven't the price," he muttered. "You are correct in your estimate of me; I am a failure." Something within me that had been as ice melted at his words. I put my hand over his and said, "I will loan it to you." He jumped up as though I had stuck him. "Do you suppose I would borrow from *you*?" he asked. "However, if you have that much faith in me I shall have faith in myself. I shall paint a picture this week that men will wish to buy. You see if I don't," and before I could utter a sound he was gone.

KATHLEEN. (*Breathless*) Did he paint the picture?

MILDRED. (*Proudly*) "The Man Who Fights."

HELEN. That sold recently for five thousand dollars. I remember reading about it.

MILDRED. He sold it for three hundred, and joined the American troops in action. At first they would none of him, but he knew the game of war, and on several occasions, when the outlook was bad, he suggested plans of attack which carried through with success, and advanced our position at critical points.

KATHLEEN. Did the Government recognize his services?

MILDRED. I think they were about to do so when he was wounded. He lay in the hut of a native long after peace had been declared, and his friends thought him lost.

KATHLEEN. But he came back?

MILDRED. Naturally, since he married me. Yes, he came back one glowing evening in June. I was

by the window of my studio, wondering why my work no longer interested me, when I saw him coming, thin, ragged, and weary, but with a look of infinite peace on his face. He found me, half laughing, half crying, and we were married the next day.

KATHLEEN. (*With a sigh of bliss*) That ended beautifully.

MILDRED. So it seemed, for from the time he took up his brush again everything he painted was grabbed at by art lovers, but (*sadly*) his wound never fully healed, and when the Lusitania was sunk he went to Washington to beseech those in authority to act. He found the time not ripe for action, and the disappointment killed him.

HELEN. And yet you are not bitter against the Government.

MILDRED. Bitter! Why should I be? On the contrary, my sorrow has taught me how small are the interests of one individual compared with those of a nation, and it has given me a more sympathetic understanding of men and women.

HELEN. You will sing again some day, will you not?

MILDRED. Perhaps, if by so doing I can be of service.

KATHLEEN. (*Rises, stretches*) Helen is perpetually singing some tune. What is that latest craze you hum day and night?

HELEN. "The Knitting Girl." Know it?

KATHLEEN. Tell me!

HELEN. We did it at the Red Cross Show, eight of us tall girls dressed as soldiers, and eight of the shorter girls as our sweethearts; Janet Hale was mine. Come on, I'll show you how it goes.

KATHLEEN. But I don't sing!

(HELEN rises, takes KATHLEEN to center stage, and

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sings the song with action as indicated. KATHLEEN hangs back, and is very slow and awkward about it, so when JANET enters, HELEN drops KATHLEEN and takes JANET for partner, and they do it perfectly.)

HELEN. (To KATHLEEN) You don't need to sing; just act. (*Sings*)

Summer time, so Grandma says, was one long holiday,
Boys and girls would meet and love in the good old-fashioned way,
But all the boys I know are enlisted for the war,
And it's hard to find a boy to love me anymore.
So to serve my country, with a diligence divine,
I knit socks and sweaters in the good old summer time.

The Knitting girl so coy (*HELEN goes to KATHLEEN and tries to embrace her, but KATHLEEN pulls away*)

Knows how to train a boy.

"Present your arms! (*Holds out her arms to KATHLEEN*) Don't be slow! Hold the fort! (*Draws KATHLEEN'S head down on her shoulder*) Let me go!" (*Permits KATHLEEN to cross her, then takes her hands, arms crossed, one behind and one in front, and as they sing, they dance, three cross steps to each side*)

When you get a brief vacation,

If you want to serve your nation,

Believe me, (*Shakes forefinger at partner*)

You should be,

Making love to a knitting girl. (*Takes partner with arms crossed, one at the back and one at the front, and smiling at her, swings from side to side*)

(JANET HALE enters. *She is a very dainty young girl.*)

HELEN. Here is my real sweetheart now, just in the nick of time. (JANET has in her hands a good sized plate, covered with a white napkin. HELEN takes the plate, puts it on the table without uncovering it, and she and JANET do the chorus in perfect rhythm. At the end, JANET lets her head droop on HELEN'S shoulder)

JANET. (*Going to lounge*) - Now I am all out of breath, and I came over to impart a perfectly ripping bit of news.

KATHLEEN. (*With excitement*) Germany has declared peace!

JANET. (*With scorn*) Germany! Do you want to be bossed by the Kaiser? America won't accept anything at Germany's hands—not even peace.

HELEN. (*Who has peeked under the napkin, takes it off revealing a large, iced layer cake. She reaches for a knife and is about to cut into it*) Meantime, I shall take a piece.

JANET. (*Grabs her hand*) No! That is for the boys at Camp Hills. I am going to get a dozen nice, big, gooey cakes, and we will motor over to Camp to-night, and watch the boys eat.

KATHLEEN. Heavenly!

JANET. (*Coolly*) Don't be too sure you will be invited. You have to make your cake first.

KATHLEEN. I will go straight home and tell the cook to make a chocolate one with four layers.

JANET. Oh no! These are not to be cook-made cakes; we have to make them ourselves and show the boys we can use our hands.

KATHLEEN. But I don't know how to cook!

HELEN. There you go again. Do you know how to do anything useful?

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KATHLEEN. (*Offended*) I am a crack tennis player.

(*All laugh, even MILDRED.*)

JANET. Luxuries are to be dispensed with during the war. You are a luxury Kathleen.

MILDRED. (*Kindly*) Nevertheless, Janet, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," and I believe the boys at Camp Hills would just as willingly talk to Kathleen as eat her cake.

KATHLEEN. (*Throws MILDRED a kiss*) Thanks angel!

MILDRED. (*Pointing to the cake*) Who is the donor of your first offering?

JANET. Miss Saunders. Isn't that a peach of a cocoanut layer?

(*There is a visible chill comes over the girls.*)

HELEN. (*Slowly*) If Miss Saunders is to be one of your party to-night, you can count me out.

KATHLEEN. (*Promptly*) Me too.

JANET. That's silly. She is a perfectly all right girl.

HELEN. (*With a shrug*) We won't argue.

JANET. You don't know anything against her, do you?

KATHLEEN. She *paints!* Her cheeks.

JANET. So do you.

KATHLEEN. In the *daytime!* And she lives all alone with that horridly common woman she calls Aunt, but who isn't a bit like her; and she is awfully pushing; tries to go everywhere, and meet every-one; I hadn't been home two days before she called on me, and——

MILDRED. (*Very slowly and distinctly*) "The Knitting women count sixty." (*The girls look at*

her in amazement, but she is placidly taking the unfinished sock from her bag, having laid the one she was knitting on the table)

HELEN. What did you say, Mildred?

MILDRED. "The Knitting women count sixty."

HELEN. Isn't that a bit irrelevant?

MILDRED. It is a quotation from the "Tale of Two Cities." Do you remember how, during the French Revolution, the people kept track of the aristocrats they beheaded?

JANET. Yes; they were all numbered, and the knitting women took as many stitches as the number of the man or woman whose head came off.

MILDRED. Women have always knitted during every war, and oddly, their knitting has been indicative of their state of mind—their way of being, "In Action." It is said that when William the Norman invaded England, women wove bow strings of their hair, hoping the life in it would carry the arrows closer to the hearts of the enemy.

KATHLEEN. (*With no comprehension of MILDRED'S idea*) What a pretty thought!

MILDRED. When this war came, and we girls began to knit, I wondered what was in our minds. What was in yours, Helen?

HELEN. (*Promptly*) Red Cross.

MILDRED. And yours Janet?

JANET. (*Hesitates*) Why—I guess I did it because the other girls did.

MILDRED. And why shall you learn Kathleen?

KATHLEEN. (*Cross*) I won't learn, unless you all nag me into it.

MILDRED. In short, we were influenced to knit. This is the day of organized effort, of community ideas. It came to me how beautiful it would make our knitting if, instead of count the heads that *fell*, we counted the heads, or rather the souls, that were saved. (*Holds up the unfinished sock*) I have

recorded in this sock every man, and every woman, who has escaped, as by miracle, during this war; that is, everyone of whom I have heard. A few minutes ago I recorded your brother's escape. Kathleen.

KATHLEEN. (*Comes to her, takes sock in hand*) Billy's escape? Where? Tell me?

MILDRED. (*Points to recent stitches*) There. I have recorded sixty lives saved. I am not quite certain how many the French women recorded. Will you not all start your records?

HELEN. What has this to do with Miss Saunders?

MILDRED. A soul saved over here is just as important as one saved over there. I have an idea you girls can save Rodelle Saunders.

HELEN. (*Bluntly*) Save her from what?

MILDRED. Frankly, I don't know, but I do know that she has need of friends.

JANET. She says she is all alone in the world excepting for this awful Aunt.

HELEN. She is so forward. She acts as if she owns the Red Cross rooms——

MILDRED. She has been one of your best helpers there, has she not?

HELEN. (*Reluctantly*) Yes.

JANET. She suggested the cakes and our trip to Camp. She said some homesick, raw recruit would feel happier if he got a bite of homemade cake in him.

MILDRED. She has initiative, and she has sense. Don't judge her by trifles. In my opinion someone very dear to her is in the front line of trenches over in No Man's Land.

(*At this moment NORA RYAN puffs into the room with several packages under her arm. She is a comely Irish girl, large as to body and heart.*)

Her bark is much worse than her bite, and while she grumbles, she adores MRS. THAYER whom she serves.)

NORA. Shure, Mis' Thayer what do yez think has happened now? That Saunders girl has been arrested fer havin' wan hundred pounds o' sugar locked up in her top bureau drawer.

KATHLEEN. What did I tell you?

(Together)

HELEN. There!

JANET. What a pity!

MILDRED. Arrested! Are you sure?

NORA. Shure I'm shure. 'Twas Mis' McCabe war a-tellin' me; she see Mike Hennessey whin he war startin' fur the arrest.

MILDRED. This is a great village for mixing facts.

HELEN. Yes, instead of Balmville it should be named Gossipville.

NORA. *(With determination)* 'Twas that woman what lived wid Mis' Saunders as blabbed on her. She warn't the girl's aunt a'tall, but jest a paid servant, and this day they had a quarrel, and the woman, to git even, walked down to the food commissioner who is staying the week at the hotel, and told as how Mis' Saunders had the sugar, an' he an' Mike Hennessey is gone to the house to find it on her.

KATHLEEN. Will she have to go to jail?

NORA. Shure she will.

MILDRED. I think not. They will probably fine her.

JANET. I'm glad I got the cake first.

MILDRED. If you will excuse me, I will run over

and see if I can be of service. There must be some reason for this. (*At window*)

HELEN. (*Looks*) Isn't that Miss Saunders coming up the hill now?

NORA. Herself! Shure she's got the bold face on her to be walkin' the sthreet, and the whole village knowin' as how she has been arrested.

MILDRED. Take your bundles to the kitchen Nora, and go to the door.

(*NORA exits.*)

HELEN. (*Starts to put on her hat*) Coming my way, Kathleen?

KATHLEEN. (*Rising*) Yes.

MILDRED. (*Goes between them, and with authority, removes HELEN'S hat and taking both girls by the arm leads them back to the lounge*) No! You are going to stay, both of you, and be kind to Rodelle Saunders.

HELEN. Really I can't.

MILDRED. "Be ye knit together in brotherly love." I am not sure those words are in the Bible, but the idea is there. Show your patriotism by not condemning an American unheard.

HELEN. To hoard sugar! Such a low trick.

KATHLEEN. When the boys have to pay 86 cents a bar for almond chocolate at the front!

MILDRED. There's a reason. Be reasonable, and find out what it is.

(*Reluctantly the girls resume their seats. HELEN takes out her knitting and goes to work. KATHLEEN takes a magazine from the table and pretends to look at the pictures of leading actresses. The door bell rings.*)

NORA. (*Outside*) Shure she's at home, but I'm not shure she's at home to yez.

MILDRED. *(Goes to door quickly)* A caller Nora? *(Goes through door. Outside, in accents of feigned surprise)* Miss Saunders! How nice. Miss Hale has just been telling us your splendid plan for this evening. Come in, the girls are here. *(She leads in RODELLE, a fragile looking girl, with appealing voice, but rather gauche manner. She is not well dressed, and it is evident she is country bred. This is strongly marked in contrast with the others, who, although they live in the country, have had town training. RODELLE has an honest way of looking straight at one, that is disconcerting to those who do not like her. She has made up her face to hide her pallor, but nothing can hide the haunted look in her eyes)* Of course you are well acquainted with Miss Hartley at the Red Cross, and I think you have met Miss Norris.

(The girls bow stiffly.)

RODELLE. *(With an effort to appear at ease which ill becomes her)* Hello! Fine weather, isn't it? *(There is no reply. RODELLE turns helplessly to MILDRED, who indicated that she remove her hat, and sit down. She does so, leaving her hat on chair back stage)*

MILDRED. We think your moonlight excursion to the Camp, with refreshments for the boys, most alluring.

RODELLE. I may not be able to go. *(She looks about wistfully, but the faces of the girls are hard. Only MILDRED shows sympathetic attention, and so RODELLE addresses her)*

NORA. *(Re-enters)* I got to go back for the salt. Ye kin cook widout sugar, but vituals ain't no good without salt. *(She stalks out)*

RODELLE. You see, when I told you I was all alone in the world, I told you the truth, but not the whole truth.

MILDRED. (*Kindly*) Very few of us ever tell the whole truth about ourselves, dear.

RODELLE. My stepfather runs the hotel at Lime Rock.

KATHLEEN. (*Drops her magazine and leans forward*) Lime Rock! I spent the summer there.

RODELLE. So my stepfather wrote me. (*Her eyes twinkle*) He said you were ornamental, but not effectual.

KATHLEEN. What did he mean by the last, tell me?

RODELLE. I guess he meant you did not make a lasting impression. (*Quickly*) Of course he was wrong, but after mother died, we got into the habit of sort of summing up the boarders that way. It kept us good friends. We didn't get on very well, me and my stepfather.

KATHLEEN. Why, if you are the daughter of the man who ran the hotel, you are the girl everyone asked for this summer, who got married—(*She pauses suddenly*)

RODELLE. (*Simply*) Yes. I married Austin Wood.

ALL. Austin Wood!

RODELLE. Yes. My mother's name was Saunders, so I took it while I lived in Balmville.

(*The girls stare at each other. MILDRED hesitates an instant, then crosses the room and sits close to RODELLE.*)

MILDRED. Why did you not take Mr. Wood's name, dear?

RODELLE. Austin writes, you know.

KATHLEEN. (*Pointedly*) We know he *tried* to write.

RODELLE. (*Very quietly*) He had been all his life working on one play. It was all but finished

when he enlisted, so he asked for, and was given a term of leave to finish it. He did not want to come home, for his mother would feel the time belonged to her.

KATHLEEN. (*Bursts out*) She always did think she owned him!

RODELLE. So he came up to Lime Rock. It was early in the season, he was the only boarder. When he had been there before we had seen a good deal of each other, and this time—(*She stops, chokes*)

MILDRED. This time you decided you loved each other.

RODELLE. (*Pitifully*) He was going to France, so soon, and we wanted to feel that nothing could ever separate us, so we got married. (*HELEN screws uncomfortably in her chair, and JANET looks out the window, but KATHLEEN comes near RODELLE*) Austin did not want to tell his mother; she thought she was his only sweetheart, and he felt she had enough to bear as it was, with him going away—

KATHLEEN. So she had.

RODELLE. So he arranged for me to come down here for the summer. He thought I could become acquainted with her, and sort of break it to her gently.

KATHLEEN. (*In disgust*) That's Austin Wood all over. Makes the other fellow face the music.

RODELLE. It would not have been hard if she had been different, but—(*Again she hesitates, obviously unwilling to criticize her husband's mother*)

HELEN. But Mrs. Wood is about as approachable as a stone griffen.

RODELLE. You see, at the hotel, I had been popular, and Austin thought I could manage; but it was different there; down here I haven't seemed to—get on. (*Sighs*)

HELEN. (*Impulsively*) You were a mystery.

RODELLE. (*In surprise*) Was I? How so?

JANET. (*Impulsively*) Why, this very morning, about the sugar.

RODELLE. (*Relieved*) Oh *that!* (*She laughs*) I explained about that to some men who said they were going to arrest me. You see last winter my stepfather had a chance to buy sugar cheap, so he took ten barrels.

HELEN. But that was precisely what the Government asked us not to do.

RODELLE. (*Patiently*) He had to have it for the hotel; boarders won't stand not having dessert at least once a day. Ten barrels was his allowance. But last week, after the season was ended, he found he had half a barrel left, and I had written how difficult it was for me to get sugar here, and that I wanted it to make cakes for the soldiers, so he sent it down to me.

ALL. Oh!

RODELLE. I thought of giving a tea, and asking Mrs. Wood to come. I am a good cook; perhaps, after she ate my cake she would be glad Austin had me. (*Reflectively*) His stomach is terribly weak!

(*Everyone, even MILDRED, laughs.*)

JANET. Imagine Mrs. Wood going to tea at the home of a strange girl and being told that girl is her son's wife. Ye gods!

MILDRED. This small hamlet is more conventional than conventional Boston, my dear. You will have to win in another way than the one you propose.

RODELLE. (*Quickly*) Yes, I know. That is why I came to you for help. I have the way—here. (*Holds up a letter*) His play has been accepted, and they are to produce it at once.

KATHLEEN. Really?

JANET. It should be accepted since he spent his life writing it.

RODELLE. Oh that is not the one. (*Sadly*) That came back from the manager. I haven't dared write Austin. (*Brightens*) But, after we were married we had ten days together, and in them he wrote another play, kept at it, day and night—wrote it just as if it wrote itself—and I sent that in and—(*Almost hysterical*) *It's going on!*

MILDRED. Splendid!

(*At this moment NORA rushes into the room, her eyes rolling.*)

NORA. (*Wails*) Oh Mis' Thayer, Mis' Thayer, one of the Balmville bys is kilt entirely! Oh Alanna the day!

ALL. A Balmville boy? (*They jump up*)

NORA. (*Nods vehemently*) Oh his poor mother! God bless her and save her.

KATHLEEN. (*Takes NORA by the arms and shakes her*) Not Billy? Not my brother?

NORA. Not yer brother, a'tall a'tall. It's likely he's safe and sound, wid the other poor lad lying cold and still on the ground afther the great battle.

MILDRED. (*Sharply*) Who is it Nora?

NORA. It's Austin Wood it is. A foine, up sthandin' broth o' a lad he war, wid the curly head on him! (*As she gives the name RODELLE sinks down in a little heap on the chair by the lounge. They all move quickly towards her, but she wards them off with one hand, and with the other draws a cushion to her, and, putting it on her knees, buries her face in it. NORA, oblivious of everything save her own emotion*) Oh the poor mother! Wakin' in the night to think o' her only son—kilt!

MILDRED. Nora, go directly to Mrs. Wood's home. Tell her she must come here at once; do you

understand? *At once.* It is of the utmost importance.

NORA. Ah well, I wouldn't loike to be afther doin' that now. The poor soul will be wantin' to weep by hersel' for a day or so.

MILDRED. (*With authority*) Do as I bid you.

NORA. (*Grumbling*) I'll go, but it's not o' me own accord. (*She exits muttering*)

(MILDRED *bends over* RODELLE, *the other three form a stricken group by the table.*)

MILDRED. (*Tenderly*) It's the woman's part dear. The woman's cross. She must bear it as bravely as she can. Remember he was killed "In Action." That, to me, would be a comforting thought. (RODELLE *does not move, or indicate that she has heard. The girls are awkward, with the awkwardness of youth in the time of great stress. MILDRED strokes RODELLE's hair softly for a full minute, then she moves slowly to the piano—if there is no piano on stage she can sing without it—and softly striking a chord, she sings "The Rosary," with great depth of feeling. As she ends RODELLE lifts her head.*)

RODELLE. (*As in a dream*) He was so strong! So strong, and so young!

MILDRED. (*Goes to her*) That is the awful part of war dear. It takes the young.

RODELLE. (*Still dazed*) He had my picture in his pocket, my name on his clothes—(*Suddenly she blinks as if coming out from darkness into a strong light*) It is not true he is killed. It can't be true. His identification card bore my name and address, he did not want the news to come direct to his mother for fear the shock would prove her death too. (*She rises feverishly, and goes for her hat*) I must go to her, I must go at once, and tell her it is a mistake—

(NORA, *out of breath, hurries back into the room.*)

NORA. Praise be, I didn't have to moind ye that toime, Mis' Thayer, for on the road I met up wid Mike Hennessey, an' he tolt me it war all a mistake about Austin Wood bein' kilt. (*With a tremendous sob of joy* RODELLE *seizes NORA and kisses her.* NORA, *offended, draws back*) Pardon! It's dem-on-stra-tive ye are!

MILDRED. There's a reason Nora. (*She puts her arm around RODELLE.* To NORA) How did you get your story so mixed?

NORA. Me is it! Me, mixed the story! Shure ye blames me fur iverything that happens in this house.

MILDRED. Everything good Nora—but how was it?

NORA. 'Twas that fool o' a Bridget McCarthy who mixed things.

HELEN. It is criminal to make a mistake of that nature, and terrify one's friends.

NORA. Shure it is. Well, Bridget read in the newspaper that a Austin Wood war kilt, and niver lookin' to see the lad's address nor title nor nothin', she ran out into the street and blabbed the news to iverywan she met. (*Reflectively*) That woman is a poll parrot shure as me name is Bridget Ryan. (*As she stands with her hands on her ample hips,* RODELLE *seizes her by the shoulders*)

RODELLE. You are *sure*—it was not my Austin?

NORA. (*Shakes the girl off like a dog shakes off an annoying fly*) Am I shure this, an' am I shure that, an' am I shure t'other! How kin I be shure o' what nobody ain't shure? I tells the news as I hears 'em, and all I knows is, the Austin Wood what was kilt comes from Oregon, and ain't got nary title, while the Balmville lad war a Lieutenant.

RODELLE. Now I can go face his mother and tell

her about his play and our marriage. Now I could face Daniel in the lion's den, and take the biggest lion by the paws (*She grabs NORA by the hands so tightly that the Irish girl cannot shake her off*) and make him do the one step with me. (*Drags NORA across room*)

NORA. Glory! The poor thing is crazy!

RODELLE. Yes, crazy with happiness.

NORA. I'm thinkin' ye're crazy wid *sugar*!

RODELLE. (*Laughingly with joy*) I am. Life is sweet. The world is a sweet place in which to be alive. Not even a German can kill the same man twice, and if Austin Wood is dead, then he cannot be killed, and he will come back to me.

(NORA, *scared, succeeds in breaking away from*
RODELLE.)

NORA. Crazy as a loon! It hits 'em that way sometimes; in the head loike. I must be afther tellin' Bridget McCarthy this is her work.

RODELLE. (*Puts on hat*) Good-bye everybody; I am going to make peace with my mother-in-law. Peace! The most wonderful word in the language excepting, *Life*. We'll go to Camp Hills to-night, and I'll make enough cakes this afternoon that every boy there can have a slice.

NORA. So that's what we hid the sugar for. Bless ye. I've a nephey o' me own at Camp Hills.

RODELLE. I'll give him a whole cake—for his aunt's sake. Good-bye, till to-night. (*She goes out*)

(HELEN *slowly comes back to lounge and takes up*
the knitting.)

JANET. It brings No Man's Land very close, does it not? (*She covers cake with napkin*)

KATHLEEN. (*Slowly*) I guess I will come to the Red Cross rooms to-morrow. Perhaps—if I don't sew both legs of the pajamas together—I may help to keep some soldier alive.

HELEN. We will work as we never did before.

NORA. (*Going out*) Life is a blessed thing, shure.

MILDRED. (*Takes up her unfinished sock*) And the Knitting Girls Count One! (*As she takes her stitches*)

(*The Curtain Falls.*)



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