THE KNITTER OF LIEGE

"How near are the Germans, Father?"

The speaker was a Walloon peasant woman, and she spoke in the rough, guttural, Walloon patois. She was past middle age and her face, tanned and hardened by work in the fields, was as expressionless as a mask. Her gnarled fingers were busily manipulating a set of steel needles attached to an almost finished heavy woolen stocking.

The priest turned a worn and haggard countenance toward her, and there was a mild reproof in his answer.

"Yesterday," he said, "You have asked that question of me, daughter; the day before you have asked the same, and twice this day."

"Thrice," the old Knitter corrected calmly, "and I shall ask it again of some one before the moon is high this night. I would be one of the first to welcome the Prussians, Father." And she laughed mirthlessly.

A gleam of interest showed in the eyes of the priest, and he gave her a searching glance.

"You have sons perhaps, out yonder?" He pointed in the direction of the eastern forts.

For a moment the mask which served the Knitter for a face seemed alive. It appeared to writhe with anguish – the lips were contorted – but, when at last their owner spoke, it was in the same toneless voice.

"Yesterday at sunset," she said, "I had a son --there at Fleron – fighting for the king. Today, when the sun shall set – who knows?"

A little harsh sob seemed to tear its way up and out and for a moment the bony, calloused hands stopped their mechanical movements and 1aborious I y made the sign of the cross. Then, thrusting the dangling stocking-leg into her flat bosom, the Knitter moved on, her hands again busy with the shining needles.
In front of the Hotel de Ville her progress was blocked. A mass of awed and excited people were gathered there. All of the faces were grimly apprehensive. Terror-stricken ones showed here and there, but, for the most, they were courageous. Now and then a little forced cheer would go up at the sound of the fort guns, but at the answering boom of the enemy's cannon, which seemed drawing nearer and nearer in appalling pace, they would gaze helplessly into each other's eyes.

Circulating slowly among the crowd, the old Knitter learned that the Germans were pressing closely in on the town – the last report placing them at less than six miles away. And then, as if having found the object of her quest, she detached herself from the assemblage and turned back the way she had come, leaving the broad streets at

last for darker, narrower ones, and then on, until she came to the foot of a dingy stairway which led crookedly up from the cobbled sidewalk.

With a foot on the first step, she paused, and leaning to one side against the time-stained walls, lifted her gaze to the roofs of the town, dyed red by the setting sun.

A lull had come in the firing from the forts and in that still father away. A waiting, questioning portentous silence seemed to hang above the place, broken suddenly by the chime of the evening bells – the bells that were to be forever silenced by shot and shell before another Angelus hour.

The broad rim of the great shallow basin which holds Liege -or what is now left of that quaint old city showed purple against a rapidly slivering sky. A strong breeze, heavy with the chill approaching autumn, swept down from the Ardennes, the mountainous crest between the Meuse and the Moselle. It brought with it the odor of the un-harvested fields over which it had winged in its day's journey.

The Knitter shivered as if struck by a wintry blast. Her lips moved in broken sentences of the Benediction. Then, as if with reluctance, she climbed slowly, haltingly, up the narrow stairs.

On the landing sat an old man before a closed door, his grizzled head bowed sorrowfully on his knotted hands. He looked up with red-rimmed eyes, and the Knitter, meeting his look, let her work fall from the loosened hold of her fingers.

"Not – not - ?" She gasped hoarsely, protestingly, and clutching at her throat, making a curious, choking sound. Her eyes were fixed on the closed door – tragedy in every line of face and figure.

But the old man sat on apathetically.

"Henri had him sent home," he said at last, in the same guttural patois, and rising stiffly, he unclosed the door and beckoning the other to follow, moved falteringly within.

A stark, stalwart young figure lay stretched on a wooden bench and candles burned at both head and feet. The left breast of the gay uniform it wore showed a jagged rent and was smeared with an ugly stain darker than the crimson which predominated in the Belgian uniform. Just beneath the stain lay a small Belgian flag unfurled. One cheek of the young face was grimed as if it had lain hard pressed against the damp earth for many hours. For the rest, it was a peaceful pose – there was a faint smile on the clean-cut lips, as if the boy had lain down to happy dreams.

Sinking to her knees, the old Knitter rumpled the fair hair with trembling fingers and moaned softly, while the old man stood rigid, with uncovered head, his stolid peasant face livid with suppressed grief.

Presently, the kneeling mourner looked up sharply.

"Marie?" She questioned anxiously.

"I sent her to her mother's when I heard, to stay over night," the old man answered.

As if in direct refutation, a low voice rang from outside the door:

"Pere -," it called sweetly.

The Knitter got quickly and painfully to her feet – and the two within the silent room read consternation as well as grief in each other's faces.

"Pere!" – the voice rang out again, musical as the bells a half hour silent – but there was no response.

"Pere!" The call had a frightened note – then the door was flung open and a young, swift, sunny thing fluttered on the threshold.
"You frightened me," it cried to the old people moving lifelessly toward the door. "I thought you would be lonely, Pere, with me away, and I came back. Are you not – “

The sweet young voice broke off. The girl stood in the doorway – the light of the dying day entangled in the gold of her hair lovely with the exquisite loveliness of approaching motherhood – one round arm thrown above her head, poised like a butterfly for flight – her gaze traveling beyond the two whom she had addressed. For a moment thus, and then, with a sudden startled and despairing cry that pierced the hearts of the living like a two-edged sword, she flew across the room and threw herself tumultuously on the heart of the dead.

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"How near are the Germans, Father?"

In the early hours of the morning, even before the sun had thrown its advance guard of light above the foothills surrounding Liege, the priest of thee worn and haggard countenance was roused from his devotion to answer the familiar query.

"Near, very near," he responded, wearily, fixing his sleep-heavy eyes on the old Knitter whose face appeared even more mask-like in the imperfect light.

"Will you come with me, Father? My son is dead – my daughter-in-law is dying."

The Knitter spoke calmly. In her hands was the ribbing of a new piece of work. Her fingers moved ceaselessly.

The priest turned a compassionate gaze upon her. He was used to the stolid reserve of the Belgian peasant, but his stoical acceptance of affliction bewildered him.

They moved side by side through the gray of the dawn, neither speaking until they came to the crooked stairway where an old man had waited outside the closed door. A woman was waiting now – one whose face, despite the lines and marks of toil and the ravages

of recent grief, bore a faint resemblance to that of the sunny thing that had hovered "above the threshold a few hours before. The voice, too, was a faded echo of the other voice.

"Hurry, Father," it said, brokenly, "the end is near, very near" – reminding the priest curiously of his own words a few moments earlier.

They passed inside the door the old man had guarded. The bench was empty now. The stalwart young soldier was no longer in view. On a wide, low bed lay a slender white-robed figure that seemed to breathe only at long intervals – colorless, save for the sunny hair. Beside it reposed a tiny form that breathed not at all.

The priest bent over them for a moment, then lifted his face, murmuring Latin phrases. "Absolve te," he said, distinctly. Then his voice was drowned by low, gentle sobbing, like the litany of the fall rain.

It was the mother of the broken butterfly, sweeping.

“Ora pro nobis," murmured the priest, and the sobbing swelled into a crescendo of agonized grief.

The old Knitter, of whose face the eyes alone seemed living, drew the home-woven white coverlid above the two waxen faces, with hands that trembled but faintly.

His duty performed, the priest turned unsteadily toward the door. But the old Knitter went beside him, and on the landing she beckoned him to follow her down a narrow back stairway instead of the one by which they had come, and without question he followed.

At the foot of the stair way they faced a tiny garden. In one corner an old man leaned heavily on a spade and stared vacantly at a yawning excavation. A long chestnut box rested on the ground close by, a rope knotted loosely about either end. Parallel with the gaping crevice were three long, newly-made mounds. The Knitter pointed them out to the priest, with shaking hand.

"Our sons," she said, in tones harsh with suppressed emotion, and at her words the old man leaned more heavily on his spade and lifted hopeless eyes.

"If – you would only – help me – Father,” he choked, and pointed to the long box.

And the sad-eyed priest, comprehending, came and helped to lower the box in the waiting hole. Then, softly repeating the services for the dead, he took the spade from the trembling hands of the old father and shoveled in the heaped-up earth until a mound like the three others showed grimly in the full light of the new day.

During the brief ceremony, the Knitter had crouched against the stairway with hidden face. But, as the priest stood smoothing the rough clods as if to make the mound less hideous, she crossed the narrow plot to the old man's side.

All night he had been digging a grave for his last son. His face showed bloodless. The Knitter gripped his arm with rough tenderness and compassion, her face twitching.

"We will ask the Father," she said, falteringly, "to send someone to make the resting place for our Marie and the little one."

For a moment the old man stared dazedly, then a horrible sound came from his throat. He seemed to rear upward and backward, the stoop gone from his habitually bowed shoulders. Then, with frothing lips, he pitched forward at the feet of the priest, who lifted pitying eyes to the aged Knitter.

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"How near are the Germans, Father?"

For centuries – it seemed to the besieged – Liege had been under the fire of the monster Krupp guns. For centuries shells had been falling, leaving death and destruction in their wake. When the news had spread through the city that the Prussians were going to shell Liege, that the women and children were in danger, the people had moved in a vast wave toward the station. But the last refuge train left many behind – some, who at the last moment refused to desert friends and loved ones – many for whom there was no means of transportation. The women and children left were supposed to be closely housed and the priest turned in astonishment at the well-remembered question.

“Within the hour they will occupy the city,” he returned. “Why are you not inside?”

“I would die in the open, Father!” The old Knitter’s voice had an odd ring that caused the priest to shudder. She knitted industriously as she talked.

“Should anything happen to me, Father,” she continued, calmly, “you will find many pairs of warm woolen stockings down there.” She nodded toward the narrow, dark street. “They will be needed for our poor little Belgians who must go on fighting to the end – for this – .” With one hand she indicated the wreck and ruin about them, then moved slowly on, the tireless fingers once more busy.

The priest looked after her and sighed, but he was to see her yet once again.

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The forts of Liege lay gasping in a final death agony. Shot to pieces, they offered no further resistance to the invaders.

The main streets were choked with men wearing gray tunics. From the square about the Hotel de Ville floated the odor of camp cooking. The Germans laughed and sang as if in high good humor. Officers in gold-laced uniforms rode up and down the streets issuing commands. It was the sunset hour – sunset without the Angelus. The lingering rays of

the dying day fell on the fort of Fleuron and showed the terrible toll which death had taken within and without.

An old woman crept stiffly down a narrow stairway into a dusky, narrow street. Without once pausing, she came steadily on, entering at last one of the main thoroughfares. Across one drooping shoulder, she carried a bag of something carefully balanced. From her hands dangled the leg of a coarse woolen stocking to which were affixed some shining needles. She knitted mechanically as she moved along with an effort at haste, her gaze on the soldiers. Presently some of them noted her and shouted something in Flemish, and getting no answer, halted her forcibly.

What had she in the bag, they demanded to know. Was it something good to eat? They were hungry, they declared. Grasping the bag tenaciously, the old woman refused at first to answer, but admitted at last with apparent reluctance that it was sugar which she was carrying to her son's house.

At this there was loud laughter. She might take her son the Germans' compliments, they would relieve her of the sugar – and so on – taking it from her resisting hands at last and throwing a coin at her feet as they made off with their booty.

The old woman went haltingly on for a block or so; then, turning into a dusky alley, she drew from among the voluminous folds of her clothing two slender bottles, whose amber contents sparkled alluringly.

Coming back to the street, she plodded steadily on, displaying the bottles conspicuously, and passed at last a building whose open doors showed a group of officers within, clustered about a table filled with important-looking papers. As she went slowly by, a man on the steps stopped her peremptorily, offering to buy the wine she carried.

"It is not for sale," she told him. "It is for my wounded son." But the man merely laughed, dropped a silver piece at her feet and took the bottles easily from her puny grasp, bidding her shortly to "get off the streets".

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"How near are the Germans, Father?"

The familiar question and voice halted the priest, coming home from a long night's vigil among the dead and wounded. He looked up, dazed. A cart rumbled along the streets, and in it, with closely pinioned arms, guarded by a German soldier on either side, sat the old Knitter of Liege. The toil-worn hands for once were empty – the knotted fingers for once at rest. The red light of the rising sun shone full upon her face, and the priest, staring with mouth agape – saw that it was radiant with a sort of frenzied radiance, the kind of look which Sidney Carton must have carried to the guillotine.

"Remember me, Father," she called clearly and with exultation in her voice.
"What has she done?" A boyish soldier stopped another within hearing of the priest.

"She gave poisoned sugar to our soldiers," was the answer. "Many of them are dead. And two officers," he continued, "are also dead from drinking her poisoned wine."

They passed on, and the priest, looking after the rumbling cart, did remember. Remembered the four graves of the Knitter's boys side by side in the tiny garden; remembered the old man who had fallen lifeless at her feet after digging a grave for the last of their sons; remembered the young daughter-in-law to whom he had administered extreme unction, and the waxen babe prematurely born; remembered the heaps of dead and dying about the fort of Fleuron; remembered the ruin and desolation of his beloved city – and lifting his face, he murmured broken Latin sentences – among them one he had used above the little innocent mother and the sinless babe:

"Absolvo te."

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