

The Inglenook

A Soldier Chap.—A Guernsey Idyll.

BY E. GALLIENNE ROBIN.

"If there's a thing I am set against in this world it's you going with them soldier chaps, so mind what you're about, my girl!"

Old Jean Letocq frowned fiercely, and stared his granddaughter out of countenance; she blushed a little, but answered quietly:

"Bet, grandfather, I don't go with soldiers! And they are not all wild and fond of drink, like you always say. Why, there's two or three from Fort Houmet that goes as regular as can be to the Catel Chapel every Sunday night."

"Eh? Eh? And how do you know that, Susie?"

"Oh, but I can't help it if I see them there! They sit in a line with us. And, grandfather, soldiers are brave, brave fellows! Surely you'll say 'yes' to that!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, but it's their work, ain't it? and their paid for it, ain't they? But come now, Susie, put on your scoop, and take a basket for to try and bring me a few limpets from the rocks. And while your gone I'll have a doze, before ten."

Susie took down her pink sun-bonnet from the rack, and a basket from the hook on the wall, and sped across a wide common towards the rocks. She had no difficulty in finding a plentiful supply of limpets, and she was just thinking of turning homewards when a white something perched on a high rock caught her eye. It was a young sea-gull. The very creature she had longed to catch and tame! Putting down her basket, she crept stealthily up the face of the rock, and leaning over the young bird, she clasped it eagerly. With a terrified shriek it struggled to get free, but Susie clutched it firmly, and prepared to descend by an easier path. Suddenly she saw that she had mistaken the way, for without looking before her, she had gone blindly down, and now she found herself on a jagged point above a boiling mass of surf. She staggered, lost her balance, shrieked wildly, and then fell, while the sea gull flew away with a joyful cry.

The rock upon which the girl fell heavily was a broad flat one, which effectually saved her from rolling over into the sea. But she lay perfectly still, and the blood flowed from a wound in her forehead. Suddenly a young soldier scrambled round a point of cliff, and started as he came in view of the seemingly dead girl. He had heard the cry of the gull, and had come to see if it had flown away from a nest. He little expected to see pretty Susie Letocq in such a state. He knew her well by sight, and admired her neat figure and sweet face, as did many other young men from Cobo Bay.

Bending down he heard her moan pitiously, and with careful hands he raised her in his strong arms and carried her over the rocks; it was no easy task, but he walked faster across the common and knocked at her cottage door, feeling as if he had been years bringing her home.

"Come in," said a gruff voice, and Edward Turner entered the bright, clean kitchen, where the table was set for tea.

Jean was smoking his long clay pipe, and he started up as the scarlet coat horrified his eyes.

"What is it?" he cried. "How dare you come in? What's the matter with Susie?"

In a few hurried words the soldier told what he knew of the accident; then saying he would go for the doctor and send in a neighbour, he left the cot-

tage. He soon returned with a doctor whom he had met as he drove on his country rounds, and Susie's hurt was pronounced slight, though the shock to her nervous system would necessitate some days of complete rest.

No one took any further notice of Edward, and after hanging about in the hope that he might be of further use, he was obliged, at last, to return to Fort Houmet, where his regiment was quartered. But he thought a good deal about Susie, and at last, a few days after the accident, he decided to call and inquire how she was. One bright Sunday afternoon he knocked at the cottage door, and old Jean's voice bade him enter.

Susie sat in a big armchair near the window. She was propped up with pillows, and looked white and weary. Jean sat beside her, with a large open Bible on his knees, and she stared with an angry frown at the visitor. Edward felt, all at once ill at ease; though the girl's grateful words and smiles warmed his heart, the old man's evident antagonism was on the point of driving him away, when again the door opened, and a minister entered the kitchen. After greeting Jean and Susie, he turned to the soldier with outstretched hand.

"I am glad to see you," he said, "for, of course, I have heard of your gallant rescue of my little friend; besides that, you are such a regular attendant of Catel Chapel, that I want to tell you how delighted I am to see you always in your pew every Sunday night."

Edward's relief was extreme at being courteously treated; but the minister's interest in the young man did not mollify Jean and he treated Susie to a tirade against redcoats as soon as the soldier had gone away with the preacher. But Susie was more than inclined to take the part of Edward. She owed him her life, she said, and besides he was good, and—

The old man interrupted her harshly and bade her never speak of soldiers again; they were a bad lot and there was no doubt that this Turner would prove a hypocrite. Thus Susie was silenced, but she was not convinced. She hoped Edward would not venture to come again, for she feared her grandfather would send him from the door, and yet she was sadly disappointed when weeks went by and no bonny, fair-haired soldier ever appeared to ask if she was dead or alive. But she improved rapidly, nevertheless, and her heart beat fast when she entered Catel Chapel the first Sunday after her complete recovery. Would he be there? Perhaps he had been ordered away! Perhaps he might be in England for a furlough! She turned timidly and looked at his pew. He was there, and meeting her glance, he smiled in a most friendly manner. Reassured, Susie gave her thoughts to the service with a happy, glowing face and a grateful heart.

Coming out of the chapel, it was very dark and Susie was feeling her way out of the yard, when a pleasant manly voice asked if she were alone. Susie peered through the darkness and made out the tall stalwart figure and merry face of Edward Turner. She was alone, she replied hurriedly, and then he asked permission to take her home. How friendly the two became as they walked closely down the hill and along the bay! How many things they had in common! Above all, it was a matter of no small rejoicing when Susie discovered that Edward was a soldier of Jesus Christ, and when they parted, each felt the other to be already dear and necessary to life's happiness.

After that Sunday evening they met often. Susie was a good conscientious little girl, but she did not hesitate to see her lover unknown to Jean. She

realised that his prejudice against a soldier was wholly absurd and unwarranted, and at last the day came when Edward would have to face the grandfather again, for his permission must be sought in a momentous matter. One evening he came to the cottage, and before Jean could order him away, Susie rose and said firmly:

"Please, dear grandfather, you must listen just this once—Mr. Turner has something most important to say."

Now Jean could not refuse his Susie, and so, with a stormy face, he sat beside the fire, and listened to the soldier's tale of love and devotion. As Edward finished the old man rose, and, drawing himself to his full height, he said sternly—

"If I live to be a hundred I will never give my consent to this marriage, Susie. I'd rather see you dead in your coffin than married to one of these shiftless soldier chaps."

Susie gave a cry of bitter pain, and threw her arms around her soldier's neck, while he held her close and bowed his curly head on her shoulder; and the old man looked at them, frowning and perfectly unmoved. No one spoke, only Susie moaned sadly.

Then suddenly the door was flung open, and another soldier appeared.

"You must excuse me!" he cried, in terrible excitement, "but our regiment is ordered off! We must leave Guernsey to-morrow morning. We are off to the war! We are going to smash the foe! Hurrah!"

A glint of horrible joy shone in the old faded eyes of Jean Letocq. Ah! he thought to himself that Providence was on his side. But poor Susie sobbed and cried and suffered agonies at the parting with her lover; and he, proud to be off to the war, was yet full of grief too. It needed a heart of stone to withstand the tears and love of the two young creatures, so good, so beautiful; but Jean Letocq hardened himself and heaved a great sigh of relief when, at last, Edward Turner tore himself from Susie's clinging arms and rushed away through the darkness to Fort Houmet.

He wrote long letters on the voyage out and Susie received a few hurried scraps when he reached his destination. Then, suddenly, his letters ceased and the poor girl's anxiety and suffering tortured her almost beyond endurance. It was awful to bear the suspense alone, for her grandfather would not hear the war mentioned and never spoke the slightest word of sympathy. Susie spent nearly all her little hoard of savings in buying newspapers. Every day when her work was done, she tramped into Sainte Pierre Port, the capital of Guernsey, to get the latest news of the war. But Sunday was her saddest day. It stabbed her with a cruel pain to see Edward's empty pew at Catel Chapel, and yet she would not have missed her Sunday night services for the world; it was a blessed comfort to think of him and pray for him in the old place, where they had first seen each other.

But as the weeks went past, and the war continued Susie began to lose hope. Never a word did she hear from Edward. She felt that her desire for life was ebbing away. She prayed to the Great Father to take her away, since it must be that her soldier was dead. And yet, even then, when Jean Letocq saw her falling from him, saw her bowed and broken with grief, he said not one word of comfort to ease or quiet her poor smitten heart.

One evening he left Susie lying on the jouquiére in the firelight, and went out to have a chat with a neighbor. As he shut the door after him, Susie buried her fair head in the patchwork pillow and cried long and bitterly. She pictured so many dreadful things as she lay there. She saw him—her lover—dead on the battle-field, with his blue eyes set, and the blood oozing from many wounds, for Edward would die hard. Or she followed him through battle after battle, and saw him taken prisoner by the enemy. She stifled her sobs and tried to pray, then a sense of healing and rest fell over her as her tired eyes closed, and she slept.

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"Susie, Susie, wake up!"