

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

E. P. Roe

Table of Contents

<u>SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS</u>	1
<u>E. P. Roe</u>	2

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

E. P. Roe

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

Picnicking in December would be a dreary experience even if one could command all the appliances of comfort which outdoor life permitted. This would be especially true in the latitude of Boston and on the bleak hills overlooking that city and its environing waters. Dreary business indeed Ezekiel Watkins regarded it as he shivered over the smoky camp-fire which he maintained with difficulty. The sun was sinking into the southwest so early in the day that he remarked irritably: "Durned if it was worth while for it to rise at all."

Ezekiel Watkins, or Zeke, as he was generally known among his comrades, had ceased to be a resident on that rocky hillside from pleasure. His heart was in a Connecticut valley in more senses than one; and there was not a more homesick soldier in the army. It will be readily guessed that the events of our story occurred more than a century ago. The shots fired at Bunker Hill had echoed in every nook and corner of the New England colonies, and the heart of Zeke Watkins, among thousands of others, had been fired with military ardor. With companions in like frame of mind he had trudged to Boston, breathing slaughter and extermination against the red-coated instruments of English tyranny. To Zeke the expedition had many of the elements of an extended bear-hunt, much exalted. There was a spice of danger and a rich promise of novelty and excitement. The march to the lines about Boston had been a continuous ovation; grandsires came out from the wayside dwellings and blessed the rustic soldiers; they were dined profusely by the housewives, and if not wined, there had been slight stint in New England rum and cider; the apple-cheeked daughters of the land gave them the meed of heroes in advance, and abated somewhat of their ruddy hues at the thought of the dangers to be incurred. Zeke was visibly dilated by all this attention, incense, and military glory; and he stepped forth from each village and hamlet as if the world were scarcely large enough for the prowess of himself and companions. Even on parade he was as stiff as his long-barrelled flintlock, looking as if England could hope for no quarter at his hands; yet he permitted no admiring glances from bright eyes to escape him. He had not traversed half the distance between his native hamlet and Boston before he was abundantly satisfied that pretty Susie Rolliffe had made no mistake in honoring him among the recruits by marks of especial favor. He wore in his squirrel-skin cap the bit of blue ribbon she had given him, and with the mien of a Homeric hero had intimated darkly that it might be crimson before she saw it again. She had clasped her hands, stifled a little sob, and looked at him admiringly. He needed no stronger assurance than her eyes conveyed at that moment. She had been shy and rather unapproachable before, sought by others than himself, yet very chary of her smiles and favors to all. Her ancestors had fought the Indians, and had bequeathed to the demure little maiden much of their own indomitable spirit. She had never worn her heart on her sleeve, and was shy of her rustic admirers chiefly because none of them had realized her ideals of manhood created by fireside stories of the past.

Zeke's chief competitor for Susie's favor had been Zebulon Jarvis; and while he had received little encouragement, he laid his unostentatious devotion at her feet unstintedly, and she knew it. Indeed, she was much inclined to laugh at him, for he was singularly bashful, and a frown from her overwhelmed him. Unsophisticated Susie reasoned that any one who could be so afraid of HER could not be much of a man. She had never heard of his doing anything bold and spirited. It might be said, indeed, that the attempt to wring a livelihood for his widowed mother and for his younger brothers and sisters from the stumpy, rocky farm required courage of the highest order; but it was not of a kind that appealed to the fancy of a romantic young girl. Nothing finer or grander had Zebulon attempted before the recruiting officer came to Opinquake, and when he came, poor Zeb appeared to hang back so timorously that he lost what little place he had in Susie's thoughts. She was ignorant of the struggle taking place in his loyal heart. More intense even than his love for her was the patriotic fire which smouldered in

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

his breast; yet when other young men were giving in their names and drilling on the village green, he was absent. To the war appeals of those who sought him, he replied briefly. "Can't leave till fall."

"But the fighting will be over long before that," it was urged.

"So much the better for others, then, if not for me."

Zeke Watkins made it his business that Susie should hear this reply in the abbreviated form of, "So much the better, then."

She had smiled scornfully, and it must be added, a little bitterly. In his devotion Zeb had been so helpless, so diffidently unable to take his own part and make advances that she, from odd little spasms of sympathy, had taken his part for him, and laughingly repeated to herself in solitude all the fine speeches which she perceived he would be glad to make. But, as has been intimated, it seemed to her droll indeed that such a great stalwart fellow should appear panic-stricken in her diminutive presence. In brief, he had been timidity embodied under her demurely mischievous blue eyes; and now that the recruiting officer had come and marched away with his squad without him, she felt incensed that such a chicken-hearted fellow had dared to lift his eyes to her.

"It would go hard with the Widow Jarvis and all those children if Zeb 'listed," Susie's mother had ventured in half-hearted defence, for did she not look upon him as a promising suitor.

"The people of Opinquake wouldn't let the widow or the children starve," replied Susie, indignantly. "If I was a big fellow like him, my country would not call me twice. Think how grandfather left grandma and all the children!"

"Well, I guess Zeb thinks he has his hands full wrastling with that stony farm."

"He needn't come to see me any more, or steal glances at me 'tween meetings on Sunday," said the girl, decisively. "He cuts a sorry figure beside Zeke Watkins, who was the first to give in his name, and who began to march like a soldier even before he left us."

"Yes," said Mrs. Rolliffe; "Zeke was very forward. If he holds out as he began—Well, well, Zeke allus was a little forward, and able to speak for himself. You are young yet, Susan, and may learn before you reach my years that the race isn't allus to the swift. Don't be in haste to promise yourself to any of the young men."

"Little danger of my promising myself to a man who is afraid even of me! I want a husband like grandfather. He wasn't afraid to face anything, and he honored his wife by acting as if she wasn't afraid either."

Zeb gave Susie no chance to bestow the rebuffs she had premeditated. He had been down to witness the departure of the Opinquake quota, and had seen Susie's farewell to Zeke Watkins. How much it had meant he was not sure—enough to leave no hope or chance for him, he had believed; but he had already fought his first battle, and it had been a harder one than Zeke Watkins or any of his comrades would ever engage in. He had returned and worked on the stony farm until dark. From dawn until dark he continued to work every secular day till September.

His bronzed face grew as stern as it was thin; and since he would no longer look at her, Susie Rolliffe began to steal an occasional and wondering glance at him "'tween meetings."

No one understood the young man or knew his plans except his patient, sad-eyed mother, and she learned more by her intuitions than from his spoken words. She idolized him, and he loved and revered her: but the terrible Puritan restraint paralyzed manifestations of affection. She was not taken by surprise when one evening he said quietly, "Mother, I guess I'll start in a day or two."

She could not repress a sort of gasping sob however, but after a few moments was able to say steadily, "I supposed you were preparing to leave us."

"Yes, mother, I've been a-preparing. I've done my best to gather in everything that would help keep you and the children and the stock through the winter. The corn is all shocked, and the older children can help you husk it, and gather in the pumpkins, the beans, and the rest. As soon as I finish digging the potatoes I think I'll feel better to be in the lines around Boston. I'd have liked to have gone at first, but in order to fight as I ought I'd want to remember there was plenty to keep you and the children."

"I'm afraid, Zebulon, you've been fighting as well as working so hard all summer long. For my sake and the children's, you've been letting Susan Rolliffe think meanly of you."

"I can't help what she thinks, mother; I've tried not to act meanly."

"Perhaps the God of the widow and the fatherless will shield and bless you, my son. Be that as it may," she added with a heavy sigh, "conscience and His will must guide in everything. If He says go forth to battle, what am

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

I that I should stay you?" Although she did not dream of the truth, the Widow Jarvis was a disciplined soldier herself. To her, faith meant unquestioning submission and obedience; she had been taught to revere a jealous and an exacting God rather than a loving one. The heroism with which she pursued her toilsome, narrow, shadowed pathway was as sublime as it was unrecognized on her part. After she had retired she wept sorely, not only because her eldest child was going to danger, and perhaps death, but also for the reason that her heart clung to him so weakly and selfishly, as she believed. With a tenderness of which she was half-ashamed she filled his wallet with provisions which would add to his comfort, then, both to his surprise and her own, kissed him good-by. He left her and the younger brood with an aching heart of which there was little outward sign, and with no loftier ambition than to do his duty; she followed him with deep, wistful eyes till he, and next the long barrel of his rifle, disappeared in an angle of the road, and then her interrupted work was resumed.

Susie Rolliffe was returning from an errand to a neighbor's when she heard the sound of long rapid steps.

A hasty glance revealed Zeb in something like pursuit. Her heart fluttered slightly, for he had looked so stern and sad of late that she had felt a little sorry for him in spite of herself. But since he could "wrestle" with nothing more formidable than a stony farm, she did not wish to have anything to say to him, or meet the embarrassment of explaining a tacit estrangement. She was glad, therefore, that her gate was so near, and passed in as if she had not recognized him. She heard his steps become slower and pause at the gate, and then almost in shame in being guilty of too marked discourtesy, she turned to speak, but hesitated in surprise, for now she recognized his equipment as a soldier.

"Why, Mr. Jarvis, where are you going?" she exclaimed.

A dull red flamed through the bronze of his thin cheeks as he replied awkwardly, "I thought I'd take a turn in the lines around Boston."

"Oh, yes," she replied, mischievously, "take a turn in the lines. Then we may expect you back by corn-husking?"

He was deeply wounded, and in his embarrassment could think of no other reply than the familiar words, "Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off."

"I can't help hoping, Mr. Jarvis, that neither you nor others will put it off too soon—not, at least, while King George claims to be our master. When we're free I can stand any amount of boasting."

"You'll never hear boasting from me, Miss Susie;" and then an awkward silence fell between them.

Shyly and swiftly she raised her eyes. He looked so humble, deprecatory, and unsoldier-like that she could not repress a laugh. "I'm not a British cannon," she began, "that you should be so fearful."

His manhood was now too deeply wounded for further endurance even from her, for he suddenly straightened himself, and throwing his rifle over his shoulder, said sternly, "I'm not a coward. I never hung back from fear, but to keep mother from charity, so I could fight or die as God wills. You may laugh at the man who never gave you anything but love, if you will, but you shall never laugh at my deeds. Call that boasting or not as you please," and he turned on his heel to depart.

His words and manner almost took away the girl's breath, so unexpected were they, and unlike her idea of the man. In that brief moment a fearless soldier had flashed himself upon her consciousness, revealing a spirit that would flinch at nothing—that had not even quailed at the necessity of forfeiting her esteem, that his mother might not want. Humiliated and conscience-stricken that she had done him so much injustice, she rushed forward, crying, "Stop, Zebulon; please do not go away angry with me! I do not forget that we have been old friends and playmates. I'm willing to own that I've been wrong about you, and that's a good deal for a girl to do. I only wish I were a man, and I'd go with you."

Her kindness restored him to his awkward self again, and he stammered, "I wish you were—no, I don't—I merely stopped, thinking you might have a message; but I'd rather not take any to Zeke Watkins—will, though, if you wish. It cut me all up to have you think I was afraid," and then he became speechless.

"But you acted as if you were afraid of me, and that seemed so ridiculous."

He looked at her a moment so earnestly with his dark, deep-set eyes that hers dropped. "Miss Susie," he said slowly, and speaking with difficulty, "I AM afraid of you, next to God. I don't suppose I've any right to talk to you so, and I will say good-by. I was reckless when I spoke before. Perhaps—you'll go and see mother. My going is hard on her."

His eyes lingered on her a moment longer, as if he were taking his last look, then he turned slowly away.

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

"Good-by, Zeb," she called softly. "I didn't—I don't understand. Yes, I will go to see your mother."

Susie also watched him as he strode away. He thought he could continue on steadfastly without looking back, but when the road turned he also turned, fairly tugged right about by his loyal heart. She stood where he had left her, and promptly waved her hand. He doffed his cap, and remained a moment in an attitude that appeared to her reverential, then passed out of view.

The moments lapsed, and still she stood in the gateway, looking down the vacant road as if dazed. Was it in truth awkward, bashful Zeb Jarvis who had just left her? He seemed a new and distinct being in contrast to the youth whom she had smiled at and in a measure scoffed at. The little Puritan maiden was not a reasoner, but a creature of impressions and swift intuitions. Zeb had not set his teeth, faced his hard duty, and toiled that long summer in vain. He had developed a manhood and a force which in one brief moment had enabled him to compel her recognition.

"He will face anything," she murmured. "He's afraid of only God and me; what a strange thing to say—afraid of me next to God! Sounds kind of wicked. What can he mean? Zeke Watkins wasn't a bit afraid of me. As mother said, he was a little forward, and I was fool enough to take him at his own valuation. Afraid of me! How he stood with his cap off. Do men ever love so? Is there a kind of reverence in some men's love? How absurd that a great strong, brave man, ready to face cannons, can bow down to such a little—" Her fragmentary exclamations ended in a peal of laughter, but tears dimmed her blue eyes.

Susie did visit Mrs. Jarvis, and although the reticent woman said little about her son, what she did say meant volumes to the girl who now had the right clew in interpreting his action and character. She too was reticent. New England girls rarely gushed in those days, so no one knew she was beginning to understand. Her eyes, experienced in country work, were quick, and her mind active. "It looks as if a giant had been wrestling with this stony farm," she muttered.

Zeb received no ovations on his lonely tramp to the lines, and the vision of Susie Rolliffe waving her hand from the gateway would have blinded him to all the bright and admiring eyes in the world. He was hospitably entertained, however, when there was occasion; but the advent of men bound for the army had become an old story. Having at last inquired his way to the position occupied by the Connecticut troops, he was assigned to duty in the same company with Zeke Watkins, who gave him but a cool reception, and sought to overawe him by veteran-like airs. At first poor Zeb was awkward enough in his unaccustomed duties, and no laugh was so scornful as that of his rival. Young Jarvis, however, had not been many days in camp before he guessed that Zeke's star was not in the ascendant. There was but little fighting required, but much digging of intrenchments, drill, and monotonous picket duty. Zeke did not take kindly to such tasks, and shirked them when possible. He was becoming known as the champion grumbler in the mess, and no one escaped his criticism, not even "Old Put"—as General Putnam, who commanded the Connecticut quota, was called. Jarvis, on the other hand, performed his military duties as he had worked the farm, and rapidly acquired the bearing of a soldier. Indomitable Putnam gave his men little rest, and was ever seeking to draw his lines nearer to Boston and the enemy's ships. He virtually fought with pick and shovel, and his working parties were often exposed to fire while engaged in fortifying the positions successively occupied. The Opinquake boys regarded themselves as well seasoned to such rude compliments, and were not a little curious to see how Zeb would handle a shovel with cannon-balls whizzing uncomfortably near. The opportunity soon came. Old Put himself could not have been more coolly oblivious than the raw recruit. At last a ball smashed his shovel to smithereens; he quietly procured another and went on with his work. Then his former neighbors gave him a cheer, while his captain clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Promote you to be a veteran on the spot!"

The days had grown shorter, colder, and drearier, and the discomforts of camp-life harder to endure. There were few tents even for the officers, and the men were compelled to improvise such shelter as circumstances permitted. Huts of stone, wood, and brush, and barricades against the wind, lined the hillside, and the region already was denuded of almost everything that would burn. Therefore, when December came, Zeke Watkins found that even a fire was a luxury not to be had without trouble. He had become thoroughly disgusted with a soldier's life, and the military glory which had at first so dazzled him now wore the aspect of the wintry sky. He had recently sought and attained the only promotion for which his captain now deemed him fitted—that of cook for about a dozen of his comrades; and the close of the December day found him preparing the meagre supper which the limited rations permitted. By virtue of his office, Zeke was one of the best-fed men in the army, for if

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

there were any choice morsels he could usually manage to secure them; still, he was not happy. King George and Congress were both pursuing policies inconsistent with his comfort, and he sighed more and more frequently for the wide kitchen–hearth of his home, which was within easy visiting distance of the Rolliffe farmhouse. His term of enlistment expired soon, and he was already counting the days. He was not alone in his discontent, for there was much homesickness and disaffection among the Connecticut troops. Many had already departed, unwilling to stay an hour after the expiration of their terms; and not a few had anticipated the periods which legally released them from duty. The organization of the army was so loose that neither appeals nor threats had much influence, and Washington, in deep solicitude, saw his troops melting away.

It was dark by the time the heavy tramp of the working party was heard returning from the fortifications. The great mess–pot, partly filled with pork and beans, was bubbling over the fire; Zeke, shifting his position from time to time to avoid the smoke which the wind, as if it had a spite against him, blew in his face, was sourly contemplating his charge and his lot, bent on grumbling to the others with even greater gusto than he had complained to himself. His comrades carefully put away their intrenching tools, for they were held responsible for them, and then gathered about the fire, clamoring for supper.

"Zeke, you lazy loon," cried Nat Atkinson, "how many pipes have you smoked to–day? If you'd smoke less and forage and dun the commissary more, we'd have a little fresh meat once in a hundred years."

"Yes, just about once in a hundred years!" snarled Zeke.

"YOU find something to keep fat on, anyhow. We'll broil you some cold night. Trot out your beans if there's nothing else."

"Growl away," retorted Zeke. "'Twon't be long before I'll be eating chickens and pumpkin–pie in Opinquake, instead of cooking beans and rusty pork for a lot of hungry wolves."

"You'd be the hungriest wolf of the lot if you'd 'a' been picking and shovelling frozen ground all day."

"I didn't 'list to be a ditch–digger!" said Zeke. "I thought I was going to be a soldier."

"And you turned out a cook!" quietly remarked Zeb Jarvis.

"Well, my hero of the smashed shovel, what do you expect to be— Old Put's successor? You know, fellows, it's settled that you're to dig your way into Boston, tunnel under the water when you come to it. Of course Put will die of old age before you get half there. Zeb'll be the chap of all others to command a division of shovellers. I see you with a pickaxe strapped on your side instead of a sword."

"Lucky I'm not in command now," replied Zeb, "or you'd shovel dirt under fire to the last hour of your enlistment. I'd give grumblers like you something to grumble about. See here, fellows, I'm sick of this seditious talk in our mess. The Connecticut men are getting to be the talk of the army. You heard a squad of New Hampshire boys jeer at us to–day, and ask, 'When are ye going home to mother?' You ask, Zeke Watkins, what I expect to be. I expect to be a soldier, and obey orders as long as Old Put and General Washington want a man. All I ask is to be home summers long enough to keep mother and the children off the town. Now what do you expect to be after you give up your cook's ladle?"

"None o' your business."

"He's going home to court Susie Rolliffe," cried Nat Atkinson. "They'll be married in the spring, and go into the chicken business. That'd just suit Zeke."

"It would not suit Susie Rolliffe," said Zeb, hotly. "A braver, better girl doesn't breathe in the colonies, and the man that says a slurring word against her's got to fight me."

"What! Has she given Zeke the mitten for your sake, Zeb?" piped little Hiram Woodbridge.

"She hasn't given me anything, and I've got no claim; but she is the kind of girl that every fellow from Opinquake should stand up for. We all know that there is nothing chicken–hearted about her."

"Eight, by George—George W., I mean, and not the king," responded Hiram Woodbridge. "Here's to her health, Zeb, and your success! I believe she'd rather marry a soldier than a cook."

"Thank you," said Zeb. "You stand as good a chance as I do; but don't let's bandy her name about in camp any more'n we would our mother's. The thing for us to do now is to show that the men from Connecticut have as much backbone as any other fellows in the army, North or South. Zeke may laugh at Old Put's digging, but you'll soon find that he'll pick his way to a point where he can give the Britishers a dig under the fifth rib. We've got the best general in the army. Washington, with all his Southern style, believes in him and relies on him. Whether their time's up or not, it's a burning shame that so many of his troops are sneaking off home."

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

"It's all very well for you to talk, Zeb Jarvis," growled Zeke. "You haven't been here very long yet; and you stayed at home when others started out to fight. Now that you've found that digging and not fighting is the order of the day, you're just suited. It's the line of soldiering you are cut out for. When fighting men and not ditch-diggers are wanted, you'll find me——"

"All right, Watkins," said the voice of Captain Dean from without the circle of light. "According to your own story you are just the kind of man needed to—night—no ditch-digging on hand, but dangerous service. I detail you, for you've had rest compared with the other men. I ask for volunteers from those who've been at work all day."

Zeb Jarvis was on his feet instantly, and old Ezra Stokes also began to rise with difficulty. "No, Stokes," resumed the officer, "you can't go. I know you've suffered with the rheumatism all day, and have worked well in spite of it. For to-night's work I want young fellows with good legs and your spirit. How is it you're here anyhow Stokes? Your time's up."

"We ain't into Boston yet," was the quiet reply.

"So you want to stay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you shall cook for the men till you're better. I won't keep so good a soldier, though, at such work any longer than I can help. Your good example and that of the gallant Watkins has brought out the whole squad. I think I'll put Jarvis in command, though; Zeke might be rash, and attempt the capture of Boston before morning;" and the facetious captain, who had once been a neighbor, concluded, "Jarvis, see that every man's piece is primed and ready for use. Be at my hut in fifteen minutes." Then he passed on to the other camp-fires.

In a few minutes Ezra Stokes was alone by the fire, almost roasting his lame leg, and grumbling from pain and the necessity of enforced inaction. He was a taciturn, middle-age man, and had been the only bachelor of mature years in Opinquake. Although he rarely said much, he had been a great listener, and no one had been better versed in neighborhood affairs. In brief, he had been the village cobbler, and had not only taken the measure of Susie Rolliffe's little foot, but also of her spirit. Like herself he had been misled at first by the forwardness of Zeke Watkins and the apparent backwardness of Jarvis. Actual service had changed his views very decidedly. When Zeb appeared he had watched the course of this bashful suitor with interest which had rapidly ripened into warm but undemonstrative goodwill. The young fellow had taken pains to relieve the older man, had carried his tools for him, and more than once with his strong hands had almost rubbed the rheumatism out of the indomitable cobbler's leg. He had received but slight thanks, and had acted as if he didn't care for any. Stokes was not a man to return favors in words; he brooded over his gratitude as if it were a grudge. "I'll get even with that young Jarvis yet," he muttered, as he nursed his leg over the fire. "I know he worships the ground that little Rolliffe girl treads on, though she don't tread on much at a time. She never trod on me nuther, though I've had her foot in my hand more'n once. She looked at the man that made her shoes as if she would like to make him happier. When a little tot, she used to say I could come and live with her when I got too old to take care of myself. Lame as I be, I'd walk to Opinquake to give her a hint in her choosin'. Guess Hi Woodbridge is right, and she wouldn't be long in making up her mind betwixt a soger and a cook—a mighty poor one at that. Somehow or nuther I must let her know before Zeke Watkins sneaks home and parades around as a soldier 'bove ditch-digging. I've taken his measure.

"He'll be putting on veteran airs, telling big stories of what he's going to do when soldiers are wanted, and drilling such fools as believe in him. Young gals are often taken by such strutters, and think that men like Jarvis, who darsn't speak for themselves, are of no account. But I'll put a spoke in Zeke's wheel, if I have to get the captain to write."

It thus may be gathered that the cobbler had much to say to himself when alone, though so taciturn to others.

The clouds along the eastern horizon were stained with red before the reconnoitring party returned. Stokes had managed, by hobbling about, to keep up the fire and to fill the mess-kettle with the inevitable pork and beans. The hungry, weary men therefore gave their new cook a cheer when they saw the good fire and provision awaiting them. A moment later, however, Jarvis observed how lame Stokes had become; he took the cobbler by the shoulder and sat him down in the warmest nook, saying, "I'll be assistant cook until you are better. As Zeke says, I'm a wolf sure enough; but as soon's the beast's hunger is satisfied, I'll rub that leg of yours till you'll want to dance a jig;" and with the ladle wrung from Stokes's reluctant hand, he began stirring the seething contents of

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

the kettle.

Then little Hi Woodbridge piped in his shrill voice, "Another cheer for our assistant cook and ditch-digger! I say, Zeke, wouldn't you like to tell Erza that Zeb has showed himself fit for something more than digging? You expressed your opinion very plain last night, and may have a different one now."

Zeke growld something inaudible, and stalked to his hut in order to put away his equipments.

"I'm cook-in-chief yet," Stokes declared; "and not a bean will any one of you get till you report all that happened."

"Well," piped Hi, "you may stick a feather in your old cap, Ezra, for our Opinquake lad captured a British officer last night, and Old Put is pumping him this blessed minute."

"Well, well, that is news. It must have been Zeke who did that neat job," exclaimed Stokes, ironically; "he's been a-pining for the soldier business."

"No, no; Zeke's above such night scimmages. He wants to swim the bay and walk right into Boston in broad daylight, so everybody can see him. Come, Zeb, tell how it happened. It was so confounded dark, no one can tell but you."

"There isn't much to tell that you fellows don't know," was Zeb's laconic answer. "We had sneaked down on the neck so close to the enemy's lines——"

"Yes, yes, Zeb Jarvis," interrupted Stokes, "that's the kind of sneaking you're up to—close to the enemy's lines. Go on."

"Well, I crawled up so close that I saw a Britisher going the round of the sentinels, and I pounced on him and brought him out on the run, that's all."

"Oho! you both ran away, then? That wasn't good soldiering either, was it, Zeke?" commented Stokes, in his dry way.

"It's pretty good soldiering to stand fire within an inch of your nose," resumed Hi, who had become a loyal friend and adherent of his tall comrade. "Zeb was so close on the Britisher when he fired his pistol that we saw the faces of both in the flash; and a lot of bullets sung after us, I can sell you, as we dusted out of those diggin's."

"Compliments of General Putnam to Sergeant Zebulon Jarvis," said an orderly, riding out of the dim twilight of the morning. "The general requests your presence at headquarters."

"Sergeant! promoted! Another cheer for Zeb!" and the Opinquake boys gave it with hearty goodwill.

"Jerusalem, fellows! I'd like to have a chance at those beans before I go!" but Zeb promptly tramped off with the orderly.

When he returned he was subjected to a fire of questions by the two or three men still awake, but all they could get out of him was that he had been given a good breakfast. From Captain Dean, who was with the general at the time of the examination, it leaked out that Zeb was in the line of promotion to a rank higher than that of sergeant.

The next few days passed uneventfully; and Zeke was compelled to resume the pick and shovel again. Stokes did his best to fulfil his duties, but it had become evident to all that the exposure of camp would soon disable him utterly. Jarvis and Captain Dean persuaded him to go home for the winter, and the little squad raised a sum which enabled him to make the journey in a stage. Zeke, sullen toward his jeering comrades, but immensely elated in secret, had shaken the dust—snow and slush rather—of camp-life from his feet the day before. He had the grace to wait till the time of his enlistment expired, and that was more than could be said of many.

It spoke well for the little Opinquake quota that only two others besides Zeke availed themselves of their liberty. Poor Stokes was almost forced away, consoled by the hope of returning in the spring. Zeb was sore-hearted on the day of Zeke's departure. His heart was in the Connecticut Valley also. No message had come to him from Susie Rolliffe. Those were not the days of swift and frequent communication. Even Mrs. Jarvis had written but seldom, and her missives were brief. Mother-love glowed through the few quaint and scriptural phrases like heat in anthracite coals. All that poor Zeb could learn from them was that Susie Rolliffe had kept her word and had been to the farm more than once; but the girl had been as reticent as the mother. Zeke was now on his way home to prosecute his suit in person, and Zeb well knew how forward and plausible he could be. There was no deed of daring that he would not promise to perform after spring opened, and Zeb reasoned gloomily that a present lover, impassioned and importunate, would stand a better chance than an absent one who had never been able to speak for himself.

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

When it was settled that Stokes should return to Opinquake, Zeb determined that he would not give up the prize to Zeke without one decisive effort; and as he was rubbing the cobbler's leg, he stammered, "I say Ezra, will you do me a turn? 'Twon't be so much, what I ask, except that I'll like you to keep mum about it, and you're a good hand at keeping mum."

"I know what yer driving at, Zeb. Write yer letter and I'll deliver it with my own hands."

"Well, now, I'm satisfied, I can stay on and fight it out with a clear mind. When Zeke marched away last summer, I thought it was all up with me; and I can tell you that any fighting that's to do about Boston will be fun compared with the fighting I did while hoeing corn and mowing grass. But I don't believe that Susie Rolliffe is promised to Zeke Watkins, or any one else yet, and I'm going to give her a chance to refuse me plump."

"That's the way to do it, Zeb," said the bachelor cobbler, with an emphasis that would indicate much successful experience. "Asking a girl plump is like standing up in a fair fight. It gives the girl a chance to bowl you over, if that's her mind, so there can't be any mistake about it; and it seems to me the women—folks ought to have all the chances that in any way belong to them. They have got few enough anyhow."

"And you think it'll end in my being bowled over?"

"How should I know, or you either, unless you make a square trial? You're such a strapping, fighting feller that nothing but a cannon—ball or a woman ever will knock you off your pins."

"See here, Ezra Stokes, the girl of my heart may refuse me just as plump as I offer myself; and if that's her mind she has a right to do it. But I don't want either you or her to think I won't stand on my feet. I won't even fight any more recklessly than my duty requires. I have a mother to take care of, even if I never have a wife."

"I'll put in a few pegs right along to keep in mind what you say; and I'll give you a fair show by seeing to it that the girl gets your letter before Zeke can steal a march on you."

"That's all I ask," said Zeb, with compressed lips. "She shall choose between us. It's hard enough to write, but it will be a sight easier than facing her. Not a word of this to another soul, Ezra; but I'm not going to use you like a mail—carrier, but a friend. After all, there are few in Opinquake, I suppose, but know I'd give my eyes for her, so there isn't much use of my putting on secret airs."

"I'm not a talker, and you might have sent your letter by a worse messenger'n me," was the laconic reply.

Zeb had never written a love—letter, and was at a loss how to begin or end it. But time pressed, and he had to say what was uppermost in his mind. It ran as follows:

"I don't know how to write so as to give my words weight. I cannot come home; I will not come as long as mother and the children can get on without me. And men are needed here; men are needed. The general fairly pleads with the soldiers to stay. Stokes would stay if he could. We're almost driving him home. I know you will be kind to him, and remember he has few to care for him. I cannot speak for myself in person very soon, if ever. Perhaps I could not if I stood before you. You laugh at me; but if you knew how I love you and remember you, how I honor and almost worship you in my heart, you might understand me better. Why is it strange I should be afraid of you? Only God has more power over me than you. Will you be my wife? I will do anything to win you that YOU can ask. Others will plead with you in person. Will you let this letter plead for the absent?"

Zeb went to the captain's quarters and got some wax with which to seal this appeal, then saw Stokes depart with the feeling that his destiny was now at stake.

Meanwhile Zeke Watkins, with a squad of homeward—bound soldiers, was trudging toward Opinquake. They soon began to look into one another's faces in something like dismay. But little provision was in their wallets when they had started, for there was little to draw upon, and that furnished grudgingly, as may well be supposed. Zeke had not cared. He remembered the continuous feasting that had attended his journey to camp, and supposed that he would only have to present himself to the roadside farmhouses in order to enjoy the fat of the land. This hospitality he proposed to repay abundantly by camp reminiscences in which it would not be difficult to insinuate that the hero of the scene was present.

In contrast to these rose—hued expectations, doors were slammed in their faces, and they were treated little better than tramps. "I suppose the people near Boston have been called on too often and imposed on, too," Zeke reasoned rather ruefully. "When we once get over the Connecticut border we'll begin to find ourselves at home;" and spurred by hunger and cold, as well as hope, they pushed on desperately, subsisting on such coarse provisions as they could obtain, sleeping in barns when it stormed, and not infrequently by a fire in the woods. At last they passed the Connecticut border, and led by Zeke they urged their way to a large farmhouse, at which, but a few

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

months before, the table had groaned under rustic dainties, and feather-beds had luxuriously received the weary recruits bound to the front. They approached the opulent farm in the dreary dark of the evening, and pursued by a biting east wind laden with snow. Not only the weather, but the very dogs seemed to have a spite against them; and the family had to rush out to call them off.

"Weary soldiers ask for shelter," began Zeke.

"Of course you're bound for the lines," said the matronly housewife. "Come in."

Zeke thought they would better enter at once before explaining; and truly the large kitchen, with a great fire blazing on the hearth, seemed like heaven. The door leading into the family sitting-room was open, and there was another fire, with the red-cheeked girls and the white-haired grandsire before it, their eyes turned expectantly toward the new-comers. Instead of hearty welcome, there was a questioning look on every face, even on that of the kitchen-maid. Zeke's four companions had a sort of hang-dog look—for they had been cowed by the treatment received along the road; but he tried to bear himself confidently, and began with an insinuating smile, "Perhaps I should hardly expect you to remember me. I passed this way last summer——"

"Passed this way last summer?" repeated the matron, her face growing stern. "We who cannot fight are ready and glad to share all we have with those who fight for us. Since you carry arms we might very justly think you are hastening forward to use them."

"These are our own arms; we furnished them ourselves," Zeke hastened to say.

"Oh, indeed," replied the matron, coldly; "I supposed that not only the weapons, but the ones who carry them, belonged to the country. I hope you are not deserting from the army."

"I assure you we are not. Our terms of enlistment have expired."

"And your country's need was over at the same moment? Are you hastening home at this season to plow and sow and reap?"

"Well, madam, after being away so long we felt like having a little comfort and seeing the folks. We stayed a long as we agreed. When spring opens, or before, if need be——"

"Pardon me, sir; the need is now. The country is not to be saved by men who make bargains like day-laborers, and who quit when the hour is up, but by soldiers who give themselves to their country as they would to their wives and sweethearts. My husband and sons are in the army you have deserted. General Washington has written to our governor asking whether an example should not be made of the men who have deserted the cause of their country at this critical time when the enemy are receiving re-enforcements. We are told that Connecticut men have brought disgrace on our colony and have imperilled the whole army. You feel like taking comfort and seeing the folks. The folks do not feel like seeing you. My husband and the brave men in the lines are in all the more danger because of your desertion, for a soldier's time never expires when the enemy is growing stronger and threatening every home in the land. If all followed your example, the British would soon be upon your heels, taking from us our honor and our all. We are not ignorant of the critical condition of our army; and I can tell you, sir, that if many more of our men come home, the women will take their places."

Zeke's companions succumbed to the stern arraignment, and after a brief whispered consultation one spoke for the rest. "Madam," he said, "you put it in a way that we hadn't realized before. We'll right-about-face and march back in the morning, for we feel that we'd rather face all the British in Boston than any more Connecticut women."

"Then, sirs, you shall have supper and shelter and welcome," was the prompt reply.

Zeke assumed an air of importance as he said: "There are reasons why I must be at home for a time, but I not only expect to return, but also to take many back with me."

"I trust your deeds may prove as large as your words," was the chilly reply; and then he was made to feel that he was barely tolerated. Some hints from his old associates added to the disfavor which the family took but little pains to conceal. There was a large vein of selfish calculation in Zeke's nature, and he was not to be swept away by any impulses. He believed he could have a prolonged visit home, yet manage so admirably that when he returned he would be followed by a squad of recruits, and chief of all he would be the triumphant suitor of Susie Rolliffe. Her manner in parting had satisfied him that he had made go deep an impression that it would be folly not to follow it up. He trudged the remainder of the journey alone, and secured tolerable treatment by assuring the people that he was returning for recruits for the army. He reached home in the afternoon of Christmas; and although the day was almost completely ignored in the Puritan household, yet Mrs. Watkins forgot country,

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

Popery, and all, in her mother love, and Zeke supped on the finest turkey of the flock. Old Mr. Watkins, it is true, looked rather grim, but the reception had been reassuring in the main; and Zeke had resolved on a line of tactics which would make him, as he believed, the military hero of the town. After he had satisfied an appetite which had been growing ever since he left camp, he started to call on Susie in all the bravery of his best attire, filled with sanguine expectations inspired by memories of the past and recent potations of cider.

Meanwhile Susie had received a guest earlier in the day. The stage had stopped at the gate where she had stood in the September sunshine and waved her bewildered farewell to Zeb. There was no bewilderment or surprise now at her strange and unwonted sensations. She had learned why she had stood looking after him dazed and spellbound. Under the magic of her own light irony she had seen her drooping rustic lover transformed into the ideal man who could face anything except her unkindness. She had guessed the deep secret of his timidity. It was a kind of fear of which she had not dreamed, and which touched her innermost soul.

When the stage stopped at the gate, and she saw the driver helping out Ezra Stokes, a swift presentiment made her sure that she would hear from one soldier who was more to her than all the generals. She was soon down the walk, the wind sporting in her light-gold hair, supporting the cobbler on the other side.

"Ah, Miss Susie!" he said, "I am about worn out, sole and upper. It breaks my heart, when men are so sorely needed, to be thrown aside like an old shoe."

The girl soothed and comforted him, ensconced him by the fireside, banishing the chill from his heart, while Mrs. Rolliffe warmed his blood by a strong, hot drink. Then the mother hastened away to get dinner, while Susie sat down near, nervously twisting and untwisting her fingers, with questions on her lips which she dared not utter, but which brought blushes to her cheeks. Stokes looked at her and sighed over his lost youth, yet smiled as he thought: "Guess I'll get even with that Zeb Jarvis to-day." Then he asked, "Isn't there any one you would like to hear about in camp?"

She blushed deeper still, and named every one who had gone from Opinquake except Zeb. At last she said a little ironically: "I suppose Ezekiel Watkins is almost thinking about being a general about this time?"

"Hasn't he been here telling you what he is thinking about?"

"Been here! Do you mean to say he has come home?"

"He surely started for home. All the generals and a yoke of oxen couldn't 'a' kept him in camp, he was so homesick—lovesick too, I guess. Powerful compliment to you, Miss Susie," added the politic cobbler, feeling his way, "that you could draw a man straight from his duty like one of these 'ere stump-extractors."

"No compliment to me at all!" cried the girl, indignantly. "He little understands me who seeks my favor by coming home at a time like this. The Connecticut women are up in arms at the way our men are coming home. No offence to you, Mr. Stokes. You're sick, and should come; but I'd like to go myself to show some of the strong young fellows what we think of them."

"Coming home was worse than rheumatism to me, and I'm going back soon's I kin walk without a cane. Wouldn't 'a' come as 'tis, if that Zeb Jarvis hadn't jes' packed me off. By Jocks! I thought you and he was acquainted, but you don't seem to ask arter him."

"I felt sure he would try—I heard he was doing his duty," she replied with averted face.

"Zeke Watkins says he's no soldier at all—nothing but a dirt-digger."

For a moment, as the cobbler had hoped, Susie forgot her blushes and secret in her indignation. "Zeke Watkins indeed!" she exclaimed. "He'd better not tell ME any such story. I don't believe there's a braver, truer man in the—Well," she added in sudden confusion, "he hasn't run away and left others to dig their way into Boston, if that's the best way of getting there."

"Ah, I'm going to get even with him yet," chuckled Stokes to himself. "Digging is only the first step, Miss Susie. When Old Put gets good and ready, you'll hear the thunder of the guns a'most in Opinquake."

"Well, Mr. Stokes," stammered Susie, resolving desperately on a short cut to the knowledge she craved, "you've seen Mr. Jarvis a-soldiering. What do you think about it?"

"Well, now, that Zeb Jarvis is the sneakin'ist fellow—"

"What?" cried the girl, her face aflame.

"Wait till I get in a few more pegs," continued Stokes, coolly. "The other night he sneaked right into the enemy's lines and carried off a British officer as a hawk takes a chicken. The Britisher fired his pistol right under Zeb's nose; but, law! he didn't mind that any more'n a 'sketer-bite. I call that soldiering, don't you? Anyhow, Old

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

Put thought it was, and sent for him 'fore daylight, and made a sergeant of him. If I had as good a chance of gettin' rid of the rheumatiz as he has of bein' captain in six months, I'd thank the Lord."

Susie sat up very straight, and tried to look severely judicial; but her lip was quivering and her whole plump little form trembling with excitement and emotion. Suddenly she dropped her face in her hands and cried in a gust of tears and laughter: "He's just like grandfather; he'd face anything!"

"Anything in the 'tarnal uiniverse, I guess, 'cept you, Miss Susie. I seed a cannon-ball smash a shovel in his hands, and he got another, and went on with his work cool as a cucumber. Then I seed him writin' a letter to you, and his hand trembled——"

"A letter to me!" cried the girl, springing up.

"Yes; 'ere it is. I was kind of pegging around till I got to that; and you know——"

But Susie was reading, her hands trembling so she could scarcely hold the paper. "It's about you," she faltered, making one more desperate effort at self-preservation. "He says you'd stay if you could; that they almost drove you home. And he asks that I be kind to you, because there are not many to care for you—and—and——"

"Oh, Lord! never can get even with that Zeb Jarvis," groaned Ezra. "But you needn't tell me that's all the letter's about."

Her eyes were full of tears, yet not so full but that she saw the plain, closing words in all their significance. Swiftly the letter went to her lips, then was thrust into her bosom, and she seized the cobbler's hand, exclaiming: "Yes, I will! I will! You shall stay with us, and be one of us!" and in her excitement she put her left hand caressingly on his shoulder.

"SUSAN!" exclaimed Mr. Rolliffe, who entered at that moment, and looked aghast at the scene.

"Yes, I WILL!" exclaimed Susie, too wrought up now for restraint.

"Will what?" gasped the mother.

"Be Zebulon Jarvis's wife. He's asked me plump and square like a soldier; and I'll answer as grandma did, and like grandma I'll face anything for his sake."

"WELL, this IS sudden!" exclaimed Mrs. Rolliffe, dropping into a chair. "Susan, do you think it is becoming and seemly for a young woman——"

"Oh, mother dear, there's no use of your trying to make a prim Puritan maiden of me. Zeb doesn't fight like a deacon, and I can't love like one. Ha! ha! ha! to think that great soldier is afraid of little me, and nothing else! It's too funny and heavenly——"

"Susan, I am dumfounded at your behavior!"

At this moment Mr. Rolliffe came in from the wood-lot, and he was dazed by the wonderful news also. In his eagerness to get even with Zeb, the cobbler enlarged and expatiated till he was hoarse. When he saw that the parents were almost as proud as the daughter over their prospective son-in-law, he relapsed into his old taciturnity, declaring he had talked enough for a month.

Susie, the only child, who apparently had inherited all the fire and spirit of her fighting ancestors, darted out, and soon returned with her rosebud of a face enveloped in a great calyx of a woollen hood.

"Where are you going?" exclaimed her parents.

"You've had the news. I guess Mother Jarvis has the next right." And she was off over the hills with almost the lightness and swiftness of a snowbird.

In due time Zeke appeared, and smiled encouragingly on Mrs. Rolliffe, who sat knitting by the kitchen fire. The matron did not rise, and gave him but a cool salutation. He discussed the coldness of the weather awkwardly for a few moments, and then ventured: "Is Miss Susan at home?"

"No, sir," replied Mrs. Rolliffe; "she's gone to make a visit to her mother-in-law that is to be, the Widow Jarvis. Ezra Stokes is sittin' in the next room, sent home sick. Perhaps you'd like to talk over camp-life with him."

Not even the cider now sustained Zeke. He looked as if a cannon-ball had wrecked all his hopes and plans instead of a shovel. "Good-evening, Mrs. Rolliffe," he stammered; "I guess I'll—I'll— go home."

Poor Mrs. Jarvis had a spiritual conflict that day which she never forgot. Susie's face had flashed at the window near which she had sat spinning, and sighing perhaps that Nature had not provided feathers or fur for a brood like hers; then the girl's arms were about her neck, the news was stammered out—for the letter could never be shown to any one—in a way that tore primness to tatters. The widow tried to act as if it were a dispensation of Providence which should be received in solemn gratitude; but before she knew it she was laughing and crying,

SUSIE ROLLIFFE'S CHRISTMAS

kissing her sweet-faced daughter, or telling how good and brave Zeb had been when his heart was almost breaking.

Compunction had already seized upon the widow. "Susan," she began, "I fear we are not mortifyin' the flesh as we ought——"

"No mortifying just yet, if you please," cried Susie. "The most important thing of all is yet to be done. Zeb hasn't heard the news; just think of it! You must write and tell him that I'll help you spin the children's clothes and work the farm; that we'll face everything in Opinquake as long as Old Put needs men. Where is the ink-horn? I'll sharpen a pen for you and one for me, and SUCH news as he'll get! Wish I could tell him, though, and see the great fellow tremble once more. Afraid of me! Ha! ha! ha! that's the funniest thing—Why, Mother Jarvis, this is Christmas Day!"

"So it is," said the widow, in an awed tone. "Susie, my heart misgives me that all this should have happened on a day of which Popery has made so much."

"No, no," cried the girl. "Thank God it IS Christmas! and hereafter I shall keep Christmas as long as love is love and God is good."