

The Christmas Gift

A Complete Story by Albert Kinross

THERE was, it appeared, no need to make a formal presentation; Mrs. Golding and Colonel Sebright had met before.

"So you know our lion?" said Lady Dallison; and Olive Golding, a little palely, "Oh, yes; Edmund and I were friends as boy and girl."

Jack Golding had charge of the colonel now, and he was delighted to come so close to a popular hero, to meet him in the flesh and grasp his hand.

"No life like a soldier's," he was saying; "we poor fellows that stay at home—what are we?"

The colonel couldn't enlighten him.

"Olive Moorsom's husband, for one thing," he might have said, had he spoken out.

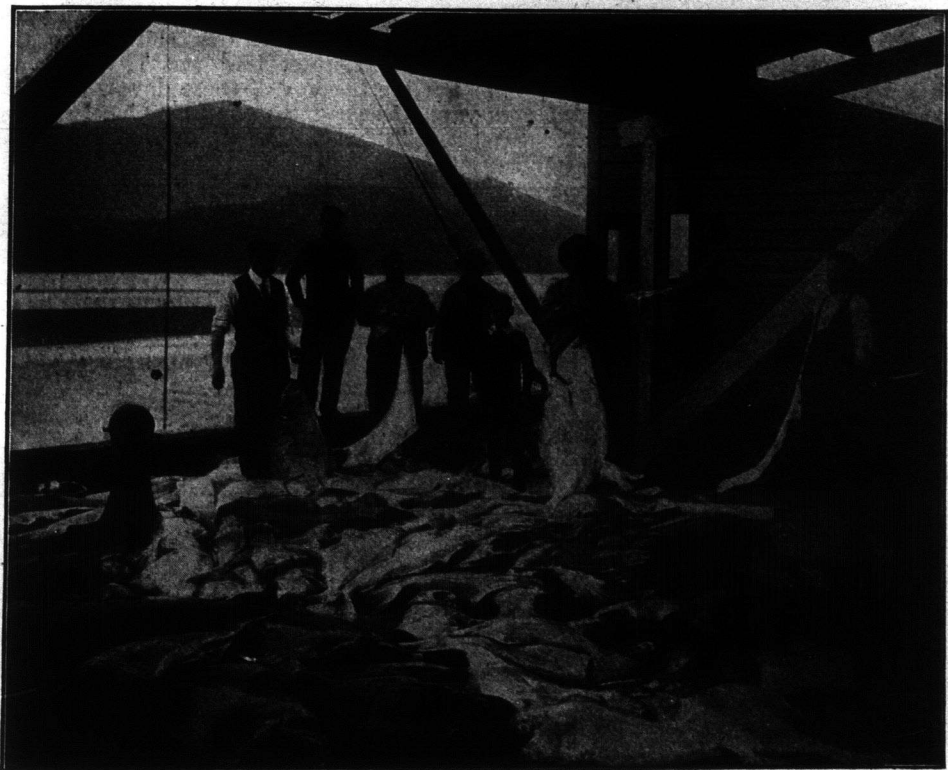
"I hear he's to be knighted, a K.C.B.—none of your Indian orders." Olive was listening to Jermyn Dallison. "I don't think he cares. Those fellows who have done things never seem to care. I gave

in the smartest places. Such a gay young dog on paper! Really, he lived alone in the jungle. The solitude was too much for him. He gave it up and shot himself. Much better fun to be home," he ended, "much better fun."

Of the actual defence and holding of a hard-pressed frontier post, of the valour and shrewdness that had made him prominent, the colonel said nothing; but he admitted that he had eaten horseflesh, and that it was rather good. And when the ladies were gone, and Jack Golding had him in a corner, "Oh, it's all in the papers," he said; "they know more about it than I do. You see, one's too busy," he laughed.

"This is the man Olive married," he was thinking under his moustache; "seems rather a good sort."

The colonel walked home that night. He had promised to call on the Goldings—what had he not promised? Jack Golding would take no denials—there was even something comic in Jack Goldings'



30,000 lb. catch of Halibut, Prince Rupert

five thousand for my handle—services to the party," and he laughed.

The colonel was presented to a vivacious spinster, and to a lady and gentleman who took him very seriously indeed; who made quite a point of taking him very seriously. It was rather foolish of them, his grey eyes seemed to say. He had another moment with Olive before dinner was announced. She must be thirty-eight—and married and children in the nursery—"Handsomeness—very handsome," he reflected, giving Lady Dallison his arm.

There was just a whisper of excitement under all that dinner-party, a heightening, a something scarcely perceptible, but nevertheless evident. Even the servants were full of Colonel Sebright and the exploit that had put his name in so many mouths.

He swallowed his soup, however, like any other body; indeed, he seemed singularly young and cheery and unspoiled. The lady, who took him so very seriously, asked him whether he was not sorry it was over. She would like to have been in his place, it appeared. So would Jack Golding—more fondly still; though what either of them would have done in it was not so clear.

Over the colonel's face rippled a smile at their enthusiasm.

"It's better fun to be home," he said, "much better fun. You don't know how we fellows abroad envy you and think of London." And later, sipping his sherry: "There was one poor chap I knew in Burma—blew his brains out—couldn't stand the solitude. We went over his papers—pages full of imaginary spees. He'd sat alone in the jungle and planned such evenings! Dinners everywhere, and such good dinners—he gave you the whole six courses with all sorts of additions and corrections; but always salmon after the soup—seemed to have liked salmon; and then to a music hall or a play, and suppers

warm insistence and pinning to a date; and "any afternoon," Olive had said, "if you send a note in the morning. I've so few engagements, and the children rather look to me," as she gave him her hand.

Olive Golding must be thirty-eight. There had been three years between them. "Doesn't look it," he reflected; and then again he saw Jack Golding fixing the evening he should dine with them, waving aside his hesitations, begging him to accept all kinds of hospitality, and finishing with, "We've a little place in the country—quite cosy for week-ends—if you could join us—"

Just for a second a dangerous hardness crossed the colonel's eyes.

II.

It was December now, and London darkened early. Sebright had thought of going abroad for Christmas, and, before he went, he would like to say good-bye. He chanced it one afternoon. If Olive were in, so much the better; if she were out, he would send a line when he reached home.

She was in. It was the first time he had been alone with her informally, and seen her in the quiet of every day.

"I suppose it'll be the South of France," he said, when Olive asked him whether he had made any plans.

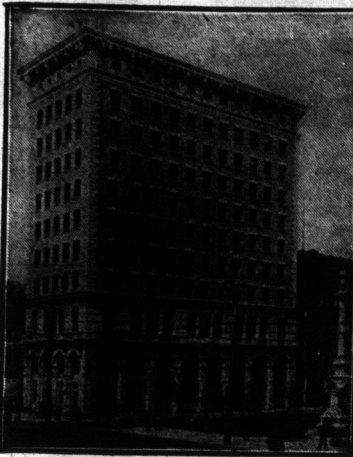
"Rather a dull Christmas," said she. "We shall be quite a party. My big girl came home yesterday—she's just left school—and the two elder boys will be here to-morrow. It seems hard on you having no home."

"One doesn't miss these things unless one's had 'em," he answered, easily as though in himself he had often made the same reply before.

She put her sewing before her and faced him squarely.

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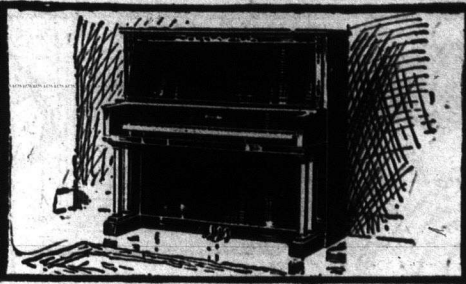
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