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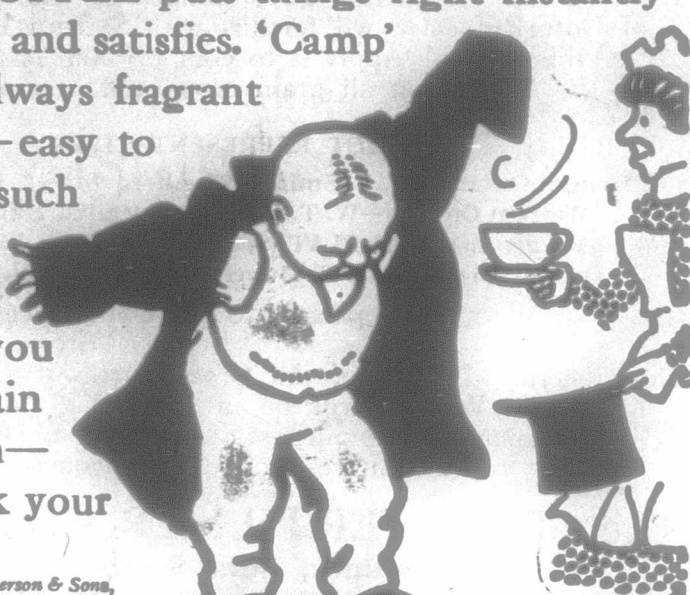
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The Oil of Gladness.

By Mary Stewart Cutting.

It was two weeks to Christmas. Mrs. Fairlie, red-cheeked in the glow of the frosty air and the warmth of her brown furs, was returning home after taking her packages to the express-office; there was one package less than usual, on account of the invitation which she hoped to send instead. She had determined to be well ahead of the rush this year she had a pang of memory whenever she recalled the last Christmas and the expressman who had brought a gift-box to her house after four o'clock on the day itself. Heretofore she had had a hazy, rather pleased feeling that people who brought things to the house liked the glimpses of the merrymakings within; Mrs. Fairlie always wished the men a Merry Christmas, and gave a fee in addition to any that might be collected.

But the man who had brought her Susie's belated gift couldn't be put into any easily made category of holiday benefaction—his burning eyes, his sullen mouth, the tense repression that showed in every motion of his vigorous young frame, seemed to voice a deep and embittering injury against all who enjoyed themselves at the expense of others—her one glance outside at the still piled-up express-wagon had driven the stab home to her own heart. She had painstakingly now started in purchasing for everybody at a distance before beginning at all upon the home people; it should not be upon her head that she had helped to make an unhappy Christmas for anyone, she wanted everybody to be happy then; it was her simple faith that the occasion demanded it. Mrs. Fairlie herself loved Christmas, though, as a rule, she kept quiet when other people expatiated on their difficulties and distresses; to profess her own enjoyment made a discordant note—it was as if she thought herself on a different plane. The portioning out of moneys, the making of lists, the endless discussions as to what this person wanted or what that one wanted were to her only delightful preliminaries which made the season lengthily festive. Yet, her desire to have every one happy sometimes led to complications, one of which, she felt as she went homeward, was waiting for her now. Since Minnie's letter of the morning and her own resolution—

It was wonderful, she mused, what a difference letters made in one's scheme of things; they were an influence which you couldn't control, a power from the outside continually exerted on one's inner life, and a power for which one continually forgot to make allowance. Mrs. Fairlie was, in a way, a simple woman; she had still a warm-hearted, childlike faith in the goodness of life; she still enjoyed ingenuously, although her children were grown up; yet she had her deeper wonderings and ponderings. She had a fashion of getting down to the root of things for her own satisfaction, though it was a satisfaction which her children didn't always share.

It was a pleasure to have both her daughters run to meet her as she entered the house—they had been away for a week-end; a pleasure to have them escort her up-stairs between them, and take off her furs and hat and coat and establish her in a comfortable chair, as they poured out the recital of the happenings of their visit. They were pretty girls, the executive Katherine dark, like her father, with, however, deeply arched eyebrows, and a red mouth that drooped at the corners; while Jean was light and round-faced and rosy, as her mother was still. Jean, it appeared, had had the "banner" time on this occasion, the most beautiful young man of the house-party almost flaunting himself her captive. Katherine furnished the graphic description, while Jean modestly demurred.

"Did you want to stay longer?" the mother found herself asking, to receive Katherine's emphatic:

"No; oh no! Not when it was growing so near Christmas. Did Aunt Mary's check come?"

"Yes."

"Thank goodness! I was so afraid it wouldn't, this year."

Aunt Mary's check, embodying a pleasing fiction that it was to buy a Christmas gift for Mrs. Fairlie's own use, was always thoughtfully sent well before the time, so that she might have the comfort of it in her Christmas expenditure for others. Into how many obscure

channels of charity it flowed was never divulged, nor how many an extra dollar it added to presents for the loved ones of the household, as well as for the outlying stranger. Mrs. Fairlie had indeed her allotted portion for Christmas giving, as well as her regular allowance for the household; but there came a period in the days just before the festival when it seemed as if a spouting geyser of "change" wouldn't be enough to supply the demand for all the "last" things. Those were the times when she had to fortify herself very much with the Christmas spirit to keep her legs and her head from falling her—the times when it seemed as if she were always going out for three yards more of holly ribbon, and a dozen sheets of tissue-paper, and a spool of pink sewing-silk for the dressmaker, and a pair of shoes to fit a doll, and a few little extra gifts for the maids, and something for dessert and a present from Katherine for still another friend: "Anything you see that you think she'd like, mother, and don't spend more than fifty cents for it." Those last commissions seemed a herculean task, almost impossible of complete fulfilment. Her mood leaped ahead now to that day of stress, and the clear lift of Aunt Mary's check, which, however, she was secretly destitute to other uses, —to be recalled only by Katherine's words:

"Mother, you're not listening at all! Jean and I have made up our minds to take possession of that check this year—it is not to go for us or for anybody; you are to get with it something that you really want yourself. You are to buy the big Turkish rug for the dining-room; you've been moaning over the old one long enough, and it is a disgrace. Now wait! Jean and I are each going to contribute the ten-dollar gold piece that grandmamma always sends us, and father will help out, too, if it's necessary. For seventy-five dollars you can get the kind you want, something that will last us all our days, if we wait till after Christmas to shop for it. And then I won't be ashamed to ask the Fentons to dinner—such a lovely time as we had there! What's the matter, mother? We thought you'd be so pleased!"

"Yes, yes, I am pleased," assented the mother, hastily. At any other time the thought of the rug and their co-operation would have been intoxicating; the need of it had been deeply mooted again and again. Mrs. Fairlie had tentatively frequented Oriental auctions, she had studied up the different weaves in books of information with colored plates; the attainment of the rug was something always of interest to look forward to. She was incapable of buying anything intrinsically cheap for her household; she could go without, but what she purchased must be "good"; the tone in which she said the word expressed volumes. As she looked at her children's faces now she felt more than ever a traitor.

"Yes, yes, I am delighted! But there is something I must speak to you about first. I had a letter from your cousin Minnie this morning." She hurried ahead after a moment's expressive silence: "Cousin Minnie seems to be so very lonely in that new town. She has a position in some institution, I believe, and she's among entire strangers. Her boy is working his way through college this year; it's the first time they've ever been separated, but it costs too much to have him come on, she says."

"Mother, you're not going to ask her here for Christmas? Well, I know something was the matter the instant I saw you!" Jean's tone was pregnantly expostulating. "To think of having that dreadful woman here all through the holidays! She writes the most depressing letters I ever heard. I hate to have them come into the house; they always use you up! She either tells you how she misses that prig of a boy, or about all the illness of the people you don't know. To ask her here over the holidays, when there were so many people we wanted to have—"

"Oh, Jean dear!" Mrs. Fairlie looked from one to the other of her daughters with a pleading which did not deceive; they knew, if she did not, that she had inexorably made up her mind. "You cannot always judge a person by letters; I had an admirer once who wrote most beautifully, sixteen pages at a time, and yet when any one talked to him he seemed positively lacking. You