Oil Of Gladness

By Mary Stewart Cutting

COPYRIGHT, 1907, BY HARPER AND BROTHERS.

"I wish, oh, I wish that I had never asked her!" cried the renegade.

"Never mind; we'll have to invite him to dinner, anyway," said Jean, pale with resolve. "I hope—I only hope that she won't talk about operations at the table!"

It was late on the evening of the appointed nineteenth that Cousin Minnie came, long after the delayed dinner had at last been cleared away and the cook gone to bed with the toothache.

Such a slight little figure the mother ushered into the room! She looked hardly more than a child; it was only by gazing closely at the small oval face that one could see the lines of care around the dark eyes and at the corners of the pretty mouth. When she spoke, the tones of her soft voice were vibrant with a sweet earnestness; her eyes had a way of meeting yours with a swift, half-frightened gaze, that changed trustfully the next instant into a little crinkling smile. Anything less like the Fairlies' preconceived idea of her it would have been hard to find. Her dress was black, indeed, but, as Katherine noticed at once, the short skirt had the correct flare, the twist of ribbon in the becoming hat had an air of its own. She seemed to be the possessor of some charming magnetism to which Mr. Fairlie succumbed at once, after the first conventional questions and answers, and which drew the womenkind hospitably back and forth from Cousin Minnie's bedroom afterward, in all the intimacy of kimonos and undressing, when they had at last formally escorted her there.

In all the intimacy of Kimonos and undressing.

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 4 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 glimpse 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 any one, 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 discussion 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 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 upstairs 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 of 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.

Her mood leaped ahead now to that day of stress, and the clear gift of Aunt Mary's check, which, however, she was secretly destining 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 something with it 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 $75 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 knew something was the matter the instant I saw you!" Jean's tone was poignantly 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 illnesses of 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—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 know that I won't ask your cousin Minnie if you don't want her, but"—Mrs. Fairlie's eyes moistened; they were very young eyes, for all her forty-odd years; her sensitive mouth trembled—"when I think of any one being left out and lonely at Christmas—it must be so dreadful to be without your child—and I have so many blessings—and when we really have room enough to spare—"

"But you've never even seen her; you don't know what she's like!"

"No, but I ought to have seen her, Katherine, before this. Ever since your cousin Arthur's death—the only relative your father had in the world—" Mrs. Fairlie was embarked on a favorite subject. "I'm sure I've never forgotten how lovely he was to us when we were on our wedding trip, and he was hardly more than a boy himself—hiring a carriage and taking us around Niagara Falls (and carriages were so expensive there, he must have spent a week's salary), and giving me that bouquet of pheasant-eye pinks at the train—"

"Mother always speaks of her wedding trip as if it happened yesterday," interrupted Katherine, impertinently.

"And ever since your cousin Arthur's death Minnie has taken care of herself and the boy; of course your father has sent money when he could, but she has never asked for a thing. And now, when she is living so much nearer to us, and without her child—" Mrs. Fairlie's voice broke.

"Oh, well, mother, don't feel like that about it! Have her if you want to." Katherine's voice was affectionately resigned. "Only"—how Mrs. Fairlie dreaded that "only"!—"Jean and I had wanted to ask Mr. Leiter here. Mrs. Fenton said she hoped we'd be nice to him; she knew his mother; and now, of course, we can't do anything, with the house all filled up, and Jack's chum coming home with him, too! But really we don't mind—only"—another only!—"you give me that check! You're not to spend it sending for Cousin Minnie's boy, if that's what you're planning to do. You are going to have that rug."

"Maybe she won't accept," suggested Jean, hopefully, to be met by Katherine's ruthless, "That kind always accept."

Events justified her prophecy. Cousin Minnie accepted, indeed, but whether with joy or reluctance it were hard to tell.

"Your letter arrived last evening," she wrote, "and I would have answered it at once, but I was asked to watch by the bedside of a lady who is suffering with nerve trouble; I fear she will never recover from it.

"It is very kind of you to ask me to spend the holidays with you. I will leave here on the eighteenth, although I am afraid that I will be sadly out of place in your gay household; I have had no new clothes for several years. It seems impossible that I shall not see my dear Evan at Christmas; he says that he is well, but I often fear that he is keeping his real state of health from me. What a blessing it must be to have money! I hope that my presence will not be a damper on your festivities. Hoping to see you soon, I am,

"Your affectionate cousin,
"MINNIE FAIRLIE."

"Well!" said Katherine, emphatically, as she threw the letter down on the table. "We're in for it! When I think of all the people we might have had, who would have liked to come—"

The mother herself began to wonder, with a sinking of the heart, whether she had been quite wise or quite fair to her own in following out her first intention so single-mindedly. Was she preferring a stranger's fancied happiness to that of her children? The home was theirs as well as hers; the season belonged peculiarly to them—it was their especial time, even if they were grown up. Even her easy-going husband had been a little doubtful when she had told him of her intention of inviting his cousin's widow to stay with them now. "Won't she be a little in the way?" he had asked.

She swung so far the other way now that it hung over her blackeningly; even Katherine, who, her hardest critic, was also her staunchest upholder, was fain to give a word of comfort.

"Don't look like that, mother, she may not be so awful as we think; and, at any rate, it's for only one Christmas. I suppose we'll live through it. Of course we'll each have to give her a present."

"I have a box of note-paper you can take for her." Mrs. Fairlie's tone offered it eagerly; her Christmas spirit revived at the very mention of gifts. "People can always use note-paper—and this was unusually cheap for the quality. The picture on the box is really lovely. See, a little child offering a lemon! . . . What is that you say? . . . Well, my dear, I don't see why a lemon isn't quite as appropriate as cherries or apples, or any other fruit. You girls have such queer, slangy ideas of your own. I bought some things the other day, thinking they might come in handy. Jean can give Cousin Minnie these hat-pins, and the handkerchiefs can be from Jack. I will get her some pretty silk for a waist, and your father will give her a small check. There is nothing, after all, like a little money at Christmas!" Mrs. Fairlie sighed—the season, as usual, blotted all else from her sight, though even through her Christmas madness she tried to be glad that her daughters had kept her own check from her for her more lasting benefit; she was remorsefully glad that they were having one thing as they wanted it.

Yet through all the saturnalia of preparation Cousin Minnie's coming hung heavily over the household. It was on the same day that the last painful letter arrived from the expected guest ("a man of note in the place has just been taken to the hospital"), and also one from Mr. Leiter, the beautiful youth of the house-party; he was to be in town on the 23d. Mrs. Fairlie could hardly stand the tragedy of Katherine's eyes.

"I think it was the dearest thing of you to ask me to come," said the visitor, when Katherine had pulled down the blinds, and Jean had brought her some toilet water, and Mrs. Fairlie was getting yet another coverlet from the closet. Cousin Minnie's eyes sought those of each person in turn—the hairbrush she held in her hand shook. "You can't think what it seems like to be in a real home, it's so long since I've had one; though any place seemed like home to me when I had Evan. Can I unhook you, dear?"

"Please. What beautiful hair you have!" said Jean.

"My hair? Why, it's nothing now! It's only to my knees. I used to be able to step on it."

"It's the most beautiful thing I ever saw," said Katherine, rapturously. "I wish I could twist mine that way!"

"I'll do yours for you tomorrow if you'll let me," offered the visitor. Her earnest voice took on a sweetly coaxing tone. "You must let me do everything I can to help when I'm here; it will be such a pleasure! I want to make one of my puddings for Cousin Richard. Evan thinks I can cook better than anybody. And I brought my thimble in the bag so that I can start sewing for you the first thing in the morning. I know how many pretty things girls need to have finished for the holidays."

"You oughtn't to work while you're here," protested Jean, with one arm thrown around the little figure. "You ought to rest."

"Oh, no, dear! I can't rest." Cousin Minnie's fingers locked and unlocked with a strange, wild little motion. "Since Evan went away I just have to work. I can't explain it, but to rest would kill me! I often sew overtime at the institution."

"What do you sew there?" asked Katherine, curiously; she had cuddled down in a heap on the chintz lounge, with her eyes fixed on the visitor.

"I made denim overalls?" said Cousin Minnie, simply.

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Fairlie, wincing; her imagination, fertile as it was, had never compassed anything like this. But the other went on:

"It will be such a delight to work on pretty laces and chiffon." She turned to the mother with her little crinky smile. "You don't know how I love girls!"

"They are pretty nice to have," responded Mrs. Fairlie. "But I heard you telling Richard how splendidly your boy was getting on, working his way through college and all. You must be very proud of him. Where does he spend his Christmas?"

"Why, he's staying alone right there!" said Cousin Minnie. There was a sudden catch in her voice. "He was invited to visit a friend, but the friend has been taken ill. Evan writes me not to mind about him; he's very fond of reading. He writes to me every day. He— But perhaps you'll like to see the picture of my—Arthur's son!"

She turned to the open suitcase and, taking from it a leather-framed photograph, stood it proudly on the dressing table. "There he is!"

She well might triumph in their gaze. Photographs, often so obliterating, so concealing of the real person, have their magic moments; the soul of Cousin Minnie's boy stood revealed in this portrayal of him, in the sturdy set of his shoulders, the gallant poise of his bonny head, the sweetness of his curved lips, the high-heartedness, the divinely youthful courage of those straightforward eyes.

"Oh, isn't he a dear!" cried Katherine, with a gasp, and Mrs. Farlie put her arms around the little mother as if feeling the latter's loss for the first time.

"How you must miss him!" she exclaimed, and Cousin Minnie's eyes brimmed pitifully; two great tears fell and ran down her cheeks, while she tried to smile unflinchingly through them.

"He's so glad I'm with you!" she said.

Preparations for Christmas went on with a new ardor, a new facility of completion, after Cousin Minnie's arrival. There seemed nothing about her to justify their harrowing anticipations save the fact, artlessly announced, that writing letters, except to Evan, frightened her to death; she was such a poor letter-writer, she never knew what to say; her morning's epistle to the matron of the institution seemed to have been, from her own version of it, filled with accounts of the cook's toothache and the lameness from which Mr. Fairlie had suffered before she came, as matters of polite interest. For the rest, as an inmate of the household, she filled in chinks with a velvet-like ease and cheerfulness that was the most soothing thing in life. Her coaxing, "Now, let me do this for you" witched care from the soul and work from the fingers, whether it were sweeping or dusting or mending or tying up those endless parcels in tissue paper.

When young Mr. Leiter came to dinner it was Cousin Minnie's decorations that made the table so lovely, and her tact afterward that blessedly kept "father" playing checkers with her all the evening; it was she who listened to Jean's and Katherine's confidences long after the tired mother was in bed, and she who listened at every chance the next day to that mother's intensely interested converse about her children. Mrs. Fairlie would have been very happy with this sweet help and sympathy if—

Oh, deep in her soul was the corroding anguish of Minnie's deprivation! If she hadn't combined her money with the children's for the rug—if she could only have surprised Minnie with the gift of her dear boy's presence on Christmas Day! There were moments when the thought of all her blessings compared with Minnie's poverty was almost more than she could bear. She tentatively opened the subject with Richard, only to receive his sympathetic assurance:

"I'd like nothing better than to send for Evan—I'd like nothing better for Minnie's sake. They seem to be a plucky pair—Arthur might be proud of them, poor fellow! But I absolutely haven't any $60 to spare just now, that's the truth—and it would take all of that to get the boy here and back again. You'll have the house pretty full, anyway, won't you, with Jack and his friends?"

"Mother will go without everything she really wants unless we look out for her." Katherine proclaimed to the sympathizer in public. "Now, mother, I'm not talking to you!"

"My dear, I've been thinking how very pretty some of the grass rugs are," said Mrs. Fairlie, diplomatically. "Those large oriental ones are so heavy, and they require a great deal of care. I really don't know that I feel quite up to it. A cheaper kind, now, for a few dollars—"

"Now, mother!" Katherine's arm went around her parent protectingly. "You know perfectly well that you hate cheap things. She does, Cousin Minnie; she never uses them after she gets them! She won't have anything but what is 'good.'" Her eyes flashed meaningly in denial of her mother's dumb appeal. "And you're going to have it! Jean and I are not going to let you go without it for anybody! Jean and I are looking out for you."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Fairlie, with, after all a thrill of pride in their care for her—she had no right to gainsay it. But how she hated that rug! To her intenseness the idea of stepping on it was like stepping on Minnie's heart.

Yet she hoped against hope during all those hours in which it would still be possible to get a letter to Evan in time; then, on the evening of the 22d, she finally gave up. It was too late now.

Jean came to her room as she was dressing, to say: "Now, mother, dear, I hope you're not foolish enough to worry about Cousin Minnie. She's enjoying everything so much—she told me so today; and she had a lovely letter from Evan—he's quite contented where he is."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" said Mrs. Fairlie, happily.

Minnie was enjoying herself. Mrs. Fairlie watched her that evening, noting her pretty wavering color and her merry laugh. Minnie was looking so much better since she came to them.

Mr. Fairlie was away that night. Jack and his chum had come home with all sorts of schoolboy chatter and clatter. It was late when they all got to bed, and later still, nearly 1 o'clock, when Mrs. Fairlie, who had just dropped asleep, was awakened by the blaze of her electric light, and saw the night-gowned Katherine's eyes glaring at her.

"Mother— We can't stand it a moment longer!" A wild jerk over her shoulder indicated the ghostly approaching Jean. "We saw a light in Cousin Minnie's room—Jean and I had been sitting up talking—and we opened the door softly to surprise her, and she was lying there with Evan's picture—crying—crying! Oh, mother, we never saw any one crying like that! Oh, mother—there, I'm going to howl myself now!"

"Hush! hush!" said the mother warningly, with arms around both white-robed figures as they huddled together on top of the bed.

"I can't hush until we do something to get that boy here!" Katherine's voice moaned defiantly through her sobs. "We don't care any more about that old rug than you do! Tomorrow's only the 23d— Mother, we want to telegraph the money and instructions to him the first thing in the morning, the way you did me once—and he can take the afternoon train from New York and get here for Christmas Eve—in time to help put up the greens—if you're willing."

Willing! As Mrs. Fairlie lay there that night she had a soberness of joy, as one who had unwittingly set foot in sacred places. As of old, this was to be a festival of a mother and a child. And to have those you loved one with you in the glory in the highest!

It seemed as if she had been indeed "anointed with the oil of gladness above her fellows."

"She was lying there with Evan's picture—crying—crying!"