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ESPÉRANCE GIRLS' CLUB,

45, GRAFTON STREET, FITZROY SQUARE, W.

Singing, Musical Drill, etc., etc.

MARY NEAL,
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ST. CHRISTOPHER'S BOYS' CLUB,

19, FITZROY SQUARE, W.

Open every night from 8.30 to 10 p.m. for
working boys.

WARWICK GUY PEARSE, *Leader.*

“Dear

Mother

Earth.”

By Mary Neal.

To
my friend
Emmeline Petbick.

DEAR MOTHER EARTH.

"My head is on the mighty Mother's arm,
I will not ask if life goes ill or well."

I HAD a dream once. It was a long time ago, when I first met the girls who came to me when I opened the Club. I dreamed of what I wanted them to be, strong and brave, good and true. I dreamed of them free, facing life gladly, awakened and yet not dismayed. As I came to know more of the reality of their lives, the fulfilment of my dream seemed a long way off, and as the years went by and knowledge deepened, the dream seemed often to be receding further and further away. The real was so terribly present. I learnt that the working girl is almost always either terribly overworked or out of work altogether, an alternation of circumstances in itself demoralising. I learnt that they were never properly fed or clothed or housed. Girls of seventeen and eighteen were sharing *one room* night and day with their fathers and mothers, and as they came to know and trust me I began to understand why some of the faces of my girls were drawn and lined like the faces of old women, and why some could never smile with the simple hearted mirth which is the very essence of girlhood. I came to understand what it meant to the little overworked servant, toiling from early morning till late at night for 2s. 6d. a week, to be tempted by her master and offered money as the price of her virtue, especially when she had a mother to keep, who was ill and nearly blind.

And more than anything else I came to know the moods which meant in the finer and more sensitive spirits a nameless dread and terror of life. Sometimes the realisation would sweep over a girl, that there only stood between her and those so often dependent on her and the in-coming forces of starvation and destitution, a needle, a scrubbing brush, or some other equally frail defence; then we should find her sobbing with uncontrollable grief. We who have entered life better equipped are often long in learning this lesson and all that it means in what we are so apt to misjudge as temper, hysterics, or affectation.

I wonder sometimes, as I look back, how I ever had the heart to keep my dream, but I did, and perhaps that is why one summer evening I suddenly discovered that it had come true. It may have been fulfilled longer than I realised, but all at once I knew about it. We had been for a walk in a pine wood just to listen to the sound of the wind in the tree-tops. There was in the air that mysterious hush and stillness which only the presence of pine trees ever brings to me. They know nothing of the sudden throb of life with which the other trees come out of winter darkness into the green life of springtime, but they are always changing, softly and silently, as one by one the pine needles fall around.

Their strong, invisible, ever changing life spoke to me of our girls and taught me how they would change and grow, not suddenly, but gently and persistently, as they too were swayed and urged by the beautiful Spirit of Life which bloweth where it listeth.

The pine wood had never looked more lovely and mysterious with the brown shadows lingering in the trees and the radiant moonlight overhead. Suddenly, just as we were leaving the wood, we heard voices singing in the distance, and we stopped to listen. Nearer and nearer they came, until we could hear the words:—

Lead kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
The night is dark and I am far from home;
Lead Thou me on.

We drew back into the shadow of the wood, and there passed quite close to us a band of happy girls linked arm in arm across the woodland path.

I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on.
I loved the garish day, and spite of fears
Pride ruled my will; remember not past years.

Past us, and further and further into the distance went the singers, unheeding us, who listened.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent till,
The night is gone.

After that we could hear no more words, only the fresh young voices dying away in the distance. We spoke no word to each other, my friend and I, but in that moment, thrilled through and through by the beauty of the night, and the beauty of life as we saw it in our girls, we lived—*lived* as only those ever live who “dream the impossible dream and it comes true.” We lived over again the past years with their stress and strain, and we knew that it had all been infinitely worth while; our girls were glad and free; they had escaped from the sordidness of their surroundings. We had conquered.

* * * * *

A spring evening in the midst of the city. A chill weird light with neither the cheeriness of winter nor the joy of springtime. A girl is coming wearily along the street, and her tall overgrown figure fits in oddly with the atmosphere around her. There is the same look of comfortless chill, the same look of being out of place, out of harmony, that always comes with a light evening which is cold and dreary. There was, too, the same subtle charm for all those who could see it; in the evening, of coming springtime life and beauty; in the girl, of a womanhood that would be also beautiful and not quite ordinary. The girl had come to us wild as a gypsy, with a free, bright spirit that somehow had never quite adjusted itself either to her body or to her surroundings. To-night the spirit is clouded and the limbs drag wearily. The bitter winter which lies behind her, with its hardships, its lack of food and warmth, its utter discomfort, has done its work on the unformed girl and now she is ill, out of work, with only that latent power and vitality to fall back upon, which is almost always the possession of youth. She has come to ask our help; not our money, but

our help, for she has no friends but us, and now she is stranded. We decide to send her to the country, and with light hearts we see her off to a village in Gloucestershire, where we picture her roaming over the meadows, rejoicing over the singing birds and gathering celandines and wind blossoms in the woods we know and love.

But her letter comes and dismay is our portion, satisfaction dies away. "The country is very nice, but it's cold. I am counting the days till I get back to the Club, but I will try and bear it for your sake. Our street looks so miserable it gives me the hump."

"Our street" is a country road leading to the cottage where she is staying.

She comes back to London well and strong, with wonderful stories of the country, the terrors of cows who haunted the fields whispering together and laying plans of attack, and of other new and nameless terrors enfolded in the quietness and dark of the nights, and of the general enmity of horses and dogs and pigs and all other live things. Our first attempt to send a Londoner into the country was not a success.

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But it was thus we learned our lesson and discovered that folks who have lived all their lives in cities must be won back to their allegiance to the country, the imagination must be awakened, the heart must be set to a new melody.

It has often seemed to us as we have watched the little London girl making her first acquaintance with the fresh beauty of her country, that we seldom realise that those whom we have disinherited from the earth which is their birthright have suffered an irreparable loss. The disinherited in losing the land have lost also the healing, the comfort, the security of the earth beneath their feet, and are adrift in uncertainty and unrest.

And so we planned our next holiday differently—we decided to go all together. Our first Club Holiday was at Bisley in Gloucestershire, a pretty village at the foot of the Cotswold Hills.

We never have had, and we never can have again, quite such a holiday. Every hour was a glad surprise, every incident full of new

interest, every minute filled with laughter and such merriment as surely can only be enjoyed once in a lifetime. It began in the journey out of the city into the fields and lanes. "Eh! Emmer, the cows is beginnin'," sent the party flying to the window of the railway carriage; and "My! ain't 'is *chest* red!" greeted a robin on the railing of a wayside station. The drive from the station in wagonettes, the rambles through woods and meadows, the simple, orderly, abundant meals, the quiet reading out in the open air, the talks and companionship as we walked arm-in-arm on summer evenings, all worked like a charm. The girls looked prettier than they had ever looked in the city; a certain gentleness and frank delight in life began to appear which they have never lost, but which has steadily grown during the seven years which have followed that first holiday. And the fun of it all! One day with frank goodwill one of the girls asked a man leading a tall rather bony horse by a halter, with no vestige of saddle or bridle, for a ride. "Up you get!" said he as he lifted her on to the horse. Clutching the horse's mane in one hand and holding tightly on to the man with the other, up and down the lane she jolted. Then she came flying to the group of girls who had been watching over the hedge. "Eh! gels, it's lovely, and 'e 'olds yer 'and all the time; come on and 'ave a ride." One by one they all went, one girl remarking at the end with quiet humour: "These country people don't seem to 'ave much work to do!"

With such good humour did they inspire the village folks that they were soon able to charter most carts and traps and horses for their amusement, all the payment required by the villagers being their frank enjoyment and happy laughter.

The last day saw gifts of country produce pouring in for the "poor Cockneys what 'ad got to go back to London," and we landed at Paddington laden with every imaginable vegetable, fruit and flower which Gloucestershire produces in midsummer.

Next summer saw us there again; this year every girl who had been for the holiday before being a contributor of at least 5s. towards the expenses.

Enterprise did not yet take us farther afield than the known delights of Bisley. Besides, is there not always a charm in renewing old scenes of delight and meeting again the people who have hospitably entertained one, never to be found in the place visited for the first time?

The same dog lay basking in the village street, a little wiser looking for another year's guarding of the village shop. We wondered if he remembered the bite which he had administered to one of our party, to impress upon us all that he did not allow familiarities from town's folk; although very pleased for us to deal at his shop, our relations were to be strictly a matter of business.

For all the girls knew, the same birds were singing, the same cows were whispering and plotting—more friendly plots though this year,—the same flowers were growing, and the same cool fresh wind was blowing from the hills. Only we had changed.

We no longer trailed long frilled skirts in the dust, we no longer wore light boots with high heels, we no longer sat on the wayside as we toiled up the hills, and cried because we were tired. No, we had left all our best clothes in London this time, and we had cut our skirts short and our heels low; our boots were stout and our dresses loose. We ran up the hills and we rolled down them on grassy slopes, we almost felt as if we had been born and lived in the country.

Last year we had seen a field of barley, the bearded grain waving in the wind. And we had heard: "Eh! gels, look! Here's shrimps all ready for boiling." The cuckoo had been to us only a wooden bird in a wooden clock and the setting sun nothing more glorious than a bull's-eye lantern. Now we rejoiced in every field of corn, we saw the cuckoo in the tree and knew something of her wicked ways, and the sun was not more glorious and familiar than the evening star and the beautiful plough up in the sky which we could now adjust with the plough in the farmer's field.

How the days raced past us! yet, what an illimitable space they left behind, on which we lived through all the long winter that followed, through the spring days which only brought us interminable hours of work.

Then we made fresh plans once more, and this time we took possession of a tiny hamlet in Surrey at the foot of Leith Hill. By this time the girls were able to contribute at least 10s. towards the expenses, so that we were able to make rather different plans. We still had all our meals together in one house, but we took rooms outside for the elder girls who, two and two, in different cottages, made many friends and learned some of the delights of freedom and independence.

There were many new pleasures in Surrey. Instead of meadows and lanes we had miles and miles of wind-swept heather-covered common land.

There were higher hills to climb and pine woods to possess, for there are few hedges and few barriers here, and we could walk to the full extent of our power in almost any direction without seeing either "Trespassers will be prosecuted" or "No thoroughfare." We came very near to each other during the three holidays we spent in Surrey, and we knew every mile of the country there, and because it is near London the girls have been able to renew their interest from time to time by day's excursions and week-end visits.

There is always a welcome for them from the old lady who keeps the keys of the tower on Leith Hill. She once said to me when I enquired which way my party had gone: "Over the hills, my dear, full of life, you'll hear 'em singing!" And there is always a welcome from the cottagers in whose homes they have stayed. "Bless 'em, they deserve a holiday, working 'ard as they do," said one woman who washed their frocks and made her son clean their shoes, and would not take a penny for the extra trouble.

After five holidays in the country a great longing seized us for the sea, for boating and bathing and sea breezes. Nothing seemed impossible now, when most of our elder girls could pay the full cost of the holiday, 30s., and when even the youngest could scrape together 2s. 6d., fired to enthusiasm by tales of what we did in "the Club Holiday." The trouble of finding suitable rooms at the seaside was amply repaid by the awe and wonder with which the girls saw the sea for the first time. "My! ain't it comin' in, somethink

shockin'," said a little tailoress, running back from the on-coming tide, after standing speechless long enough to let the waves wash right up to her feet.

"Ain't it 'ansome!" said another, with the limited vocabulary of the cockney, to whom everything is either "'ansome or lovely," and whose every shade of pleasure or annoyance has to be expressed by infinite variations of intonation in the words "all right." "Ain't this a little bit of 'all right'?" said one, looking at an expanse of wet sand, which reflected in glowing colours the gorgeous sunset in the west, and the amber of the crescent moon rising over the sea to the east. And, "Ain't this different from other Saturday nights?" said the youngest of the party, whose home we knew to be in one of the worst slums in the West-End, where Saturday nights are both in sound and sight a veritable hell on earth. There was infinite pathos in the contrast which the child drew in her mind.

This holiday we spent at Littlehampton, and our usual good luck followed us. We bathed, we swam, we rowed, we sailed on sea and river, in the summer sunshine and in moonlit nights. Those moonlight sails, out to sea, in the big trawler that held us all, shall we ever forget them? Again we heard in the voices of our girls, as we came singing home from the sea, up the river to the little quay where we landed, the "Song of Hope," from which we named our Club, and which has been ever in our ears.

During all these years we have never had an accident worth mentioning, no girl has ever misbehaved, we have never had a regret nor a misunderstanding. One friend who stayed with us this summer said to me, "I have never once seen a selfish action nor heard one unkind word; it has been a delightful holiday."

Once more we want to go further afield. We want every Girls' Club we know to have a happy summer's holiday, and we want especially to put at the disposal of others the experiences we have gained in eight holidays of catering, housekeeping, chartering boats, trains, etc. Every year has taught us something fresh that has made each holiday better

and cheaper, and, we think, the time has now come to put this to practical use.

We are proposing to take a house at the seaside, which can be had on very advantageous terms. We propose to furnish it very simply, to put in a well-tried housekeeper, and to use it as a Holiday Hotel for Boys' and Girls' Clubs, and for working people and their families generally. After the initial expenses of furnishing the house and setting it going, we shall charge at a rate just sufficient to cover all expenses; beyond that no profit will be made. We think that while Clubs or individuals will pay about the same for board and lodging as they have hitherto done, we shall be able to provide better food and accommodation, and thus enhance the pleasure and benefit of the holiday. Probably about £300 is all that will be needed to start the House going, and so make it possible to offer good and convenient accommodation to many Clubs, and save the leaders much trouble and anxiety in finding suitable holiday resorts.

We shall go to a place conveniently situated, where there is good and cheap bathing and boating on sea and river. There are beautiful walks in the country around, and many delightful places for a day's picnic.

We shall be glad at any time to receive donations towards furnishing and setting the house going from any one who, knowing what a holiday means to hard-worked city folks, would like to have a part in giving them a holiday.

MARY NEAL.