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“ My

Pretty

Maid.”

By Mary Neal.

To
Mary Katherine,
for
"Auld Lang Syne."

"MY PRETTY MAID."

THE STORY OF A GIRLS' CLUB.

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid?"
"I'm going to my *Club*, kind Sir," she said.

SHE is a very pretty maid indeed, with a soft, bright colour and curly hair, and she is as dainty as any lady in the land. She is good too, good in helpful words and little kindly acts of service and of love, and she has a courtesy of manner which any woman might envy.

Yet she is only a working girl, a tailoress, and her earnings, taking them all the year round, would not average more than six or seven shillings a week.

With this she has to do everything—pay her rent, buy food, fire and light, and dress herself. Of course she has never been properly clothed for winter in all her life. She never has a fire except on Sunday afternoons, however severe the weather may be, and her meals are oftener tea and bread and butter than anything else. She has no money at all for recreation, she can never buy a book, a country walk is out of the question, for the fare by train to the nearest country is a shilling return. She knows very little even of London, and until this year she had never seen S. Paul's Cathedral, and the City was to her almost an unmapped country. If you know nothing of history and nothing of works of imagination, it is not very interesting to walk about London in the few hours that are left to you after working between seventy and ninety hours a week in the season.

Out of the season, when you have no work at all, you have not much heart for sight-seeing, and besides you must spend all your time look-

ing for work, even if you are pretty sure that the search is hopeless.

Last year she had a birthday present for the first time in all her life, her master gave her half-a-crown; she brought it to me to take care of it for her, she was so afraid she should spend it, and she wanted to save it towards a summer holiday which I was trying to arrange for her. She had never seen the summer, she said, and she told me, "I have never had a present in all my life, no not so much as a card."

She has no sweet haunting memories of childhood; my pretty maid has nothing of which to make happy day-dreams as she stitches away hour after hour through the long summer days, or as she goes to and fro in the bitter winter weather to the tailor's den in which she works. Her childhood was one long hardship, it is one long memory of always feeling hungry and forlorn and neglected. When she was about fourteen she had a serious illness, the doctor said that her brain was overtasked. It was not with study, but it was with having to work so very quickly in a noisy crowded room for such long hours. She had often fallen down several steps into the street when she was a tiny child, for her mother used to leave her alone for hours while she went off drinking; the doctor thought that this too might have something to do with her illness.

Until she was eighteen her home had never been more than one room, and she had shared it night and day with her father and her mother and a sister a little younger than herself.

And yet to-day, in spite of all the hardships of her life, and in spite of its necessary limitation, she is wonderfully happy and serene, for since she joined our "Girls' Club" six years ago, the best gifts of life have been hers, love and comradeship and the joy of knowing that freedom and gladness await all those who have set their faces towards the light and who are following truth with however slow and faltering steps.

She is growing in knowledge every day, and this alone is enough for happiness and the deepest peace.

She is only one of many who came to us six years ago and who to-day are the very pride and joy of our hearts.

During those years, as I have come to know very intimately the lives of our London working

girls, their homes, the conditions under which they work, and their terrible temptations and hardships, I have seen very clearly that the really practical way to help them at the present time is through Girls' Clubs, conducted on free liberal lines that will include every interest of their home and industrial life. And above all, and embracing all, their must be a strong and over-mastering spiritual influence, which will uplift and make sacred every detail of lives that are in such danger from the inevitably sordid materialism of their surroundings.

We started our Club with a great faith in the possibilities of our girls, with an intense belief in the power of girlhood to "wear the white flower of a blameless life," no matter how difficult its preservation, and our faith has been royally rewarded. We have learnt much in these years. I know now that the girl who for years seemed in one long sulk has a tragedy in her past, such as only a crowded slum home makes possible, but which is common enough, as we workers know. I know that the girl who for years was almost our despair, with her rude uncouth manners and her noisy ways, is constantly beaten black and blue by a drunken mother, who varies the torture of her daughter by occasionally emptying a pan of live coals on her husband's head. I know too that this girl's heart is loyal and true and tender, as I wish every woman's heart were. I have learnt that apathy and dulness may be the result of constant semi-starvation or want of sleep.

When a girl, as so often happens, has to sleep in the general sitting room, it means that however tired she may be she has to sit up until every member of the family and the frequent visitors have retired; and I know a girl, at this moment, who seldom, if ever, gets to bed before one or two in the morning, simply for this reason.

Rude, noisy, uncultivated as many of these girls were, they are only pitiful and pathetic as one comes to realize that they have had no home training, that their childhood was spent in the gutter, and that even their childish games were oftenest an imitation of the drunken brawls of father and mother.

Yet we never despaired of our girls; we had too much faith for that, and "to him that believeth all things are possible." Given time and love, and an inexhaustible patience, all things

are possible to the women folk of the working classes.

We started our Club with one idea and one only; we would make for our girls a bright and a happy Christian home, and we would share with them as literally as possible all the good gifts which had been given to us in our own lives.

Anything like a night school or an institution is of no use to the ordinary working girl; her work has been so hard during the day, her whole life is such a long, grey, monotonous drudgery, that in the evening she must have life and light and as much merriment and joy as it is possible to give her. And we have made the girls' lives our own; we have tried to share with them our friends, our interests, our hopes for the future, and have not only lived in their lives, but we have let them live in ours.

We have talked to them of our childhood; we tell them about our holidays; we give them all we can of every meeting of interest we attend. We study all questions that affect their industrial life, and try to get them to take an interest in them too, and we try to interest them in public events and so to awaken and develop their whole tone and spirit. The result of this has been a wonderful absence of little-mindedness and jealousy amongst our girls; we meet them in interests outside of and wider than our own little lives, and, as ever happens when this is so, our own lives are elevated and enriched on every side.

I want this paper to be very practical, and I want it to lead to the starting of Girls' Clubs in different parts of England. A number of small clubs meet the needs of the girls far better than one large one; a small club is so much more of a home, and gives much better opportunities for close personal touch with the girls. I should like to see a Girls' Club in every street of the great manufacturing cities of England. One other thing is very important: it is of very little use to open a Girls' Club at all unless it can be opened at least four nights a week; even then eight hours in a week is not very long in which to do a work which practically means counter-acting all the other hours of the week. The forces of evil and of environment arrayed against one are so strong that one wants all the help that long companionship with the girls can give one. One helper ought always to be

there every night; let her get as many others to come for one night as she possibly can, but to give a feeling of home, and love, and permanence to the club, the girls ought always to be sure of finding one friend there who is there every night.

It is lovely to see our girls come in and look round to see if we are there, just as when we were children our first words on coming in from school were always, "Is mother in?"

I will now give our week's programme:—On Monday we have a singing class; this is very important, and perhaps nothing does more for the girls than to put them in possession of the sweet old national melodies. Girls will sing, and if we do not teach them good songs, they will sing the only ones they can learn, the music hall songs which are ground out on every barrel organ.

A German lady once said to me that she was surprised how little the English people know of their own National songs, and that she did not believe an English audience could sing two verses of "Home Sweet Home" without the words. We have made a great point of teaching the girls good songs, believing that good singing would do as much as anything to brighten the homes of the working classes.

Tuesday we make an informal night. Sometimes we have a lecture on health, or any other subject of interest. Sometimes I get the girls to write essays; these are sometimes very amusing, and throw a good bit of light on their ways and thoughts. One night I set them as a subject "The Ideal Husband." Nearly every girl said the ideal husband was "one who would work," a rather rare quality evidently, and one to be highly prized. "One that would clean the boots and knives of a Saturday, and take me out of a Sunday," wrote another. "One with an open countenance that acts accordin'" was another girl's ideal, and only one girl out of the whole number described what I should call a *Family Herald* hero as her ideal. One of them put at the end, "If I don't get what I've wrote in this essay I shan't marry at all." She has since married, and when she wrote to tell us about it she said, "I've got all what I wrote in that essay; he's neither tall nor short, he's in between colour, and he talks to me about politics and things what I don't understand, and that's what I like."

Sometimes on Tuesdays we have only a quiet read or talk by the fire, sometimes on summer evenings we make an expedition to Hampstead Heath, on the top of an omnibus, sometimes we go for a walk and finish up with hot potatoes at a street corner.

On Wednesday we have a class for musical drill, and this too is a very essential feature of a Club, the girls of which are working all day at such sedentary occupations as dressmaking and tailoring. The drill class helps us in very many unexpected ways, and I have come to see that no smallest thing in life is too small to be used as a lever to a higher and brighter life. We had one girl who was so stupid that I often wondered if she would ever wake up, nothing we said or did seemed to interest her in the least. At last we arranged to have a dress made especially for the drill; they were to be made all alike, only each girl was to have her own colour. "Well, Millie, what colour are you going to have?" I asked. "I shan't 'ave no colour, I ar'nt going to 'ave no drill dress at all," she answered with a disagreeable shrug of her shoulders.

However, two or three days afterwards she ran up to me in the street and said in a very excited tone, "Here, I'm going to 'ave one of them dresses, my mother's going to make it, black, with a white sash she's 'ad by her." I did not anticipate much from a white sash which had been lying by in a slum room, but the result was better than my expectations, and the dress was a success. From that day the girl has been completely changed, everything interests her now, and she is as bright and happy as any girl in the Club.

On Friday night we have a Bible Class, and the girls come almost more regularly to this than to anything else. If one keeps well to subjects that touch their lives there is no more encouraging and responsive audience than one composed of working girls; they have a delightful way of owning up to any and every sin one mentions, and of reporting their progress in overcoming it week by week. Once I was speaking about "eye-service," and I said "I wonder how many of you were looking out of the window this morning when the mistress was out, instead of going on with your work." "I was," came instantly from various parts of the room. Next week one girl said, "I only done

one bit of eye-service this week. I did sweep the ashes up under the grate when I ought to have took 'em downstairs." I always found their notions of religion took very practical shape indeed, and one girl once described being a Christian as "not wearing no feathers nor nothin'." Another girl told me once, "It's just a year since I turned. I don't see much difference, but my mother does."

I thought this as good evidence of her conversion as anything could well be. I thought of her a year before, when she came into the Club one night and announced to all assembled there, "Well, gels, I've got converted. A lady done it; she prayed to me." It did not seem then that much spiritual light had come; after events proved that it had been a very real turning to the light. Their philosophy is apt sometimes to be one too many for their teacher. One night I had been talking to them about not taking offence and not expecting attention, and generally about taking a broad and large-minded view of life. At the end I said, "It's this way, girls, take it for granted always through life that you don't deserve anything, then you'll be thankful for anything you get." "Yes," said a girl, "but suppose you ain't expectin' nothing, and someone give you a crack on the head, what then?"

"Take it for granted you deserve two and be thankful you only got one" was all I could do on the spur of the moment to meet that difficulty.

Every night before going home we have family prayer, and everything we most love in our Club has become centred round this half hour. We generally sing one or two hymns, then we have a chat about anything we think will interest them, and then we close with prayer. I know now that the influence of this follows them to their homes; that it stays by them at their work, and that the memory of it is a stronghold for them in many an hour of temptation.

And so year after year our lives have intertwined with the lives of our girls; four times we have taken them into the country for a fortnight; for six years we have spent most of our evenings with them; we have greeted them day by day in the street. We have had cosy chats on Sunday afternoons, and to-day they are our friends, our comrades, and our fellow-

workers, pledged to the same ideal, the same aim, and the same work.

We have lost all consciousness of class distinction; we have come near enough to discover that we are one, for are we not all the children of one Father? In all there is the same capacity for love, for suffering, and for service, the same reaching after patience and fortitude, and all generous impulses; it is only externals that bar the way to human lives and hearts. Once we are beyond these, once we have reached the real human life underneath, there will be no need to raise the cry for equality; nothing but a perfect equality will be possible. We are looking now to our girls to carry out in their own lives all that we have tried to give them, all that we have tried to teach them.

Hon. Secs. of the Club :

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