THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER.

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THE GIRLS' HOLIDAY HOME.

By L. H. YATES.

There were ten or a dozen girls gathered around the fire in the club reading-room one evening; just such a party of girls as may be found almost any evening in any one of the many girls' clubs that abound in London. It was the close of one of those dull, wet, stormy days of early spring, and several of our number had contracted colds and chills as the result of battling with inclement weather, while all were more or less tired of the dreary monotony of daily office and clerical duties. Summer holidays had come up for discussion, as such subjects frequently do when the prospect of their realization seems most remote. With our several small incomes—not one of us earned more than twenty-six shillings per week—holidays could never amount to much in the way of travelling or amusement; those who had country homes or friends to visit were accounted fortunate. Suddenly I, having a daily paper in my hand, set up.

"Oh, listen to this," I said—"'To be Let, furnished, a four-roomed cottage, no garden, close to beach and within walking distance of railway station on G. E. R. Rent 8 shillings per week. Apply to 'Coastguard,' Kirby Cross, Essex.'—there, isn't that even within our means?"

"But it would have to be taken for a long time, wouldn't it—it doesn't say for the season?"

"Perhaps—only think how many there are of us to share the costs, and amongst us we are sure to have friends who would be glad to join us, so that it could be taken for several months at least, if it was suitable."

"What a perfectly lovely idea; a sort of Combination Holiday scheme, with living, à la Caleb Balderstone."

"Or say rather in Daniel Peggotty fashion!"

"You may laugh," I said, a trifle nettled, "but if you will think seriously for a few moments, you will, I am sure, agree with me, that to take such a cottage as this for a few months would give a cheap holiday to us each individually, when the expenses are shared up, in comparison with the cost of an outing by the sea, taken in the ordinary way."

"And to me, for one, that last is ever unattainable," put in one whose income, as we all knew, was considerably under the great Guinea; her sigh met with a sympathetic echo.

"We must, however, first find out what and whereabouts this desirable residence is, then what the cost of reaching it would be, and whether excursions ran that way, also upon how little we can exist when there." This

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A SEA BREEZE.
was from a young person whose occupation as cashier made her keen after the details.

I headed my letter for full particulars, and also wrote to the Railway Company for information as to the probable reduction in fares for the summer, and we can see the train leaves at 9.05 and arrive at my further station early. It is very much appreciated, and you do not all sufficiently appreciate the value of my discovery, I replied.

In two or three days I had obtained the information I required, and so convened the Club.

"Coastguard's" reply was a letter written in a crabbled hand, in uncertain spelling, but its genneness was patent enough.

The following summer season was supplemented by a courteous note from the Great Eastern Railway manager, giving assurance that excursions were frequent enough to afford the comfort for reaching the coast at a small cost. The first letter must give in detail however.

"Dear Miss," it ran, "my little house is a good solid house, I built it myself. The furnishing has been my Peggy's an mine this for the summer. It is a very good house. She's dead now. I'm going away to another place, but should like the house to be kept. Can you have it for as long as you like.

"Yours respectfully,

"D. LONG."

"Daniel Peggotty is very self, I'm sure!" Alice Hughes exclaimed, as I finished reading this quaint epistle, and a general laugh went round, with much sympathy for the probable contents of the "D. Long's little house.

"Let us get to business," the cashier said at last. "How many are there who are willing to join in sharing the expense of the house for the summer?"

The managers assented, and we forthwith made our replies.

"Thirteen names were given without hesitation, and she promptly added her own, then mine.

"What makes fifteen: eight shillings per week divided between fifteen is a little over sixpence per week each, not a ruinous speculation.

"But what about food?" another asked.

"We should need to see what was obtainable in the neighbourhood, and what it would be better to take from town; also what cooking vessels we should consider, and what we would permit of," I suggested, adding a rider to the effect that a simple diet ought to suffice us, when all possible time should be spent out of doors.

"Do you mean us to lay by sixpence a week towards rent, and then pay for our food as we have it, and travelling expenses, or for each one to pay their full share as they take their turn?"

"It seems to me it would be the best for each one to contribute regularly to the rent from the time the house is taken, our cashiers keeping a separate account of the amounts, and to pay out when the rent is due, all other expenses to be shared at the proper time," I replied.

"Is the house taken?" someone else asked pertinently, and we all joined in the laugh which went round, it was so easy to talk, after that.

All the same, our debate ended in a decision for the scheme, it had so many attractions, and it was left with me, as the one having most time at disposal, to go down and view this cottage, which, if found really suitable, I was empowered to take on the spot. So I wrote "Coastguard" to the effect that I would visit the place today, if possible.

I did so. Saturday morning found me in Liverpool Station, on route for Walton-on-the-Naze, Kirby Cross being the station before that. I took a return-ticket, for which at that time of the year I paid six shillings, a little later in the year it was not quite so much.

How fresh and salt the air smelt as I stepped out of the train at Kirby Cross, and I began to walk further down the road. A quick run of exactly two hours and twenty minutes had brought me here out of the dull London atmosphere.

A keen breeze laden with North Sea ozone blowing across grassy fields made me quicken my steps involuntarily as I inhaled its breath. It was like drinking new wine!

Inquiry at the station had elicited the information that the fishing hamlet of Silver Creek was: "a four mile tow" further on; but in side of the far were the cottage clusters, clustered below a winding path, cut zigzag fashion down the slope, seeming to be the only way of reaching these.

"CAUTIONLY I went down this first time on the way, the path like the goats themselves. It brought me right into the middle of the group of cottages.

A sturdy grey wife pointed out the coastguard's house at some little distance farther on, "if it's Dolly Long's as ye mean," she said. I presumed it was.

I saw a very trim little stone house set on a kind of natural terrace; very strongly built, it had a stone bench on the seaward side, on which at this moment an old man, promenading up and down the:<ref> It's front door faced the high road, and the pathway thereto was flanked on either side by a strip of ground, already bidding fair to be grey without any other grass to soften it into the garden. Having sighted the old man, I did not knock at the door, but went round to the other side of the house and introduced myself.

He was a very tall old man, rather stern-looking, and by no means feeble—not a person to be trifled with—but he greeted me very courteously.

He opened a door behind him, into what was evidently the kitchen-place, and invited me to enter. It was spotlessly clean and bright, a good fire burned in the old-fashioned grate, every article of the table shiny with polish, and a thick rug covered the floor near the hearth. In the far corner of this kitchen stood a cucumber clock, and on either side of the fire were two cozy grandfathers' chairs; on one wall a tall dresser with shelves covered with a valuable supply of the genuine old willow-pattern service filled the space, some of which was piled on chairs filled the opposite side. A window at either end, both bright with Spotless curtains and flowery plants, completed the ideal cottage kitchen.

The front door opened into a narrow passage, which divided this place from the room beyond, this latter appeared to have been recently used as a library, and an open fire burned in the hearth. I could see through the large window, and wondered if this room were one of the upper rooms having been brought down had left that that these upper rooms were quite sufficiently furnished with all that was really necessary and were beautifully fresh and clean. From the windows there was a good view into the wide open seas studded with craft of all kinds.

Four girls at a time could be accommodated quite easily I found, and we could use the downstairs room for two more if we chose to purchase a few of the housewives in our living room, and after all why not, as we should really live out of doors?

I concluded the bargain to take this cottage exactly as it stood, and to take it on the same terms as if it were, starting from the first of the next month—May. We should have to try and find a "first" tenant, as none of the club members would be able to the place that summer before Whitsun tide; but the probable first tenant was already almost a certainty in my own mind. Rent was to be paid monthly to the owner at the Harwich Coastguard Settlement and before that was made straight to our mutual satisfaction.

I had time before returning to town to explore a few of the natural resources of the place, and one of the best art of the place was the Silver Creek itself was a natural harbour on a somewhat rocky bit of coast, but affording a capital haven for fishing-vessels. A little way beyond our cottage and round the other side of the coast the shore became flatter and sandier, well fit for bathing purposes, and as quiet as could be wished, while on the further side of the beach you had the possibility to walk along by the shore into the town of Walton, Harwich, with its teeming shipping, was further away still, but the constant passing of the vasting vessels kept a lively interest on the water-way in front.

In the hamlet of Silver Creek I could disassemble only one shop, a very general store of state goods, and it was also the post-office; but that there was abundance of fresh wholesome fish to be had almost for the trouble of catching it was every one's experience, it would be sure to be procurable at Kirby Cross. So I returned to town in a very contented frame of mind.

But the objection the project met with was, as I expected, the fact that it would be standing empty for nearly a month before any of us could use it, and the rent going on all the time. It was little use to explain that if not taken at once the chance would probably have slipped from us altogether. They could not see this, so I kept my counsel and wrote off that same night to an aged relative of mine, whose very tiny income had made holidays by the sea hitherto almost impossible for her also. Her answer was not long in coming; the prospect of a whole month by the sea, and for so small a sum as one to be lightly refused by "amite," and she at once agreed to become a sharer with us.

By her joining she equalised our numbers, and reduced the rent subscriptions to the exact sixpence each week.

Accordingly, on the morning of the first Monday in May, I met my dear white-haired old lady at Liverpool Street Station, and escorted her the remainder of her journey.

We were the first to turn the key in our new domain, and found it very much as I had seen it at first. With the fire burning, it only needed a match to set it alight; and when the curtains were drawn wide apart the sunshine flooded the place.

"Dear Friz!" she exclaimed rapturously; and she sank into one of the grandfather chairs as if at last she had found a real heaven. In a day or two she was quite at home, and seemed positively in her element moving about that cosily kitchen-place.

"Dolly Long" had replaced the bedstead and restored the sitting-room to a prim order; but I placed in the latter the soft camp-bed I had brought from town, and, with a few other contrivances, made of this a most cozy room for Liberty's use, and spared her mounting the stairs.

I stayed with her a day or two to see her comfortably settled and supplied with such
provisions as she would need, arranging with one of the fishwives to give her a morning call lest she might be requiring anything during the day. For the rest auntie declared herself quite able to manage, as she was "a first-rate breadmaker," and "especially good at contrivances."

She was to be sure and write if she felt nervous or too lonely, as the post went out every day; but the little old lady laughed at the bare suggestion of loneliness. "Haven't I lived alone all my life?" she asked; and I couldn’t say she had not.

Whitauntide saw a whole swarm of girls eager to go down to the "cottage;" but they had to persevere to reduce the number to six, as room for more could not possibly be made even when auntie had vacated.

About the latter’s turning out I had some qualms, although she quite expected to go, as her letters showed; but they showed also that this month had been to her one of the very happiest of her life. On the other hand, if it could have been arranged for her to stay the cottage would always be ready for occupation, and she would take its "keeping" off our shoulders; also she would keep it far more economically than we could. Yet it was difficult for me to be the one to propose her staying.

The difficulty was settled for me, however.

I was not one of the number who went down to Silver Creek at Whitsuntide, and it was agreed between us that auntie was to join me in town for a few days on her way home. She was to leave the cottage as soon after the party had arrived as she pleased. But though I waited expectantly she never appeared that evening, and I was in a decidedly perturbed state of mind until a telegram arrived to set my fears at rest.

The girls told me afterwards what had occurred.

The dear old lady was waiting with her bonnetittings tied, and her bag already packed when they entered, and she only stayed to see them all safely housed before setting off to walk—yes, actually to walk—to Kirby Cross for her train. They let her go, not thinking much about her at first—girls are not much given to thinking—and, being hungry, they sat down to the bountifully spread ten-table she had laid in readiness. They said what a delicious tea it was—such an abundance of home-made bread and cakes, better, fruit, and a dish of pickled fish, with honey and jam, and a bowl of flowers set in the middle of the table. Then, both upstairs and down, the house was so spotlessly dainty, so bright with flowers too, they could not imagine how she had done it. While they sat enjoying this someone said suddenly:

"I call that old lady a regular dear; and don’t you think it’s a bit of a shame to have turned her out with scarcely a ‘thank you’?"

"Yes, I do; and I wonder if it is too late to fetch her back? She can’t have got very far as yet."

"And we really might let her stay on and on all the time. She wouldn’t take up much room, and look how cozy she makes the place!"

"A very unselfish way of putting a good intention, well-meant, so we’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, Millie. However, are we not all agreed that this old lady is to be fetched back if she will agree to come?"

It seemed that they were unanimous on the head, and two of them set off at once to try and overtake my auntie. They found her about half way on the road, sitting on a fallen tree, looking very warm and tired, and one asserted there were a few wet drops trickling down her cheeks. These of course she wiped away when she saw them coming.

"I was just resting a wee bit," she said.

They had some difficulty in making her quite understand what they meant at first; but when she did realise it the wet drops came thick and fast.

"Oh, my dears, do you really mean that you want me to stay?" she cried. "If you knew how I love that cottage! I love every stone of it! And Peggy Long’s furniture is as dear to me as if it were my own. If I might stay there all summer I’d cook and work for you all, and you’d never regret it."

"Indeed, we have proof of that already," they said, and, one on each side, they marshalled auntie back and installed her as the mistress there and then; and so she remained until October days brought holidays to an end.

However many girls claimed a share of the cottage at a time, auntie was able to make room for them all. She had a magician’s faculty for making up shakers with rugs and pillows, and as to her lovely little "spreads"—well, they needed no praise.

It was agreed that we paid to auntie a shilling each per day for our food, paying for a week in advance, and if this was found to be insufficient we were to divide the deficit again. It was only once insufficient, yet how she made that small sum cover all our meals was a constant marvel to us. She said things were not at all dear to buy; she was able to get butter and eggs from a farm near by, also a fowl or duck occasionally, all at fully a third below town prices; fish was ridiculously cheap, vegetables cheap also, and as she made nearly all the bread herself, that came cheaper too; while for meat—well, we did not seem to need much meat. Auntie thought we were as well without it, and as she made such delicious soups and stews of vegetables, the want of meat was not felt.

We had a substantial breakfast by way of beginning our day—tea and coffee, with an abundance of beautiful milk, then eggs, boiled or fried, buttered or scrambled, as we chose, sometimes bacon, hot or cold, with stewed fruit and lettuces, and plenty of bread. After breakfast we helped with the housework, and each girl made her own bed. Then we set
off for a long morning out of doors, taking with us a basket of cake or sandwiches.

We usually reached home soon after one o'clock, ready for a good dinner, at which we were treated to a vegetable soup, some fish belled, fried, or baked—with potatoes and a nice sauce. Sometimes instead of fish there would be a savoury stew of vegetables with bacon, or a piece of baked ham with peas, broad beans, or cabbage and mint sauce, a milk pudding, a fruit dumpling, a tart, or custards and stewed fruit to conclude with.

Usually we lounged about near home in the evening, making acquaintance with the fisherfolk or reading on the beach. Then we had an early tea, and afterwards were ready to stretch our legs again, sometimes going as far as Walton to have a peep at the fashionable on their promenade, and then home to a supper of bread and milk or bread and cheese, and early to bed.

A week of this life brought the hue of health to both of us, and tried it, and a fortnight made them quite new creatures. This brings me to expenses—for we must be exact if we would be helpful.

Including the weekly variables—available for Friday to Tuesday, one week or one month, the respective prices of which were 5s. 10d., 6s. 6d., and 10s. each—we lived here for 11s. per week or 20s. per month (rent included).

Surely a cheaper or a more healthful holiday it would be hard to obtain!

May I recommend our example to other girls' clubs? It may be said that we had exceptional good fortune in meeting with such a cottage. I reply that one has but to glance down the columns of our big daily papers in the weeks of early spring to find many such cottages advertised, both in the country and by the sea, which if taken then cost little, if any, more than did ours.

Then as to "auntie." Well, of course, there were several such aunties in this world; but there are other dear old ladies in plenty who would fill such a post as she did very nearly as well, and to enable others to make herself indispensable to others is to have "served the opportunity" right well, and will add additional sweetness to the lot of all.

CHAPTER XV. AN EXPEDITION TO THE WEST END.

MIRABEL was stirring the next morning before it was light. It was Saturday. Mirabel did not go to the laundry on that day; but devoted its hours to cleaning the rooms and to household tasks of various kinds. Willie was wont to help her with those in his childish fashion. Harry was busier on that day than on any other; while Lizzie worked only till two o'clock.

She turned her thoughts to good purpose in the early hours, and had done most of her morning's work ere Lizzie roused herself from her heavy slumber.

"Whatever made you get up so early, Mirabel? she asked sleepily.

"I must have been five o'clock when I first heard you moving."

"I wanted to get forward with my work," said Mirabel, and the reply satisfied Lizzie: She herself had made plans by which she could carry out her much inward excitement. Her mind was so occupied with these that she did not wonder why Mirabel wanted to advance the day's work, nor mark in what an abstracted manner her sister went about her familiar duties, doing everything thoroughly, in a way which showed that her thoughts were far from the things which she saw and handled.

Nor did Lizzie observe how colourless was Mirabel's face, or her strained look, or the dark circles beneath her eyes. Lizzie ate her own breakfast without knowing that Mirabel scarcely swallowed a morsel. Only little Willie was conscious that Mirabel was not herself, and his heart was troubled.

His spirits rose like magic however when, as soon as Lizzie and Harry had gone, Mirabel told him that she was going to take him out. They were going a long way, to the other side of London, and he would have a ride in an omnibus.

Delighted at the thought, he helped her to wash up the breakfast things and put them away. Then she dressed him in the suit which had been given her on the previous evening. As a further protection against the cold, for the morning was raw and foggy, she wrapped about him a little plaid shawl which had belonged to their mother. Dean still lay on his bed in the inner-room, sleeping off the effects of his last night's potations. Mirabel took a look at him, and decided not to rouse him. She put some food on the table in readiness for him when he wanted it, and then she and Willie set off, as full of glee and regarding the expedition as a grand treat, in spite of Mirabel's pale, sad face and strange silence.

They walked some distance along the foggy Marylebone streets ere they got into the omnibus. Mirabel had closely calculated the cost of their journey and would not spend a penny more than was absolutely necessary. Willie seated at the end of the omnibus, where he could see the horses and the people near them, was as happy as possible as they went along. He wondered that Mirabel did not share his delight. Once he saw her wiping away a tear. He could not understand her, and cried, when everything was so pleasant, for how the fog was clearing away and the sun shining red behind it.

The little fellow could have no idea of the weight of dread which oppressed his sister, nor the bitter thoughts which brought the tears to her eyes. She was haunted by the picture which the newspaper report had brought so vividly before her imagination. Bruce Collier, struck down by a cowardly blow from behind, lying half dead on a public path. Who could have had the heart to do such a cruel, wicked thing, and to him, who had never harmed anybody? The newspaper had spoken of the kindliness of his nature and the sympathy with which he had listened when she told him of the troubles of her life, and her tears fell fast.

"He led me on to talk about my life; he made me tell him of my troubles, or should never have done so," she thought. "Oh, how can people say that gentlefolks have no hearts? Why do men like Jim Lovell cry out against the rich, as if they were all alike?"

She remembered that it was supposed that some such rascal against society had struck the fatal blow. With the recollection a thought came to her which was almost an intuition, and which made her heart stand still with horror. Could it be Jim Lovell, who had done this thing? she knew but too well that Lovell, who hated all the rich and prosperous, had a special hatred for Bruce Collier. She could not forget the vindictive look she had seen in his eyes whenever she had mentioned the artist in his hearing. She knew what prompted the feeling, and it struck her with a new, sharp pang that, if her conjecture were true, she was indirectly responsible for the cruel fatality that had befallen Bruce Collier. Yes, she, who loved him better than her own life, who had willingly embraced poverty and grinding toil and the hardships of a heart-loneliness rather than do him the least harm, was the cause of all his suffering.

Tortured by such thoughts as these the omnibus route to Kennington seemed to Mirabel interminable; but it was none too long for Willie, and he was sorry when his sister told him that they must alight. With a strange sense of unreality Mirabel took her way along the familiar roads. She soon entered that in which the artist lived. It was a pretty road in spring, when the trees were in fresh foliage and the gardens bright with flowers, and even in winter the prettily-decorated houses with their fancy-clipped windows looked very attractive. But Mirabel noted none of these, as she passed on, eager yet fearful to reach the house she sought. Her heart beat rapidly, her breath grew short and painful as she approached it.

Bruce Collier didn't want to be asking her questions, but she had not the least idea what he was saying. She felt as if she must die herself if she heard that Bruce Collier was dead.

The artist's house was distinguished from the rest by having a quantity of