

# The Beneficent Fairy of Nine Elms

[*The Story of a Woman's Life Work—Theosophist—Suffragist—Socialist.*]

**N**INE Elms Lane is not a nice place. When the writer walked through it he was fearful of being engulfed in mud. At one point a railway crosses the road, and every now and again the traffic is stopped by a policeman, who rings a huge hand-bell with much vigour, whilst a procession of trucks crosses at that leisurely pace which always seems to animate traffic when it is in the wrong place. One can get acquainted with the choicest slang listening to the carmen chaffing at the delay.

A little further down the lane on the left-hand side, opposite to several huge cranes which pick up great weights with the ease of the giants who used to live in our infantile story books, one comes to the gasworks. Not a district one would choose for a holiday resort. Yet men, women, and children live all around in poky little dolls'-houses whose windows blink at you in a curious sort of way, as if they had a sense of humour at being supposed to let in light and air for the benefit of the human residents.

Currie Street and Everett Street form a *cul-de-sac*, with the gasworks as sentinel of the angle formed by their meeting. One realises the tragedy and ugliness of our modern industry, and wonders if it is not possible to alter it. One person, at any rate, has faith, and has determined to do her share in the work of brightening the lives of those who live in the district.

If the gasworks stands as the sentinel of industrial darkness, just beside it stands a little shop as sentinel of light and beauty, and in a room or two over this shop lives Mrs. Despard, who fixed her headquarters here some sixteen years ago, and who is now the good fairy of the

place. This seems but appropriate, for all Irish people believe in fairies, and is not Mrs. Despard an Irishwoman?

Many years ago this good fairy lived in Esher, in a house where fairies ought to dwell, but she felt that she was selfish in living amid such surroundings when others were compelled to exist in dark places. She sought a way to help them, and, as to all real seekers comes the discovery of the way, so it came to her. Two neighbours used to journey once a week in connection with a mission to Nine Elms, and Mrs. Despard travelled each week with them, taking with her a trunk of flowers.

She soon found plenty of work to do, and before long she was adviser-in-chief to the womenfolk of the neighbourhood. Incidentally, one portion of her work at this time illustrates that if a thing is just it will be helpful to everyone, although on the surface it may appear to be only beneficial to the few. Most historians would say that the Married Women's Property Act only helped women of property. Mrs. Despard's experience proved the contrary. In this district, composed largely of the poorest class of casual labourers, homes could be found in which the Drink Fiend reigned supreme. Drunken and besotted men would prey upon their wives, sometimes deserting them, leaving them to face the world and to incur all its buffetings in order to snatch an existence for their children and themselves. Then when they had turned the corner, and out of their scanty earnings they had saved a little, the husband would come back and claim it all, and the law upheld him. Mrs. Despard acted as a trustee to a number of deserted women, so that the little money they had

could be saved from the drunkard and the deserter. The passing of the Married Women's Property Act was a real charter of liberty to the womenfolk of Nine Elms. The woman could control her savings and was free.

For a time Mrs. Despard had to leave these people in order to accompany her husband in what was in the end a vain search after health and strength. When



the time came for him to lay down the burden of this life, Mrs. Despard turned once more to Nine Elms, there to seek comfort and solace among a kindly people. The fairy home at Esher knew its occupant no more, but there is much brightness in the Surrey Hills, and a glint of it went to Nine Elms and stays there unto this day.

For Mrs. Despard is regarded by the people as one of themselves. Once, soon after she returned, a poor woman came seeking advice and assistance. Alas! time had gone by, and it was too late to render help. "But," said Mrs. Despard to the woman, "why did you not come to Mrs.

So-and-so (the lady who had undertaken to carry on the work during her absence) and tell her?" "Oh, I couldn't do such a thing!" replied the woman. "But," said Mrs. Despard, "you have come to me and told me everything." "Oh, yes," replied the woman, "but you ain't a lady." "That," said Mrs. Despard to the writer, "was the greatest compliment ever paid to me."

Help and advice, however, are not the only things to be found at 2, Currie Street. In the old shop itself is an excellent clinic for children. Here are treated all the minor ailments from which little ones suffer, and which are often the forerunners of more serious disease. Some twenty little urchins of both sexes were being treated on the occasion of our visit, and some of them certainly seemed to like it. It was a lesson to anyone who is leading a soft, comfortable existence to see how children of seven or eight bore unflinchingly and with a brave face the smarting pain when ointments and lotions were applied. The eyes are a source of grave anxiety to the excellent trained nurse who is in charge. I felt, as I watched her deft fingers at work, that at least one woman had found her vocation. Life has little more to offer us when we find a vocation instead of a profession.

The children regard the place as their own, and often a rap, rap, rap is heard at the door. When it is opened a child will be found bringing another who has received some hurt in its play. The lame duck is attended to, and goes on its way rejoicing.

A slight murmur on the other side of the street led us to leave the clinic in order to investigate. It was lunch time, and the restaurant which Mrs. Despard has opened was doing a roaring trade. The best vegetarian fare is served, and on the occasion of our visit suet (vegetable) pudding was in demand. A long queue was formed, and much grumbling took place when the supply gave out. All the sustained eloquence of the server could not persuade one sturdy urchin of about nine summers to accept plum pudding in its place.

Sometimes there is much shoving and pushing; but Mrs. Despard spoke with pride of the times when, at a word from her, the big boys of from fourteen to sixteen will stand aside to let the little ones have their share, although they are hungry and know that the supply may give out and they will have to go without.

Attached to this building is the ex-baby's home. When the new-comer arrives in a workman's home the previous child runs a serious risk of being neglected. Father is at work and mother is in bed. In Nine Elms this ex-baby is looked after. For a shilling a week it is fed and cared for until mother is able to be about again. "It is delightful," said Mrs. Despard, "to see the fathers come up on Saturdays to pay the small fee—only too willing to do so—and be relieved of all anxiety.

This work at Nine Elms would be sufficient for many, but Mrs. Despard is one of those who, doing much, find time to do more. In the Hampstead Road we can find the "Despard Arms," a real refreshment house, which has already become famous.

Yet this is not all. If you are connected with the Women's Suffrage movement, naturally you think of Mrs. Despard. Often has she braved the terrors of the law, and the gates of Holloway Prison have clanged behind her. Not that she sought notoriety: like most earnest workers, she is worried by publicity. But always at the back of her mind she sees the faces of the patient working women of

Nine Elms, and she is spurred on to every effort.

If you are interested in Theosophy you will at once think of Mrs. Despard as a writer and lecturer on its behalf.

And last, but not least, if you want to know how she is beloved, go into any place where the working class meet and ask if they know Mrs. Despard? Perhaps I can illustrate this best by an incident which happened during the great London dock strike of 1912. The men were very, very weary, the women sick at heart, and the children wanted food. One woman in East London was struggling bravely to feed and relieve them. Mrs. Despard went to see her, and for a short hour went round the streets where the dockers lived. As they passed by a crowd of labourers, ill-clothed, half starved, and despairing, one of them stepped out, and, touching the East-End woman on the arm, pointed to Mrs. Despard and said, in a tone half-fierce, half-kindly, "Mind you take care of her."

Thus they who are at the bottom think of her; thus they love her—this dear, gentle dame, on whom the years as they pass sit lightly. Time seems not to exist for her. Meet her where you will, the step is firm, the voice resonant, the eye flashing with fire betraying the indomitable spirit hidden in the frail body. Love and service are the dominant passions of her life. When the history of this time is written no one will occupy a higher place than the beneficent fairy of Nine Elms—Charlotte Despard.

JOHN SCURR