

The Lady of the London Docks.

As in the case of Mr. Fisher I knew about Mrs. Welin long before I met her. I had even been carefully instructed how to pronounce her name which should sound like Feleene, not like Wellin.

I first heard the name when Helen went as a student to Madame Bergman-Osterberg's Physical Training College at Dartford Heath. The head gymnastic teacher was a Miss Gunhild Welin. In spite of the fact that she was a teacher and my sister only a pupil she and Helen became great friends and she sometimes came to stay at Harston House during her holidays.

Gunhild was beginning to feel the strain and responsibility of her work and to want, as a change, to get some practise in domestic matters. She and I took a tiny furnished cottage near a wood in Norfolk in order that she should do the house work and cook while I went out and painted. I usually found when I came back at the end of the morning that my friend was in black despair either because her little joint was not ~~done~~ cooked to a turn or that her pastry was not light enough. She was happier after supper and ready for a talk. It was then that she told me about her brother's wife. As I was very much interested in her account of such a strong and unusual



character we often talked of her. This is what Gunhil told me of Mrs. Welin.

To begin at the beginning of the story I must go back to the days when it was the fashion for girls to wear their hair in chignons with two long curls coming down from both sides of the chignon. At that time there was living in Stockholm a young Swedish girl of about eighteen years old whose name was Agnes. She was an orphan. Her brother, much older than herself, was her guardian but she did not live with him. She was brought up in a family that he thought was suitable for her. The members of this family were much interested in missionary work and Agnes became enthusiastic over it and was fired by the thought that she was called to the mission field of India. She went through a course of training but, according to Swedish rules, the training for missionary work must include a year's study of the English language in England itself. She asked her brother for the necessary money for her stay in England but he refused it, indeed he was horrified at her idea of going to India as a missionary or of her being one anywhere. He told her he was preparing for her to come out into Society as a young lady of some means. The plan did not appeal to Agnes so in spite of her brother's wishes and of his refusing to help her should she still persist in her idea she could not give it up. She persuaded herself that if she were once in England her brother would give way. She had friends who lived in London. She arranged with them to receive her and



when she had saved up enough money she made the journey and after she had arrived in England told her brother what she had done. He was very angry and did not send her any money and let her know that she must either return or fend for herself.

She was determined that by hook or by crook she would stay her year. She was very clever with her needle. She hired a room and with the help of her London friends got together a little circle of clients and made simple dresses and did any sewing work that came her way. Every Sunday afternoon and evening she spent with her friends in their home.

One Sunday evening she called on her friends and a lady, hearing that Agnes was Swedish, at once wished to speak to her. She told Agnes that she helped to run a Mission room for seamen and dock workers in East London and that that afternoon four Swedish sailors had come in. She had not known what to do with them not understanding their language. On the chance that they, or others, might come again she begged Agnes to visit the Mission next Sunday. Agnes told her that that kind of work was not what she wished to do as her aim was to help the native women of India, but that she would certainly visit the Mission the next Sunday. She was given the address.

The following Sunday she started out to make her first visit to the East End of London. She asked no one to come with her. She had put on a quiet coloured dress but as she had fair hair and had two long shining curls hanging down her back from her chignon she was a noticeable figure. It was not easy



in those days to find a way about the lanes and byeways of the East of London especially near the Docks and Agnes soon lost her way. She found herself at one end of a very narrow slummy street. Women were sitting on the doorsteps, boys and girls playing in the streetway and men lounging about against the walls. Agnes had to find her way to Lemon Street so she asked a rough looking girl where she ought to go. "I'll show you" said the girl. "Lemon Street is this way. Here, Bill, come and help the lady to get there quick!" She caught hold of one of the ~~knux~~ long curls. She had a stick in her hand. Bill joined her and caught hold of the other curl and the two, handling the stick between them and pulling at the long curls like reins, drove Agnes through the narrow street with the men, women and children jeering at her and shouting with laughter at the prank. When the bigger street was reached their victim was allowed to go free. At last she found the Mission room, entered and sank on a chair near the door, hot, exhausted and dishevelled. There were men in the room to whom her new friend was speaking but the lady ended what she was saying and came at once to her. "I am so glad you are here", she said. "Some Swedish sailors have just come in. I have taken them upstairs. I told them that you would soon be with them". The poor girl was by now thoroughly unnerved. "I can't go to them! I just can't! I should'nt know what to say! I dont want to do any-thing to-day"! "Nonsense, my dear" said the lady. "You



will be all right". "I am too tired! London is a dreadful place! I can't see them!" But she spoke incoherently. The lady was firm and cheery and would take no notice of her terrors. She managed to get the frightened girl upstairs, Agnes not being strong enough to resist her. In any case the lady talked so much that any words spoken by the girl were drowned. The room they entered was bare of furniture except for chairs. It had a sash window. Sitting round the stove were about six Swedish seamen. Agnes turned giddy at the sight of them, perhaps she was all the more nervous and shy because they were her countrymen. She tried to retreat but she declared afterwards that she heard the lady lock the door behind her. At all events she believed the door was locked for she went straight to the window to see if she could jump out but it was far too high up. She would have made an effort to open the door if it had not been for the terrifying thought that to go out she must pass through the room where that extremely dominant English woman was talking to the men. She felt sure she would only be sent upstairs again. She realized that there was no help for it. She must face her compatriots. She felt more than ever tongue-tied but the thought darted into her head - "I can't talk, but I can sing". She began to sing, at first alone, then in company, old, well known Swedish hymns. One after the other they sang than with the talk between the hymns growing easier until at last all their tongues were loosened. Time



passed and when the English lady appeared at the door she found them in full conversation and beamed with pleasure at the sight. She said the time had come for closing but begged Agnes to come again next Sunday, a request the girl refused but the refusal was not taken. Agnes hurried back - gled as a bird escaping from a cage - sayin to herself now and then in a kind of refrain - "I'll never go to that place again !Never! Never! Never !"

This refrain she repeated to herself at intervals during the five days of the following week. Her mind was curiously agitated. She felt angry and she hardly knew at what she was angry. She could not say her prayers properly and did not sleep well. On the Saturday she was still more perturbed but in the evening she said to herself "Well ! I'll go once more and that will finish it. I will tell the lady firmly that I will never go again !" She said her prayers and slept that night and on Sunday afternoon she started out for better prepared for finding her way then before. She avoided the slummy street and reached the Mission room to find that some Swedish sailors were waiting for her. Hymns were sung and conversation flowed easily. She heard interesting life stories. She heard of the difficulties sailors had in London. There was no place for them to go that was respectable. They were badly treated in what lodgings they could go to. Hearing of their troubles her anger and sympathy rose hot within her and though



help seemed out of her power to give yet she promised she would come again to the Mission to meet any Scandinavian sailors who might turn up.

She went again and yet again but the Mission was for English seamen and dock workers. She and her sailors were there on sufferance. Her room was wanted. She knew too that if she were to go to India at the end of her year she must not get too much involved in London work. However, owing to some slight illness, she saw a doctor who told her that her constitution was not suited to the climate of India and advised her to give up the idea. She wrote to her brother telling him that she would not go. He sent her her money and things were now easier for her.

Agnes felt that Fate, not she, had arranged her work in life. Her missionary work was to be among her own people - among seamen not Indian women. What was up to her to do was to gather help for getting a home for Swedish sailors in London. She wrote and talked, she interested friends both in London and Sweden in her plans. She hunted hard for a house not far from the Docks for that must be found as quickly as possible. The need seemed to grow as her desire to help grew. Soon the sailors would be crowded out of even their present meeting place and indeed the room itself was now far too small.

Near the Mission house was a little shop belonging to a pork butcher who seemed to have kept a sort of restaurant



and general store. I suppose Agnes got to know the shopkeeper from going to his small restaurant but at any rate they became friends. He knew her work and what she was trying to do. It was he who told her that there was a house which would shortly be for sale. It was a suitable house for what she wanted in size and position. It was owned by a Jew. The old Jew was not an easy man to deal with, the shopman told Agnes, but she determined to go to him and find out the price. An interview was arranged and he seemed at first kindly disposed but when he heard the reason why she wanted it he refused to sell it for such a purpose. It would be a Christian Organisation and besides that he had friends among the lodging house keepers who would loose clients. This was a great disappointment not only to her but to her shopkeeper friend who was so much interested that he, among others, had promised to help her in the purchase.

Very shortly after the Jew's refusal to sell the house to her he fell ill and died before he had been able to sell it. The executors were willing to let Agnes have it if she could pay the price. All help obtainable was gathered in by the enthusiastic girl and before long she found herself at the head of a Sailors Home needing all her time, strength, talent and sympathy to run. Quarrels among the men were frequent. Drunkenness was a terrible difficulty. The short strong knives every Swedish man carries she found necessary to confiscate for the time of stay. Agnes had often to separate angry men. She once had to cut down the body of a drunken man who had



hung himself. In spite of all the problems and troubles that assailed her she made the place a success and it became more and more known as a decent home for the men and one where they would find a friend.

A Swedish officer, an Engineer, who had long been interested in the plan to help the sailors, would often visit her Home. He became more and more attracted to Agnes. His name was Welin and he had already given his name to a gun with an arrangement for more accurate sighting. It is, or was, used in our navy and was called the "Welin" gun by the seamen. Mr. Welin and Agnes married. They lived in the Home and Agnes continued ~~the~~ to work there. Before long the house bought from the Jew's executors had become too small. However by now the people of Scandinavia - as well as the Swedes, Norwegians and Danes living in England - knew what was being done for their sailors. Money was subscribed and a large airy building was raised close to the Docks. The King of Sweden came over to open it.

There Gunhild Welin's story of her sister in law ended.

A very long while after the telling of it, and a long while from now when I ~~am~~ writing about it, I was asked to stay a night in the Scandinavian Home at the Docks with Helen who knew the two Welins. I was delighted at the invitation. As we passed through the iron gates that led to the grounds a drunken sailor reeled past us and staggered up the steps into



the Home. I had not thought that the sight of a drunken man could ever give me anything but pain but I confess to feeling a sort of pleasure in seeing him. It seemed so right. After all I knew that he would be attended to, his knife taken away, that he would be put to bed and would recover in the morning. He would receive in the morning also a very severe scolding from Mrs. Welin.

I was soon introduced to her. She was in the big hall talking to a grup of men. I tried to fancy her as the young girl with the fair curls hanging down her back and in the flowing dress of about 1875, but I failed. I saw nothing that reminded me of her. I saw only an elderly lady in a work-day brown dress but there was a humourous twinkle in that elderly lady's face. The lines round her eyes and mouth were not those of weariness or sorrow but of cheerfulness. She looked so balanced and strong that I could hardly imagine that she could have allowed herself to feel frightened, even when she was being driven through a slum by her curls. I was conducted away from the hall by Helen who knew where our rooms would be. As we left it I heard a hearty, fresh laugh from Mrs. Welin at something that the sailors had said to her. I felt sure that if I saw much of that lady I should love her. All I ever saw of her was on that evening and, for a short time, the next morning but those short meetings with her I am glad to remember.



There is a portrait of Agnes Welin in the Swedish Rectory in London. It is usually on view to those who wish to see it but it has now been put in a place of safety until the war is over. The Sailors Home is at present a Salvation Army Hostel. Mrs. Welin's work is carried on by the Swedish Seamen's Church.