

Zara McFerran,  
Villiers School,  
North Circular Road,  
Limerick.  
Artistic Response: Literature

## The Work of Mary Elmes

I was a young nurse when I met Mary Elmes. I had just completed my studies in nursing back at home in Dublin, and I had decided to gain some hands-on experience with Sir George Young's University Ambulance Unit. It was a blustery spring evening when I arrived at the children's home in Perpignan, France. I was dropped off at the entrance. I remember gazing up in awe at this large country house. It had a cobbled driveway which led to a quaint courtyard. The gardens and grounds were immaculately kept. Not a single blade of grass or leaf on a tree was out of place. The trees were another thing that caught my attention. Along the far wall was a long line of cherry blossom trees. They stood tall and proud, even in the pouring rain. A cold breeze crept under my scarf and touched my neck. Quickly, I gathered my bags and made my way up the driveway to the front door. I could tell that it was freshly painted. It was a bright, welcoming duck egg blue. It had a large brass knocker which made a heavy thud as I knocked on the door. Almost immediately, it was swung open by a young woman who immediately ushered me inside.

"You must be Nurse Anne? Welcome dear, my name is Mary." She took me along a wide corridor to the kitchen. The kitchen had a homely feel to it; There were freshly baked scones upon the table and a fire was crackling away. "Now sit yourself down at the table and help yourself to some scones that I made earlier today. You poor thing must be famished after travelling all day. Let me put on the kettle." Mary started busying herself at the stove fixing up some tea. In no time at all, I was presented with

a large mug of steaming hot tea. As I took a sip, I felt a feeling of warmth rushing through my body. “Now Anne, I must tell you how things operate here in the children’s home,” Mary began. As she told me the story of the usual day-to-day operations, I couldn’t help but wonder how many children lived here. As I asked Mary, I could see her shift uncomfortably in her chair. I was puzzled by this reaction as it was a normal question to ask. Instead, Mary asked me a question: “Have you heard the rumours about Hitler and his death camps for Jewish people?” Upon these words, a shiver ran down my spine. It felt like the temperature in the room had suddenly dropped a few degrees. I knew all about the rumours. Hitler himself had ordered the Nazis to round up all the Jews in Europe and kill them in the gas chambers. It disgusted me how people seemed to turn a blind eye to this and let Hitler get away with it all. I responded with a simple “yes” to Mary’s question. She looked at me intently for a few seconds and she seemed to reach a decision. “About your question. You see, I have a secret to admit. There is supposed to be a maximum of 25 children staying here at any one time. However, depending on how many children I rescue it can reach 40 or 50.” The way she worded her answer caught my attention. “Rescued?” I thought to myself. A peculiar way to refer to caring for the children. Suddenly something clicked in my head. She had asked me if I knew about the fate of the poor Jewish people – children included. Just then I realised what she meant by the word “rescue”. “Mary, have you been saving the local Jewish children from being shipped to Auschwitz?”, I inquired. She responded with a simple nod. I was utterly speechless for a few seconds. I looked at this woman in awe and I could not help but admire her. She was a woman of honour amongst the rest of us weak. She was risking her life for these children. If caught she could be sent to prison or worse – killed by the Nazis for defying their orders.

Mary then stood up and put on her raincoat. "Well, are you coming or not?", she asked. Slightly bewildered, I grabbed my jacket from behind the chair and followed Mary out into the night. Overhead was a full moon shining brightly. The rain had cleared up to create an endless sky full of twinkling stars. Mary told me the plan for the night. She had planned to rescue the children before the train left the station. By the time Mary had filled me in on the plan, we had arrived at the station. Mary instructed me to stay in the car as a lookout and if I saw any Nazi officers to flash the lights to alert her. My heart was in my mouth. To the far end of the station, I could vaguely make out the officers herding children onto the train, like sending lambs to the slaughter. Watching the scene, I thought, "the poor thing stands there vainly, vainly he strains his voice. Perhaps he'll die. Then can you say how beautiful is the world today?" I felt a pang in my heart as I saw how many poor innocent children were boarding the train – if you could even call it that. It was more alike to a cattle carriage than one fit for people. I could hardly hear my own breathing over the sound of my thumping heart. I scanned the area for any signs of trouble but luckily things were quiet.

It was many hours before Mary returned. By now it was the dead of the night. The only light was from the full moon and the headlights of the car. A soft dew was beginning to form on the grass. "Anne, come here and help me," she called. I quickly jumped out of the car and opened the boot. I saw Mary with nine children huddled around her. Hastily, we both put the children into the boot of the car. My adrenaline was through the roof. We both rushed to our seats and started the car. The tyres screeched on the gravel as we sped away from the station. When we returned to the house, the pair of us busied ourselves, helping each child out of the car and into the kitchen. The children in front of me could not have been

older than eight. Every child was shaking like a leaf. Their eyes were wide open, darting around the room as they took in their new surroundings, unsure if they were safe or not. When all the children were sitting round the kitchen table, Mary began to prepare a meal for them. She cut a loaf of fresh bread and placed it down in the middle of the table along with some butter and jam. "Stretch or starve!", she said with a warm smile. Each child was hesitant at first, but once they understood that Mary was indeed helping them, they soon devoured the bread. While the children were eating, Mary had found each child a pair of warm pajamas and a bed to sleep in.

I knelt beside one of the children who looked the most frightened. I smiled at her and asked her who she was. She responded in a tiny quavering voice: "My name is Talia." I looked at her curly chestnut hair, and gently reached out to tuck it behind her ear. "Now Talia, it's time for us to go upstairs and put on your pajamas. Then I will tuck you in nice and snugly. Does that sound nice?" Talia looked at me with deep brown eyes and nodded her head earnestly. I stood up and took her tiny hand in mine. I brought her upstairs to a cosy bedroom with four other beds. "This is where you and the other girls are going to stay", I said warmly. Talia gazed around the room in awe. She turned to me and wrapped her arms tightly around me. I was touched by how grateful she was. I turned away for a moment as tears sprung to my eyes. At that moment I vowed to help her and the other children in any way that I could.

When each child had been put to bed and were sound asleep, I was amazed as I complimented Mary upon how she managed to save them. Mary being her usual modest self, responded with a nonchalant shrug and said, "Anyone could have done it." I sat there in awe as Mary told me her plans to rescue many more children. She

reached into her bag and pulled out a large black notebook. She said: "This book is where I am going to record the children's information so after the war, I can help return them to their families." Mary then took off her glasses and sighed, "You know Anne, there are so many other children that need our help and it's up to us to save them." I nodded my head in total agreement.

Over the next few days Mary busied herself with finding safe houses for these children. She even began making plans to help them flee the country altogether. She stayed up until all hours of the night, ensuring each child was guaranteed a safe place to stay. She sat for hours each evening in front of the dying fire, ensuring that each child had somewhere to go. Over the next week, Mary began to smuggle the children to their safe homes and to train stations to help them flee. When Mary had delivered the last child to their safe house, she immediately began planning how to save the next lot.

I often asked Mary when was she going to share her story? She was in disbelief at this question. She said that her story was nothing remarkable and that anyone in her position would have done the same. I often shook my head and sighed at this. Mary was too humble for her own good. She went above and beyond for these children, not caring about the repercussions. She stood up for these children when no one else would. She gave these children an opportunity to experience life to its fullest. "The whole, wide world is ruled with a certain justice, so that helps perhaps to sweeten the poor man's pain and woe." These are words from "It All Depends on How You Look at it" by Miroslav Kosek. The justice in the world of the children came in the form of Mary's determination to see these children escape the clutches of the Nazis. She was truly Righteous Among the Nations.