

AN ANCIENT LIGHT.

IT is very instructive and interesting to read how the old reformers climbed up steep and rugged precipices to reach the level plain along which we walk so easily. Chief among patient reformers in the world of medicine and surgery is Dr. Smellie, whose "Midwifery" is perhaps one of the most interesting publications of the new Sydenham Society. What a light his work throws on the ignorance of the times in which he lived, and the forces against which he had to fight almost single-handed. Patient, good-humoured, common-sensed and practical, he had to make his way through traditional mis-conceptions and prejudices that we can hardly realise; and were it not that his battles were fought in the presence of suffering, and with death very near at hand—too often, waiting for the sufferer—we could often laugh in genial sympathy over his curious experiences. Yet, though times have changed in many—in most—ways for the better since Smellie "took notes" of his cases between the years 1722 and 1732, there are some experiences of his that are common enough in the lives of general practitioners in England to-day. To be sent for at night, in mid-winter, to a poor woman who had been delivered safely enough, but was dying of cold in a miserable cottage, bare of all the necessaries of life; to give from his own purse money for the husband to go to an alehouse—a mile off—and bring back a warm covering and wine; to catch a very severe cold on such an errand, at such a time, in a hovel that had neither fire nor fuel in it—these are some of the experiences of the practitioner of to-day. Also the fact that the miserable husband drank up the money, got drunk and left the poor woman to die in cold, darkness, and loneliness, is not a very uncommon one, alas, amongst us to-day. But it is to be hoped that the case of the patient who "was kept too warm" is far more rare. On one occasion Dr. Smellie was sent for on an "uncommonly hot" day in London to a patient in labour, and he found doors and windows tight shut, a hot suffocating fire, and the patient, as might be expected, very feverish. The ignorant nurse had piled blankets on the bed as though it were winter, and had put "plenty of wine and spicery in the caudle." "Flowers in pots" were put in the room next day, and kept carefully sprinkled with water to cool and sweeten the air. It is quite a relief to find him so often ordering his patients barley-water, instead of the strong caudle then in vogue. What disdainful looks must have been hurled at his retreating form by some ancient Gamp with whose administration of "strong waters," and brandy and wine he had interfered, can be better imagined than described; but all experience is on the side of Smellie, and though Lady Bountiful is no longer called upon, or should not be, to send wine and spirits, and "cunninglye wrought caudell" to the lying-in room of her poorer sister, there are plenty of other ways in which her tender sympathy can be testified. But oh, how harrassing and fearful to have

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to be kept awake "by the reading of old romances," just at that time of all others in life when sleep was most needed as Nature's anodyne after pain! Tradition had asserted that it was dangerous for the worn-out mother to go to sleep after delivery, and so we can almost hear the illiterate reader stumbling along the misty lines of some badly-printed old novel, something after the fashion of Pomona in "Rudder Grange," and with more than a hundred years between to deaden the sound; we can hear the reader stop and exclaim: "Dearie me, sakes alive, if she ain't dropt off agen!" and a slow feeble whisper from a pillow, "No, no! I wasn't asleep, I only closed my eyes because of the light." But surely "a loose, white night-gown" was not "a very commodious" dress for the accoucheur to wear while performing his arduous duties? Yet that is what the good doctor says about it. There is a terrible picture given in the third volume of the extent to which scientific enthusiasm can lead people to ignore the claims of decency and humanity. It is where Dr. Smellie describes his being called to attend a case in one of the narrow lanes in St. Giles, where the houses must have been very small, and his pupils had crowded into the poor chamber to the number of twenty-eight! Alarmed by seeing such a number go in, a mob had assembled, and the parish officers were sent for. In consequence the case was hurried, and the infant's thigh broken. Smellie tells us the child died from the carelessness of its drunken mother. Here is a brief description of the attire of a man-midwife whom he encountered:—"An old greasy matted wrapper, or night gown, a buff broad belt of the same complexion round his middle, napkins wrapped round his arms, and a woman's apron to keep him from being bedaubed. On his head was a large periwig." Altogether, there is much that entitles Dr. Smellie to be called a reformer; we may well forget the mistakes that are back in the past for the sake of the benefits he has conferred on the present, and also be grateful to Dr. McClintock and the New Sydenham Society for having so well preserved his work.

BRAIN-STARVED CHILDREN.

A LECTURE that should be an exceedingly useful and interesting one, is going to be given on March 17th, at 4.30 p.m., by the kind permission of the Marchioness of Ripon, at 9, Chelsea Embankment. It is on *Brain-Starved Children*; the lecturer is Mrs. Ormiston Chant; and invitations can be obtained from the Lady Isabel Margesson, Hon. Sec. to the Parents' Educational Union, under the auspices of which it will be delivered.

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