

The Midwife.

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The Character of the Midwife.

Those who are observing the working of the Midwives' Act are watching with some anxiety to see the type of woman who is encouraged to take up midwifery, for on this depends to a large extent whether the Act is to prove a blessing to the mothers of the labouring classes and their offspring, or whether evils which flourished in the practice of ignorant midwives in the past are to be perpetuated.

There are some persons—those who wish to do their philanthropy on the cheap—who demand that the midwife shall also be the household drudge, living in the house of the patient, and sleeping with her, clean or dirty, cooking, scrubbing, cleaning, looking after the children, besides acting as midwife and maternity nurse, for the miserable sum of twelve or thirteen shillings a week, less than any ordinary charwoman would accept. Picture the woman who is willing to enter into an engagement to work under such conditions, and consider further whether it is safe for a woman in close attendance on a lying-in case to be turning out the dirty corners of a cottage at one moment, and immediately afterwards to be rendering most intimate services to her patient, with hands which are much more easily infected than disinfected.

Again, there is the class of woman, worthy if somewhat dull, who comes up from the country for a few months to a London lying-in hospital to learn enough to enable her to pass the examination of the Central Midwives' Board. Strongly imbued with local prejudices, the growth of a life-time, she retains them throughout her short training, and though on returning to her own locality she may do useful practical work, she is not calculated to raise the standards of those amongst whom she works to a higher level, for she is of them, and their standards are her standards.

And there is yet another type of midwife, skilled in her work, in touch with progressive movements, well educated, and able to teach to others what she herself knows, who, by practice as well as precept, sets before her patients high standards of hygiene, of sanita-

tion, of personal life. Though these may at first be looked upon as "fads," when repeatedly inculcated, line upon line, precept upon precept, the assured result is the formation of methodical and thrifty habits, the upbringing of healthy children, and the living of clean lives by those who had previously thought little about any of these things.

Of all those who enter the homes of the poor to render them service of various kinds, none is so potent for good or ill as the midwife. She, above all others, needs to be a woman of high moral character.

To take one instance, that of drinking. There are midwives who never leave a house after a confinement without instructing the patient and her friends that she is not to have stimulants, and there are others, who expect a glass of gin and other intoxicants as part of their fee, who administer them to their patients in order to "keep their spirits up," and who assure them that stout is a necessity to a nursing mother, advice which, taken in all good faith by young women with their first babies, is often the beginning of the formation of drinking habits, and the consequent ruin of the family happiness. Perhaps no statement more calculated to effect a cruel injury to the lying-in woman was ever made than that of Mr. Sydney Holland to the Select Committee on Registration of Nurses: "If she (the midwife) is so minded when she has finished she may go and drink herself stupid if she likes. In her case as long as she can do her job accurately and well it makes no difference."

It makes no difference. What happens when the midwife who is "drinking herself stupid" receives an urgent summons to another case? It is well then if the patient escapes with her life. Does it make no difference that innocent children contract the alcohol habit as they draw poisoned milk from their mother's breasts, owing to the advice given by a drinking midwife; and does it really make no difference that young mothers are taught to drink by the midwife who attends them? The midwife who gets drunk between her cases, drinks at her cases, although she may be sober enough to "do her job" accurately, and many a home is permanently ruined as the result of her evil influence.

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