

"Trustworthy, Sober, and of Good Moral Character."

A MOTHER'S MEETING ADDRESS ON THE MIDWIVES ACT.

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You will perhaps think that an Act of Parliament sounds like a very dull subject for us to talk about, but in this case it is a subject of great interest to all women, and especially to all mothers, for I want us to think about the Midwives' Act, which was passed by Parliament in 1902. Very likely you heard some talk about it three or four years ago, and you may know women who got their certificates then and had "Registered Midwife" on their door-plates.

Of course, we know that it is a very old custom to have midwives, indeed they are mentioned in the Old Testament. But, perhaps, it is not so well known that here in England in old times, and until about a hundred years ago, the midwives had to get permission from the Bishop of the diocese before they began to practice. Every midwife had to be presented to the Bishop by two people of good character, who spoke for her, and if she did anything that was wrong in her work, she could be ordered not to go on with it.

But midwives are very much like the old saying, and "when they are good they are very, very good, but when they are bad they are horrid," and by degrees women took up the work who were not fit to do it, and who were careless, dirty, and, perhaps, drunken. In consequence, many women lost their lives for want of proper attention, or were, perhaps, injured for life. You all know how dreadful it is if a woman gets puerperal fever, or "child-bed fever" after her confinement, and it has been found that careless, dirty midwives get many more cases of this fever among their patients than those midwives who are clean and particular. Also an ignorant midwife may neglect the babies so that they are injured for life, for many children have gone blind because their eyes were not properly attended to when they were born. All this was felt to be such a serious matter, both for the mothers and babies all over the country, that in 1902 an Act of Parliament was passed, making certain rules for the women who wished to carry on the work of midwives. Now, what is this Act of Parliament meant to do? We hope that the result of it will be that in a few years all the midwives will be good, competent, *trained* women, who know their work, and (what is perhaps almost more important) who also know when

a case is more than they can manage, and when a doctor should be sent for. Those are the sort of midwives we hope to have in the future, but, of course, we cannot expect to get them all like that immediately, and if all the women who were working as midwives had been stopped unless they had received hospital training, there would not have been enough left to carry on the work. So the Act ordered that women who had been practising for at least a year before 1902 (when the Act was passed), and who could show two testimonials that they were "trustworthy, sober, and of good moral character," should receive their certificates and be put on the Register of Midwives, *not* as "trained," but as what are called "bona-fide" midwives. Any woman who applied like that, and got her certificate from London, has the right to call herself "certified midwife," and to put that on her doorplate, and she can go on with the work for the rest of her life if she does it well and obeys the rules that have been laid down for all midwives. A certain time (until April, 1905) was allowed during which these midwives could apply to be put on the Register, but after that time was up nobody could get a certificate or be registered unless she passed an examination.

Now sometimes we hear it said, "Mrs. So-and-So is not on the Register, but she is still going out." What about that? If any such woman calls herself a midwife, or tries to make out that she is on the Register, she can be prosecuted and fined £5; and the Act says that after April, 1910, any woman not certified under it who makes a practice of going out, and is paid for her work, can be prosecuted and fined £10. We must remember, however, that this does not, and never will, mean that a neighbour will get into trouble if she goes to help in an emergency. So we see that in a few years nobody who is not on the Register will be able to work as a midwife. Until 1910, if anybody likes to have a woman who is not on the Register, and has no certificate, she has a right to go to the case, if she does not pretend that she has any special knowledge or that she is a certified midwife.

You see now what this Midwives' Act means, and perhaps you are wondering how it concerns you. Surely it concerns you in this way—that when you know what being registered or not registered means, you should be careful what sort of woman you engage to attend you in your confinements. You have just heard how those who had been doing the work could be registered if they were known to be "trustworthy, sober, and of good moral character." That is not a very great deal to ask, and it was surely worth the trouble and

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