

The Midwife.

Midwifery in a Poor District. 5

Few people probably have a better opportunity of seeing how the poor really live than the district midwife of a slummy neighbourhood. She goes in and out among them as one of themselves; they treat her as a friend and confidant, letting her know all their troubles, difficulties, and contrivances, and telling her very few fibs. They, the women at least, are in many ways mere children, and the cheerfulness and passivity with which they accept anything that comes along, from the new baby to the husband's Saturday night outbreak or the school board inspector's threats, are at first depressing, and one longs to rouse them to a knowledge and resentment of their wrongs and to encourage them to fight for themselves. But one soon sees that this same stolidity is really the saving of them, the only thing that makes their lives just endurable, and one becomes loath to disturb it unnecessarily.

To the nurse who, coming from a good, up-to-date hospital, is suddenly thrown on her own resources in a very poor district, the work at first presents many difficulties, and she must indeed be self-reliant and adaptable if she is to carry it out successfully.

Suppose her called to a case in the night. A message is brought, "Will nurse come at once, my missis is very bad indeed." She hurries off with "Dad," who may be really anxious, and tears along with the bag at a pace with which she cannot possibly keep up, or who on the other hand may have been having a drop of cheer on the way up, and be in just that condition when he is not quite sure which really is the nearest way home. However, they arrive sooner or later, she secures the bag and stumbles up the narrow crooked stairs leading to the room in which the family live. It is lighted by a cheap smelly lamp, often quite a tiny one giving about as much light as a night light. Sometimes there is gas, but that is rather a doubtful luxury, as it is apt to go out for want of a penny in the slot just when it is most needed. Candles are apparently quite unknown in the slums, but people generally manage to have a fire at these times, however poor they may be.

There are probably two beds, which, with the ricketty table, nearly fill up the room. Three or four children are fast asleep on one bed in their day clothes, with a piece of old

quilt thrown over them. The nurse glances at them, and devoutly prays they may remain asleep until her work is finished. The other bed is prepared for the patient. If she is a careful woman there will be a few clean bits of rag, a nice lot of the fresh newspapers she has been told to save, and very likely a new patchwork quilt. More often there is practically nothing, or, at the most, a dark grey-looking article which the midwife is proudly informed is the "clean sheet," and perhaps a rag of blanket. For the baby there is usually one set of clothes, often two or more gowns, bought at the pawnshop for 2d. each, and sold again for 1d. when finished with, a much-washed flannelette "back flannel," so thin that it is transparent, and a little cotton shirt, the only thing made by the mother, for women of this class are not clever with their needle. Then, whatever else may be missing, there is almost sure to be a brand new head shawl, generally pink flannelette worked round with bright blue worsted. An old woman in the neighbourhood makes them for 2d. each, and the half-yard of flannelette costs 1½d.

The nurse ruthlessly clears the table of all unnecessary articles and asks firmly but with inward qualms for two basins and hot and cold water. If she is wise she has brought at least a kidney tray with her, and resigns herself cheerfully to using that and a tin bowl that has a hole on one side, and so must be kept tilted up. Water is sometimes a difficulty in the night, the tap being kept locked by the landlady. Then there is often only a small saucepan or a pint beer can to boil it in, so that the poor nurse who has been used to an unlimited supply of hot and sterilised water, has much to learn in the way of economising. She must try to have only to "scrub up" once, and contrive to use her left hand deftly for many things, for not a drop of the precious water must be wasted. The "mother in waiting," however, is a great help, she is often a capable person with much experience of these affairs, and if carefully managed will be useful and level headed in any emergency. She is almost always a neighbour and unpaid. In fact, the poorer people are, the more freely do they help each other.

Well, we will imagine the patient safely delivered, baby washed, adorned in the gay head flannel, and cosily tucked up with mother under granny's shawl, her own skirt, Dad's coat

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