

## The Midwife.

### THE "LITTLEST MOTHER."\*

A serious, intense little girl of six, living in a progressive Pennsylvania city, was known among relatives, family friends and neighbours as the "littlest mother." Babies adored her and stretched out chubby fists at sight of her. No mother seemed afraid to let her cuddle the latest arrival in her small, but protecting arms. Her Aunt Jane prophesied that she would develop into a successful trained nurse. Her father said she was a born mother, and built her a marvellous play-house in the backyard. Here she raised her own family of bisque, wax and sawdust children, tending them with an earnestness that turned her blue eyes a deep violet when "sickness" invaded the circle.

Even when school brought absorbing interests, the babies on the block and in the doll house were not neglected. When she grew too tall to sit with comfort in the play-home, she moved dolls, beds, baths and wardrobes to a warm corner in the attic, where she continued to watch over them, crooning and smiling in her dream-motherhood.

Here, in her twelfth year, she found—

#### THE BOOK.

It was bound in faded green and gold, shabby and loose-leaved, which is perhaps why it opened so easily to her hand at the chapter on the care of the new-born baby. She followed the pages eagerly. Maybe she had not done the right thing by her sawdust family! Perhaps she might even pass on information to her next-door neighbour, whose new baby was distressingly puny and fretful.

But in places the chapter was not clear. Puzzling references to events preceding the baby's birth confused her, so she decided to start at the very beginning. When she laid aside the book, her quaint little face had undergone a change. The blue eyes were now a very deep violet, and the tender young mouth was white and pinched.

Couched though those pages were in strange, grown-up phrases, this much had been horribly clear to her—doctors did not carry babies around in their pockets, like peppermint drops, to be left at any home where a baby was really and truly wanted!

And being devoid of deceit or fear, the intense "littlest mother" carried the faded book to her own mother, and asked for an explanation. What followed is summed up in a later conversation between her mother and her Aunt Jane.

"Of all luck, to have her stumble on that doctor's book! I haven't seen it since before John was born—and I supposed it was burned."

"What did you tell her?" inquired Aunt Jane.

"What could I say except that such books were not for little girls to read? Later she should know all about it."

"Quite right," approved Aunt Jane. "She's altogether too young to know about such things."

The most natural—and easy—way to dismiss an annoying family problem! How many mothers of your acquaintance have dismissed it in the same fashion?

So it happened that no one noticed the change which gradually came over the girl as she neared her teens. The habit of "mothering" had somehow died within her. The doll nursery in the attic was deserted. The babies on the block waved chubby fists in vain. For a beautiful illusion had been shattered, a child-dream had died in her heart. New babies were no longer the dearest, sweetest of little creatures, to be hugged to one's heart, but something to be mentioned in whispers, a mystery that was neither "proper" nor clean.

During the busy years which followed for the growing girl her mother never thought again of the old green book nor her promise to explain its true meaning. There were examinations to be taken, frocks to be made, summer resorts to be visited, finally a coming-out party, and then, to the amazement of her family, a sudden determination to go into business. The girl never came back to her mother with the question which grew out of her quiet hour in the old attic. And, as is the way with mothers, no thought was given to the matter. Perhaps this mother believed that wisdom in such subjects fell like manna from on high. How could she know that this strong, athletic girl, who could dance, skate and golf admirably, who could direct the work of an office staff or take charge of an emergency in the home, directly, competently, had said in her heart that she never wanted to be a mother—she who had been the "littlest, dearest of mothers" a few years before!

She was well on in her thirties before a good man came into her life, melted the ice around her heart and revived the old, passionate maternal instinct. And so, still uneducated for the greatest work of her life, she was married. Without any real preparation she assumed the responsibilities of parenthood. She did not even know why she was a fine, healthy being but accepted the fact as desirable.

After marriage she went right on dancing, skating, golfing and motoring. Worse still, when housecleaning time rolled round, she thrust aside impatiently the services of an awkward, heavy-handed servant, and in her own rapid, energetic, competent way, hung curtains, cleaned high shelves and moved furniture.

Eventually she woke up in a hospital, not only to the meaning of life itself, but to the terrible realisation that motherhood was for ever denied her.

\* From the *Canadian Nurse*.

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