

The Midwife.

A CHRISTMAS GIFT.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

A Mother,

A Baby,

A Midwife.

Mrs. Barnaby is a young woman of 25 years of age. She has been married four years. She has a very good "husband," she says; he is earning good wages in a munition factory, where he has been working since the war broke out. He gives her all his money, except a little for "baccy" and a "drop of beer sometimes." She does not enquire how much he retains; why should she? seeing that she has enough for the needs of both of them, and something over to buy "really nice things"—and this thought gives her a thrill of pleasure—"for my baby boy." She wants a boy so she anticipates his sex, for—she says with a sigh—"so many have been killed in this cruel war." Her pleasure in the anticipation of the event is mixed with just a little of the alloy of anxiety; she is a brave woman, however, and tries not to think of it too much, but she hides nothing from the trained nurse and midwife who has been advising and helping her through nine months of waiting, and—*fear*. Yes, *fear* it is, lest the baby she so longs for should be born *dead*. She has had two miscarriages and one still-birth. She nearly broke her heart over it, but other women who had similar experience told her kindly not to fret, as it was quite a common thing, and it was "the Lord's will." This argument seemed to be unanswerable, so hope revived; she had implicit faith in the Nurse, who said she must always be hopeful. As the time drew near, hope and fear fluctuated, and struggled for mastery in her heart.

It was Christmas Eve. Mrs. Barnaby was sitting in front of the fire which was burning brightly, and the table was laid for an evening meal, the kettle was singing cheerfully on the fire, when Nurse Goodall entered.

"You are expecting your husband, I see, so I won't stay long. I only came to see how you are."

"I'm all right, thank you, Nurse, but I feel as if it would not be long now."

"I tell you what, Mrs. Barnaby, you are going to have a *very nice Christmas gift*."

"Do you think he will come to-morrow, then?"

"He ought to come to-morrow and I hope he will; would you not like him to have the same birthday as"—and here she lowered her voice and putting her hand up on the shoulder of the expectant mother, she looked kindly into her face and said—"the One who took little children up in His arms and said 'Suffer the little children to come unto me?'"

"Yes—but"—a sob.

"Come, Mrs. Barnaby; this is not like you."

"If"—another sob—"I could only be sure he would be born *alive*."

"Are not babies generally born alive? Come, cheer up; I can't leave you like this and I have got other people to visit."

Mrs. Barnaby wiped her eyes with her apron and promised to cheer up when she heard that her visitor would call in again later.

10.30 p.m.

The scene the same as before, except that the kettle has been taken off the fire as the water was boiling away. Nurse Goodall enters softly, not receiving any response to her knock. "Oh! lor! you give me such a turn; I thought it was me 'usband!"

"Has he not returned yet?" "No; they do work 'im so 'ard at them munition works. I call it a shame, that I do."

"Is he on day duty or night duty?"

"Well, it seems to me, 'e's on both; 'e's there all day; then 'e comes 'ome and 'as 'is tea, and then 'e often goes back again to do over-time 'e sez; and many a time 'e don't get back till near midnight, pore chap; don't it seem a shame? And to-night, just when I wanted 'im most, 'e aint come 'ome at all."

Christmas Day, 12.15 a.m.

"You have got your wish, Mrs. Barnaby; it is a boy, and he is a *Christmas gift*."

"Oh! I am so glad; but—is 'e alive?"

"Yes; he is alive."

"My 'usband will be so pleased, and 'e is such a good 'usband to me and 'e 'as so longed for a live child. When may I see 'im?"

"When—you have had a little sleep."

When Nurse Goodall took the baby on her lap to wash him, she sat down on a low stool with her back to the bed. When she had finished, she rose and gave a furtive look at the sleeping mother and gave a sigh of relief; the next moment, however, the mother awoke, and with her eyes glowing with mother love, she said, "Let me see my baby boy?"

"Oh! oh! is this my baby—look at 'im! 'is face is so yellow and wrinkled; my pore 'usband, 'e will break 'is 'eart over this. I never see such a baby in all me life," said the young mother, sobbing.

4 a.m.

Nurse Goodall at home. She kneels before a picture of the child Christ in the arms of his Mother. "Oh, God!" she cries—while big tears fall on her folded hands—"by Thy Holy Incarnation, make England pure."

BEATRICE KENT.

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