

## MIDWIVES' MIDWIFERY.

By ROBERT BARNES, M.B., M.R.C.S.

I FORWARD to THE LANCET the following specimen of midwives' midwifery, not that I imagine such to be of rare occurrence, or hitherto unnoticed, but because that it is but discharging a duty to society to set on record proofs of the lamentable extent to which life and limb are brought into jeopardy by the culpable rashness of ignorant persons. It will be conceded that this duty is the more imperative at this particular time, when it is in contemplation to abandon a large proportion of the population of these realms into the hands of charlatans and impostors.

I was called up at a quarter past eleven, p.m., yesterday to go to a midwife engaged at a labour in the immediate neighbourhood of my residence. I found the patient tossing about on the floor in a state of great excitement, afraid that all was not going on well, and calling aloud for the use of instruments, having been in labour since early in the morning, although the midwife had "worked like a horse." On a rapid examination I found the head low down in the pelvis; there being time, I consequently lifted the patient on to the bed, in which proceeding I was resolutely opposed by the midwife, who loudly exclaimed against any interference with "her case." She boasted that the "hand had been down, and that she had turned the child." On the strength of this feat, and of having been twenty-six years a "*medical woman*," she was determined not to yield, although the friends had sent for me. I, however, insisted on making a more accurate examination. I then found the head on the perineum, a large mass of the umbilical cord protruding, and the expelling pains strong; there was, as might be expected, no pulsation in the cord. Having ascertained the state of affairs, I asked the "midwife" her opinion as to the nature of the case. "The hand had come down, and she had turned the child," was the re-

ply! I took leave to accuse her of ignorance, and pronounced the child to be dead, in all probability through improper treatment. As the woman stuck resolutely to her post, I left the bedside to remonstrate with the husband, and to insist upon the midwife's leaving, and to send for another practitioner to support me, and witness the proceedings. The midwife hereupon named one of Sir J. Graham's *protégés*, an unqualified practitioner, as a proper person to be called in. *Par nobile fratrum!* (the medical woman and the impostor be it understood). In the mean time the child was born, and the midwife, as is the wont of the sisterhood, lost no time in hauling away at the placenta, which, by way of enhancing her own cleverness, she declared to be a "fixture." It, however, soon came away, though she worked as hard as she could to make it a difficult matter. The job done, she fell down on her knees and thanked the Lord for his mercy, not forgetting to extol her own share of the merit, that she "had brought her patient through." She unconcernedly enough overlooked the fact that there were two patients in the case instead of one; the child was of no importance; and besides she said "*the children were always born dead when the cord came down.*" This reminds one of Dr. Blundell's midwife (v. Lect. in LANCET) who "*always broke the child's legs in a breech-presentation.*"

The child was full-grown; the face was very livid; the scrotum swollen and red; the cuticle not separable, nor the bones of the head remarkably loose. I considered the child might have been dead nine or ten hours. I have seen the patient this morning; she feels assured that the child was alive at twelve, p.m. The midwife broke the membranes at eleven, p.m. The patient has passed a bad night, and complains of great pain in the abdomen, which is hardly to be wondered at. Were I to turn to the records of my experience while house-surgeon to the Queen Adelaide's Lying-in Hospital, I could easily cite other cases as appalling as the preceding. This one will serve to show the fearful dangers to which poor women are exposed in the critical moment of parturition, when left to the tender mercies of midwives and "their consulting surgeons," to wit, such as the unqualified practitioner alluded to.

And now, without stopping to comment upon the foregoing case, to prove the homicidal ignorance of the midwife, to show that the child might have been saved, or that the woman's life was perilled, all this being a work of supererogation, I would inquire what is the remedy for so fearful a state of things? Are the lives of the labouring classes to be utterly despised? Is there to be no care for the prevention of manslaughter? Legislators would do well to pause ere, by passing Sir James Graham's Bill, they give such a damning proof that laws are made for the rich and not for the poor.

It may be argued that medical practitioners could not possibly take charge of all the midwifery of the country. There is no proof of that; but, in God's name, if women must be employed, let them have an obstetric education, as in France; let our poor countrywomen have some guarantee that they fall into the hands of *respectable* and competent persons; let us be assured that these persons shall know the difference between the human hand, and a handful of umbilical cord.

In the meantime, and while continuing to pray that our law-givers may be "endued with grace, wisdom, and understanding," upon this point, the medical profession, whose highest honour it has ever been to stand forward as the natural protectors of the poor, should exert themselves to diminish the evil. I conceive this may be done to a great extent by the establishment and extension of lying-in charities; and I firmly believe that the ladies of the middling and upper classes would cheerfully co-operate in providing their poorer neighbours with that succour which they themselves enjoy.

One word more in reference to the so-called Medical Reform Bill. Sir James Graham would place no penalties upon the practice of medicine by unqualified persons; he would only provide against their holding any public appointments. Of course, he would not be so ungallant as to make an exception to the prejudice of the "medical ladies." They will be preserved, of course, in the undisputed right of practising in the most important

class of cases in which the art of medicine is called upon to administer relief to suffering humanity. It need not be asked whether the post of parish-midwife will be considered a public appointment. Sir James Graham and the monopolists by whom he is earwigged, will doubtless determine that any woman is competent to practise midwifery, as any rogue is to practise medicine. Surely, then, if impudence enough and knavery enough are to be held as sufficient qualifications for the practice of medicine, the motto of Sir James Graham and his Bill must be:—

—"Where ignorance is bliss  
" 'Tis folly to be wise."

Bulmer House, Notting Hill, Aug. 14, 1844.