

The practice of hiring wet nurses (especially those from the 'fallen') considered, as it affects public health and public morals : a paper contributed to the Public Health Department of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, at the Bradford meeting, October, 1859.

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Publication/Creation

London : John Churchill, [1859]

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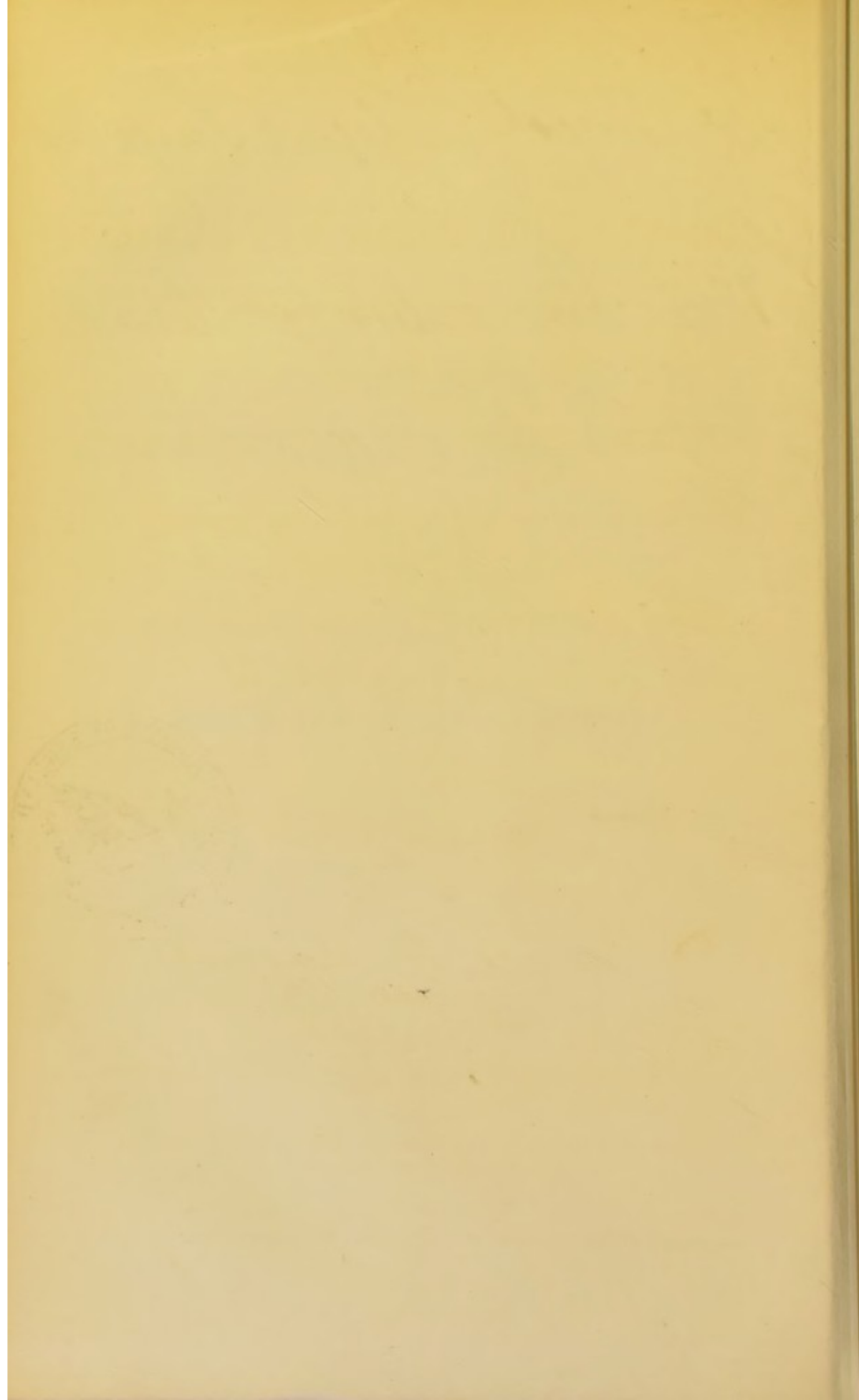
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THE

PRACTICE OF HIRING WET NURSES.





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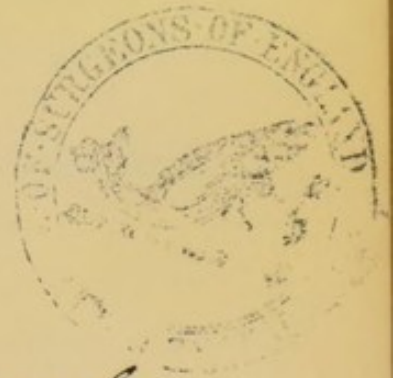
A PAPER CONTRIBUTED TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE,

AT THE BRADFORD MEETING, OCTOBER, 1859.

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By M. A. Baines
1859

LONDON :

JOHN CHURCHILL, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

SOLD ALSO BY

T. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY ; BOOTH, 307, REGENT STREET ;
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BRIGHTON :

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LONDON :
REED AND PARDON, PRINTERS,
PATERNOSTER ROW.

THE
PRACTICE OF HIRING WET NURSES.

THE physical and moral evils involved in the practice of hiring WET-NURSES are very numerous; those which belong to the *moral* aspect alone, would, if fully discussed, far exceed the limits of this paper. The writer will, therefore, merely glance at the most distinctive features included in this division of the subject, and then pass on to consider those *physical* results, which more immediately concern the question of PUBLIC HEALTH.

The moral and social evils resulting from the hire of *wet-nurses* may be thus enumerated:—

1st. The sanction and encouragement given to immorality by *preferring* unmarried mothers for the duties of that delicate office.

2nd. The risk of contaminating other members of the household, by associating them under the same roof with persons of that description.

3rd. The bad moral tone that may be disseminated very widely, by countenancing vice in any form; but especially it is injurious to society to allow the *fallen* to be lifted to the highest position in the

household, and to have bestowed upon them such privileges and such favour as should only be enjoyed by the virtuous and the pure, but rarely to be obtained by them.

The PHYSICAL evils of this practice will now be considered:—

It has been ascertained that the high rate of mortality among infants under two years of age, may be chiefly referred to two distinct causes, viz. :—

1st. The want of maternal milk.

2nd. The injudicious feeding and tending to which young children are too often subjected.

With regard to the first-named cause, it is lamentable to think that much of this fatality is induced by mothers refusing to perform an obvious duty to their children. An instance may happen here and there in which Nature has denied the mother the power to fulfil that duty, but in the majority of cases no such physical disability exists; and “a mother who cannot, or will not suckle her own offspring, has no right to endanger the life of the child of another.” * Nevertheless, this is too often done: the infant of the wet-nurse is put aside to make room for an interloper; both children are robbed of their rightful inheritance, and *both* fall a sacrifice, in too many cases, to the prevailing fashion!

Oh that mothers could comprehend the endearing pleasures they miss, and the miseries they inflict

* *Lancet*, April 3rd, 1858.

upon their hapless little ones by thus ignorantly or wilfully neglecting to obey one of the first great laws of their being! Would that some eloquent pen could pourtray these facts; some persuasive voice convince such mothers of their error—the wrong they are committing, not only to themselves and their offspring, but to the whole community—the possible good rejected—the positive evil pursued, nay, realised!

A picture might be held up to them, so inviting, that none save those who are unworthy of the name of *mother*, could resist its influences upon their better nature. A very touching appeal is made to the sympathies of mothers towards their offspring, by an esteemed correspondent, whose name would give weight to his words, were it permitted to be published; he says:—"Is there any pleasure of which her nature is capable, equal to the touch of those little fingers resting on her bosom, and those loving, trusting eyes looking into hers? Or can anything compensate the child for the want of that love which her own eyes should send back into its little heart?"

But another and a far different picture is visibly before us: our every-day experience tells us of that which will form a dark page in the history of many a mother: "The wailing, dwindling infant confided to an inefficient or careless wet-nurse for its sole means of sustenance; the 'child of misery baptized in tears,' whose little life is starved away; the babe

who slowly but surely dies from repeated doses of sedatives—all these are *witnesses* which may well make many a mother tremble, lest, for the little life blighted here, an accusing spirit should confront her in the hereafter.”*

It may be fairly assumed that *the children of wet-nurses form a very large proportion of those who die prematurely*,† and such a result must continue to take place as long as Nature’s laws on this point are ignored, and the duties incumbent on woman in her maternal relation are so grievously disregarded. The preceding description—though bad the state of things it discloses—forms the very best view we can take of the pernicious custom. We have been supposing the wet-nurse may be a respectable, healthy married woman; but let us imagine a case where a different selection is made, where a healthy, moral nurse is *not* secured: think of the effect upon the constitution of the suckling, by nutriment derived from such a source! Disease may not exhibit itself at once,—it may take months, nay years, to appear;

* *Lancet*, April 3rd, 1858.

† “It is much to be regretted, that our vital statistics have not been arranged to show the evil results of wet-nursing. In the absence of such statistics, no exact calculation as to the number of infant lives lost through this practice can be made; but it is certainly very large.

“French statistics of infant mortality disclose the fact, that out of one hundred children in Paris, suckled by their mothers, eighteen die in the first year; while of those wet-nursed, twenty-nine die.”

The Evils of Wet-nursing.

Published by the LADIES’ SANITARY ASSOCIATION.

but it is well known that scrofula, consumption,* and other disorders are frequently due to the nurse; it will be understood, therefore, how great a risk to the child is incurred by the employment of a wet-nurse under any circumstances. Such being the facts of the case, the writer wishes to suggest the propriety—it might be said the necessity—of instituting some restrictive means by which women should be prevented lending themselves for hire in this objectionable manner, and some compulsory measures might be adopted with regard to *capable* mothers suckling their own infants.†

*“Scrofula and consumption are both dependent on the deposit of a cheesy substance (tubercle); in *scrofula*, this happens in the neck and other glands, in *consumption* it takes place in the lungs. They are different manifestations of the same tendency.”

There seems, therefore, no impropriety in speaking of them as distinct forms of disease, although due to the same condition of blood.

† This may appear an extreme proceeding to advocate; but a similar plan has been proposed in the *Lancet*, and those who are inclined to take a fair and impartial view of the matter, will consider the suggestion reasonable and right.

After remarking in strong terms upon the evils of the system alluded to, the following passage occurs:—“If the mother can afford a wet-nurse, she can also pay for a certificate from a responsible and official medical man, *nominated by the state*, of the fitness of the nurse; that her infant’s need shall not be supplied at the risk of the life of another human being.

“The number of wet-nurses in large towns who are fitted for the duties they undertake, is but small, and, *inefficiency is fraught with danger to the child*. . . .

“It is a sad truth, that such vicarious aid is often sought without necessity, because some foolish, vain woman desires to preserve the outline which she calls her ‘figure,’ or to get rid of the burden of fulfilling a mother’s duties. Such an *official referee*, as that above alluded to, would be a check to these proceedings.”

Medical Annotations.

Lancet, April 3rd, 1858.

It is not improbable, that the old objection may be raised against such a plan, which so often proves obstructive in the case of other schemes for social and sanitary improvement, viz., that "individual privileges must be respected." To this it may be answered, that no individual has a right to exercise his or her personal privileges, to the prejudice or injury of the many. The question is not one of *individual right*, but of *social wrong*; and all persons who contribute to such wrong, through neglecting a duty to their children, or in any other manner, must be amenable to preventive or punitive laws, as the case may be. If such laws be wanting, it is the duty of the State, in its paternal character, to frame some measure which is likely to remedy the abuses referred to.

2nd. The injudicious feeding and tending to which infants are too often subjected, is a prolific cause of sickness and mortality.

The great question, or inquiry, that has been lately undergoing scientific investigation, viz., *What is the most fitting food for infants?* might very properly be considered here, as an important portion of the subject in hand; it would, however, occupy too much time and space, to enter into it as fully as it deserves.

But those who are interested in this matter, are referred to a pamphlet by Dr. C. H. F. Routh (Physician to the Samaritan Free Hospital), wherein the dangers and disadvantages of wet-nursing are

fully explained; and although the superiority of natural to artificial feeding is admitted, this is done with some reservation; for, from the statistics of infants severally “suckled” and “reared by hand,” and from investigation into the history of cases, we find, that the high death-rate of the latter (hand-fed children) is due to the lamentable ignorance under which they have been tended.

Dr. Routh says, “Although the mortality of infants is great from the want of breast-milk, ignorant management is the source of a much greater number of deaths.” M. Benoiston de Chateauneuf maintains a similar opinion, in the words quoted by Dr. Routh: “Care and skill do everything in preserving the life of a child; climate, &c., nothing, or next to nothing.” It is certain, that whilst ignorance and recklessness slay thousands of little ones annually, a very ordinary amount of intelligence and care may, under proper superintendence, be successful in rearing infants—most delicate and fragile—with the greatest success.

One word concerning what is called *natural food* for infants: the term is in general used to signify human milk, as distinguished from *artificial food*—administered by the sucking bottle—such as cow’s milk, and other animal or vegetable substances. But this acceptation is objected to, for the following reason.

The mother’s milk is undoubtedly “natural” food, and the very best nutriment an infant can

receive for the first few months of its life, supposing the mother to be healthy, and her milk sufficient in quantity and quality for the purposes of nutrition ; but it must be emphatically denied that the “hired breast” is *natural* food ; the milk of a strange woman is as unlike its own mother’s milk to the child, as would be a strange child to a woman who had lost her own : the one cannot be substituted for the other, with propriety in either case ; the idea of both is revolting, because contrary to Nature.

However some persons may differ, or be dubious, on a few of the points insisted on here, all must agree in pronouncing it a “monstrous evil,” for mothers of the middle and upper classes to neglect their maternal duty, and the substitution of a wet-nurse, instead of being a “relief and a remedy” (as it is said to be by its advocates), is a great aggravation of the first offence, because two infants thereby suffer instead of one. Neither can it be accepted as a “*necessary evil*.” We must admit no compromise. Here is a deplorable evil—let us meet it, and combat it in right good earnest.

The only circumstances which could justify the employment of a wet-nurse, are the following :—

We will suppose that a mother, from physical or social causes, may be unable to suckle her infant—that an attempt has been made, under medical or other efficient superintendence, to rear the child by hand ; but that it proves so far a failure as to place the little life in danger. Then, if a healthy, good-

tempered, married woman, of irreproachable character, can be obtained to perform the duties of wet-nurse, and if that woman's child can be received into the house with her, or otherwise provided for by the family who have been the means of robbing it of its best chances of maintaining health and life—if all these conditions could be secured—the objections to wet-nursing would lose much of their force and severity. It would be well if medical men were required to give a certificate as to the *necessity* for a wet-nurse, before an application for one could be attended to. This plan has been adopted at the *British Lying-in Institution*, Endell-street, and it is so praiseworthy a course, that it is deserving of imitation by every institution of the kind in the kingdom. We shall now consider to what extent such restrictions are needed.

Doubts have been expressed in some quarters, as to whether the practice of wet-nursing prevails to the extent implied in this paper and elsewhere. Such doubts may be at once dispelled by seeking information at the various *Lying-in Institutions* of the Metropolis, known to recommend poor women for that office. The applications by ladies for wet-nurses are numerous ; and in those institutions which receive married women only, the demand greatly exceeds the supply ; this fact is highly creditable to the poor mothers, who, for the most part, are proof against the temptations held out to them, wisely considering that even the large sums offered, and the

temporary possession of ease and comfort, do not compensate for the miseries entailed upon the whole poor family through the absence of the mother from her home.

Here is an example of motherly affection, did the high-born ladies heed it! But no: the demand for wet-nurses continues; and it consequently turns upon *single women*, so that as the demand in this direction increases, the supply will be recruited to meet it—the inference is obvious. It may be worth while to recur briefly in this place to the moral view of the question, in its *social* bearings.

It has been objected by some persons that those who are opposing the practice of hiring unmarried women as wet-nurses “do not sufficiently recognise *grades* of fall, that some of these cases are hopeful, and that a helping hand might rescue them from future sin.”

Doubtless, many objects of this description offer and would repay benevolent efforts on their behalf; but seeing that, under the most favourable circumstances, the *wet-nurse system* involves numerous evils, it must be admitted that it is inexpedient to sanction the practice at all.

Employ these women in any other way, and a blessing may attend an effort to snatch them from future ruin.

The following extract from the *Philanthropist* will prove that the class referred to have the sympathies of those who are strenuously opposing the practice

of wet-nursing, so that, if that door were closed, other and more suitable sources of remunerative employment might be opened to them.

A NEW WORK FOR PHILANTHROPIC LADIES.

From the "Philanthropist" for June.

"If any benevolent person or persons can devise some means by which single women seeking situations as 'wet-nurses' can be otherwise employed, and could aid in practically carrying out some scheme with the view of checking the pernicious practice, they would contribute to the amelioration—perhaps suppression—of many evils which are involved therein.

"These women are for the most part—morally and physically—very unfit persons to be received into private families.

"The question of hiring wet-nurses from the fallen forms one corner—and a very important one—of the 'great social evil.'

"The increased want of *wet-nurses* has grown out of the artificial state of society, which has obtained to a lamentable degree of late. It is an evidence of an abnormal condition of things, requiring an earnest and combined effort in the direction indicated, in order to help to re-establish the relation between mother and child on a more natural and proper basis; and which relation cannot be interfered with and set aside without the most disastrous consequences, not only to individuals, but to society at large.

"Let such philanthropic persons as may feel interested and willing to co-operate in the furtherance of this cause, visit the various *Lying-in Institutions* of the Metropolis, where may daily be found numbers of these misguided women (with their infants, whom they are about virtually to sacrifice by deserting), waiting to be hired as 'wet-nurses.' Show them that other occupations offer which may be undertaken without incurring the hard necessity of parting with their babe.

"It would be for ladies an especial work of mercy, to find such employment for these women. If other doors were open, that of *wet-nursing*—which ought to be the last resource of all—would be speedily closed. The remedy for this evil lies also in the hands of *medical men*, as well as with *mothers* of the middle and upper ranks.

"This scheme presents a new phase in philanthropic history, and we wish it all possible success."

In conclusion, it may be suggested, that Government might, with great benefit to this cause, establish and encourage TRAINING SCHOOLS,* where young women could be instructed theoretically in the duties of the nursery; and, in order that such knowledge might also be practical, these training institutions might be made to co-operate with *Infant Orphan Asylums, Foundling Hospitals, &c.* The manifold and wide-spreading advantages resulting from such an arrangement are so evident, that time need not now be occupied by entering into further explanation on that head.

M. A. BAINES.

* When speaking of training schools for giving instruction in physiology and the general laws of health, it may be as well to name the LADIES' SANITARY ASSOCIATION,* which proposes to impart the knowledge referred to. But its funds being hitherto inadequate to allow the Training Institutions to be opened, it has been limited in its operations to the publication of tracts on sanitary subjects.

* Office, 14A, Prince's-street, Cavendish-square, W.