

LETTERS FROM MARGARET LOVELL JAMES (1915)
1915.
chloroform; indeed, I had it with all my seven children, except two, as I have always such long and terrible labours, although I am a big woman—5 feet 8 inches, and I weigh over 13½ stone. I flooded with two. By the way, I am never able to get up under three weeks after confinement, as I always start to flood directly from five to seven weeks after. I always have terribly sore breasts, although the doctor treats them three months beforehand, but it makes no difference. My last confinement was worst, as I found, five months before baby was born, that my husband was having an immoral going-on. The shock was so great, I could not speak when first I heard it. A cold shiver went over me, and my body seemed to go together in a hard lump. I was never right after, till she came. Indeed, I was never right till my operation last October. I always had a weary bearing-down pain in my body all the time I was carrying babies, and suffer a great deal in my back. I never had morning sickness with any of them, and not one varicose vein, I am so thankful to say. And yet I know many women who can go right up to a few hours before, and then tell me they think nothing about it, while to me it is like a time of horror from beginning to end. I suppose we are differently made, somehow.

My husband earned 6d. an hour, and some of the summer months he worked overtime at the same rate of wages. What he earned overtime we always put in the Post Office, and what else we could spare towards the long winter months, as many times we started short time in August, which did not bring in very much. Then we were very lucky if we were getting 10s. a week at Christmas-time, but it used to be oftener *nothing* for weeks before Christmas. But we never went into debt. What we could not pay for we did without, and I can

Wages 26s.; one child.

(48) "A TIME OF HORROR."

My two last babies came to me in troublous times, the boy, four years since, when my husband (through being too prosperous and false friends) gave way to drink, although he never tried to strike me, or any of the outward cruelty that I know many wives have to contend with; but it was so different to what I had been used to, and three months before the baby came, I was practically an invalid. Up till dinner I could manage to get about, but after dinner I had to lie or sit as best I could. I could not get on nine in men's shoes, my feet swelled up so, and every night my hands were in agonies; the only relief I got was when I used to hammer them on the wall, to try and take the awful dumb pain out of them. Then when I started in labour, I was in it from eleven o'clock on the night of Thursday, the 17th of February till Saturday, the 19th, at 10 a.m. The waters broke at eleven o'clock on Thursday night, and baby came at ten o'clock on Saturday. The doctor had to put it back, as it was not coming naturally. Of course, I had

every chair I have got to with my brush in my hand. Then after confinement, as soon as I could sit up in bed, having such a large family, I have had to sit with my needle in my hand. But all this does no good, but only tends to keep a woman's health down. When I had my first miscarriage—it happened in October—and I crawled about all the winter, and well on into the next summer, like a person in consumption; in fact, it was generally thought that I was. And, of course, all those months we were obliged to have a woman in, as I could do nothing. So I think if anything could be done to lessen the sufferings of the coming generations, I for one should be in great favour of it, as of course, if it is too late for me to benefit by it, I have daughters growing up, and sons' wives to think of. Suffering as I have done, it is really a time when extra funds are needed, so that one could pay a little to have anything done, instead of having to do it themselves.

Wages 17s. 8d.; nine children, six miscarriages.

53. WORK IN THE MILL.

When I have been pregnant I have suffered very much with bad legs. You see, I had to go to work in the mill, and so I had not the chance to give them the rest they needed. I think it is a great hardship for a woman to have to do so. However, when I have got over the confinement, I seemed to pull up after my first baby. But after my second one was born I was in bed nearly a month, and my husband (who, thank God, is one of the best) had to lift me in and out of bed, and put my legs on a level with my body while he made my bed. After the third I was something the same, only not quite so bad.

My babies have been very strong and healthy, though

80

they have not always had the best of health since. But I have tried to do my duty to them as well as I could.

I might say that I think ignorance has more to do with suffering than anything, and I think if our Guilds would get the doctors to lecture to them on this subject it might help our members, and also other people, to take more care of themselves.

Three children.

54. IN FAVOUR OF BREAST-FEEDING.

I have not had children as fast as some, for which I am thankful, not because I do not love them, but because if I had more I do not think I could have done my duty to them under the circumstances. I may say I have had a very good partner in life, and that has made it better for me. But seeing my husband is only a weaver, I have not had a lot of money to go on with. I have been compelled to go out to work. I have worked when I have been pregnant, but I have always given up when I have been about six months, and then I have done all my own work up to the very last, and I can tell you it has been very hard work. Then when it has been over I have had to begin to do my housework at the fortnight end, and I think that is too soon, but what can women do when they have not the means to do it with? Of course, I am not half so bad as some. I have never carried a baby out to nurse. I have always managed to stop at home one year and get them walking. But I think if we as women had our right, we should not have to work at all during pregnancy, because I think that both the mother and baby would be better. I never knew so many bottle-fed babies as there is now. Nearly all the young married women cannot give breast. How is it? Now, I think because they work so hard

81

the time of pregnancy, and again another six weeks when baby was four and a half months old. I have mentioned the above fact, for I am sure it was partly due to that that I did not regain my strength for years after. I fed the baby on the breast for thirteen months. By that time I felt so low that it was an effort to walk upstairs, and was glad to sit on the top stair to pull myself together; so I went on until I got really ill. I was under the doctor's care for three months. Meanwhile I had had several attacks of inflammation inwardly, but the last attack was so severe I myself was frightened. The doctor then told me it would be some time before I regained my strength. I certainly gained strength after that illness; part of it, I feel, was due to rest.

Wages 21s. to 31s. 6d.; one child.

73. SUFFERING AND HARD WORK.

During the early stages of pregnancy, with first baby, I was very much subject to a fainting condition, which I was informed was a perfectly natural condition during such a period, and could not be avoided. Whether such be the case or not, I cannot say. Otherwise my health generally was very good, being at that particular time blessed with an excellent robust constitution. My first baby was one year and eleven months old when the second one arrived. During the first four months of pregnancy with second child, except suffering violently from morning sickness (another thing I am told cannot be dispensed with), I maintained my usual state of health. After four months had elapsed a pain developed in my right side (I can compare it only to a gnawing toothache), which caused me a great deal of annoyance through the day, and most restless nights. This continued until my baby was born. I recovered

splendidly from my confinement, but owing to circumstances had to be about performing household duties much earlier than I ought to have been. My third baby was born two years and eight months after second one. Whilst carrying this baby, from very early stage, I was distracted with an almost unbearable itching in the exterior part of the abdomen. In fact, I thought I should have gone mad with it, and had I then had the means at my disposal to consult my medical adviser (but 2s. 6d. was a great consideration to me at that time, for one visit, out of a small income), I could have been spared a great amount of agony. . . . During pregnancy with my third and fourth babies, I had to contend with the pain in my side, as with the second one. I attribute this pain to having to carry one child about so much whilst in a state of pregnancy with another, and not being able to employ anyone to assist me in the more laborious duties, such as washing, scrubbing, etc., to give me the necessary rest which my condition demanded. When my third baby arrived, I regret to say it was disfigured with a hare-lip, from which cause it could not take its food properly, which caused it to cry almost incessantly, and after a trying period of eleven weeks, she, poor little mite, succumbed. Owing to the worry connected with this misfortune, also having to be up again too soon after confinement, and for want of rest, I felt my health giving way, and being in a weak condition, I became an easy prey to sexual intercourse, and thus once more I became a mother in fourteen months. My health was very moderate whilst in pregnancy with my fourth and last baby, now seven years of age, which I attribute solely to having children too quickly in succession, and in not procuring, as I said before, the necessary rest and nourishment which is essential to a mother at these periods.

I was again pregnant, and as I had overworked myself I was again too weak to carry; and thus occurred the second miscarriage, due entirely to having no rest. I suffered two months with hemorrhage that threatened to end my life, but I revived and continued in a weakly state for three years, being just able to do my housework, when my little son was born, strong and healthy, weighing at birth 12 pounds, and has remained healthy up to two years, the present time; and I have fed both children by breast up to two years each, without the aid of stout or intoxicants, milk being my chief diet. Thus you will see that I have had two miscarriages and two lovely babies. If you can understand this jumble of events, you will notice that while I was worried by circumstances I could not bear children, while during both times when I was obliged to rest I was successful, showing that homes of rest for women in pregnancy and confinement would result in a great saving of life, and also result in children being healthy born. Also, the grant advocated would relieve the mother of the necessity to overwork herself.

In reference to my husband's earnings, during the time they varied from 16s. 6d. to 25s. per week. But of course I never received more than the small amount in the winter, and the largest amount in the summer, for housekeeping, as my husband had to lose short time in winter.

Wages 16s. 6d. to 25s.; two children, two miscarriages.

86. "NOT MUCH STRENGTH LEFT."

I am afraid I cannot tell you very much, because I worked too hard to think about how we lived. When my second baby came, I did not know how I was going to keep it. When the last one came, I had to do my

110

own washing and baking before the week-end. Before three weeks I had to go out working, washing, and cleaning, and so lost my milk and began with the bottle. Twice I worked to within two or three days of my confinement. I was a particularly strong woman when I married. There is not much strength left. But, thanks be to God, I have not lost one. I have two girls and three boys, every one strong and healthy.

The firm my husband worked for failed; then for the most times he did not work; but I can truly say that for the most part of twenty-five years 17s. per week was the most I received from him.

Wife's allowance 17s.; five children.

87. STRUGGLES OF A MINER'S WIFE.

I dare say I could write a book on my early struggles with my seven children, and a miner's home to contend with; and many a week my husband has not had a penny of wage to bring home, besides the experience of three big strikes and many small ones.

I may say we were married nineteen years before we lost one, and then I lost my baby first, a grand little girl of two. Then, a year and a half after, I lost a fine lad of fourteen in the fever hospital, of scarlet fever and diphtheria. Two years after that we lost a girl of twelve from tubercular disease of the kidneys from cow's milk. The doctor was treating her for eight years for Bright's disease of the kidneys. I brought them up breast-fed, so she must have contracted it after she was weaned. Such a clever child she was. So you will see we have had our troubles.

I may say I had very good times at confinements, except the first and the last. The youngest was born feet first, which was an awful experience, and her heart

111

I took in washing and sewing, and have not been near a bed for night after night. I was either at my sewing-machine or ironing after the little ones had gone to bed. After being confined five days I have had to do all for my little ones. I worked sometimes up till a few moments before they were born. I do hope I have not done wrong in relating so much of my past, and that it may be of some use in the furthering of our scheme.

Wages £3 or £4 to nothing; ten children, two miscarriages.

133. MATERNITY BENEFIT "INTENDED FOR THEMSELVES."

I was married when nineteen years of age, and my first baby was born just nine months after, and that was before I was twenty. My second was born two years afterwards, and, owing to ignorance, I got up too soon after confinement, and it has left me with a weakness that I suffer from now. I think that a woman is anxious to get about too soon, but now that the Maternity Benefit provides for proper nursing, women should be made to understand that the money is intended for themselves. It is more knowledge and help that women need.

I hope that you will get a great amount of information on this important subject.

Wages 20s. and house; two children.

134. AN AWFUL STRUGGLE.

First child, very sick early period, and when labour set in kept it to myself; baby born before doctor arrived. Got on well.

Second, through reaching high shelf, child had to be

162

turned, causing good deal of suffering. Child died at three months, undergoing operation for nerves. Doctor said caused by rick or strain at birth. Miscarriage caused by fright. Did not understand it; got up next day, went about usual duties.

Third child, usual symptoms. Fourth ditto. Second miscarriage, hard work and lifting bath of water, being very weak. Doctor said would have been twins. Fifth child born on stairs, no ill-effects. Third miscarriage, very ill. Sixth child very ill, caused by lifting out of bed sick child. The bladder obstructing the way, and child could not be born only by replacing it. Labour lasting from Thursday morn until Saturday noon. Seventh and eighth child quite natural.

When we were married, thirty-one years ago, my husband was a framework knitter. Having learnt his trade thoroughly, he was capable of earning from £2 to £3 weekly, but we had only been married a fortnight when, through the introduction of machinery, he was out of work. In less than two years his earnings was 11s. to 16s. weekly. Our rent was 5s. 3d., but I let the two front rooms. The third year he was out twelve weeks, only earning 2s. 6d. the whole time. No one would employ him; he looked pale, and his hands, owing to using silk and cotton, were soft and clean. One man told him he was not the sort of man for field-work. However, he got a job as rural postman, earning 15s. a week, leaving home 5 a.m., returning 7 p.m. In order to supplement his earnings, he hired a room and mended boots, but some people did not pay him, and he had to give it up. Then a manufacturer found he could still do with a little hand-work, but alas! things were no better; some weeks he earned 20s., some weeks less.

There were five of us to keep, so I got some work from the factory, and if I worked hard I could sometimes

163

washes the baby and sees to the mother once a day for a week, but when the mother gets up, she often has more loss, and therefore feels her weakness.

Wife's allowance 18s. to 30s.; six children, one still-born.

P.S.—I could give you many very wretched cases, as I am on the Guild of Help Committee, also the N.S.P.C.C., so come across a lot of sad cases—in fact, I have a case on my list just now where the woman has had thirteen children under fourteen years. Twelve are living, the last two being born this week. I visited her before the children were born, to see if she was having sufficient food for herself and family, as her husband was unable to work, suffering from nystagmus. She said she had only been able to eat dry toast for weeks, her throat and chest were so bad. The woman at this time is very ill, and has two babies to consider. Her husband has done nothing for ten weeks. These are the cases we want to fight for.

144. BAD MEDICAL ATTENDANCE.

I have had three children. There was one year between the first and second, two years between the second and third. I have had no miscarriage, and no still-births. But I have been very ill at times ever since my children were born. I can assure you that some doctors are very neglectful at these times. This you will see when I tell you about myself at these times. My first child was a boy, and I nearly lost my life because the doctor did not bring his bag containing the necessary instruments for use at these times, and his home was five miles away. So I can assure you I was nearly gone when the child was born. Then, when I had the second one—which was a girl—the very same doctor (there

172

was only one doctor within miles then) came nearly drunk, and I had a frightful time. What is called the after-birth had grown to my side, and he never got it all away. I had milk fever first, and then childbed fever. I lost all reason, never knew a soul for just three months. Then I had to go under an operation to have the substance got away, which left me in a very bad way, the child being eight months old when I was able to get up. And, still worse, I had nearly the same thing to go through over the third, through not being able to get a doctor, and had a midwife who was not very experienced. I had to be taken to the hospital, and the doctors told me there I should never have any more children through the way I had been treated at the last childbirth, and I was very pleased to hear it, I can assure you, after what I had gone through. My youngest child is just twenty years old, and I have never had any since, but I love children, and I think they are a blessing to every good mother. I know I shall have to suffer while I live through being neglected at childbirth. The Maternity Benefit would have been a godsend to me while I was having children.

Wages 14s. to 20s.; three children.

145. ILLNESS COSTING NEARLY £20.

I have only had one child, a girl, and I had a most fearful time, which nearly cost me my life. I got up and tried to get about, as I had only engaged my nurse for three weeks, and I thought I must try, as time was going on, and I was in agonies all the time. The doctor had left me, and the nurse I had assured me it would pass off as I got stronger, and instead I grew worse and worse, until my husband would call in the doctor again. I had a fearful time. The womb had got twisted, and

173