Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) usually presented as a sort of secular saint for her work on improving nursing during the Crimean War (1851-1854), is an example of woman who turned away from conventional domesticity to engage in a career. After Crimea, Nightingale, using very unsentimental statistical data, worked in the area of public health, hospital administration, and sanitary reform.

We will now deal with the PRESENT STATE OF RURAL HYGIENE, which is indeed a pitiful and disgusting story, dreadful to tell.

For the sake of giving actual facts, it is no use lecturing upon drainage, water supply, wells, pigsties, storage of excrement, storage of refuse, etc., etc., in general; they are dreadfully concrete, I take leave to give the facts of one rural district, consisting of villages and one small market town, as described by a Local Government Board official this year; and I will ask the ladies here present whether they could not match these facts in every county in the kingdom. Perhaps, too, the lady lecturers on Rural Hygiene will favour us with some of their experiences.

A large number of the poor cottages have been recently condemned as "unfit for human habitation," but though "unfit" many are still "inhabited," from lack of other accommodation.

 Provision for conveying away surface and slop water is conspicuous either by its absence or defect. The slop water stagnates and sinks into the soil all round the dwellings, aided by the droppings from the thatch. (It has been known that the bedroom slops are sometimes emptied out of window.) There are inside sinks, but the wastepipe is often either untrapped or not disconnected.

 It is a Government Official who says all this.

 Water supply almost entirely from shallow wells, often uncovered, mostly in the cottage garden, not far from a pervious privy pit, a pigsty, or a huge collection of house refuse, polluted by the foulness soaking into it. The liquid manure from the pigsty trickles through the ground into the well. Often after heavy rain the cottagers complain that their well water becomes thick.

 The water in many shallow wells has been analysed. And some have been closed; others cleaned out. But when no particular impurity is detected, no care has been taken to stop the too threatening pollution, or to prohibit the supply. In one village which had a pump, it was so far from one end that a pond in an adjoining field was used for their supply.

 It may be said that, up to the present time, practically nothing has been done by the Sanitary Authorities to effect the removal of house refuse, etc.

 In these days of investigation and statistics, where results are described with microscopic exactness and tabulated with mathematical accuracy, we seem to think
figures will do instead of facts, and calculation instead of action. We remember the policeman who watched his burglar enter the house, and waited to make quite sure whether he was going to commit robbery with violence or without, before interfering with his operations. So as we read such an account as this we seem to be watching, not robbery, but murder going on, and to be waiting for the rates of mortality to go up before we interfere; we wait to see how many of the children playing round the houses shall be stricken down. We wait to see whether the filth will really trickle into the well, and whether the foul water really will poison the family, and how many will die of it. And then, when enough have died, we think it time to spend some money and some trouble to stop the murders going further, and we enter the results of our "masterly inactivity" neatly in tables; but we do not analyse and tabulate the saddened lives of those who remain, and the desolate homes in our 'sanitary districts.'

Storage of Excrement in These Villages. This comes next. And it is so disgustingly inefficient that I write it on a separate sheet, to be omitted if desired. But we must remember that if we cannot bear with it, the national health has to bear with it, and especially the children's health. And I add, as a fact in another Rural District to the one quoted above, that, in rainy weather, the little children may play in the privy or in the so called "bam" or small outhouse, where may be several privies, several pigs, and untold heaps of filth. And as the little faces are very near the ground, children's diarrhœa and diseases have been traced to this miasma.

Cesspit Privies. The cesspits are excavations in the ground; often left unlined. Sometimes the privy is a wooden sentry box, placed so that the faecal matter falls directly into a ditch. Cesspits often very imperfectly or not at all covered. Some privies with a cubic capacity of 18 or 20 feet are emptied from once to thrice yearly. But we are often told that all the contents "ran away," and that therefore emptying was not required!

These privies are often close to the well-one within a yard of the cottagers' pump.

Earth closets are the exception, cesspit privies the rule. (In another place 109 cesspit privies were counted to 120 cottages. And, as might be expected, there was hardly a pure well in the place.)

In one, a market town, there are water closets, so called from being without water.

Storage of Refuse and Ashes. Ashpits are conspicuous by their absence. Huge heaps of accumulated refuse are found piled up near the house, sometimes under the windows, or near the well, into which these refuse heaps soak. Where there are ashpits, they are piled up and overflowing. Privy contents are often mixed up with the refuse or buried in a hole in the refuse heap.

As to the final disposal, in most cases the cottagers have allotments, but differing in distance from but a few yards to as much as two miles from their homes. Their privy contents and ash refuse are therefore valuable as manure, and they would "strongly resent" any appropriation of it by the Sanitary Authority.

And we might take this into account by passing a bylaw to the effect that house refuse must be removed at least once a quarter, and that if the occupier neglected
to do this, the Sanitary Authority would do it, and would appropriate it. This amount of pressure is thoroughly legitimate to protect the lives of the children.

Health Missioners might teach the value of cooperation in sanitary matters. For instance, suppose the hire of a sewage cart is 1s. the first day, and sixpence every other day. If six houses, adjacent to each other, subscribed for the use of the sewage cart, they would each get it far cheaper than by single orders.

The usual practice is to wait until there is a sufficient accumulation to make worth while the hiring of a cart. The ashes, and often the privy contents too, are then taken away to the allotments. A statement that removal takes place as much as two or three times a year is often too obviously untrue.

But, as a rule, the occupiers have sufficient garden space, i.e., curtilage, for the proper utilisation of their privy contents. (I would urge the reading of Dr. Poore's "Rural Hygiene" on this particular point.)

Often the garden is large enough for the utilisation of ashes and house refuse too. But occupiers almost always take both privy and ashpit contents to their allotments. Thus hoarding up of refuse matters occurs. In some cases the cost of hiring horse and cart-the amount depending on the distance of the allotment from the dwelling-is so serious a consideration that if bye-laws compelled the occupiers to remove their refuse to their allotments, say every month, either the value of the manure would be nothing, or the scavenging must be done at the expense of the Sanitary Authority. From the public health point of view, the Sanitary Authority should of course do the scavenging in all the villages.

The health Economy of the Community demands the most profitable use of manure for the land. Now the most profitable use is that which permits of least waste, and if we could only regard economy in this matter in its true and broad sense, we should acknowledge that the Community is advantaged by the frequent removal of sewage refuse from the houses, where it is dangerous, to the land, where it is an essential. And if the Community is advantaged, the Community should pay for that advantage. The gain is a double one-safety in the matter of health-increase in the matter of food, besides the untold gain, moral as well as material, which results from the successful cultivation of land.

There are some villages without any gardens-barely room for a privy and ashpit. But even in these cases the occupiers generally have allotments.

Plenty of bye-laws may be imposed, but bye-laws are not in themselves active agents. And in many, perhaps in most, cases they are impossible of execution, and remain a dead letter.

Now let us come to WHAT THE WOMEN HAVE TO DO WITH IT - i.e., how much the cottage mothers, if instructed by instructed women, can remedy or prevent these and other frightful evils.
And first

(1) OUR HOMES—The Cottage Homes of England being, after all, the most important of the homes of any class, should be pure in every sense. Boys and girls must grow up healthy, with clean minds, and clean bodies, and clean skins. And the first teachings and impressions they have at home must all be pure, and gentle, and firm.

It is home that teaches the child after all, more than any other schooling. A child learns before it is three whether it shall obey its mother or not. And before it is seven its character is a good way to being formed.

When a child has lost its health, how often the mother says: "O, if I had only known, but there was no one to tell me!"

God did not intend all mothers to be accompanied by doctors, but He meant all children to be cared for by mothers.

(a) Back Yard and Garden. Where and how are slops emptied? The following are some of the essential requisites: slops to be poured slowly down a drain, not hastily thrown down to make a pool round the drain; gratings of drain to be kept clean and passage free; soil round the house kept pure, that pure air may come in at the window; bedroom slops not to be thrown out of window; no puddles to be allowed to stand round walls; privy contents to be got into the soil as soon as possible—most valuable for your garden; cesspools not to be allowed to filter into your shallow wells; pumpwater wells must be taken care of, they are upright drains, so soil round them should be pure. Bad smells are danger signals. Pigsties-Moss litter to absorb liquid manure, cheap and profitable; danger from pools of liquid manure making the whole soil foul.

Source: