

MIDWIVES' UNION SECTION

The Midwife in History

From 'The Nursing Times'

Throughout history the midwife has been accepted as a woman with specialised experience. In the greatest historical work known to the world, the Old Testament, we find that she is definitely mentioned in two cases of abnormal labour recorded in the book of Genesis, that of Rachel, in which the midwife was able to recognise the sex of the child before birth, and that of Tamar, a case of complicated twin labour. The passages are of unique interest to midwives and are as follows:—"And it came to pass when she (Rachel) was in hard labour that the midwife said to her 'Fear not, thou shalt have this son also' (and) as her soul was departing, for she died, that she called his name Ben-oni, and Rachel died." The whole pitiful little case can be visualised in these few lines. The second case mentioned, that of Tamar, is given in more detail, "And . . . in the time of her travail, behold, twins were in her womb. And when she travailed the one put out his hand, and the midwife bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying 'This came out first.' And . . . as he drew back his hand. . . his brother came out, and afterwards came out his brother that had the scarlet thread upon his hand." Later, in the Book of Exodus, two midwives are specially mentioned by name as godly women who defied the King of Egypt rather than murder the Hebrew male infants. It is perhaps hardly realised that the names of these two women, Shiprah and Puah, are the first names to be inscribed on history's roll of midwives.

These early books of the Old Testament are supposed to have been written by Moses, but there is known an even earlier work, a medical treatise which Moses himself may have studied as he grew learned in the wisdom of the Egyptians. It was written in the year 1550 B. C., and is known as the Ebers Papyrus because it was discovered by a German Egyptologist, George Ebers, during excavations in Thebes in the nineteenth century. It contains references to diseases in women, to the use of a speculum, prescriptions for causing abortions, for promoting labour and for curing displacements of the uterus.

Through the writings of the early classical authors, and from the works of Hippocrates, the "father of medicine," who lived over 400 years B. C., and his pupils, we can follow the midwife through the early years of Roman and Greek history. Labours were invariably managed by women, and invocations were raised to goddesses to help and facilitate labour. Physicians were only called in and gods invoked when matters went seriously wrong and a dead infant needed extracting. Tradition says that the operation "Caesarean section" is so called from the fact that Julius Caesar was brought into the world in this way, but it is more probable that the name is derived from the Latin verb *caedo* (*caesum*) to cut. In the medical works which have descended to us from the first centuries after Christ, we learn that the practitioners of those days considered the chief necessities for obstetrical work were a knife or perforator for opening the head, a commuter for breaking the bones, and a hook for extracting the body of the baby.

Some midwives of this period are mentioned by medical writers as having been of help to them when compiling their books. In the second century A. D. we hear of one Agnodice, a midwife, who disguised herself in male attire so that she might attend lectures on medicine and the diseases of women. In the middle of the second century a physician named Moschion wrote a guide for

midwives in the form of question and answer, and this book remained a standard work down to the time of the Renaissance.

As the Dark Ages settled down on medicine and learning, little is known of midwifery except that it remained chiefly in the hands of women both in England and abroad. We come to the sixteenth century before any development in obstetrics begins to appear. Medicine, and later surgery, gradually profited by the wave of intellectual stimulus which came into force at the Renaissance and the Reformation, but midwifery was now a profession adopted by women of the lowest order, who passed their knowledge verbally from one to another. Such books as there were on the subject, usually copied from the earliest documents, were in the hands of physicians only, and medical men were not expected to interfere until they were called in as a last resource.

Ambroise Paré, the famous French barber-surgeon, who has been called "the Father of Modern Surgery" and lived from 1510 to 1590 was one of the first to make a step forward in obstetrics. He studied the question of podalic version and showed how in some cases the infant could be saved by this means, instead of being extracted piecemeal. A new text-book called "Childbirth, or the Happie Deliveri of Women", written by one of his pupils, took the place of some of the earlier writings. In 1671 we find a midwife, Jane Sharpe, writing a handbook on the subject called "The Midwives' Book, or the Whole Art of Midwifrie Discovered." Nevertheless, a contemporary doctor cites the case of a midwife who tried to move a malignant tumour under the impression that it was a baby, and in his writing he bitterly remarks that any woman who wanted to earn a shilling or two could set up as a midwife. So little was known of normal labour by the ordinary practitioner and so credulous were other people that as late as 1720, when a woman in Godalming declared that she had given birth to rabbits everybody believed her, including the King's physician!

(To be Continued)

There are three classes of cheques—bearer cheques, order cheques, and crossed cheques. Both bearer and order cheques may be cashed over the counter of the bank on which they are drawn, provided, in the case of an order cheque, the signature of the person to whom it is made payable is written on the back. When a cheque is crossed, however, the cash cannot be obtained on demand; the cheque must go through a bank account, or a Post Office savings account. This helps to prevent fraud by forgery, or, in the event of the cheque being stolen, gives time for the cheque to be cancelled.

A pawnbroker cannot get rid of an unredeemed article within a year and seven days of its being pledged. After that period of time has elapsed he may sell it. If he advanced ten shillings or under upon it the proceeds of the sale are his own property. Over that value the article must be sold by auction, and within three years from the date of pledging the pawnier has the right to demand any surplus after the expenses have been paid.

A point of view frames the habit of a mind; it depends on the mind within, not on the circumstances without, "A man is but what he knoweth."

"It is in thy power to think as thou wilt: the essence of things is in thy thoughts about them."

All men are not masters of their circumstances or even of their own money, but over that most precious possession their heart their power is supreme.

To surrender an advancement in life with all it offers in wealth and fame, is a sacrifice, but seen by the light of the Cross it is worth while, and in God's Hand man's welfare is assured.

"Christ's, I am Christ's and let that Name suffice you. Yea, and for me too He greatly hath sufficed".