

To Dr. B A T T Y.

SIR,

THE following account of the state of Midwifery in modern Greece, constituting a proof that Nature often defies the most destructive attempts of art, is translated from a new work of Sonnini, *Voyage en Grèce & Turquie*: If you think this contribution to the history of the obstetric art deserving a place in your useful Publication, it is very much at your service.

I am, &c.

Soho Square, July 13, 1801.

C. KOENIG.

THE manner in which the children of the modern Greeks make their first entrance into the world is, indeed, too remarkable to be left unnoticed here. It is surprising, that of the multiplicity of travellers to the Levant, and particularly to the Isles of the Archipelago, none should have had the least idea of the method these people have adopted in assisting at the labours of their women. Having myself had an opportunity of being present at the delivery of a lady of that country, and being the first who has treated upon this subject, so interesting for the history of men, I shall not hesitate to enter into the particulars of the manner of their proceedings.

The young woman, at whose labour I was present, had just completed her eighteenth year; she was tall, well made, of a healthy, vigorous constitution, and possessed such a share of beauty, as might have excited the envy of even the ancient female inhabitants of Greece. The forerunners of labour manifested themselves just when she was going to supper; the young lady was, therefore, conducted to her bed-chamber, where I, having obtained permission, did not omit following her. The midwife, who was very old, and reckoned particularly skilful in her profession, arrived soon after, accompanied

by a female assistant, who, though equal in age, was far inferior to her in respect to the expression of her features. A painter, wishing to represent a Sybil, could not have selected a better model. Her apparel, and, indeed, the whole of her appearance, was sorceress like; and the answers she gave to my questions, as for their obscurity, might have passed for so many oracles. She also brought with her a kind of tripod, composed of two pieces of wood, joined at an acute angle, and having at the place of their union a flat piece of wood fit for sitting upon; the whole was bound with pieces of old linen, and supported by three low clumsy legs. The first attention of the midwife, before she began her operation, was directed to the locks; doors, trunks, drawers, and every other thing in the house, provided with such safe guards, were carefully opened. This precaution, founded upon a very singular analogy, is taken with a view to effect an easy delivery; and from the same ridiculous principle, matrons only are permitted to attend on these occasions, virgins being absolutely excluded. They likewise informed me, that if I chose to be present, I ought to remain in the chamber till the operation was entirely finished, this being a rule from which nobody was permitted to swerve. The moment the labour begins, those who are in the apartment must not retire, nor are those without suffered to enter; the former are even considered as impure, and unfit for mixing with other people, until a priest is called for, who, by bestowing his blessing, cleanses them from their supposed impurity.

In the mean time Nature began to act; the efforts which she uses for accelerating the birth of a new being became more frequent, and all the circumstances promised an easy labour and successful delivery. During the action of the *infant upon the mother*,\* the latter was not suffered to be at rest, for she was forced to walk continually in the apartment; and as often as want of spirits, or weakness, made her wish for a moment's repose, the two old matrons would support her under her arms, and *oblige* her to continue, though really she did not appear to be much pleased with this *promenade*. When the pains came on, she was desired to bend her body forward, while the midwife, being placed behind at the bed, violently pressed the young lady's sides, which was persevered in till the pains were over. After this a fresh walk commenced, and was continued till new pains afforded an opportunity to the midwife to re-assume her applications.

I am not sufficiently acquainted with the mechanism Nature

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\* I scarce need observe, that this is a mistaken idea of Sompini.

employs in these cases, to decide whether the method just related be injurious or not; I can only say, that it is universally practised in the countries I describe, where difficult labour is scarcely ever witnessed. I may add, that I myself beheld the good effects (at least apparently) of this operation; for the pains, though rapidly succeeding one another, were of no long duration, and the young lady seemed little affected by them. A famous physician whom I consulted about this, very much disapproved of such violent measures. There is, however, perhaps, no country on the face of the globe where labour is less severe than in Greece: This indulgence of Nature towards the Grecian ladies may be considered not only as a reward for the simplicity and regularity of their manner of living, but chiefly as the effect of the climate in which they live: A serene sky, an atmosphere not condensed by severe frosts, but incessantly warmed by the breath of vernal zephyrs, and impregnated with effluvia's, exciting health and vigour, enable the women to overcome those dangers they seem so perpetually liable to.

Man-midwives are quite unknown in this country, and really if any should attempt to practise here, he would meet with no encouragement; for, without having read *Hacquet's* work, they think it the highest degree of indecency for a woman to employ a man for her delivery: And really Nature in this country performs every requisite herself, while the midwives, on the other hand, use every means to counteract it. In cases of some difficulty, they will resort to superstitious remedies; (with them science does not extend farther than that) but fortunately, such cases are ranked among things extraordinary.

During the time I spent in the chamber of the young Grecian in labour, I asked the midwife several questions concerning her practice; for instance, I enquired what she used to do in cases of an unnatural position of the child? Such cases, she replied, happened but very seldom; if they did, she would endeavour to bring the infant into due position; and this proving fruitless, she would apply to the husband, who, in the opinion of the women of this country, has it fully in his power to remove every obstacle to a successful delivery. This magic power, which, she assured me, would never fail, consists in three raps, which the husband applies with his shoe upon the shoulders of his wife, pronouncing at the same time, with a loud voice, the following words; "'Tis I who have given you this burden; 'tis I who take it off."

At last the critical moment arriving, the young woman was placed upon the tripod; good nature and apprehension were depicted upon her face, and the placidity of her features ap-

peared not to be much altered by the pains she endured. The midwife placed herself before her, rather lower, and the assistant sitting behind the patient upon a more elevated chair, slung her arms round the middle of her.

The infant soon made its appearance: When it was separated from the placenta, the assistant, with her vigorous arms, lifted the patient for several times, perpendicularly, over the tripod, upon which she again dropped her with great rudeness. In this manner she was unpitifully handled till the delivery was entirely concluded, which fortunately took place very soon.

However solid the motives may be by which rational physicians are prompted to exclaim against such a rude method of hastening delivery, yet it would be a matter of great difficulty to abolish it in a country where they do not experience any fatal consequences attending it. It was astonishing to me, that the patient herself did not at all complain of such a cruel procedure, but went to bed without any appearance of fatigue. A very short repose rendered her as easy as she was before; her complexion, though (now) less brilliant, still retained its former freshness: she received, without constraint, a volley of congratulations, and answered them as if her situation was the most tranquil imaginable.

Directly after her delivery, the lady was closely wrapped from her bosom to the flanks in a broad linen bandage. Here again the European physician will have an opportunity to cavil at the application of bandages: "Every mechanical compression of the abdomen of a delivered woman is highly pernicious; the weight of the infant, during nine months of pregnancy, the successive contractions of the uterus, or the violent pains of labour, having co-operated to irritate the organs; every compression in this state cannot but be extremely injurious."\* Though this reflection may be the result of a rational theory, yet the ladies of Greece would consider it as merely chimerical; for, indeed, they suffer the pressure of the bandage with the *same impunity with which they defy* the dangers of the violent treatment in the first stage of labour. They even pretend to derive from this operation the advantage of preserving the beauty of their forms, by *preventing* the usual concomitants of frequent labours, an excessive swelling, and the appearance of wrinkles on the abdomen.

During the first day after delivery, the midwife boils fresh petals of roses in wine and honey, and afterwards uses the same

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\* From a letter written by *Sacombe* to *Sonnini*, on the danger attending the Grecian practice of midwifery.

decoction from the dried leaves. After several lotions with the former, the use of the latter is continued till the next day, when the pudenda are fomented with cotton dipped in warm wine, after which, the powders of cinnamon or cloves, nutmeg or carraway seed, are applied alternately; one of these aromatic substances being only used at a time, and changed at each dressing.

Instead of wine, which is only used for the above mentioned purpose in cases of great delicacy of the frame, they generally resort to brandy, the application of which is not without a great share of pain. Whatever be the state of the delivered woman, the dressing with the aromatic substances is continued for the space of eight days, morning and evening. The most singular circumstance is, that the midwife, at each dressing, ascends the bed at the side opposite to the pillow, and having placed her legs between those of the patient, she takes hold of her hands, and putting one of her feet exactly upon the suffering parts, she shocks them for three times with the greatest violence.

On the evening of the eighth day, an egg is boiled hard, which, after being deprived of its shell, and strewed over with the powder of one of the mentioned spices, is tied to those parts which had experienced the rude foot of the midwife, and left there for two or three hours. This operation, which, as the old matron gravely told me, is made with a view to remove the cold which the patient might have possibly caught, puts a final end to the treatment after the delivery, and the midwife is dismissed.

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