

The Midwife.

A Great Midwife.

"We take up the task eternal,
And the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers, O Pioneers."—Whitman.

The Memoirs of Madame la Chapelle make fascinating reading; she stands out pre-eminently among midwives as a great woman. She had rare gifts, rare character, rare scope; she did brilliant work in her profession, revolutionised the training of midwives in France, and made no slight contribution to the Science and Art of Midwifery. Her book in three volumes, "*Pratique des Accouchements*," was published in Paris by Ballière (1821—1825); it was edited by her nephew, who was Professor of Obstetrics at Montpellier. He pays a high tribute to her, insisting that nearly all he knew of Midwifery he had learnt from her, and that if he had made advance on her teaching that again was due to her influence—*à un germe inséré par elle*.

The form into which the Memoirs is thrown is both simple and illuminating. L'Envoi gives the key note, "*Les exemples persuadent bien mieux que les simples raisonnemens, et l'expérience donne la perfection à tous les arts*" (Mauriceau).*

The style is easy and graphic; here and there, however, are quaint expressions, old words, and curious orthography, marking the date of the book. Here we have an account of her careful and intelligent observations; her experience can only be described as colossal, 40,000 deliveries having been under her direction. Some interesting details of her practice will be given in a future paper.

Marie Louise la Chapelle (née Dugués) was born in Paris in January, 1769. Her father is described as an "*officier de santé*," her mother was head midwife at the Hôtel de Dieu, the most ancient hospital in Paris, for twenty-five years. She was a very able woman, but had to work under bad conditions.

Her daughter, brought up from her earliest years in the atmosphere of a hospital, inherited her gifts and predilections. She married Monsieur la Chapelle, a surgeon, in 1792, but continued to live at the Hôtel de Dieu, assisting her mother. He died in 1795, leaving no children. Madame la Chapelle was then free to devote herself to her profession. She succeeded her mother when she retired on a pension from the Privy Purse.

The arrangements at the Hospital at this time for lying-in women were most inadequate; there was only one ward devoted to them, and this was

occasionally so crowded that several women occupied one bed. There was no other hospital in the whole of Paris for maternity cases. There were six pupil midwives, who took a three months' course, but the scanty accommodation and the little interest taken in this department made it up-hill work. Midwives as a class were badly taught, their practical training was neglected, and though they learnt theory it was frequently from Professors who knew little of the subject but theory. Sepsis was very prevalent; a large number of women died; the children born in the Hospital were transferred to a Foundling Hospital, miserably situated in a damp, sunless quarter of Paris; it was little wonder the death-rate was high. Reform was urgently needed. In 1797 it was proposed to establish a special Maternity Hospital. Many distinguished physicians consulted Madame la Chapelle. Monsieur Baudelocque, the famous obstetrician, was a prime-mover in the matter. After some delay, Port Royal was finally decided upon as the site of L'Hospice de la Maternité. Madame Dugués and daughter were transferred thereto. Its growth was rapid. In the year 1816, 2,887 deliveries took place. Monsieur Baudelocque was appointed Professor, and Madame la Chapelle succeeded her mother as Head Midwife; she it was who stood out for a longer and more thorough training of pupils in what was essentially a practical subject. At first the old regulations were in force, but, thanks to her zeal, a year's course was decided upon, with the option of staying on a second year with increased responsibility. About a fourth of the pupils usually took advantage of this. The aim of the Maternity was a double one, to ease suffering, and to educate midwives. There was a separate division for septic cases, with a Physician in charge.

The post of Head Midwife was a most responsible one; she was called in all cases of difficulty; if forceps were indicated she applied them; if turning or any other manual operation were needed she it was who operated. It was only in very complicated "thorny" cases which needed the knife that the Professor was called in. Each pupil nursed the woman she delivered; during her year's training she was allowed to either turn or put on forceps under the direction of Madame la Chapelle, who took infinite pains in teaching. She lectured daily, giving simple graphic explanations, illustrating points by cases personally observed by her, insisting much on essential points, lightly touching on others of dubitable importance. She appealed to the pupils to use their imagination and common-sense, and impressed upon them the value of making correct and careful diagnoses. Her clinical lectures were most valuable, the points of each difficult case, and the reasons for line of treatment were explained. She

* "Examples are more convincing than simple precepts, and experience perfects all arts."

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