

The Midwife.

A Page of History.

Sir William J. Sinclair, M.D., in his extremely interesting pamphlet, containing "A Plea for Establishing Municipal Maternity Homes for Cases of Abnormal Labour and Puerperal Fever," for which he makes out a very good case, gives an historical sketch of "Child-Bed Fever, and Child-Bed Illness." He says:—

"It was in 1847—just sixty years since—that Semmelweis, then assistant in the Vienna Lying-in Hospital, first announced the true nature of puerperal fever, and began to adopt measures for its prevention in the division of the Institution of which he was the practical, if not the titular, chief. He set an example in this respect to the whole civilised world, and he devoted the remaining years of his too brief and unhappy professional career to advocating the claims of his "doctrine," and appealing to the obstetricians of Europe to adopt his life-saving methods. Yet since then about a quarter of a million women in the bloom of life have died from the disease in England and Wales alone, and about two millions more have from the same cause been left to struggle on through their shortened lives with ruined health, chronic suffering, and disablement, and too frequently amidst consequent domestic misery. The loss to the community and the human suffering which have in the same period resulted, directly or indirectly, from infant mortality and diminution of the birth-rate can be more readily imagined than calculated.

"So it was with Lister and antiseptics in England. His principles and methods were treated with contempt and ridicule by English obscurantism in surgery, and their adoption was a triumph of the enlightenment and receptivity of Continental surgeons. Yet 'Listerism' is now held as demonstrated like a proposition in Euclid, and maintained with the conviction of a religious creed.

"It was in the same year, 1847, that Sir James Simpson began to experiment with chloroform, and a few years later that anæsthetics came into general use in this country for the prevention or relief of pain, especially in midwifery practice. This special direction given to chloroform anæsthesia at the first was the natural result of Simpson's position as professor of midwifery, as obstetric practitioner, and as introducer of the anæsthetic

into the practice of obstetric surgery. So Simpson also ranks, if only on this account alone, as a great benefactor of mankind. . .

"As always happens at the outset of great reforms in medicine and surgery, the principal obstacles to the spread of the Semmelweis doctrine, with its life and health saving beneficence, were professional obscurantism and jealousy, combined in this case with administrative stupidity and folly. But the truth completely triumphed at last, and now we justly rank Semmelweis, like our own Jenner, who stayed the plague of small-pox, as one of the greatest benefactors of the human race.

"From the tables given by Semmelweis in his '*Ætiologie*' we know that from 1841 to 1846 the number of women confined in this portion of the General Hospital was 17,791, of whom 691 died from puerperal fever, that is, on the average of 3.3 per cent. That was at the time when the mortality in the contiguous division for students of medicine was on the average of 10 per cent. among 20,042 patients, without counting those 'transferred' to other parts of the hospital for treatment. Transference of septic cases is not unknown at the present time, and nearer home. More than one British lying-in hospital has to thank the hospitality of the Fever Hospital and the Workhouse Infirmary for comparatively favourable statistics of puerperal fever. . .

"We have seen what a frightful mortality prevailed in the division devoted to the training of medical students in the Vienna Lying-in Hospital in the time of Semmelweis before the epoch-making discovery; it stood for years at an average rate of 10 per cent. The immediate and marvellous fall in the death-rate which followed the adoption by Semmelweis of practical measures of preventing infection might have converted the most prejudiced and jealous official person from "the good old way," but the history of the period tells the old tale of spite and jealousy. The colleagues of the pioneer on the staff of the Lying-in Hospital were the bitterest and most unscrupulous opponents of the new doctrine. In fact, they scored a record success against Semmelweis: they ruined his career: they broke his heart and shortened his life: and they misrepresented and vilified him for years after the removal of his pathetic remains from a mad-house to the grave. But the truth at length prevailed, and all that infamy now belongs to the province of medical history.

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