

## The Midwife.

### THE FOLK - LORE OF THE UMBILICAL CORD.

The *British Medical Journal*, in an interesting article which we quote, in part, below, says:—

In Scotland there are various beliefs which centre round the umbilical cord as regards its power of affecting the genito-urinary organs and the general health of the new-born child.

In a curious collection of miscellaneous "information," originally published in London in 1595, we find it laid down that—

As soon as the child is born—especially a boy—there ought to be great heed taken in the cutting of the Navel String; for the Member of Generation doth follow the proportion of the Navel String; and if it be tied too short in a Wench it may be a hindrance to her bringing forth her child. Therefore it is meet that Midwives have a great regard therein!

Here, then, we have clearly pointed out to us the danger of overdoing what otherwise is a necessary precaution.

In Scotland there is a further belief that if the umbilical cord be tied carelessly and allowed to bleed, the child will be a bed-wetter. The compiler of *A Thousand Notable Things* varies this somewhat, for he says:

If the navel string after it is cut do chance to touch the ground before it is burned, the same child will not be able to hold his or her water, whether night or day.

Elworthy, speaking of Devonshire, bears testimony to this belief:

The piece of the *funis umbilicus* should be taken off at the proper time and burnt; if this is not done and it is allowed to drop off naturally, especially if it should drop on the floor, the child will grow to be a bed-wetter.

He goes on to make what is obviously a reference to the connection between the cord and the genital organs:

Much more might be said as to the reasons given for the careful attention to this operation, especially as to the different treatment of a boy and a girl.

The number of "knots" on the umbilical cord of a first-born child is held to foretell how many of a family the mother is to have; divination and augury being thus added to the power of the navel string in addition to sympathetic effect.

In Lincolnshire it is believed that the navel string should be carefully kept by the child's mother, just as some hold that a caul should be kept, otherwise harm will accrue to the child. And, to quote *A Thousand Notable Things* again, we find that "a piece of a child's Navel String, worn in a ring, is good against the Falling Sickness, the pains of the Head, and of the Collick." Later on in the book the cure is repeated, with the emendation that the "Navel string must be so borne as to touch the skin." Salmon tells us that

a drop or two of the blood of the Navel String being first given to a new-born Child in a little Breast milk prevents the Falling Sickness, Convulsions and all other Fits; and very wonderfully revives it almost dead.

This belief that the umbilical cord has a sympathetic connection with the child, and that what is done to it produces a corresponding effect for good or ill on the child, is common in various parts of the world. Frazer tells us that in Mandeling the midwife cuts the cord with a piece of a flute on which she has first blown, as then the child will have a good voice. Among some tribes in Western Australia it is held that a man swims well or ill according as his mother puts his navel string in water or not. In Rhenish Bavaria the cord is kept for a while wrapped in old linen, and then cut or picked to pieces according as the child is a boy or girl, in order that he or she may be a good workman or a skilful seamstress. The navel string of a boy in ancient Mexico was given to soldiers for burial on a battlefield in order that the boy might acquire a passion for war. So among the Indian tribes of British Columbia the cord fastened to the dancing mask of a famous dancer will make the child a good dancer; attached to the knife of a skilful carver, a good craftsman in woodwork; attached to the baton of singing master, a good singer. And the navel string of the King of Uganda is kept with the utmost care throughout his life. Wrapped in cloth, the number of wrappers is increased with the years of the king, until it ultimately assumes the form of a human figure swathed in cloth. The custodian ranks as an important Minister of State, the bundle being from time to time presented to the king.

Hartland also deals very fully with the subject. In cases of barrenness, water containing three drops from the navel of a newborn child

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