

# The Midwife.

## ENGLISH MIDWIVES IN THREE CENTURIES.\*

*Abridged.*

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"The lives of the Queens of England," by Agnes Strickland, in six volumes, gives many picturesque details of the doings, manners, costumes and sayings of queens-consort, queens-regnant and queens-dowager. It is chiefly from these books and from Aveling's "English Midwives" that one can gather information about midwives in English history.

### MARGARET COBBE—A FRIEND IN NEED.

The first royal midwife mentioned in the old records is Margaret Cobbe, who attended Queen Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV, at the birth of Edward, the elder of the little princes murdered in the Tower. He was born in a strong, gloomy building called the Sanctuary, at a short distance from Westminster Palace, to which his mother had fled in panic; his father was waging war on Warwick, who was the partisan of Henry IV.

The Queen registered herself, her three daughters and Lady Scrofe as sanctuary women. She was destitute of every necessity for her confinement, but the Abbot of Westminster "sent various conveniences" from the Abbey close by, and "Mother Cobbe, a well-disposed midwife, charitably assisted the distressed queen in the hour of maternal peril and acted as nurse to the little prince," the much-hoped-for heir. When the rebellion was over Edward IV bestowed princely rewards on the "humble friends" who had aided his Elizabeth, as he calls her, in that fearful crisis. He pensioned Margaret Cobbe with £12 per annum.

### WHEN MIDWIVES WERE WELL PAID.

In the privy-purse expenses of Elizabeth of York, wife of Henry VII, is found an entry of £10 paid to Alice Massey, the queen's midwife, for the exercise of her office.

She was difficult to please in her choice of a midwife. She preferred first with a French nurse, but dismissed her with a gratuity of 6s. 8d.; the queen's niece then recommended a Mistress Harcourt, but she likewise was dismissed with the same sum. Perhaps her final choice was none too wise, for she developed serious symptoms on the seventh day after her confinement, and died on the ninth.

### A DRAMATIC INCIDENT.

At the birth of the first born of Henrietta Maria and Charles I, a dramatic incident took place. Labour set in prematurely while the queen was at Greenwich, with neither physician nor midwife to attend her.

\*From "Maternity and Child Welfare."

The "good old woman" called in was so agitated and perturbed that she swooned, and had to be carried out of the royal chamber. The French "sage-femme" chosen by the queen's mother had been captured en route by a privateer; there is a record of £100 given to one Alice Dennis for her services on this occasion.

During the Civil Wars a petition was presented to Parliament by midwives. They made "just complaint" of the loss of their living that the war entailed. They stated they "were formerly well paid and highly respected in the parishes for their great skill and midnight industry." The Chamberlens, re-inventors of the forceps, would not have agreed as to the great "skill." They agitated for improvements in the practice of midwifery, and one of them tried to provide for the instruction of midwives, "the uncontrolled femal arbiters of life and death."

### THE FIRST TEXT-BOOKS OF MIDWIFERY.

In 1665 Hugh Chamberlen published a book on midwifery for the instruction of midwives; and in a book, "The County Midwife's Opusculum," Willoughby writes of midwives: "They will leave nothing unattempted to save their credits and cloak their ignorances. . . . When ye meanest of ye women, not knowing how other wise to live, for the getting of a shilling or two to sustain their necessities, become ignorant midwives, their travailing women suffer tortures." His own daughter was a midwife, and a quaint story is told of how she diagnosed a breech presentation, but longed to have it confirmed. Her father, dressed in women's clothes, was smuggled into the darkened room, but he maintained, after an examination, which the patient imagined was made by his daughter, that the head presented. He was evidently less experienced than she, for the course of events proved him wrong.

The first book by an English midwife, Mrs. Jane Sharp, appeared in the seventeenth century. She wrote much common sense on cleanliness, fitting surroundings, temperance and occupation for the expectant mother.

One other midwife's name has come down to us—Elizabeth Cellier, who was arraigned for high treason, and put in the pillory for libel. She laid a plan whereby all the midwives in London were to be united in one college before James II, but it fell through.

### THREE CENTURIES PASSED—ANOTHER UNDER WEIGH.

After the sixteenth century, the monopoly of the practice of midwifery by untrained women ceased. We can look forward to yet better things in the twentieth century; perhaps Elizabeth Cellier's idea of a college of midwifery may be realised; be that as it may, better and longer education will doubtless be insisted upon for those who follow what is so quaintly called "the midnight industry."

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