

As I acquired the information contained here, while doing research for other purposes, it seemed too intriguing to keep to myself.

THUS SAYETH THE MIDWIFE FROM BATH

“What a gladsome thing it be to dwell in London now, in this year of 1380. You, Margery, who would have counsel, and Cecilia, who would not, will each have a child in the cradle afore winter comes. Me thinks you thought little about how the wind blew when your pregnacioun began, but if it be the north wind, then you carry a knave child and not a maid. But time will tell soon enough. You have seen much of giving birth, and I have been midwife to many. From my experience, I will put your mind at rest.

“Have you heard men say that women cause the afflictions they endure from coupling—hernias or ruptures or gout? But do we not bear greater burdens from giving of our favors? And after they have done their duty, and we come not with child, they say it be our fault. Even if a man be wounded so his seed goes not out to plant, will he admit it? Never.

“Ah, but I hear of sure proof of who engenders not. Within two new earthen pots, scatter a little bran. Then the man makes water in one, the woman in the other. When nine days pass, if one pot has worms in it and stinks, it tells of impotence.

“Full many a man complains of grievous problems with privy members, but what of our monthly evils? They cleanse our bodies of melancholy, thank God. But, when these filths flow not out, we must suffer to be bled from our ankle. And what if the belly of a woman waxeth large, but there is no movement? Such a thing groweth by default. When time for a true birth has passed, diverse remedies are used which would cast out a child. Moreover, if this cause the maris, the chamber that would hold a child, to be cast out also, powders of many herbs mixed with egg white are bound on. Rest with thighs raised up must follow. In one case, it is true, women have less to endure than men—if there be a stone in the bladder. The physician will grease his fingers and manipulate the stone by

reaching into the privy member.

“And what of your apple round breasts of skin and brawn and teats and bones? They are a wonder of white glandulous and spongy flesh, with veins and arteries and sinews. Between your teats and your maris lie the milky and menstrual veins which will nourish your child as your menstrual blood flows into your paps and becomes milk. There is no doubt that this is why you have no menstrues when you have a child to suckle. As they say milk is “brother to menstrues.”

“Breasts so wonder fine and a joy to have may not always be so. Even young maidens can have ugly warts upon them. A remedy could be burning the warts with brimstone, but for so delicate a place it be better to cover so small a lump with ointment made of the droppings of doves mixed with vinegar. If the ugliness be not a wart, but a boyl, cleansing with vinegar and oil of roses, or hot water and vinegar, is wise for closeness to the heart. But what if the tribulation be more grave than a boyl? Then we mix a plaster of bran meal and crushed honeysuckle with sesame oil. And if this does not cure, if the affliction to your breast be more perilous even with letting blood from your arm, then before you lose your wits entirely—for such affliction leads to madness--your head must be shaved without delay and . . . but you have no such blemishing now. So put away such thoughts.

“But, I beseech you, harken a little moment to what I say. If the condition be dark and spreads as a cancer into the veins which raise up to look like crabs feet, then there is no other remedy but to cut off all the teat which is a very dreadful thing to do. Know that it is better to hide the malady than to cure it, for oft times those who have been thus cured die sooner than those who were not.

“But dwell not on such deliberation. Think on the happiness to come. I see your paps be of good size which foretells your babe will be not feeble. And only God knows why your privy stones and your sperm come not outside your body as with your husband, but remain within, connected by two little horns to your maris. In the same manner as your blood turns white for milk, the best blood of your husband gathers in his two balloks and becomes white to come forth as

sperm. Then, just as cheese forms from milk, both your sperm and his have worked together with great diligence to conceive this embrion.

“You did drink of herbs in tepid wine during your last menstrues. Your husband, they say, slew a boar and smote off its balloks and you did eat them so your field of generation would become fertile. We know your husband has tilled that field well. The seed is planted. And now you are blessed with this child.

“Furthermore, you have already passed forty-six days from conception. You have marked the day of perfection. This is to say that over those days the embrion enfolded in skin, brought forth its diverse parts and limbs, and was perfected. For which reason it began to move and gained its soul. With this new life, medicines must be soft and easy. Think not to be purged with harsh laxatives or your belly will not wax wonder great. Instead, your child will be cast out before the time ordained.

“But trust my counsel and drive sorrow from your heart. You have conceived—a gift not given to all women. And you are a wedded wife. You will not be mother of a wretch conceived out of wedlock, sinfully great with a child the fiend will enter. I could not say that if Cecilia were here. Her shame, doubt it not, keeps her away.

“But let us dwell not on what pertains to sin. It is by right reason that you think of the baby to come and how your breasts will give milk to nourish him. To give suck is a wonder for a new mother. Drink the juice of fennel often and you will have milk enough. Of course you will examine your teats. Mayhap they be set deep in your pap, so deep the child cannot suck your milk. Sweet wine with the juice from boiled radishes and fennel and bran would be the easy cure. If that cures not the condition, perhaps acorn husks, made hot with pitch, must be bound tightly over the point of your teat, or a sucking pipe may raise it up. But if a stronger remedy is needed, I know you would be courageous in tribulation and seek the skill of a surgeon. But then, mayhap, you will not be so unfortunate. You may never have so grave a malady for to cure.

“Let us, instead, consider when your belly worketh and the time of birth is near. I will be watchful at all times, not like some midwives suspected of villainy,

as when a Sussex child was born without limbs, or grievous travail left the mother in Rochester incurably deaf. If your milk is abundant, your breasts will never be bound. A Lincolnshire midwife did so bind and the unfortunate mother died. From experience, I know that the proper way to stop your milk is to gather pellets of a hare, crush them in wine and spread the mixture on your breasts. And if a hare be not found, crush hemlock and mix it with vinegar. Such anointing of your breasts will cause your milk to waste away. But your milk is not yet come. It be not time to think on wasting it away.

“There is a certain thing I must say that pertains to Cecilia. You may tell her; it will do no harm. I am an honorable midwife, who will help any woman in need. I swear this by the womb of my mother in which I was conceived. So, when Cecilia’s time is come, I will help her child go out into this world even though she bismorched the good name of Geoffrey Chaucer. But she can hide not the truth. Though she accused him of violating her, we see now that she is with child. How could this be if it was not her desire to have a child? We know, as the law tells us, that, by the proof God gives us, she consented and Geoffrey Chaucer is no felon. I say no more of Cecilia Chaumpaigne.

“Trust and believe that I know what should be done to fulfill the offices of midwife on your behalf. I know a powerful charm to be written on parchment and bound to your belly, or another to be recited three times in Latin. Herbs will protect the birth from corruption. And I will bring my precious child-stone to hasten your delivery. You will have shavings of ivory for to drink. And a plaster made of fern will be placed beneath your feet to speed the going out, whether your child be alive or dead.

“Now, in your prayer to have sufficient milk, you may be granted a multitude of milk which is distressing and painful. There might be a crudding of the milk; it might congeal. If it so befall I will use a curative plaster of clean bread crumbs, barley meal, cooked roots and leaves all mixed with oil to cause your milk to flow.

“And once your new hot milk is flowing it can bring many cures. A mixture of turpentine and wax and resin simmered, then thickened with honey and left to

cool for a day before your milk is added makes a very potent plaster. Furthermore, when an ulcer on the face be opened and the filth cleaned out, opium with a new mother's milk to fill the hollow will cause flesh to grow. If blood be in the eye, milk from the mother of a girl child, the white of an egg, and blood of a dove from under its wing, is mixed to a plaster with bread crumbs. For a pustule in the ear, you will apply warm oil of violets with the white of an egg, camphor and your milk blended with oil of almonds in which earthworms have been boiled. For pain of the throat, take out your pap and spreynt milk into the afflicted mouth and throat. And, if someone passes blood after prolonged probing to find the reason urine comes not out, your milk can be injected with a syringe to give comfort. As long as you have milk, if you remember all these things, you will not lack for friends who are ill or feeble.

“Until now we have spoken only of your proper time. But what if travail begins untimely? Have no concern. With all my strength I will raise up your thighs and shut them fast so the child remains within your maris til it were the time.

“When it is your true childing, there will be much for your niece to do. She will see that clean water is ready and I will show her how to bind you with oats when the baby has come. Moreover, if a maid of thirteen years be not ashamed to learn, she may be midwife when I am gone.

“Though you may groan and cry out in childbed, though your eyes strut out, I must think on what should be done to help bring the child into the world. If the throes of birth be grave, thy private parts must be anointed. I will encourage you to thrust and to hold your breath. Powder of pepper will provoke sneezing, which is powerful to cast out the child. And fragrant agrimony will be bound to your thighs to hasten birth.

“The newborn goes out into my hands. We will pray the head of the child comes first with his face turned to the earth, for all other goings out are unnatural and hard. If it be hard, it may be necessary for me to draw out the child and the skin in which it is enclosed. And you know, when the childing is difficult, you could bring forth a fair son, and then die upon your childbed. But it is best not to dwell on such thoughts.

“Also it be true that sometimes there are two children from one pregnacioun. Or, as a great physician tells, there could be five children in your belly even now. And what if, when I am holding your child, I discover there will be yet another? My friend Elinor, if you would believe her, says she once brought out seven babies from one mother. As I have said before, what if there be more than one child, and what if the second baby comes not quickly? You will hold your breath once again, and try more pepper. If that be not sufficient, I will rub mucilage from herbs on my hands and softly reach in to take the next child. When the birthing is over, ointment of basil will be inserted so that, in a few days, whatever is left will rot and be cast out. So, you see, even if there would be two, or three, or even five children, all will be well.

“It is right betimes to consider if God has ordained that this child die before it is time to be born. A great doctor says that after a long while the navel of the mother will spew putrid matter, and the bones of the baby will gush forth. That I have not seen, though we doubt not the great doctor. Some say scalded leek blades must be placed over your navel and abdomen to cast out a dead child. I believe it is better to put a medicine of herbs and goose grease with-in to bring the little dead thing forth. Or, if there still be water with the child, it is an easy matter. I would just anoint my fingers and reach in to release the water by piercing with my fingernails; the child, then, will go out easily. But, if this will not be, I will open the way as much as possible, and with my hands draw out the child whole—or by pieces. The skin that enveloped the child must also be brought forth, or you are in great peril.

“Also be warned that while you be pregnant you may swoon and that is a serious matter. A swoon is called: “a little death.” Suddenly you are pale, unable to rise, with heavy eyelids and failing heartbeat. We would shout your name, rub your hands and feet, and shake you. Pepper might cause a sneeze, or a dish of water placed on your chest give signs of breathing, even if ever so slight.

“But what if all of these signs show that you have died? Do not despair. Your child may yet survive. The law says a pregnant woman cannot be buried until the child goes out. I would open your left side with a razor and draw out your

dear baby with my fingers—just as it was with great Julius Caesar.

“And I promise, if you die, I will see that your baby is taken to church on the third day after your childing. So rejoice that you are with child.

“And if you live, and would wait to have another child, here is a bit of wisdom. Juice of mint within your privy chamber allows no conception.

“Now you know that nothing shall be worrisome. All will be taken care of. Do you have any questions?”

END

The medical information is drawn from—

The Cyrurgie of Guy De Chauliac; The Anatomie of the Bodie of Man; Lanfrank’s “Science of Chirurgie”; The “Liber de Diversis Medicinis”; Early English Metrical Lives of Saints; Trevisa’s translation of “On the Properties of Things”; and pertinent definitions in the Middle English Dictionary.