

SECTION I.

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THIS is so self-evident, that it might be passed without further notice. I do not know that conception has ever occurred previously to the appearance of the menstrual flow. Cases are recorded where it happened at a very tender age; but it was always preceded by the appearance of the function that we are taught to look upon as evidence of the fitness for conception. As an example, I may cite the following, which is perfectly authentic.

Dr. Curtis, of Boston, examined into the particulars of a case of early pregnancy that occurred in the poor-house of that city, and reported "that the girl Elizabeth Drayton became pregnant twenty-four days before she was ten years old, and was delivered of a fine, full-grown male child, weighing fully eight pounds, when she was ten years eight months and seven days old. The reputed father of the child is said to be about fifteen years of age. The mother menstruated once or twice before conception, was tolerably healthy during gestation, and had rather a lingering but quite natural labour." *

Conception has occurred at an advanced period, and even after a supposed change of life.

An instance of this sort fell under my observation in the state of Alabama, in 1840, where an old negro woman (said to be 58 or 60) became a mother, after

* *Medical Times and Gazette*, April, 1863, from the *Boston Medical Journal*, February 19th, 1863.

having ceased to have children for more than twenty years.

I regret exceedingly that I did not investigate this case more minutely, but in my younger days I did not feel much interest in the subject. But I now know of two well-authenticated cases of parturition at the age of fifty-two.

Many women conceive without menstruating, but it is always during menstrual life. Most accoucheurs have doubtless met with such cases.

I know a lady some 36 or 38 years old, who is the mother of six children, three of whom were born (at single births) without the least sign of intermediate menstruation. She menstruated soon after marriage, immediately conceived, was safely delivered at term, and while nursing found herself pregnant again; she then weaned her child, went the full term with the second, was fortunately delivered; and while suckling it, became pregnant a third time. She thus bid fair to have a large family very rapidly, but unfortunately, after her third confinement, she got some uterine disease that arrested her child-bearing for several years.

Dr. Emmet and myself saw a case still more remarkable than this in 1859. One of the patronesses of the Woman's Hospital requested me to visit a poor woman, a *protégée* of hers, who was supposed to have ovarian dropsy, which had increased so rapidly that she apprehended an early fatal result. On visiting the patient, she told me that the tumour began to grow not very long after the birth of her last and eighth child, which was now some twelve or thirteen months old. She was still suckling it, and it seemed to be drawing her very life out of her. She was in bed, greatly prostrated from

want of proper and sufficient nourishment, and from the exhaustion of super-lactation, all of which had been supposed to belong to the rapid growth of the tumour. Laying my hands on the abdomen for palpation, I instantly detected foetal movement. I asked her if she suspected pregnancy; she said no, nor had she felt any quickening, although the movements of the child were by no means feeble. The touch showed the mouth of the womb dilated fully two inches, with the head presenting. Labour set in the next day, and she was happily delivered by Dr. Emmet of a fine vigorous child. This was her ninth labour in fourteen or fifteen years; and she told Dr. Emmet, that during the whole of her married life she had menstruated but three times; thus, notwithstanding the accepted views of the profession in regard to the relation of menstruation to conception, we find anomalies, which, however, are so rare that they do not invalidate the rule.

It is a little curious that a woman should have had eight pregnancies, and have gone the full term of the ninth, without the least consciousness of a movement of the foetus.

But there was evidently no malingering, for she was immediately raised from the deepest despair to the greatest joy, when her tumour was pronounced to be a living child to be born in a few hours. I have seen several cases of pregnancy where the mothers were totally unconscious of any movement on the part of the child. I allude to this as a subject of interest to the profession at large; for an error in diagnosis, whether in failing to detect pregnancy when it exists, or in asserting it where it does not exist, always injures us as a body, and sometimes inflicts injury on the subjects of our mistakes.

A lady, married about twenty-three years, and childless, became irregular at forty-three. Her physicians said it was incipient change of life, which was doubtless true. After a few months of irregularity, the menses ceased entirely. With this change many women anticipate evil in some form or other. This poor sufferer expected cancer, but instead of that her physicians detected a pelvic tumour. She was plied with iodine for a long time, and had flying blisters alternately over the iliac regions; but in spite of the most active means the tumour continued to grow. Her case was considered hopeless, and it was thought advisable for her to return to the place of her nativity to die amongst her friends. On her arrival in New York she patiently resigned herself to her fate, and made all arrangements for her approaching dissolution. After waiting a month in vain, some of her friends persuaded her to have other medical advice, and I saw her. There was not the slightest difficulty in detecting foetal movement and foetal pulsation, and when I told her that in two weeks she would need baby-clothes instead of a shroud, and a cradle instead of a coffin, she could not believe it. During the whole of her pregnancy she was not conscious of any motion.

Here the mistake was fraught not only with damage to the profession, but with loss to the husband, for, engaged in a profitable business, he was compelled to sell it off at a sacrifice, and to make a long journey to New York, when he should have remained at home. I have seen many similar mistakes, and that too since the days of Dr. Kennedy's beautiful work on *Obstetric Auscultation*.* We may be in doubt about any case up

* "Observations on *Obstetric Auscultation*; with Analysis of the

to the fifth month of pregnancy, but never after that; for then the beating of the foetal heart will infallibly guide our judgment. Dr. Routh,* of the Samaritan Hospital, has detected pregnancy as early as from the sixth to the thirteenth week by means of his vaginoscope, which, coming directly in contact with the cervix uteri, gives an earlier indication of the placental souffle than we could get by the stethoscope.

Mistakes sometimes occur in the hands of the best men in the profession, and then it is the result wholly of carelessness. For example, a lady, thirty-five years old, the mother of several children, had a small fibroid tumour on one side of the womb. Her physician, a most accomplished diagnostician, watched the progress of this tumour, which seemed to be stationary for a long time. I should remark that from the time the tumour was observed, the patient ceased to have children. And so things went on for five or six years, when the abdomen began to enlarge, and as we sometimes see in ovarian tumours, the menses ceased. The physician put her on bromide of potassium internally, and tincture of iodine externally. In spite of this the tumour continued to enlarge, and her physician brought her from a neighbouring city to me. I had only to lay my hands on the abdomen to detect motion, and with the stethoscope the foetal heart was easily heard. Now, here the physician, having his mind full of the fibroid growth from which he had so long anticipated evil, never made any thorough

Evidences of Pregnancy; and an Inquiry into the Proofs of the Life and Death of the Fœtus in Utero." By Every Kennedy, M.D., &c. Dublin: Hodges & Smith. 1833.

* "On Some of the Symptoms of Early Pregnancy." By C. H. F. Routh, M.D., &c. London: T. Richards. 1864. Pp. 21.

investigation of the case after the abdomen began to enlarge, and the patient, who was a most intelligent woman, declared she had not for a moment suspected pregnancy, and that she had not experienced the slightest sensation of motion.

While on this subject, I may mention an opposite class of cases in which we occasionally make grave mistakes. A hysterical sterile woman, naturally anxious for offspring, imagines herself pregnant, denies that she menstruates, affects a quickening, seems to grow larger and larger, till at last the fulness of time arrives; she goes to bed, and has some irregular colicky pains; but nothing more. This is a case of hysterical monomania, for which no physician could be responsible; but if called to give an opinion, he should be careful not to be misled by the artful misrepresentations of a "mind diseased." Young women sometimes honestly imagine themselves pregnant, and physicians, I am sorry to say, are occasionally deluded into the support of their whim, notwithstanding the fact that menstruation returns regularly every twenty-eight days, and pursues its usual course.

An example of this sort occurred at Baden-Baden a few years ago, under the care of a very eminent physician, now dead, who allowed his patient to lie in bed for nine months to prevent a miscarriage, when in fact she menstruated regularly during the whole time. At the end of the tenth month another physician was called in, who said the lady had never been pregnant at all.

But while many women go through pregnancy without feeling the slightest motion of the fœtus, a very opposite state of things is occasionally met with about the time of change of life. A woman, forty years of age or more, becomes irregular; she thinks herself pregnant;

by-and-by, she quickens; she begins to make baby-clothes; she tells her intimate friends of her interesting condition; she gradually grows larger; the time for confinement arrives; she is not quite as large as in her former pregnancies; nevertheless she cannot be deceived, for the frequent regular movements of the fœtus make it impossible for her to be otherwise than pregnant. At last she becomes alarmed at the procrastination of the labour, and sends for her physician, who finds the abdomen large, but the enlargement is due to an immense deposit of adipose tissue in its parietes. He passes his finger into the vagina, and discovers the uterus in an unimpregnated state; indeed, it may be smaller than usual, for the cervix may be found rather atrophied, and the whole organ gradually undergoing the change that we always see when change of life occurs.

I have seen several cases of this false quickening, never in a woman under thirty-eight, nor over forty-eight. They had all borne children, and all had a tendency to *embonpoint*. They were all women of culture, refinement, and of good common sense; and so strong in every case was the mental impression of the sense of quickening, that it was impossible to convince them that there was no pregnancy. Two of these ladies returned to me several times in the course of a year, and insisted that I must be mistaken. I now regret having dismissed them so peremptorily, as I thereby lost the opportunity of watching the progress and termination of this freak of change of life.