

Hygeia and the newcomer

by Roland Harris

Our first baby was born in hospital. We had our second at home. The hospital was efficient and humane, as hospitals go; but we did not realise how much we, and our first child had missed, until the second was born. I make no indictment of hospitals in general; and to ours in particular, famous in London [UCH], I acknowledge a permanent debt. It was reassuring then for my wife to fall into the arms of an expert: even a husband feels no jealousy at such a time. But it is in emergencies, rather than in the conduct of natural processes, that hospitals are essentially great – adept at some Samaritan violence upon the rag-doll body deeply anaesthetized, no longer a person but ‘the patient’. An enormous and uncomfortable paradox creaks into life, like some antedeluvian monster essaying a smile, when that vast impersonality Hygeia attempts to put on mortality, to talk as woman to woman, or to man. Pert, proficient young ladies nightmare into ‘physiotherapists’; they adjure the hysterical to relax, and the monumental to be supple; and although all that they say is very sensible, nature in the end has her revenges, and they become mothers themselves – or so, I am told, their pupils always wish. The patient is forewarned – no, that is just the word the expert would not use, for it augurs ill – is gently but of course firmly told what will happen, and what to do – what to eat, when to sleep, when to arrive; and the normal process of parturition is described to her. Unhappily, before the event itself, at some examination she will catch a strayed word as the gynaecologist instructs his students; at home, she delves into the textbook she has borrowed from the library: the strayed word, or something like it, is identified in a succession of chapters nearly all of which end ‘which is usually fatal to the child, or mother, or both’. The book contains apparently no chapter on normal childbirth; or, if she finds one, the strayed word is not there.

At about midnight, when all labours choose to begin, the ambulance arrives – cheerful, prompt, comforting. The pains are frequent and regular; the event itself seems near. Once at the hospital, the husband vanishes under the raised eyebrow of dismissal, pressing a vain shilling into the doorkeeper’s hand as the latter promises to ‘phone him if anything hap-

pens' (but he does not keep his word) and the patient enters the labour-ward. Here, in the lonely company of several other women in the same predicament, she wastes and waits her time. She has no-one she knows to talk to, or to be silent with; nothing to do, or read, or listen to; and it is seven hours later that the birth occurs. Home is ten days away; and even there is to prove for a while a place of weeping and depression. Meanwhile, at night the babies in the nursery are crying; the nurse deals with it. The mother must rest. But the silly woman is wondering, which is crying? In her vanity, she feels that the baby misses her – whereas everyone knows, who has been a nurse for a week, that infants do not cry for people, but only for dry nappies or for more food. But she still feels that the baby misses *her*. My wife, I'm afraid, is badly disciplined, and incurred many of Hygeia's severest frowns. Her worst encounter with law and order happened in feeding the infant. There was a timetable for this. Mothers had their infants by their beds for part of the day (even husbands were allowed in once a day), but it was quite understood that feeding was not a matter of appetite, and that appetite must be controlled – for the mother's sake. Sore breasts, spoilt children, irregular and thus bad habits would follow irregular feeding. So that when our infant was, under protest, fed half an hour before the clock allowed, a screen as for the dying was placed around the bed, to protect the rest of the flock from the contagion of such wantonness.

I am sure the hospital was right. The truth is, my wife is a bad patient, especially when she is not ill. But even for such as she, what a change becomes apparent when a confinement takes place at home! Not anxiety and relief, but tenderness and joy, coloured all our feelings at the birth of our second child.

A bed was set in the living-room, among bookshelves, familiar paintings, by the window and the wireless; and the fire (fed by the learned, dolorous book of the Strayed Word) glowed on the opposite wall. A few simple preparations, and when the pains became fairly regular I fetched the two district nurses and their little box. They were everyday, unstilted, and talked as to equals; they came to help nature, not to direct her course. We did what we were told (I and a friend staying with us), but there was something however trivial, we could do. A cup of tea, inevitably; between whiles, talk about the weather. Leaves of the tall trees flickered in the

streetlamps. Nothing remarkable, but you felt the leaves were dancing. As the time approached, we were ushered out to the hall. My wife had had a short sleep, and now there were laughable touches of propriety in the way the senior nurse delicately pulled over the sheet if I entered the room. I could hear my wife asking that I should be present when the child was born. 'We'll see'. They were waiting to discover whether I could be trusted to be of any use. Time passed lightly. In the room, talk and silence were easy. In the hall, conversation developed in a succession of frivolous and even rather bawdy anecdotes and observations, punctuated by hardly smothered, or brazenly open laughter. This was the one sign of nervousness, for we were certainly not indifferent; the house was full of a tranquil excitement, as if the one life waiting nearby peopled it more than the whole family had been able to. 'You don't sound much of a worried father', commented the nurse. She was slightly shocked, but yet relieved. I was allowed in...

The days that followed passed as holidays. Every day, for three days, nurse called in, and I believe she repeated, as a dutiful but so slightly irreverent acolyte his creed, some of the very regulations of the oracle about feeding and habit-forming; but you could see the rigid squares of the pattern distort and dance into fields and springtime as she laughed. Hygeia, that 'gaseous vertebrate', knows so little of the habits of children: breastless, she talks of feeding; sleepless, she commends sleep; childless – but it would be cruel to go on. Our two children fed when they wished, and they woke many nights for food and reassurance; but they have never stayed awake excessively, save for the first few nights back from hospital. These indulgences do not appear to have spoiled them, and their irregularities enable them to fit undemandingly into our own irregular way of life. I think they are bad-tempered on occasion, as are most children – and this must satisfy Hygeia. It satisfied our nurses. In three days, my restless wife was busying herself with some light chores (we had someone daily to help in the house), though always discreetly tucked up in bed when nurse called. We did not want to strain her faith too far. Home was there and at once. No depressive cloud darkened. Baby gained weight and voice; strength was spent not in irritation and constraint; the house was untidy and cheerful, and life was never easier than at that time. I know that all the learned professors and the young men who write textbooks for moth-

ers tell us that babies want food and sleep and nothing else during their early days; but it was impossible to believe that the infant herself did not respond to the warmth, life, and interest of the changed house, which did not need to write its welcome on the mat.

And the event itself, ah, nowhere was our fortune better marked. We were perhaps stupidly confident, but confidence was in the air – or rather, the absence of anxiety was itself a positive quality. The baby was actually delivered by the junior of the two nurses, a young lady of about twenty-two; it was only her second delivery, she told us afterwards, but we did not feel that anyone had been in peril, and we were right. I would not minimise the skill of those two midwives – their lovely knowledge, never pedantry, and the mysteries of their art; but our being at home assisted them to conceal that art in ease, and their knowledge in the inevitability of instinct. There, relaxation was possible. I entered in such a moment of quietness, and stood by my wife's head, and held her hand. She lay half on her side; when she felt the need, she closed her eyes and inhaled peace in a whiff of gas, and then removed the mask. The midwife would say 'Breathe' – this meant deeply and quickly, not of gas – and then, 'Relax'. Although the pains were frequent now, and sweat was on her face and hand, my wife was not seemingly in pain. Instead, she was completely absorbed, and the sweat was that of an intense concentration. She responded easily and with complete control to every instruction and encouragement. The traditional terrors and panic of the novel were entirely absent. She was not then stoical (though she is of that quality) but simply very busy. There was no room in time or energy for one particle of herself: the Task filled the world. I had been half prepared to try to share in her pain, her danger – at least to give her that pity which I suppose one asks for oneself in pain. But this element of the complex feeling was transformed in a curious way: I too forgot my wife; I grew involved in the urgent concentration of the task. I do not remember the exact order of the incidents; only a stream flowing in a certain direction. The waters broke. A roughened surface, the colour of a rotten apple core, enlarged the orifice. It was the top of the child's head. 'Breathe'. 'Breathe'. Recognisable, the head appeared, grey-blue; and within a minute the child lay there complete. But not yet born.

The moment is hard to describe, though vivid to my mind; if you have ever looked at the sun, you will know what I mean. The child lay there

on the bed, still. The four wills that had urged, had focussed on its entry, fell back suddenly, irresolute. Perhaps you have opened the door at night, expecting someone – and there is a stranger whose face you do not know. That was one shade of the feeling – the powerful presence of an unknown spirit. I cannot tell you how violently, though so far off, the force of the still child's spirit intruded into the room, which had for hours been sensitive to approaching change. Blue-grey, pallid, the child lay, its puckered head sideways, frail. Hadn't we asked too much? We knew the brutality of our wills' insistence. And we waited irresolute for some gesture from the child. All this no clock would have registered; the mother had not yet seen the child at all; there is no measure for such a time. Neither were we anxious, nor confident. I do not think that at that moment we should have felt sorrow had the child been dead, or joy at its life, or any feeling. The moment was outside humanity. We awaited a sign. I remember once facing the steep ridge of a Swiss mountain: on one side, the sun burned on the rock's skin; on the other, a swirling mist checked steeply back and up, chilling and vertiginous. Grey-blue, like a wet and curious stone, the child lay outside any slope of time, on the ridge. Then gradually but quickly, her colour changed to the colour we call flesh, though mottled yet; the stone breathed in the sun. An immediate and overwhelming rush of gratitude, and sympathy, of welcome and tenderness, swept over us and enfolded the child. Hands were skilled and adept, trained in their own expertise, as we spell words correctly without a conscious thought; and sounds in the little said were translucent. My wife's voice stirred soft and gentle, prepared by love and pity to greet those newly born. I heard her asking me, 'Is she like Meg?' Meg is our first child, and is accounted beautiful. I heard her, but I could not speak. There were so many questions in her question. And the child was already herself, like no-one else. 'Is she like Meg?' she asked again. 'Yes', I answered, 'yes, yes'.

In little time the child's eyes were wiped, the cord cut, the afterbirth with its whitening ripened suckers clean away, the mother resting silent with happiness. All this had started in the evening; at ten o'clock the nurses came; at two in the morning we were all having a light supper – midwives, a friend, a relative staying in the house, myself, and my wife. The elder daughter had slept through it all in the nursery; the new daughter was fast asleep. We knew we might not have such an opportunity again!

Should not some poet observe and re-imagine such a birth? But he would, I fear, neglect to publish the unsatisfying verses – as they would be, unless the child were his own. Perhaps Hygeia would oblige us with some stanzas – to a strict and regular metre?

Written at 7 Westbourne Terrace, November 1954.