

MATERNAL IMPRESSION.

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When a doctrine has been in vogue since the earliest chapters of recorded history, and when evidence in its favor may be found in all climes and peoples, one is tempted as was Von Welsenburg to believe that some basic facts underlie the belief in maternal impression. Belief must however not be confused with fact, and the antiquity, iniquity and ubiquity of maternal impression are not synonymous with convincing evidence. In days gone by, skepticism was not particularly encouraged and the truth in a given matter was in direct proportion to the caliber, mental or physical, of the individual who uttered the statement, not to the amount of evidence he produced. Nostradamus' excellent contention for the peculiar inherent psychic qualities in the seventh son of a seventh son had a face value once upon a time, but now-a-days the Civil Service Commission would give him opportunity to pass the examination for Custom's Inspector if he applied for this position. Even in my own lifetime I have remarked that the clairvoyants are no longer born with a "caul" and have ceased to use the "caul" as the fulcrum upon which they pry into the affairs of others. Possibly through selection they have developed an instinctive second-sight. The fact that it is physiologically impossible for the hair to turn white in a single night may not be convincing, and I doubt that the inability of the German anatomist Stieda to find a single authentic case will be received any more seriously. Indeed we find that a single case cited upon good authority, even before history was, is still observed daily by trusting minds. The antiquity and ubiquity of the doctrine of maternal influence do not convince me as they did Von Welsenburg of certain fundamental facts. The sun went around the earth for myriads of years and will continue to do so even in remote peoples. Why deny our senses?

The antiquity of the doctrine is phenomenal and practically all writers pro or con hark back to the source whence all this blessing flows—the story of Jacob and his cattle. I will make an exception and dismiss Jacob with a word. It may be that Jacob used the "pilled rods" on the more susceptible human observers much after the fashion that the present day

magicians use their wands—to divert the attention and “cover the experiment.” As evidence I cannot consider it any more seriously than the remarkable feat of Joshua might be taken as proof conclusive of the futility in the study of celestial mechanics.

The ubiquity of the doctrine may also be satisfactorily explained. Like “Little Orphant Annie,” every race has its own peculiar story of how “the goblins will get you,” and it would be more than strange if superstitions of like character did not arise even in remote peoples over the birth of a child—particularly an abnormal one. I am not prepared to deny that folklore has some truth in it; but then folklore never loses in the telling and does not necessarily imply close analytical study.

The iniquity of the doctrine is notorious and consists in an attempt to convict Mrs. X. of giving birth to a mentally, morally or physically misshapen child or to a mathematico-musico-poetic prodigy by reason of certain influence she has exerted, and without giving her a chance to defend herself. If the law holds that a person must be proved guilty beyond reasonable doubt, let us first look into the evidence; for without the facts, there is nothing to disprove; without the facts, the argument may be entertaining but not productive.

Inasmuch as everyone has his own cases which illustrate the workings of maternal influence and which he looks upon anywhere ranging from a grave suspicion to conviction, I will arrange the evidence presented into several classes and illustrate each with a case.

I. Alleged bona-fide maternal impression—conscious type.

“Dr. Napheys tells of a woman, the wife of a baker, who during the earlier months of her pregnancy, sold bread over the counter. Nearly every day a child with a double thumb came in for a penny roll, presenting the money between the thumb and finger. After the third month, the mother left the bakery but the malformation was so impressed on her mind, that she was not surprised to see it reproduced in her own child.” Neither was Dr. Napheys, for that matter, for had he been skeptical, he would have inquired into what the mother of the first child saw to create the deformity, and would have commented on the frequency of this particular deformity at this time. Otherwise the evidence is excellent.

II. Alleged bona-fide maternal impression—subconscious type.

“We have heard of a mother (evidence?) who gave birth to a child that had but one hand. The other arm was handless as if amputated be-

tween elbow and wrist. The only way she could account for the deficiency was the fact that her husband's brother, who had his hand amputated, lived in the same family during the earlier months of her pregnancy. While she received no special shock, being familiar with his condition, yet maternal impression continued through a considerable period had its disastrous effects." This case is illustrative and suggestive for, as Dr. Stall says, it shows that the unconscious impression may be as potent as the conscious. Assuming that the evidence is quite good, how does Dr. Stall account for the normal children born directly of our mutilated war veterans?

III. Missed maternal impression; where a well defined shock occurred but the resulting defect did not resemble its alleged cause.

"An instance came under my observation but a few years ago in which the boy of the family had fallen from a banister of a porch some eight or ten feet to the ground below where his head came into contact with stones inflicting a large gaping wound of the scalp. The mother had it to care for until my arrival. In a few months (seven to be exact) she gave birth to a child with spinal defect that soon extended to the head to form hydrocephalus, causing great enlargement and the death of the child." Here the unborn child did not exactly register its mother's distress. Inasmuch as Goethe misunderstood the bones of the head and regarded them as modified vertebræ, the error on the part of the child is wholly excusable under the circumstances, for as Dr. Blondel said nearly two hundred years ago, it is "not yet acquainted with the outward objects that disturb the mother."

IV. Postpartum maternal impression; where a woman on beholding a marked child remembers the circumstance that must be held responsible.

I abbreviate a case reported by Ballantyne. "On July 2, 1884, she gave birth to a full term male child on whose chest there was a peculiar mark similar in size to the apple which was thrown at the patient, but rather paler in color. She then remembered the above mentioned circumstance (being hit by an apple in the previous October) and connected the impression and the mark together as cause and effect." Ballantyne, while he places this case in his list of maternal impression, remarks that it is not a strong case; to which I heartily agree. As evidence we cannot accept it any more than we accept the statement of several individuals on

beholding a well-filled pocket book—"It's mine"—as conclusive proof of the wallet's collective ownership.

V. Non-selective maternal impression; where a mother succeeds in marking both of the twins.

These cases are extremely uncommon, for as we shall see, maternal influence appears to be extremely rare and twins occur about one in eighty-eight births. I am therefore glad to report as an illustration, a case given by Wiistnei. He tells of a woman who was accustomed to taking her nap with her forehead against a porcelain stove. She gave birth to twins and it was found that each had a rather long impression running up and down on the forehead. The case is not reported in sufficient detail to comment on it. I present it for its face value, together with the suggestion that a mark down the forehead of each of the twins would be likely to make a skeptic examine the birth canal of the mother for a bony prominence in the pelvis.

VI. Non-selective type of maternal impression; where a mother only succeeded in marking one of the twins.

These cases must also be uncommon and I have found no instance reported by the champions for maternal impression either because they do not occur at all or because they do not strengthen the cause. I am of the opinion that the latter is the case: for abnormality in one twin is not particularly infrequent. I can, however, call attention to a case where the twins did not succeed in marking a single baby—the notorious example of the Balzac twins—a variety of Siamese—and one of them, I forget which, gave birth to a normal baby.

VII. Threatened maternal influence; where the mother is profoundly shocked and the infant refuses to register any marking whatever.

It may be remembered that the Messina disaster was calculated to upset the routine of that town, and yet after the earthquake only one abnormal child was born of the women who were pregnant at the time, and that in a woman who had been pinned down for many hours with a beam over her abdomen. Indeed, it was reported that a number of women that had aborted spontaneously in previous pregnancies were so severely shocked that they carried their children to term. Bischoff could not demonstrate a single case of maternal impression in 11,000 confinements; and William Hunter "during many years every woman in a large London lying-in hospital was asked before her confinement whether anything had

specially affected her mind, and the answer was written down, and it so happened that in no instance could a coincidence be traced between the woman's answer and any abnormal structure; but when she knew the nature of the structure, she frequently suggested some new cause." To this I would add a statement from Maclerc: "Do we not know how shy Women are always in confessing their Longings? They will never own upon the Spot, that they longed for such a Thing. It must be presented before them as if we knew nothing of their Desire. And, if they are so unwilling to confess their Longing and Affections before the Effect, why may they not be sometimes as backward to confess them afterwards? Certainly some Women are such unaccountable Creatures, that no more Stress can be laid on their Denials, than their Affirmations." (I would state the gentleman has been dead over a century.)

Maclerc attacked Blondel's famous treatise and based his contention on the Art of Criticism. He says: "All that lies upon me is to shew, that he (Dr. Blondel) has not proved his Negative." This argument holds today; for, as I have said, without the facts we have nothing to disprove. While nothing can be brought forward to demonstrate that a pregnant woman actually does influence her unborn child, it can be definitely proven that the child does affect the mother. Now, then, based on this fact, and with the idea that six equals half a dozen, if I propose the doctrine of fetal impression, I can defy anyone to prove me wrong—provided of course that any intelligent person will enter into argument with me. Further, this pseudo-hypothesis is much stronger than the maternal impression doctrine. If a child through congenital defect has hare-lip or what you will (and I can show that these defects arise spontaneously in egg-laying animals); and I can also show that the metabolism of the child (or call it what you like) influences the mother, then with justice I can also infer that carrying a child with a given defect will make the mother more susceptible to being shocked by a creature having a similar abnormality.

It is strange how difficult it is to think a new thought. I constructed an illustrative example for my hygiene class. "If a pregnant woman goes to the sideshow and is frightened at beholding a two-headed steer and later gives birth to a two-headed child, the biological question is, "What did the cow see?" I can not replace this with an authentic case reported by Wüstnei. It seems that a woman gave birth to a child with a sort of tumor in the pelvic region. The child died on its attempted removal, and

the tumor was found to contain a second child, or at least additional fetal parts. The mother then related that while she was pregnant she had a goose which brought forth her goslings and among the number was a double one. This double gosling she gave to her child of four years to play with but presently the sight of it became hateful to her and she was forced to dispatch it. Now while the maternal impressionist must explain what the goose saw; my pseudohypothesis of fetal impression can explain why the double gosling became hateful to the mother very readily.

I would therefore close this brief paper by repeating: The doctrine of maternal impression has four strong factors, its antiquity; its ubiquity; its iniquity and its unquestionable lack in proof. After all, the human being is more superstitious than he will openly admit, and perhaps P. T. Barnum, who capitalized credulity, should be accounted some word of authority in his statement "The public likes to be humbugged."