

MIDWIFERY IN SIAM.

SOME very interesting and curious notes on obstetric practice in Siam have been published by Dr. Samuel R. House in the *American Archives of Medicine* for 1879. The chief practitioners, he says, are elderly women. Male practitioners are summoned only in exceptional cases. Utterly ignorant as these are of anatomy and of the nature of the process of parturition, and holding that all delays and obstructions are caused by demoniacal interference, much of their practice consists in incantations and exorcisms and in rude methods to hasten expulsion. A favorite way is to press with great force on the abdomen and its contents, — shampooing vigorously with thumbs and fists. They even stand with bare feet upon the poor woman's body, crowding the heel upon the front or sides of the distended uterus. The writer has seen a large psoas abscess produced by the violence used on such an occasion. If the patient be feverish and restless, the midwife fills her mouth with perfumed water over which a charm has been muttered, and spurts it dexterously in a fine and not unrefreshing spray over the all but naked body of the sufferer, — bidding at the same time the evil spirit to be gone. In cases of tedious labor, a large brass bowl is procured, a long wax taper is lighted and fastened in the bottom of it by a few drops of the melted wax, silver coins to the amount of ninety cents (which are to revert to the midwife as fee) are stuck on the sides of the candle, and the bowl is filled up with uncooked rice, on which some coarse salt, dried peppers, etc., are thrown; and over this, with hands laid palm to palm and bowed head, an incantation is addressed to the invisible powers which have control over the malicious demons that are hindering the birth of the child.

For any bad symptoms that may arise, medicines are administered in accordance with their theory of pathology and therapeutics, that all disturbances of the system are produced by undue preponderance of one of the four elements, — fire, wind, earth, or water.

When the delivery is accomplished, one rushes out for salt; another for warm water and an earthen basin to wash the child; a third with frantic haste brings for the mother's comfort an earthen tray full of fire-brands, snatched up from the kitchen-fire, which soon fill the room with a blinding smoke. Meanwhile, from a piece of split bamboo a rude knife is fashioned, and with this the umbilical cord is cut, or rather sawed through, for with nothing metallic may the cord be severed. Since they never tie the cord, this is not bad practice, as by its liability to bleeding is prevented. An old earthen jar receives the placenta, which, with two or three handfuls of coarse salt thrown upon it, is buried in the garden, averting thus evil that would otherwise befall mother and child. The child is washed and laid on a soft pillow, around which, to protect from drafts and mosquitoes, a close curtain is ex-

temporized by using the three-yard piece of printed muslin that constitutes a Siamese dress. From the first day, babes in Siam are fed with honey and rice-water, and have the soft pulp of bananas crammed into their little mouths.

It is ingrained into the native female mind in Siam that the most direful consequences to both mother and child will ensue, unless for thirty days after the birth of her first child (a period diminished five days at each subsequent birth) she exposes her naked abdomen and back to the heat of a blazing fire, not two feet distant from her, kept up incessantly, day and night. From this curious custom none dare to exempt themselves. No superstition has greater hold upon them or more terrifies them with fear of coming evil if they fail to comply with it. Their medical science also bolsters up the custom by teaching that after the birth of the child there is always a diminution of the fire element in the system, tending to produce stagnation, a flabby state of the uterus, bad humors in the blood, a bad quality of the milk, and other unknown and terrible dangers to parent and offspring, from which this free external application of heat alone can deliver them. They think, too, the due quality and proper duration of the lochial discharge depend on this exposure to the fire. It is vain to tell them of the mothers in other countries who receive no detriment from their dispensing with such a usage. The manner of conducting this slow self-torture is as follows: A fire-place is brought in, or extemporized on the floor of the lying-in chamber by having a flat box or a simple rectangular frame-work of planks or trunks of banana-trees, three feet by four, filled in with earth to the depth of six inches. On this the fire is built with sticks of wood nearly or quite as large as one's wrist. By the side of this oblong frame and in contact with it, raised to the level of the fire, a piece of board six or seven feet in length is placed, and on a coarse mat spread upon this, or on the bare plank itself, the unfortunate woman lies, with bare back and limbs, quite nude indeed, save a narrow strip of cloth about her hips, with nothing else to screen her from a fire hot enough to roast a duck. There, acting as her own turnspit, she exposes front and back to this excessive heat. The husband or nurse is ever hard by to stir up and replenish the fire by night and by day. If it blaze up too fiercely, there is at hand a basin containing water and a small mop with which to sprinkle it on the flames and keep them in check. For the escape of the smoke no provision is made. Hot water alone is allowed to quench the patient's thirst.

His late majesty, Maha Mongkut, admitted the superiority of obstetric practice, and would gladly have abolished this absurd and injurious custom of his people. When he succeeded to the throne, in 1851, and children began to be born to him, he made some attempts in this direction. Upon the birth of the first of the eighty-one children begotten by him during his seventeen years' reign, Dr. House was summoned, in consultation with an older medical missionary, to the royal palace. Dr. Bradley had been sent for in the morning, and found the lady, who had given birth to a princess five days before, doing the usual penance of lying before a hot fire on a hard board, with the window-shutters of the apartment all closed, suffering from fever greatly aggravated by the heat and smoke. Representing the urgency of the case to his majesty, he obtained prompt and full permission to treat the

patient as he thought proper. The fire was at once, of course, removed, the window-shutters thrown open, the patient transferred to a comfortable mattress and cool water freely used, with some simple medicinal treatment. Thus relieved, the lady did well; and the success of the treatment was gratefully acknowledged by the king in an English letter accompanied with a purse of silver. There is, however, Dr. House says, no reason to suppose that this lady in her subsequent confinements dispensed with the broiling process. The queen herself, who, the ensuing year, gave birth to a prince, lay by the fire from choice, though suffering at the time with a grave disease which eventually caused her death.

It must be added, says Dr. House, there is one compensation to offset the mischievous consequences of this practice. It makes the women of the land escape the evils (prolapsus, etc.) that often result in other countries from resuming household duties too soon after the birth of a child. The Siamese mother is guaranteed by this custom, for one month at least, the fullest liberty to rest by her own fireside, undisturbed.