

MIDWIFERY.

ON THE CAUSE OF SUDDEN DEATH IN PARTURIENT WOMEN.

Read before the Boston Society for Medical Observation and communicated for the
Boston Medical and Surgical Journal.]

BY WILLIAM READ, M. D., FORMERLY PHYSICIAN TO THE BOSTON LYING-IN HOSPITAL.

In the recent volume of transactions, published by the Obstetrical Society of London (Vol. I., page 214), may be found a short article on this subject illustrated by two cases. In one, a *post-mortem* examination was made, and a firm clot was found in the heart and pulmonary artery. The other case was similar in its symptoms, but no examination having been made, no verification of the cause was obtained. The Reporter, Dr. Draper Mackinder, states that no satisfactory conclusion has been arrived at, with respect to the nature of the affection; and that upon communicating with Prof. Simpson he received no additional information, the latter being then engaged in investigating the subject.

That these cases should have made a deep impression upon the reporter's mind, is not to be wondered at when we consider the facts. Two mothers who had survived the ordinary dangers of childbirth, long enough to apparently place them beyond the reach of complications arising therefrom, were, with scarcely a moment's warning stricken down by death. Instances of like nature have occurred to many of the readers of this Journal, and reports of cases in which the same train of symptoms has occurred, have been made to the writer but with no satisfactory explanation of the cause. Believing that the principle, upon which the avoidance of such accidents is based, is sound, and from a conviction that the subject is one of the very first importance in the treatment of women subsequently to labour, the following article has been prepared, with the hope that by a dissemination of the knowledge of the *cause* of this most untoward result, its occurrence may be prevented. Prof. Meigs of Philadelphia has borne the amplest testimony on this point in his treatise on Obstetrics, in which, under the term *Heart-clot*, he has treated of the effect of the parturient hæmorrhage in producing the condition which to so great an extent predisposes the patient to this affection. ("Obstetrics; the Science and the Art." Philadelphia, 1852. P. 348 *et seq.*)

The effect of depletion in any way, by general or local bleeding, to increase the crassamentum of the blood and its disposition to coagulate, is well known. The mere amount of blood lost is no measure of this aptitude, for some constitutions will resist its effects to a degree greatly exceeding that which others can endure. This fact every obstetrician is fully cognizant of. The longer the hæmorrhage goes on, the greater also becomes the liability to it, so that either by the quantity lost, the length of time the flow lasts, or by the peculiarity of the individual case, every woman in childbirth becomes more or less obnoxious to its effects.

Fainting is caused by the diminished tension of the vessels in the sensorium, and loss of blood by inducing this condition, brings it on. "But—and this is the danger—if she faint badly, while her blood is become thin and highly coagulable from hæmorrhage, the scarcely moving current partly stops in the heart, and when she comes out of the deliquium she sometimes does so with a *clot* in the auricle and ventricle—she has got a false polypus in the heart and she will surely die." This is Prof. Meigs's way of stating the case, and it is pregnant with meaning to every one who assumes the charge of the lying-in room.

What are the conditions? A woman is taken in labour—hæmorrhage to a greater or less extent goes on through its course, and at last produces all the effects of a slow draining of the vessels—symptoms of lassitude, faintness and disturbance of the circulation. These vary in every case, but of the general fact of their presence, there is no doubt. The blood that remains in the system has been brought by this cause, to a degree of coagulability, that needs only a temporary stop to its flow through the vessels