

THE LITTLE GIRL, THE GIRL TO WHOM 'IT' HAPPENED, NATURAL PREGNANCY, SAINT MARY'S BED

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The Little Girl¹

I always liked to listen to old people's narratives about beliefs, customs, superstitions, and illnesses and their treatment. Now that I belong to the older generation, I try to compare the stories I once heard – and later experienced – with today's life style, customs, and civilized methods of healing.

In our grandmothers' time the lives of little girls were full of secrets. My grandma, and later my father, would warn me often when women were talking among themselves, "Don't eavesdrop," they would say, "it's not for you," or, "go and play, it is not proper for a little girl to be in the way." Much later, when I turned fourteen, I came to understand what those women had been talking about. I wish I could have listened to them then, not only for myself but also for all other girls of my age. It will forever remain a mystery why menstruation was such a shame, such a secret, when it is such a natural part of life. Why so much secrecy? After all, it is an essential part of womanhood, of women's health, reproduction, and the make-up of family life. Why did mothers conceal this fact of life from their daughters? Why didn't they teach them at the appropriate time?

As a result, the first appearance of the menstrual blood brought a deadly terror to those girls. I experienced this fright myself. Although I had a mother and even a sister who was ten years older than I, regardless, they did not prepare me for this unavoidable event. I had seen that my sister would sometimes wash something while hiding behind the haystack in the stable. She kept me always at bay with some excuse so that I never saw what she was washing and the laundered items were never anywhere to be found. If I asked my mother about my sister's irregular wash, she refused to answer. "It's not nice for a little girl to

be so curious," she answered. "It's your sister's business; don't meddle in adults' affairs."

When one day my stomach was hurting badly and I noticed bloodstains I thought the end was near. I didn't say a word to anyone even though I wanted to say farewell before I died. The fright was heightened when I learned that an ambulance had taken our neighbor to the hospital because her stomach was bleeding. Her husband was given no hope that she would recover. I thought to myself, if she dies and she is such a big, strong woman, then how could such a tiny thing as me survive all this? These thoughts haunted my mind all day long. At night I was afraid to fall asleep. All I could think was that the blood had come out of her mouth and mine came from somewhere else. I cried so hard that my mom began questioning me. I had to tell her the horrible news that I was going to die. Mom was astonished when she finally rooted out the "cause" of my impending death. She then comforted me and told me that she has the same trouble, as does my sister, and that it is not lethal. She said it would occur every month and that's why it's known as the monthly trouble. She then kissed me and told me that now I was a big girl. She instructed me endlessly; I should be cautious that no one should notice it, after all this was something to be ashamed of. It was then that I understood my sister's secret laundering operations.

In the mid-thirties (I was already a "big girl" by then) cotton batting was used only for application on wounds; it was unknown to those of us who lived out on farms. We used old rags folded up and layered instead of cotton batting when menstruating. My mother bought white, thick flannel material and cut it into pieces 30 cm by 30 cm. We then hemmed them and sewed laces

to the opposite ends and tied them between our thighs and around our waists. This was called the 'fökötö' [headwear/main tie]. We replaced this piece of cloth as often as necessary. It was much more tasteful than using those dirty rags. It was fairly difficult to wash them entirely clean due to a strict creed which held that if you washed the fökötö in too much water then your bleeding would be plentiful as well; not only would the "bad" blood go away, but the living blood as well. We had to be careful that no male member of the family, or any person outside of the family, would see our underwear when we washed it.

As time went by I came to learn more and more expressions for this "lethal disease", as I had earlier thought of it: "she can't go to the ball because she has to celebrate"; "her panties turned red"; "she was hit by the red car"; "the red Pentecost"; "wearing red slippers"; "Lucretia is sick"; "she'd got her trouble"; "the monthly trouble"; "the monthly thing"; "the monthly cleansing"; "the monthly tidying up".

Of course there were superstitions, beliefs, and taboos surrounding menses, just like for other things in the old days. For instance, if a girl touches her face with the clothes stained by the blood of the first menstruation her face will remain unblemished even during pregnancy. During menses a woman was not supposed to can fruit or pickle foods because it would cause the foods to go bad. It was also advised that she should avoid making noodles or kneading bread. It was also improper to go to church; if she did then she shouldn't go close to the altar of the Virgin Mary because of her impurity.

It was prohibited to visit a woman after childbirth while she lay in confinement because her baby's face would become scarred and blemished. If she forgot this rule or went and visited out of ignorance, then she was required to make good the error by a means that was utterly disgusting. Any woman who lay in confinement was obliged to ask her female visitors, "Are you 'like that'?" If the visitor answered 'yes', then for the sake of the child she had to wash a piece of her blood-covered underwear at home, then carry the water to the child's house and bathe him in it. Afterwards, she had to sponge the baby with the same underwear that she wore while menstruating while saying, "I am impure like your mother; be as pure as the angels."

There was another custom. If the time came for a woman to marry and she did not want to marry a widower, then what she could do to

avoid such a husband, was to water the foot of a rosebush with her menstrual blood in the morning. If this were done in the afternoon then she would have a widower as a husband. If there was no rose bush at her home she might go to the neighbor's, but this was a very risky act. Some believed that if a young woman wanted to get a particular young man she could make a special cake into whose filling she would add a few drops of her menstrual blood. She might add some marks or a little extra sugar on top of those pieces of pastry or cake to make certain that the desired young man, and not someone else, would eat those pieces. Its effectiveness was sworn by. That is why it is said, "this young man was fed," if he becomes attached to that woman.

In my grandmothers' time a great majority of women did not wear underwear. Those who did had them made with an open bottom. These were called "open" underwear. It was said that they were made that way so they could easily squat down to pee without having to pull their skirts up all the way. Once, when my mother was old, I found the courage to ask her about those days when they did not wear underwear, or used the open ones, and how they took care of themselves when they got their monthly bleeding. My mom, the poor thing, said to me angrily, "You know, my girl, we just put on our shoddiest underskirt underneath and from time to time adjusted it as needed. But don't ask me about these old things."

The Girl to Whom "It" Happened

I believe that if mothers had told their daughters when they got their menses regularly it meant that they were able to conceive and give birth, then there would have been far fewer single mothers, or as they used to say, girls to whom "it" happened. These single mothers had a lot of ridicule coming to them: "Her apron had a hole" or "her apron caught fire"; "she donned her mother's slippers"; "her hair went curly"; "she drank from the well"; "got done up"; "lost the virgin wreath"; "the non-smoked sausage gave her a stomach ache"; "the dressmaker shred her skirt"; or "she gazed at the stars from beneath a bush".

Some girls intentionally became pregnant so as to acquire a husband and would even take the badmouthing that came with it. Even if the young man married her, life usually wound up being miserable for her anyway. Her mother-in-law would argue, "You seduced my son, you brought a child out of wedlock into our honorable house.

Perhaps it's not even my son who fathered this child."

In the old days fathers were not held responsible by the law, making marriage difficult if even possible. If the boy was decent and married her, she could not wear a wreath on her head [for the wedding]; if she did people would speak poorly of her because only virgin girls were worthy of wearing it.

Those girls with no chance of marrying did everything they could to drive away [abort] the embryo. Women tried different methods of abortion because in those times there was no contraception. There were quack female doctors who were willing to perform abortions in exchange for a large sum. This process was known as "de-budding", "doing the tidying up", "doing away", "scraping the dirt road", or "making an angel". To rid themselves of the unwanted child the pregnant woman drank various herbal teas that made her throw up, or put as many hot bricks on her stomach as she could bear. Sometimes the bleeding began, sometimes it didn't. They took hot baths or steam baths, drank quinine mixed in elderberry tea, or the woman poked herself with a goose feather, a knitting needle or a crocheting hook, often with very sad consequences.

The last resort was to seek the assistance of a midwife who kept a shiny, metal key called the 'womb key'. With this key she opened the mouth of the uterus; success was certain, the bleeding began. I know from hearsay that this procedure was incredibly painful and very dangerous, not to mention expensive. If one didn't have the money then she would have to give the midwife her earrings, rings or other valuables to serve as payment. The midwife took no responsibility, her first condition being that after the procedure she would deny knowing the girl; she would deny everything. Many married women turned to her for help if they wished to have no more children. The midwife treated them with the same method. Her parting words would be, "If all turns out well then you are lucky; if you die, peace on your dust. I have never known you and have never met you."

Natural Pregnancy

Pregnancy that occurred within a proper marriage had its own set of names and was surrounded by superstitions - believed by some and still held by a few. Some euphemisms for the pregnant woman were: "she's in another condition"; "expectant";

"the holy spirit occupies her"; "the stork is nesting on the chimney"; "her husband threw his hat at her"; "the front of the house is getting rounded"; or "she grew out of her clothes".

Some held that a pregnancy must not be kept to oneself in secret because the child will be mute. You must not lean against the kiln with your stomach for your birth will be painful. You must not sit on a water can for your child will have a big head. You must not let your legs dangle for your child will be good-for-nothing. The pregnant woman must be careful not to see anything ugly, such as a crippled man or child because then her own child will be disfigured or be similar to the thing she had looked at. If something startles her or if someone frightens her she must not touch her face with her hands or her child will have a birth mark right where she had touched her face. In particular, the pregnant woman should neither marvel at dogs, nor cats, nor monkeys, nor caress any of them; if she does then her child will be as hairy as those animals. There was one pregnant woman who carried three cloves of garlic in a little bag worn around her neck so she would not have a freak child. A pregnant woman must not look at a dead person; her child will be pale. There are regions where pregnant women wear their blouses inside out during their pregnancy. I also hear that if a pregnant woman was scared it was suggested that she pee. If a pregnant woman combs her hair in bed, her child will be short lived. If a pregnant woman steals fruit or squash, in that case her child will be bald. If the pregnant woman eats a lot of strawberries then the child will be hairy. The expectant should not look at a dead animal's eyes because her child will have eye trouble or might even be blind. She should not step on a frog for her child will be stillborn. She should not say anything bad toward another pregnant woman or her child will have trouble learning to walk. If she chops wood on the threshold her child will be hunchbacked.

These assumptions are curious (I heard these from my grandmother, no less): If a little hat is sown into the bride's dress then she would have a boy first; sew in a little apron and she would have a baby girl. During coitus, the man must wear a hat so as to have a boy, or during intercourse the woman must keep her mouth shut and the man must hold a tobacco pipe in his teeth. It will also be a boy if the pregnant woman hides the husband's underwear under her pillow until birth. You should eat a whole piece of bread if you wish to have a baby boy. If you find a button you will have a boy, if you find a needle you will

have a girl. If the pregnant woman's apron has a hole burned in it then if the hole is oblong in shape it will be a boy, if it is round then it will be a girl. If the mother turns to her left side after giving birth then her second child will be a boy. If she gives birth to a girl she'll need to turn the straw mattress over, or a rooster must be butchered so that the baby girl will be attractive and the next child will be a boy.

A pregnant woman was very disappointed if her face became liver spotted. According to folk beliefs, such spotting of the face indicated the birth of a girl. If the pregnant woman found a mother who had had a girl and had not disposed yet of the placenta she would ask for a piece of that placenta and smear it on her face until the placenta went bad. Of course, the spots remained even for awhile after birth.

If a girl were born they would put holy water, pieces of holy candle, and a prayer book into the mother's bed so the girl would be religious. They would also put tobacco and brandy in the bed so she would marry. If a boy were born they would put potato, onion, and pieces of bread into the bed so his wife would be a good woman; in addition they would include a small, carved ax and a fragment of a saw so he would be hardworking.

The newborn baby would stay with the mother because until the child was baptized, usually when seven or eight days old, he was still a pagan and his mother's prayers would defend him from bad spirits and witches. If the child were very weak when he was born the midwife would give him a Christian name so that he wouldn't die without one. This was known as a midwife baptism. A child that wasn't baptized could not be removed from the birth room or yet placed in a crib. The feet of the child's crib or bed could not face the door as the dead were removed from the house in their coffin with feet outward.

It was prohibited to pour out the child's bath water after sunset. During the day it would have to be poured out where no hen could drink from it to prevent the child's face from being covered with scars. They would have to avoid raindrops on his diapers, clothes and bedding to prevent his face from being covered with freckles. His face could not be wiped with a diaper, even a clean one, or he would have sores about the mouth. If his clothes were left outside at night then that night the child would not be able to sleep.

Some women have a difficult time while pregnant: nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to smell, etc. Every expectant mother tried just about anything to make this period bearable, and sometimes they took the advice of old women. They ate dried plums; they soaked the petal of a lily in brandy and ate the petal or drank the liquid at the full moon. They put chalk dust into their water and drank it, or fetched water from the wells of three neighbors, mixed these, and drank it. Well, nausea goes away eventually. Some patiently endured it with hopes of bearing a daughter with long, beautiful hair.

There was some useful advice about infertility as well. About the infertile woman it was said that her blood did not match her husband's. To avoid problems with infertility it was suggested to put the placenta of a woman who has had her first child into one's bath, or to drink brandy in which dried and pulverized placenta had been mixed. If the infertile woman eats a dried umbilical cord she will become pregnant. If the infertile woman spits into the well on Christmas night she will get pregnant, or she may take a bunny into her lap, caress it, and if the bunny remains she will become pregnant. A woman wanting a child should walk with a cross to church festivals. She should go to church regularly and light a candle at the altar or at the portrait of Saint Anna. A picture of Saint Anna should be kept under her pillow.

Saint Mary's Bed

Before going into labor the woman had already agreed with her mother or mother-in-law whether to give birth in bed or on the ground like they did in the old days. I only know stories told to me by my grandmother, who would be 134 years old if she were alive, about women who gave birth while squatting or standing. She gave birth to my father in the cornfields. She stopped hoeing, gave birth, then put the child into her apron and the hoe across her shoulder and walked home.

The bed in which the pregnant woman gave birth was dubbed Saint Mary's bed. They sprinkled Saint Mary's bed and also the future mother with holy water and doused the expectant with smoke from a holy candle so that the birth would come to a successful conclusion. Even in 1932 in the area of Szeged, while the expectant lay in bed they would lock the door, darken the room, and place the holy candle at the window. This served the purpose of keeping bad spirits away. The holy candle was lit so Saint Mary would find the mother in labor.

It is interesting that in our area (Csongrád County) the husband wasn't allowed to see the woman give birth. He usually sat outside the door on a stool and listened to his wife's plaintive moaning. If the midwife or any of the attending old women needed something they would shout to him, "Bring cold water! Bring hot water! Fetch a towel but stay where you are, don't peek." They did not want the woman to be seen giving birth, dirty and untidy, by their husbands. When the mother and the newborn were clean and tidy then the midwife or one of the old women would tell him, "Come on in now, have a look at what you made." It seemed to be a requirement, especially by the old, that this be said.

If she gave birth in a stable or pen then straw would be taken from the animals and she would be made to lie on this bed of straw with the blanket of a tired horse to cover her. In such cases she would take her place in Saint Mary's bed following the birth. They would put straw on the bed and cover it with only a sheet. Lying on straw was uncomfortable but the mother had to bear it because her child would be lazy and good-for-nothing if the mother laid in a soft, comfortable bed.

I remember occasions when women on the farms would remove all the bedding from the bed and lay straw in its place [for the birth]. Once the mother was washed clean and dressed up [following the birth] the bed would be tidied up again.

Midwives prohibited giving birth in a stable. Sometimes the female relatives would deceive the midwife and only inform her of the birth after it had already taken place. [If birth had been given in the stable] the mother would carry the newborn into the house in her apron saying as she crossed the threshold with her left foot, "I have brought the fortune in hopes that no harm will come to him." Then she would bathe the baby and lay him in the clean bed on sheepskin so that his hair might be curly. When the midwife arrived with her complaints of not being properly advised the women would yammer, "Oh dear, this child came so quickly we didn't have time to inform you."

For eliminating labor pains they would place the woman's engagement scarf [a scarf given to young girls by their mothers, used for courtship] or the tablecloth used for Christmas dinner on her stomach. Or they would pour holy water into a glass, then dip rosemary or a lily in it and sanctify the laboring mother's stomach with the sign of the

cross. Every house had rosemary or lilies, especially when there was a young woman living there. They would dry it for winter storage.

If an extended labor brought the mother to suffer immensely then either her mother or mother-in-law would go and get the lash of little God. This was a wild plant that grew one meter tall, a kind of weed (I don't know its official name) that could be found by the road or in meadows. The straight stem of this climbing plant was covered all over with tiny, yellow flowers that looked as if they were glued onto the plant. They believed that this plant could chase away bad spirits and they would stroke the mother's stomach crosswise with it. How it got its name, I don't know, but every child knew that you mustn't break the lash of little God neither with a stick or by hand. If one did dare do such a thing his or her hands would dry right off.

The mother in labor, from the beginning to the end, would keep her eyes shut so her child wouldn't have bulging eyes. If she gave birth in bed then she would hold on to the bed tight, raising her arms above herself as if she had wings so that when the angels walked by they might mediate between Saint Mary and the suffering mother and they would implore the former to eliminate the mother's pain.

Often, the late departure of the placenta, or the so-called "other," would result in serious complications. Sometimes they only noticed the problem if the mother was bleeding heavily and the blood smelled foul. First they would try to remove it through home remedies. They would put a hot chamomile compress, or hot bricks, or salt on the mother's stomach. They would make her drink brandy with tea made from a white flower, or cut a lock of hair from a virgin and burn it, dousing the mother with the smoke. They turned to the midwife only when they'd run out of home remedies. If the midwife thought there were some sort of infection, then she would call for the doctor. Sometimes the mistake was made of not alerting the midwife to the birth; often these cases would end with death.

Often they would bury the placenta at the west corner of the house so the child would be calm. If the mother didn't want to have more children then the placenta would be burned and its ashes mixed into the husband's drink and the husband made to drink it without his knowledge. If the husband knew about the concoction when he drank it then it would have no effect. In some

places the placenta was dug into the manure heap with the belief that the harvest would be better.

It was believed that if a child were born in the caul he would be very lucky, so they would be very careful with the caul. Even today it is still said here in the Szeged area when someone's life path looks successful, "He must have been born in a caul."

Even in the 1930s the women on farms would stay in bed for six weeks after giving birth. Regardless of how strong and healthy the mother might be, she would have to stay in bed so her child would not be sickly. So that bad spirits would not harm her, they would never leave the woman in confinement alone. If no one could stay with her they would stick a pocketknife into the doorpost and hang garlic on the door handle. Throughout the six weeks relatives would bring fine soups, fried chicken, cake, and wine. Sometimes there would be enough food for the whole family to eat plentifully for days. There would be days when she would receive food from many people; no matter if she excused herself by saying she had just had lunch she would still have to take a bite from each dish. Otherwise the feelings of the person who brought dinner would be hurt and she would curse, "Be your child as begrudging toward you as you have been toward this food."

Young mothers were afraid that their stomach would remain big after birth, so they would tie their stomach tight with a towel even in confinement. Some even wore this uncomfortable stomach tie for one or two months to regain their pretty figures.

If the mother bled a lot it made her extremely weak; some were more hemophilic than others. The duration and quantity of the menstruation blood was an indicator. Some women menstruated for only three days, others for six to seven days with stomach and waist pains. The latter would be concerned about birthing, and their concern was well founded as all mothers and mothers-in-law believed in old superstitions and herbal medicines and sometimes only called for the midwife or doctor when it was too late. They would put various cold and hot compresses on the bleeding mother's stomach, or would make her eat bread crust dipped in brandy or the tea made from some root or other. They would watch while the mother grew weaker and weaker from losing so much blood. Sometimes the poor thing would live four to five weeks. If the mother died from losing so much blood they would say that it was the Lord's wish. But if the Lord wanted to take the mother, why did he leave this tiny innocent creature behind?

¹ Bitóné, Eszter Gera is a female writer of peasant background. She was born in 1922 on a Hungarian 'tanya' [farmstead] in the Szeged region. She received her elementary school education in Balástya and made her living by working with the land. She was never trained formally as a writer. She began writing poems when she was a young girl but later burned all her notes and writings. Eszter Gera kept her writing ambitions secret from her husband and they remained a secret until 1975 when the director of the local culture house encouraged her to submit her papers to various ethnographic journals. Her monograph, entitled 'Régi paraszt életünkre emlékezem' [Remembering our old peasant life] was published in 2000 in Hungarian. The stories of The Little Girl, The Girl to Whom 'It' Happened, and Natural Pregnancy were not included in this book. Her writing endeavors have come to a close with the recent publication of a collection of poems,

'Járom az utamat mindig fájó szívvel' [My path is taken always with an aching heart]. She lives in a three-generational family house in the village of Balástya.