

W O M A N

AN HISTORICAL GYNÆCOLOGICAL
AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL COMPENDIUM

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WOMAN

VOLUME III

CHAPTER I

DIFFICULT AND ABNORMAL BIRTHS

1. PRIMITIVE CONCEPTS OF CAUSES

ALL obstructions in the normal process of labour are usually called abnormal labour, difficult labour or dystocia. Now, although it appears that among savage peoples, delivery generally proceeds easily, yet with them also obstacles to delivery sometimes occur, and even from the peculiar regulation prescribed among different peoples for pregnant women and women in childbirth, it is possible to infer what opinions are prevalent among them as to the causes of a difficult or obstructed delivery, for the precautions taken by them indicate that they fear and try to avoid quite definite obstacles. An exact description of their ideas as to how obstacles to delivery arise can, of course, not yet be given. Moreover, we must assume that savage peoples with their imperfect observation of nature have generally only a very vague idea of the conditions of a normal or abnormal process.

First of all, however, it seems that abnormal presentations of the child must by some process of thought appear to the lower races to be the principal causes of difficult labour. This is certainly indicated by the very widespread manipulations which are employed by many of them even during pregnancy for the improvement of the position of the child. That the factor of feebleness of labour pains so important in protraction is not unknown to them, we see from the fact that they try to aid the natural mechanism of parturition by all kinds of modifications of a scientifically applied pressure on the abdomen. Among many peoples, too, we come across the idea that the child itself is not doing its duty adequately, and that it is not making enough effort to get out of the uterus, even that it is obstructing delivery intentionally so as not to be born. By no means seldom also, some obstructive magic, but especially demons, etc., are made responsible for the inexplicable protraction of labour. (*Cf.* II., pp. 426 and 783).

Medical observers in the Indian Reservations of North America record that the Indians have without doubt a certain idea how difficult labour occurs and arrange their treatment accordingly.

In Uganda, children born with the feet first are killed, and, like witches, are buried at a cross-roads. It is believed that they would be the cause of their parents' death, and if the latter were to let them live, the parents would pass away (see Roscoe).

It is also not unknown to savage peoples that a certain disproportion between the size of the child and the dimensions of the genital passage of the mother may cause very considerable obstruction in delivery.