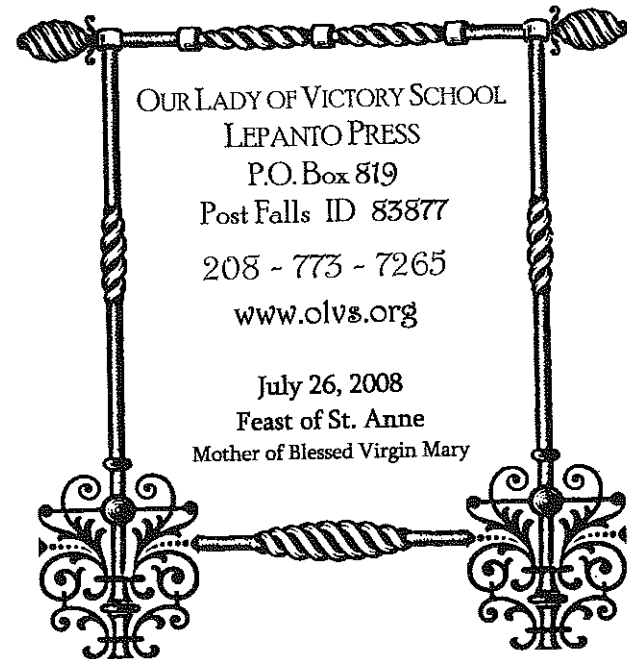


All for the Love of Mothers

LISBETH BURGER



Who Wrote "Memoirs of a Midwife"?

THIS book has given rise to a great deal of guessing and supposing and declaring. One question is asked me again and again: Is what is written in this book really true? Or, isn't it written by a priest? Is it just a good collection of fictitious examples? . . .

I can understand the hope which this supposition conceals; but I must destroy it. And I can divine, too, the trembling expectation which prompts this question and would gladly hear it answered in the affirmative.

But Lisbeth Burger really is only an old "Auntie Stork." She is not a screen for any priest. The book contains some of the bitterly serious experiences of a midwife's life. It contains accounts of actual facts and as faithful a record of various episodes as is possible without transgressing the bounds of discretion. For it was not written in order to pillory individual human beings. It was intended to show to countless numbers of doubting, wandering and seeking souls the forces which are at work in human life and the true inter-connections and ultimate origins of cause and effect. Indeed, the threads of destiny of women and girls—not of one village alone but of the whole German people, perhaps of the whole human race—are knit together.

Again and again I receive inquiries which unwittingly confirm this view. "You must have lived in W——; your description fits the conditions there exactly." Or reproachful questions: "Why did you describe the conditions in B——?" I have no intention of forgetting the love and indulgence which we all owe to our fellow-men. The name of the village is of no importance for my purpose and will never be made known.

THE AUTHOR

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Preface

Dear Reader,

At first glance when looking at this book, one might wonder if it was really appropriate to publish an older book on such a precise and delicate subject. The reality is that this obscure author had an experience that was priceless in helping to comprehend modern man. She lived as a midwife in Catholic Germany before, during, and after World War I. She had a unique insight into the intimate lives of a generation being revolutionized. From a society whose ethics were simply the natural law of the Creator, to a liberal society where all moral barriers were broken down, the elementary respect of Human Life was, and still is, abandoned. Abortion, contraception, and general immorality had devastated the fiber of social life, and had even entered the sacred sanctuary of the family.

Therefore, the primary interest of this work is not historical, it is educational and moral. It contains dozens of short stories of personal, first hand experiences regarding courtship and marriage, as well as other types of relationships between men and women. At the end of each story, you will not read, "So the moral of the story is..." The moral will be self-evident. It will be illustrated with real people and real actions and will be, therefore, all the more convincing, all the more profound.

Now one might think that this book is for certain types of people only (e.g. only nurses, only mothers, or only fiancées). Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. There is a moral for *everyone* in this book. The development of Human Life is an element which concerns all members of society: fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, grandparents, fiancées, politicians and priests. In fact, I defy any reader to read this entire book and say that he did not retain from it any lesson at all.

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Having said this, however, it is obvious that this book more directly concerns that portion of society that is apt to procreate, particularly our adolescent youth. An unsettling aspect of our so very unbalanced modern society is that on one hand, we have lost the sense of healthy decency and are now quite accustomed to shameless public immodesty. On the other hand, we have lost the tradition of father-to-son, mother-to-daughter lessons of what we would evasively call the "the birds and the bees". Let us take for granted that most parents walk their children through the practical aspects of puberty. In truth though, how many parents *properly assume their duty* to sit down with their adolescent children and explain to them the beauty, dangers, finality, order, morals, proper terms and attitudes, of that sacred union which is before them in the passage to adulthood?

When considering these most important rules of life, many young adults express their desire to have their own experiences and make their own mistakes rather than receive lessons from someone else. What adult does not identify *that* naiveté with that of Eve (fully adult in her body and yet very young in days), who wanted to make her own discovery, and then only came to the realization of it when the irreparable damage had been done? Her innocence had been lost forever - for her and her unhappy offspring.

Undoubtedly, this book of experience will spur on parents to prepare their children for the great lessons of life, and give to them living examples to illustrate these lessons, hopefully sparing them the cost of irreversible consequences.

Let us admit that the majority of these stories do not have a happy ending...such is life. Does not life itself teach us that we learn more of those hard lessons from unhappy episodes than from fairytale endings? Yet, let the reader be optimistic in seeing the good side of every story within these pages. Additionally, let

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him allow the happy endings to shine a joyful light on the whole work.

Easy to read and immediately captivating, you might read this book faster than any other you have read, and yet you may just as easily read little bits of it between long intervals. In any case, at the very least, may the great lesson remain: namely that mankind can, and will only, be happy on this earth as long as he faithfully respects the order established by his Divine Creator and His most precious natural gift, Human Life.

Father Chad Kinney, FSSPX
Albano, Italy ~ 9 March 2008
Passion Sunday
(St. Frances of Rome)

About Myself

I, OLD Lisbeth Burger, have now for forty years been midwife in a large village. All sorts of people live in the place—not only large and small farmers and day-laborers, but craftsmen, too, and people of all trades and professions up to the doctor and the chemist; and officials up to the schoolmaster and the head forester. For tens of years now there have been large factories barely a quarter of an hour distant, with workers' colonies attached, so that we have seen, too, all that industrial development brings with it. In this village I have had all sorts of experiences, and I made notes of those that seemed to me most important. Now I mean to try to relate some of them. For I believe that many of them will be of interest to every woman and every man, whether young or old.

Of course, I am an old woman. I cannot talk in the fashion of today, in such a crazy, high-falutin' style that by the time you get to the end you don't know how the man began or what he is driving at. If I go to a lecture, the words jingle and clatter in my ears like a peal of bells, but I can't make out any tune and my heart remains empty. And then, if I ask other people how they liked it, they are all sure to say: Simply splendid! Very interesting and instructive! Wonderful and uplifting. . . . But what it was all about, no one seems able to tell you—not one sentence and not one useful hint.

Well, I cannot talk like that. I am too old. Nearly seventy. But as for telling stories, that Lisbeth was always able to do. Even when I was at school, the children used to crowd 'round me and beg: Lisbeth, tell us a story. Then I often thought of something and told it them, just as if I were reading to them out of a story-book. And later, in my working life, many an hour and many a night have I sat by the mother's bedside and told her stories to pass the time and keep up her spirits. If I had been able to study, I believe I might have made a real writer.

And so I fancy I shall be able to tell my tale now, for I shall not be telling stupid, made-up stories, but about things that really happened. Indeed, every child has its own story. For no two children are exactly alike, any more than two leaves on a tree are exactly alike. But they can, to a certain extent, be classified in certain big groups, just as, for all their individual peculiarities, linden leaves are still linden leaves, and oak leaves are still oak leaves. So I shall just describe one little leaf from each tree. It is tiring to look at a hundred leaves all of one kind, and it would make my book too long.

But as nowadays records are all the fashion, let me say that I think I should be found to have traveled a good three times the distance 'round the globe if all my journeys by day and by night were added together. And I have helped two thousand two hundred and eighty-three children into the world. No one at the present day will beat that record—more's the pity! So I, too, am a record-maker and have the right to tell my tale.

It was in the year 1887. Something had happened in our village, though what it was I did not know. At that time such things were shrouded in a veil of deep mystery, which no one who was not married and who wanted to

rank as a respectable girl made bold to lift. I only knew that a mother died in childbirth, and that the blame was laid on the midwife of our village.

This midwife was an old woman, seventy-six years of age, who looked as decrepit as she was. She herself had reared ten children and up to a few years back had had to support a husband who all his life had liked to drink as much and to work as little as possible. Now he was dead. The children had left home and gone their own ways, and not one of them bothered about their old mother. It was said the poor old creature had her husband's failing, and was too fond of the bottle. At all events, she had grown very queer. And to add to her misfortunes she had now caused the death of a mother. It was said not to have been her first blunder, but the results of the others had not been so serious.

In any case, the local doctors and the district medical officer insisted very emphatically that a new young midwife must be trained. The midwife in the neighboring village was married and in childbed herself every year—usually just when she was needed. Owing to the setting up of the new factory, our village was growing. And the wives and mothers now debated eagerly who should be their midwife. But no one in their own ranks was prepared to take up the burden.

My father had once been schoolmaster in the village, but had unfortunately died very young in a typhoid epidemic. My brother had just entered the training college, and my sister, who was always ailing, was at home. I had learned a little sewing, which was then almost the only occupation open to a woman in the country districts, and I tried by this means to add to our scanty pension. A hard living, for there were already three old seamstresses in the village, and the women at that time still wore their

rustic dress, which lasted for scores of years. Their simple workday clothes they mostly made themselves.

Then one day the priest came to see us. He looked quite solemn, as though he had come to a funeral.

"Lisbeth, I want to talk to you very seriously . . ." he began.

Gracious, he surely can't want to tell me of an offer of marriage! I thought. As to that matter I had made up my mind long ago. But he soon put an end to my suspense.

"You will have heard that we are needing a new midwife in the village," he said. "Well, at the Parish Council meeting today, I suggested that they had better send you to be trained."

"But, good heavens . . ." This was far worse than I had feared. One of our family to become a midwife. . . .

"It will cost you nothing. The parish will bear the expense of your training at the school for midwives. There are about eighty births here in the year, and at the present time the fee is twelve marks. That will give you a nice little income—even if now and then a poor woman cannot afford to pay the full fee. Your sewing doesn't bring you in enough to buy the salt for your porridge."

"That's all very well," interrupted my mother. "But I did not bring up my Lisbeth for such work as that . . . no, certainly not. She must remain in some decent occupation; midwifery is no work for a respectable girl."

"What do you mean by something decent?" retorted the pastor. "Is not a midwife's profession decent? To help women through their difficult hour. You women are always glad enough at such times to have anyone decent whom you can trust at your bedside—aren't you? And to help little children into the world! Why, there is hardly a more beautiful calling for a woman who is not herself

a mother than to help and care for mother and child at such a time. It is a fine and a serious calling. The midwife always holds two human lives in her hand: the mother's and the child's. I could hardly wish for myself any more beautiful profession, if I were a woman and not married, not a mother myself."

"But it is no work for a decent girl. A girl ought to know nothing at all about such things. Unless she is married. . . ."

"But your Lisbeth is no longer a child. Nearly thirty. She might have had four children herself by this time if she had married as early as some people."

"But she has not—and so she has no concern with such things. No, I couldn't bear my daughter to agree to that. . . ."

"You keep on talking about 'such things' . . . 'such things.'" The old priest spoke quite testily, a rare occurrence with him. "Is it a sin for little children to be born in true wedlock? Did not our Lord God ordain that it should be so? God's works are good; they are always good. It is only the thoughts of men and therefore their works, too, that are wicked. Now some good person is to become midwife here so that God's whole blessing may be upon our village. An unmarried woman can perform the duties of this profession far better. She is not herself hampered by motherly cares and housework, particularly if, as in your case, there are other women at home. Lisbeth will be quite free to devote herself to other people."

"But it simply isn't fitting. . . ."

"Then why did the Virgin Mary go across the mountains to her kinswoman Elizabeth? Just to tell her a piece of news? No, but because she wanted to help her in her difficult hour. And if it was fitting for her—the purest virgin—it must still be right today. Above all, for the

pure. Pure hands and a pure heart are needed for such a responsible calling. And a clear head which is not crammed with silly notions and doesn't get flustered as soon as anything happens. And, lastly, a woman who can hold her tongue and has every bit of her heart in the right place. In fact, Frau Burger, I told them at the Council Meeting that Lisbeth is going, and I can't let you make me the laughing stock of the whole village. The mayor is already on his way to the Midwifery School so that Lisbeth can start the course in October, because it is essential to make some improvement here at once. Else another year will pass. You surely don't want to be answerable for another calamity such as happened a short while ago."

"And if my child is ruined, who is going to be answerable for that?"

"Myself, Frau Burger. I guarantee that Lisbeth will be a splendid midwife—a blessing to all the women and all the babies—and that it will harm her neither in body nor in soul. So in a week's time you will be ready to start, eh?"

"Yes," I said, "but—I am sure all you say is true . . . but I really don't know at all what a midwife has to do. . . ."

"Good heavens, child! To help the infant come into the world properly and to see that the mother takes no harm. And to attend to the child's wants—it doesn't come down from heaven ready washed and dressed."

"But I don't know at all how—how. . . ."

"You will soon learn how and what. You were always top of the school; you'll master this, too. And meanwhile your mother can tell you a few things."

"One doesn't talk about such things. My mother never did so either," said my mother curtly. And I ventured one last objection—for I really felt terribly nervous and afraid

of this mysterious world into which I was being drawn.

"But surely it is a sin for—people like us. . . ."

"Indeed, you never learned that from me in the catechism class! And do you think that, if it were, I would suggest it for you? To know how a child comes into the world is the right of every adult human being. Anyone may know about God's works who is old enough to understand them. And to share in them—to be, as it were, God's helpmate—is a great honor for a human being. It is only sinful if one abuses one's knowledge for all sorts of wrong ends. You will soon understand that and learn to draw the distinction."

We went on arguing for some time, but the upshot was that a week later—although my mother was really still reluctant to let me go—I set off to the Midwifery School. The headmaster's wife, who was a native of the town, went with me, for neither my mother nor I knew our way about the place.

There were fourteen of us new pupils. Three of us shared one little bedroom, and the first evening we all sat down to supper and could not find a word to say to one another. The next morning in the classroom we had to form in line in alphabetical order, which meant that I came first. The principal delivered to us an address in which he laid such stress on the seriousness of our calling that our hearts were quite heavy. Then he asked me:

"Have you already had a child?"

Heavens. . . . What a question to ask! What sort of person could he take me for. . . . Overcome with confusion, I stammered out: "No . . . our priest said . . . that was not necessary."

Some of them laughed, but the principal said very gravely and firmly:

"Quite right. It is not in the least necessary for the

proper understanding and performance of your duties. I am always glad when virgins devote themselves to the service of mothers and children."

But only three of us were virgins. Most were married women, and four were unmarried mothers. Then gradually it dawned upon me why my mother did not want to let me become a midwife. The old principal gave a special lesson to us three before the classes began. For that I am grateful to him to this day. He explained all that we did not know so beautifully that afterward we were really not very much hampered by our inexperience.

But at that time I often reflected that mothers ought not to let girls loose upon the world with such stupid ideas when once they are grown up. After all, it is a lovely thing to have a child in lawful wedlock, especially when one considers that God creates the soul for the little body and plants it beneath the mother's heart. . . .

We had to work hard day and night, for the weeks slipped by very fast, and at that time we had only five months in which to learn everything. Then came the examination, after which we received our diplomas, and in the first days of March, just as the starlings were paying their first spring visit, I came home bringing with me, at the instructions of the Parish Council, a perfectly new and up-to-date equipment.

My mother was waiting to meet me at the station. And, as we walked side by side through the village, curious eyes peeped out at us from behind the window curtains. The gaze of the women expressed incredulity, for they could hardly believe that an unmarried woman was now to be their midwife; that of the girls expressed amazement and obvious envy of my knowledge. The gaze of the children expressed only innocent delight.

"Look, here comes the new Auntie Stork!" called one

little fellow to his playmates. "You know, the one who brings the babies to the houses!"

"No, she doesn't bring them! The stork brings them!"

"But she has to come and take them away from the stork . . . else it bites the mother's leg. . . ."

"No, the stork brings them all to her, and then she takes them to the house in her black bag. . . ."

Blessed innocence of childhood.

My First Case

LATE on Saturday evening of that same week, just as we were about to go to bed, the station-master arrived. Would I come to his house? His wife would certainly be needing me before daybreak. So it would be better for me to wait in his warm room than that he should have to come and fetch me in the middle of the night.

"Of course, I'll go with you at once. I must just get on my shoes again." I was so glad that the work was beginning straight away and that the objections of the women to a young, unmarried midwife were clearly not too stubborn and deep-rooted.

"The last time it happened so quickly that I had to turn midwife myself," the father told us meanwhile. "Before old Babet arrived it was all over; there was nothing left for her to do but to bathe the child. . . ."

"You have three already, haven't you?" asked my mother.

"Yes, two girls and one boy. We'll see what Lisbeth brings us tonight. It's your first job, isn't it? Now mind, it's to be a boy!"

"No, a girl!"

"Of course, you women always hold together!"

"Lisbeth, do you really feel equal to it?" My mother was very nervous.

"Why, of course, Mother, I have learned my work.

Don't worry. The priest said I must always pray to all the holy angels to help me when I go on such an errand—to my own angel and the mother's and the child's. Then everything is sure to be all right."

"Now listen to that . . . the child's angel . . . ?" exclaimed the station-master.

"Yes. The angel is with it from the time it begins to live in the mother's womb. It has a soul as soon as it is conceived; so it must have a guardian angel, too."

"Well, I have three children already, and I never yet heard that. But it's quite true. Did not our Lord say: 'Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven'? You must tell my wife about that when it's all over."

"It seems to me very wrong that my girl should have been persuaded into doing such work," wailed my mother. "Who knows what may happen? I shall have no rest till she's back again. . . ." In the meantime I had got ready to start. The station-master took my part.

"She has learned her work, Frau Burger. Why, my new assistant is no more than a boy. I thought even such a greenhorn might be of some use some day. And the day before yesterday one of the points was out of order, and no one noticed it but this lad. If he hadn't, there would have been a nasty collision here. He had learned his job and so he did the right thing. Everyone has to learn to stand on his own feet some time or other."

"Shan't I tell Babet to go with you?"

"Why, surely, Mother, you wouldn't put me to shame like that! My reputation in the village would be ruined once and for all. The women are prejudiced against me already, just because I'm unmarried. Now make yourself comfortable in bed and go to sleep. And if you wake

tonight, think of the angels who are going to help me. God bless you, Mother dear!"

The station building was some distance from the village, and, as we strode along side by side, we met some men coming out of the inn. They greeted us with a little good-natured banter: "Is it coming by express again?" And the mayor, who was with them, called out after me: "See that your first job is a masterpiece!"

The station-master's wife was standing at the front door polishing the brass bell-handle as we came up the steps. "When the people come to congratulate us tomorrow, everything must be looking spick and span," she said cheerfully. "My sister-in-law is coming by the night train and won't be here till toward morning."

She pressed her lips together and bent double with the labor-pains, which had been growing more and more violent during the last three hours, as she presently confessed to me.

But she was soon laughing again: "We women have to thank old mother Eve and her wretched apple for a horribly unpleasant business," she said cheerily. In the parlor the table was laid. "My husband was working late and went straight to fetch you. We'll sit down now and have a nice cup of coffee. It's always comforting after one's been out in the cold."

She would not let anyone help her with her housewifely duties. But now and then she clenched her teeth and put her hands to her back as the terrible, tearing pains started again. But she did not want our sympathy. "A mother must not give way too soon. It's passing already . . ." she said. "Besides, in return I shall have the child!" and her mother's eyes shone already with joyful expectancy. "What eyes Peter and Gretchen and Lieselotte will make tomorrow morning, when they see a wee creature lying

in the cot! They have been bothering me every day to know if it won't be coming soon. They don't give me a moment's peace, they're so impatient."

The cradle with its snowy coverings was standing ready for the child. Linen and napkins, cotton-wool and anti-septic, water and a small bath—in fact, everything that might be needed had been prepared by the mother. After all, it was not her first, she said, when I expressed my admiration. One got to know what was wanted.

We chatted for a time about one thing and another to help pass the time. Then the mother sent her husband to bed. "Be sensible, Peter, and get some sleep. You can't help me. I've got Lisbeth here, and we two shall be able to manage. If we can't we'll call you. But you must have your head clear tomorrow. It's Sunday and the line will be busier than usual. . . ."

After a little demur the station-master did as he was told, and retired to the temporary bed which had been made up for him in the children's room. But first he bade us good night and gave his wife the evening blessing. As he made two little crosses with holy water on her brow, he said: "The other is a blessing for our child." And I thought to myself that a child which even before birth was surrounded with such parental love and faith and care must indeed be one of fortune's darlings. A husband who takes his fatherhood so seriously is a prop and stay to the mother and will never burden her with the whole care and responsibility for the child.

"But you will call me. . . ."

"As soon as ever we need you, I promise. You'll hear your little daughter screaming," she added teasingly.

"So she's set on a girl, too! No girls for me—I want a boy!"

"Men are far more anxious than we are—when they're

the right sort . . ." said the mother, when her husband had gone. "The good God is going to send us a child, and I don't mean to grumble, even if it does go hard with me."

As the pains were becoming more and more violent, I now insisted on her going to bed. The intervals of relief became shorter and shorter, and her hands clutched the sheet convulsively. The agony swept through her body like a wave and, when it reached its height, she clenched her teeth and gave vent to a low groan. But no sooner had the pain ebbed a little than the brave woman wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Life is so hard. . . . The child cries when it comes into the world. . . . No, the mother ought not to cry, too. She ought to give him a cheerful welcome. . . . Love should be happy and laughing. . . ."

"What are you going to call the child?"

"Joseph or Josephine—as the case may be. We'll see who's right, father or I. Whether he gets his boy or I my girl. . . . What did you think, Lisbeth, the first time you saw this business?"

"I kept on thinking of the dear Mother of our Lord. I thought how she knew that her only Son was going to the Mount of Olives and that He would be seized and scourged . . . she must have shared all His suffering in her room, until she could bear it no longer and went to Him and stood right under His cross. . . . The Mother of Jesus did not suffer as other women do at the birth of her child, but she suffered all the more in His last hours. . . . But at length came Easter morning. When a child is born, it always seems to me a real Easter joy. The suffering is over—new life has arisen—love has conquered. Mother love can rejoice in the victory it has won."

"That is a grand, lovely thought, Lisbeth. Only you must not do like the apostles: fall asleep or run away.

You must stay and keep watch, help and . . . pray. At these times, you know, one feels that one needs a Lord God—a power from another world."

At three o'clock in the morning the pains were at their height. We had stopped talking. The mother was too sunk in her agony—and I was filled with a profound excitement. For the first time I was alone at such a time with mother and child. I felt as though my soul were stretching out innumerable hands toward our Father in heaven.

Suddenly Joseph was there.

Limp and exhausted, the mother lay back in the pillows. But suddenly, as I was washing and tending the wailing infant, her pains started afresh, sweeping through the tired body in waves that grew more and more violent.

And half an hour later little Josephine arrived.

Then we both laughed, the mother with tears in her eyes. Joseph and Josephine—truly a Solomon's judgment! Now both father and mother had their wish. And as I handed the mother the second little bundle, she made a little cross on the puckered brow. The first mother's blessing. And she kissed the little one: "You're just as dear to us as your little brother. You needn't worry because you came last. . . ."

Wearied to death, the mother fell asleep.

What a surprise for the station-master when he came in at half past five before setting off for his work and saw the pair of them, as pink as rosebuds, lying in the white basket. And when a few hours later the three older children were admitted, their admiration and curiosity knew no bounds.

"A little brother and a little sister! Where did they come from?"

"From the good God," said the father. "He has given them to us."

"From the Father in Heaven? From Heaven? How did they get here? Did an angel bring them?"

"An angel came with them. One with little brother and one with little sister. Their guardian angels. Now they will always stay with them. And you must be very gentle with little brother and little sister, because they are so small and weak. Else the angel will be sad."

Six little hands stroked the little creatures in the basket. Three little mouths kissed them until they set up a wail. Then we had to put a stop to their caresses, which the infants had not yet learned to appreciate.

"But which is little brother?" asked six-year-old Lieselotte, gazing thoughtfully into the basket.

"The one with the red ribbon on his vest. . . ."

"But suppose you get the vests mixed?"

At that moment their aunt arrived from the station, so the child's attention was turned elsewhere. The station-master prepared to go out again.

"Father, where are you going? To fetch another aunt?"

"No, to church. To thank the good God for the children. . . ."

A Round Dozen

FEELING thoroughly proud of my achievement, I arrived home on Sunday morning. My mother and sister had just sat down to breakfast. "Did you really manage all right?" was my mother's first question.

"Yes, indeed, Mother. And two at once. A boy and a girl." By the time we set off to church together, the news had already spread through the village. Everyone questioned me and teased me, as though I were personally responsible for the twofold blessing. And I paid them back in their own coin. "Now you can see that I've learned my trade thoroughly. You know you only half trusted me." So I got the best of it and had the laugh on my side.

A few days later, at three o'clock in the morning, the farmer from the Brandhof arrived. "For God's sake, what's that?" cried my mother, beside herself with alarm, as the bell pealed at this hour.

"Oh, that will be for me, Mother. You'll have to get used to this sort of thing." And I flung a shawl round me and looked out of the window.

"Lisbeth, come along with me to my wife."

It was still quite dark, and the sky was thickly strewn with glittering stars. As we strode along, the farmer said:

"Lisbeth, it's an awkward thing to have to tell you—but Babet is at our place already. It happened like this: I