



An obstetric concert

by Chris Ellis

It was to be their first baby and she wanted to be delivered by a method invented by a French obstetrician with a name like Courvoisier or some other such brandy, I forget exactly. They were from the alternative society. He was wearing the regulation beard and sandals and she was all country crafts, yoghurt and dried flowers. They even left me with the book which Courvoisier had written so that I could read up on it. It was a type of natural birth with some innovations thrown in. You weren't allowed to hit the child with the time honoured slap on the buttocks. This was terribly passé and viewed with a horror equatable to capital punishment. The baby apparently slid gracefully out and smiled beautifully at those assembled. This, I presume, was of short duration because the father had thereupon to dunk the child like a rusk into a basin of warm water. I made a mental note to try and skip that part. According to the instructions all was calm in the labour ward. Mandolins or flutes would play soothingly in the background and the decor should be dimmed lighting with pastel shades in sepia and honeysuckle. It was obviously going to be an occasion of peace and nature reborn.

The cottage hospital in the village was an ideal environment for this sort of thing. Set on the top of a hill, the maternity ward window looked down one of Africa's most beautiful valleys to the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains. It was spacious, quiet and was seldom busy. I asked the hospital secretary if he would like to paint the walls in moonlight and ochre and he, in turn, asked me if I would like to travel back up my own evolutionary pathway so we decided to leave them as they were. Otherwise the scene was set for fair weather and tranquility.

She appeared on the day in a flowing Indian dress, long platted locks of hair and basketwork hanging in bangles from her wrists and ankles. They brought in their own music on a recorder with a cassette of classical symphonies. A thought passed my mind that perhaps this was all going to be very appropriate and I would be rupturing the membranes to the sounds of Handel's Water Music and the contractions would take place to the rhythm of Ravel's Bolero.

It is said that all plans last until the first battle and a seed of alarm started to worry me when I heard that the sister in charge of the ward was away on holiday. We had on duty, a part timer. She was a boisterous bung-ho farmer's wife who was used to pulling out calves with ropes. She was the complete antithesis of my flower child. It was all very no nonsense and what's all this music and clap trap doing in the labour ward.

Despite my earlier premonition all progressed according to plan for the first hour or two with Grieg and Delius wafting over the airwaves until I noticed a subtle change in the husband's condition. He was meant to be taking an enthusiastic and frightfully sharing sort of a role in

the whole affair but there had been no foetal movements from him for a while. He had become the colour of a wax candle, staring fixedly into the distance. The reverse was occurring on the other side of the bed as our sister, getting more and more irritated, had started to snort and paw the ground at all this effete behaviour. I quietly asked her if she could get us all a cup of tea. She went out in a brisk and efficient manner, her mane bristling in the air. It was about five minutes later that I heard her pounding back down the corridor. She came through the swing doors like a train coming out of a tunnel.

All hospitals have three legged metal stands on small wheels on top of which are large metal bowls. You find them everywhere. This one was behind the swing doors. It shot across the room and hit the opposite wall like a temple gong. As it parted company with its base, the bowl spun across the floor and hit the wall on the other side. It sounded as though someone had rung the great bell of Notre Dame in the room. It was about two minutes until we could hear the violins of Grieg's Spring Symphony again. It seemed a signal for every conceivable machine on earth to rise in tumult. A minute later a lawnmower started up outside and began to plough up and down under the window. Then a carpenter began repairing a shelf next door with a band saw. This stopped after a while and the telephone which until now had never uttered a word began to ring continuously. We just didn't seem to be able to control the noise. Everything we picked up, we dropped. Instruments fell on the floor through our nerveless hands as the carpenter next door tried to drill holes in the wall like a maniacal dentist. You could have had a Spanish dance quartet with castenets and a cymbal or two in there and it would have made very little difference.

It wasn't long though before the delivery was fairly imminent. It was then that our agricultural assistant suddenly put her arm around our flower child and started to bellow encouragement to her as though she was the Springbok rugby pack in a test match. Did Courvoisier I wondered, ever have this sort of trouble with his cases? It was on this cue that our mother came into the ensemble. She started in a steeply sliding glissando to a pitch about an octave above the carpenter's drill. She even managed a wavering vibrato at the end. This had an immediate effect on the husband. His complexion changed from wax white to meconium stained as he slid slowly onto the floor. Could it really have been to the sound of Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld?

I believe it was at about this stage that I fell in with the general exhortations to deliver the goods and there must have been a hint of desperation in my voice because she suddenly gave a couple of massive pushes and out came a bony bouncing boy. I lifted him up and smacked him on the bottom.

Well, I thought, he might as well join in with the rest of us, as a finale.