

## THE BABY ON THE TRACK: A NEWSPAPER LEGEND WITH ROOTS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

BENGT AF KLINTBERG  
 PhD HC, Professor  
 Stockholm University  
 SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden  
 e-mail: bengt.afklintberg@telia.com

### ABSTRACT

In a novel by a Chinese author, Yu Hua, the birth of the main character takes place in a train toilet. He falls down on the track and survives. During the last 30 years news stories with this content have been reported several times. The event is generally said to have taken place in China or India. From a folkloristic perspective the story can be defined as a newspaper legend. Like contemporary legends in oral tradition newspaper legends often are about accidents where babies are involved. As opposed to the orally transmitted legends they generally have a happy ending; they are published as a counterbalance to all the real accidents that daily papers have to report. The oldest version of “The Baby on the Track” was published in 1888 in a medical journal. The author, the famous physician William Osler, had a reputation for being a practical joker, and today it is difficult to judge if his story is based on a real case or if Osler invented it.

KEYWORDS: urban legend • newspaper legend • railway folklore • medical folklore • prankster • William Osler

The Chinese novelist Yu Hua has a reputation for being one of the most interesting young writers in China today. His novel *The Seventh Day*, published in English translation in 2015, is characterised by a very special mixture of everyday realism and fantasy. The man who tells the story of his life has just died, but before his body can be turned to ashes in a crematory oven he is forced to wander about as a ghost for seven days.

Here I will refrain from discussing the novel’s critical depiction of greed and corruption in modern China, however interesting that might be. From a folkloristic point of view the account of the main character’s birth is even more interesting. Here one recognises a news story that has been published in daily papers all over the world for decades, a story that can be traced as far back as the 19th century. The location where the delivery takes place is a train toilet.

The mother of the main character is at an advanced stage of pregnancy when she takes the train to her distant home village, where her old mother is on her deathbed. She has been travelling for ten hours when she feels that she has to go to the toilet. There, she is surprised by powerful labour pains. She falls to her knees on the messy floor and gives birth to the child. But the baby slips down through the round hole in the floor,

and a sharp edge at the opening cuts the umbilical cord. As the train disappears over the horizon, the new-born baby is lying between the rails. A short while later a young railway worker hears a baby crying when he is passing by the tracks. He discovers the naked but unhurt baby lying there under the starry sky and takes it home, and the child is brought up as his own son. The biological mother, on the other hand, never loses hope that she might rediscover her child, and in the end she manages to find him.

This is how Yu (2015: 80) concludes his version of the story about the baby on the track: “The local media had a field day, with ‘the boy a train gave birth to’ achieving the family reunion that all commentators agreed was the ideal outcome”. These words can, if you like, be seen as an indication that the story about the dramatic childbirth is not a creation of Yu’s imagination. It is more likely that he had read about a similar occurrence in a newspaper.

The fundamental question in this article is this: is it possible that the story of the miraculous survival of the baby on the railway track could be based on a true event, in China or elsewhere? Considering the countless number of people who travel by train every day, there must have been many pregnant women who have given birth on a train. In spite of that I find it extremely unlikely that one of these babies could have fallen through the toilet and moreover been found alive.

What makes the scenario hard to believe is the physiological factor. At birth a child is connected to its mother by the umbilical cord, which is cut after the child has emerged. I have asked an experienced midwife if it is possible for an umbilical cord to break without this action. She said that it is extremely unusual. If the umbilical cord breaks it is because it is very thin and the baby is premature (personal communication with Stina Netz). The umbilical cord connects the new-born to the placenta, which after the birth detaches from the uterine wall and is forced out by the uterine contractions. Thus, the most likely answer is that stories of new-borns who fall onto the track from a train toilet are fantasies. In the middle of last century the rail passengers of the Western world relieved themselves in toilets that allowed their waste to fall directly on the track. In other parts of the world this is still the case today. The experience of seeing the ground rush past underneath the open hole has been shared by countless people. It is a tantalising thought that a new-born might leave the body the same way that excrement leaves the train. This thought might be behind a migratory legend, reported time after time as a news story in daily papers all over the world. Several times the event is claimed to have happened in China.

“New-born Fell down Toilet” was the headline for a short news item in the Swedish newspaper *Avisen* on May 29, 1999:

CHINA. It was a real birth shock. The heavily pregnant Chinese girl suddenly gave birth to her child while sitting on the toilet on a commuter train outside Canton in China. In a panic she managed to cut the umbilical cord but as ill luck would have it, the new-born baby fell into the toilet and out into the track below.

Railway workers later found the 2.7 kilogram girl with only minor injuries. Hong Kong newspapers report that the mother and child have been happily reunited. (*Avisen* 1999)

When I contacted the editorial staff, a journalist at *Avisen* said the source was a newspaper in New York that had quoted a Chinese newspaper. The journalist had a feeling

that the story was too good to be true, but he thought that the New York newspaper had verified it.

This may serve as an example of the migration route of contemporary newspaper legends: in this case from a Chinese newspaper to an American, and then on to a Swedish paper. The item could have been an updated version of another Chinese newspaper story that made the rounds in the world press more than three years previously. One difference between the two is that the earlier story lacks the realistic detail of the woman cutting the umbilical cord, a detail which has obviously been added to make the story more credible.

It was in January 1996 that the Reuters news agency sent out the following story:

“Newborn Baby Falls Out of Chinese Toilet, Survives”

A Chinese woman whose baby was flushed down the toilet when she gave birth prematurely in a train lavatory found her son alive and unhurt on the tracks, the Beijing Evening News said on Thursday.

The train carrying young farmer Wu Ming and his seven-month pregnant wife had stopped at Wuxiang station in northern Shaanxi province when the woman felt pains in her stomach and went to the toilet, the newspaper said.

About 20 minutes later the train pulled out and her anxious husband broke open the toilet door to find his wife unconscious and covered in blood, it said.

After waking, the woman said she had given birth but the baby had fallen down the toilet chute onto the tracks. Emergency telephone calls to Wuxiang station established that police had found the baby boy unhurt despite freezing weather, it said.

Parents and son were quickly reunited, it said. (Reuters 1996)

This story was sent to me by foreign news reporter Gert Holmertz of the Swedish news agency *Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå* (TT). In his letter, dated January 31, 1996, he also said there was a follow-up to the Chinese story:

Last week we at TT published a rather improbable item from China. Today I found the same dubious story from Romania, which makes me suspect it is a migratory legend. You possibly already have many examples of the same occurrence. If not, I gladly submit a contribution to your next book.

The Romanian item was carried by the German news agency Deutsche Press-Agentur. Undeniably, it showed a striking similarity to the Chinese item from six days earlier:

“‘Stillborn’ Baby Survives after Fall through Moving Train Toilet”

A baby the mother believed to have been stillborn survived a fall through a moving train lavatory onto the track below, a Romanian press report said Wednesday.

The 2.8-kilo infant suffered bacterial infection and a bruised hip, but was recovering in hospital after a rail worker found it on the track between Tecuci and Galati in eastern Romania.

Police traced the mother after she had reported what she believed to have been a still birth to local authorities, Romania Libera newspaper reported. (DPA 1996)

Two more recent examples of this migratory legend are from the new millennium and both take place in India. On February 28, 2008 the online edition of the British broadsheet *The Telegraph* carried the following news story:

### “Indian Baby Survives Birth through Train Toilet”

A premature baby has survived falling from the toilet of a moving train just moment after her early birth.

The child’s mother, an Indian woman called Bhuri, was travelling on an overnight train near Ahmadabad, in the state of Gujarat in west India when she suddenly and unexpectedly gave birth.

The as-yet-unnamed child was found two hours later, cold but apparently unhurt. According to her brother-in-law Arjun Kumar, she went to the toilet shortly before midnight and unexpectedly gave birth, eight to ten weeks short of term.

Toilets on Indian trains are usually simple holes through to the tracks, and the baby – who weighs barely 3lb – was small enough to slip straight through.

“She fell unconscious and the baby fell through the toilet,” said Mr. Kumar. “Two stations later, we knocked at the door.”

“When we asked her about what happened, she said the baby had fallen through onto the tracks,” he went on.

After finding Bhuri, relatives pulled the emergency alarm in the train and informed officials. In the ensuing search, a guard at one of the stations they had passed found the child on the tracks.

“She was on the rail track for almost two hours,” said Dr. Gautam Jain, a paediatrician at Rajasthan Hospital, Ahmadabad, where mother and baby were taken. “We do not expect such children to survive.”

The child’s mother expressed her shock at events. “My delivery was so sudden,” she said. “I did not even realize that my child had slipped from the hole in the toilet.” (*Telegraph* 2008)

The article was illustrated with a photograph claimed to represent Bhuri and her as yet unnamed child.

A few years later, on October 23, 2013, the English edition of the international news website *The Huffington Post* carried an item that had been published in *The Times of India* two days earlier. The headline was “Baby Born in Indian Train Toilet Miraculously Survives After Falling Onto Tracks”. The source was the United Press International news agency, filing from Krishnanagar. We recognise the contents: The young pregnant Rehani Bibi from the village of Jhumka in Murshidabad finds herself together with her mother on the train to Lalgola, when she goes to the toilet and gives birth to her child, which falls onto the track. The woman’s mother hears her cries and rushes into the toilet, while the passengers make sure the train stops and the child can be saved. Both mother and baby are taken to the nearest hospital, where a doctor reports that they are both well. “But it is very miraculous that there was no injury marks on the new born baby’s body”, he says. (*Huffington Post* 2013)

These five examples, which no doubt are not the only ones to have circulated in the press during the past 30 years, demonstrate that the story is part of our contemporary legend tradition. The action has been located in both Asia and Europe, and it has been reported in newspapers from still more continents. Therefore, it might be surprising that it is not included in any of Jan Harold Brunvand’s nine collections of American urban legends (Brunvand 1981; 1984; 1986; 1989; 1993; 2000; 2004; 2012 [2002]; 2014 [1998]). An explanation might be that Brunvand’s books primarily deal with contemporary legends, which are transmitted orally. There is no evidence for “The Baby on

the Track" having had the widespread oral transmission that characterises most urban legends. Instead it is a typical *newspaper legend*, a story that has been published over and over again in newspapers, placed in different locations around the world.

Folklorists became aware of the importance of the daily press as a folkloristic source early on. In his article "Traditional Stories in Daily Papers and Weeklies" the Estonian folklorist Walter Anderson (1960: 59–60) mentions that Estonian folklore bibliographies from the interwar period include material published in the daily press, especially legends and humorous anecdotes. A more widespread interest in what in German is called *Zeitungssage*, and in English *newspaper legend*, arose in the 1930s, first in the German-speaking countries. A representative introduction to the term is Oscar Moser's article "Newspaper Legend – Folk Legend" (1985). Recent research on newspaper legends has steadily increased, which is not surprising. As Elliott Oring (1990: 165) puts it in his article "Legend, Truth, and News": "At the boundary of legend is news". We can add that the internet offers a new field of legend research, which has been amply demonstrated by Russel Frank in his *Newslore: Contemporary Folklore on the Internet* (2011).

A newspaper legend is often rather short, reporting on a dramatic event so unusual and bizarre that it speaks to the reader's imagination. Usually it has occurred at a remote location. Stylistically it differs from orally transmitted legends in that both the main character and the location of the occurrence are as a rule named. In contemporary oral legends the main character is most often anonymous, while the geographical location of the occurrence is usually given. In more detailed newspaper legends one also finds the names of other individuals involved in the story; in my first Indian example the reader not only learns the name of the woman giving birth, but also the names of an accompanying brother-in-law and a doctor. The model is taken from other newspaper articles, and the aim of course is to strengthen the credibility of the story.

Small helpless infants are found in both the contemporary oral legend tradition and in newspaper legends. But the contents differ in the two cases. The oral legend tradition above all dwells on the dangers that may threaten the child. Well-known examples in my book *The Rat in the Pizza* (1986) are the story of the big sister who cuts off her little brother's penis (no. 35), the drug-abusing babysitter who bakes the baby in an oven (no. 48), and the parents who leave their baby in a highchair to catch a plane and return to find it dead – the babysitter never showed up because of a traffic accident (no. 49). These legends reflect parents' fears of what could happen to their baby and warn them not to be careless.

On the other hand, newspaper legends about new-borns and infants often have a happy ending. The baby who falls through the train toilet and is found and reunited with its mother is just one of several examples. A story found in both English and Swedish tabloid newspapers is that of a football goalie who saves a small child who has fallen out of a window (Klintberg 1994: no. 57). Another story, published several times in American and European newspapers, is about an absentminded father who takes his two children to a grocery store. When he gets ready to drive home he puts the smallest child in a portable car seat on the car roof while he fastens the older child with a safety belt in a booster seat in the back. Then he drives off, forgetting the child on the roof. When suddenly he realises his mistake, he slams on the brakes, and watches in horror as the child flies off in front of him, and crashes on the road uninjured. (Ibid.: no. 23)



My comment on the story of the baby on the car roof could equally be used about “The Baby on the Track”:

The reason why this newspaper legend has become popular is certainly the miraculously happy end of the adventure. The reality that newspapers often must report is that small children die in accidents. Positive stories about children who are the victims of accidents but survive are significantly less common. Newspaper editors have understood their high reading value and for that reason choose to see them as authentic news material. (Ibid.: 78)

Despite “The Baby on the Track” being most often located in China or India, the story did not originate in either of these countries. Its origin is to be sought in the West. One of Rolf Wilhelm Brednich’s collections of German contemporary legends (1991) contains a story called “Precipitous Delivery”. It recounts an event which is supposed to have occurred in 1912 in the German federal state of Hessen.

A peasant woman comes to a women’s clinic at the University Hospital in Marburg for a final examination before she is due to give birth. She wears her local traditional dress with a tightly laced waist, several skirts over one another (but no knickers), and long white stockings. The doctor discovers, to his surprise, that she has already given birth. When he tells her this the woman becomes extremely distraught and has no explanation. She says that she had travelled to Marburg that morning on the local train. She had suddenly felt unwell and had gone to the toilet. The doctor guesses what has happened and bicycles back along the railway line until he finds a new-born baby lying uninjured between the rails. The peasant woman has, without having noticed, had a *Sturzgeburt*, a precipitous delivery. (Brednich 1991: no. 100)

The story is unlikely, to say the least. Even if a ‘precipitous delivery’ might happen very quickly, it is very difficult to believe that any woman could give birth into a train toilet without noticing. Moreover, who cut the umbilical cord?

If the dating of the German story is correct, this means that the story already existed in Europe more than one hundred years ago. The reason why the event has in recent decades been relocated to China and India is no doubt because most trains in Europe have been modernised. Train toilets where passenger waste falls onto the tracks are now very rare. During the second half of the 20th century, tanks were introduced which collect the waste, to be emptied later. Therefore it was no longer possible for the Western press to allow the occurrence to take place in our modern part of the world. However, the story still worked when placed in distant lands with older and more primitive train toilets.

My attempt to trace a possible origin of the newspaper legend about the baby on the tracks could, at this point, have come to an end. The German version was the oldest instance when I wrote about the legend 18 years ago in my book *Glitterspray* (Klintberg 2005: 143–148). However, afterwards I was contacted by a reader who informed me that the story is even older. The sources involved are not among those usually studied by folklorists, but rather belong to medical history. Harold L. Klawans’ *The Medicine of History from Paracelsus to Freud* gives a report of a birth in a train toilet, written in 1886 by the well-known physician William Osler (Klawans 1982: 178–180).

Osler (known after being knighted in Britain as Sir William Osler) was not only one of the most prominent physicians of his time. He also had a significant literary

talent; since his death collections of his essays, aphorisms, and letters have been published (Osler 1961; 1968; 1985). He has been the subject of several biographies, of which Harvey Cushing's 1,400-page *The Life of Sir William Osler* (1940) is the most exhaustive.

William Osler was born in 1849 in Canada to parents who had moved there from England. According to his biographer Cushing (*ibid.*: 22), Osler was as a teenager particularly ingenious in evolving and perpetrating practical jokes of an elaborate and unusual sort, which led to his expulsion from school. During his medical studies he attracted attention with his originality and talent for research. He received his medical degree at the age of 23 and during the following years contributed frequently to medical journals.

In 1880 the editor of the *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal* received an article from an Egerton Yorrick Davis, who recounted his medical field observations among the Indians in northwestern Canada. In a later handwritten note, often cited, Osler gave several biographical details describing the man:

I never could understand about Egerton Yorrick Davis. He is represented to have practiced at Caughnawaga nearly opposite Montreal where his collections were stored in the Guildhall. Some have said that he was a drunken old reprobate, but the only occasion on which I met him, he seemed a peaceable enough old rascal. One thing is certain, he was drowned in the Lachine Rapids in 1884, and the body was never recovered. He had a varied life – in the U. S. Army; in the North West; among the Indians; as a general practitioner in the north of London. I knew his son well – a nice mild-mannered fellow, devoted to his father. (Klawans 1982: 176)

His colleagues eventually realised that the author of these apparently serious articles on bizarre medical topics under the name of Egerton Yorrick Davis was none other than William Osler, and later in life he admitted that it was his *nom de plume*, the choice of name being an allusion to Shakespeare's lines about Yorrick in Hamlet: "Alas, poor Yorrick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." (Cushing 1940: 424; Nations 1969)

In 1886, while he was vacationing in northwestern Canada, Osler heard a story about a childbirth that took place in a train toilet while the train was in motion. In his report of the case, published under his own name in 1888 in *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal* he relates "an interesting experience":

Mr. Fred Brydges had kindly met our party at the Portage to take us over the Manitoba and North Western Road, and he mentioned two days before, a woman, while in the water closet on the train, had given birth to a child which had dropped to the track and had been found alive some time after. I was so incredulous that he ordered the conductor to stop the train at the station to which the woman had been taken that I might see her and corroborate the story. I found mother and child in the care of the stationmaster's wife, and obtained the following history:

She was aged about 28, well developed, of medium size, and had had two previous labours which were not difficult. She had expected her confinement in a week or ten days, and had got on the train to go to see her husband, who was working down the track. Having a slight diarrhea she went to the water-closet, and while on the seat, labour pains came on and the child dropped from her. Hearing a noise and

groaning, the conductor forced open the door and found the woman on the floor in an exhausted condition, with just strength enough to tell him that the baby was somewhere on the track, and to ask him to stop the train, which was running at the rate of about 20 miles an hour. The baby was found alive off the side of the track a mile or more away, and with the mother was left at the station where I saw her. She lost a good deal of blood, and the placenta was not delivered for some hours. I saw no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the woman's story, and the baby presented its own evidence in the form of a large bruise on the side of the head, another on the shoulder and a third on the right knee. It had probably fallen between the ties on the sand and clear of the rail, which I found, on examination of the hole in the closet was quite possible." (Here quoted after Klawans 1982: 178–179.)

Osler had first sent the account to a colleague who was at that time collecting material for an encyclopaedia, later published under the title *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*, but since the latter was aware of Osler's propensity for practical jokes, he hinted that the baby was born, not in the water-closet of the train, but in the brain of William Osler with Egerton Yorrick Davis as midwife. However, if Osler could send affidavits he would publish the account. (Farrar 1964: 781)

Osler answered that he had expected that his account would be met with incredulity, and therefore had secured himself affidavits from the train conductor. Unfortunately, he had mislaid them and he could not find them. As a consequence the article was not published until two years later. But obviously there were readers of *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal* who also had their doubts about the veracity of the story.

Some, however, could not completely dismiss the feeling that, despite his reputation as a practical joker, Osler could have actually seen the baby that fell out of the train toilet. One of these was the physician Clarence B. Farrar, who much later published an article called "Osler's Story of 'The Baby on the Track'" (1964). He relates the contents of a second letter that Osler sent to the Canadian journal, and which was published later in 1888. In it, he insists that the event has actually happened. The conductor who gave the order to stop the train could confirm it, as well as Osler's elder brother Edmund, who had accompanied him on the journey. He remarks resentfully:

What I have suffered on account of that baby! To be jeered at by the French journals, to be called by the editor of the *Medical Record* a narrator of funny stories, to be referred to by my friends as Munchausen – these things have been hard to bear. (Farrar 1964: 782)

Farrar also relates testimony from a Canadian Dr Herbert E. Rawlinson, later a professor of Anatomy, characterised by Farrar (1964: 782) as "a good med.hist.-Osler fan". His contribution to the story concerns the train baby's later fate. In his earlier years, 12 years after Osler's train journey through Manitoba, Rawlinson had been a school teacher in the town where the incident was supposed to have occurred. He recalled that one of his students, a 12-year-old girl who walked with a limp, went by the name of Railroad Winnie. In 1956, a colleague of the writer, Dr N. J. Minish, managed to track down Winnie, who was then 72 years old, and who confirmed that she was the baby that Osler had examined two days after her birth. A private photo of Winnie, together with a daughter and two grandchildren, illustrates the article.



Farrar's article leaves the reader in a state of confusion. Can it really be so that Osler, known for his practical jokes, actually told the truth when he related the story about the unlikely birth in a train toilet? In that case it is really ironic that his reputation raised doubts in many people. Or have friends during his lifetime and admirers afterwards within the medical community been prepared to keep the myth of "The Baby on the Track" alive through fictitious additions in Osler's spirit? It is unlikely there will ever be a sure answer. The latest Osler bibliography raises no questions about the credibility of his account (Bliss 1999: 160–161). As a folklorist one has to realise that "The Baby on the Track", like so many migratory legends, is a story where reality and fantasy intermix.

However unlikely it may sound, Osler was involved in another story that spread as a migratory legend during the 20th century and has reached countless people. The picture of him would not be complete if we did not in conclusion linger on his best-known contribution to the genre, his report on an English case of vaginismus.

In the Autumn of 1884, the respected American journal *Medical News* carried an article, written by an esteemed professor of Obstetrics, Dr Theophilus Parvin, under the headline "An Uncommon Form of Vaginismus" (see Klawans 1982). There he discusses the possibility that during intercourse women can suffer a cramp that causes the male organ to be held fast. The phenomenon is known among dogs that are mating and can, according to older sources cited in the article, in rare cases appear during human coitus.

Only a few weeks later the journal published a letter to the editor, signed "Egerton Y. Davis" (Davis 1884). The writer mentions that Parvin's article has recalled an event from his time as a physician in Pentonville in London. One night at 11:00 PM he had been awakened by an upset gentleman who said he had heard alarming sounds from his coachman's room. He had entered and to his dismay found the coachman in bed with one of the maids. She was screaming and he was struggling to free himself. Both rolled out of the bed and made frantic efforts to get apart, without success. He was a big and burly man, over six feet, while she was small, weighing no more than 90 pounds. She was moaning and screaming and seemed in great agony. After several fruitless attempts to separate them the man had decided to call the doctor.

When I arrived I found the man standing up and supporting the woman in his arms, and was quite evident that his penis was tightly locked in her vagina, and any attempt to dislodge it was accompanied by much pain on the part of both. It was, indeed, a case "De cohesione in coitu." I applied water, and then ice, but ineffectually, and at last sent for chloroform, a few whiffs of which sent the woman to sleep, relaxed the spasm, and relieved the captive penis, which was swollen, livid, and in a state of semi-erection, which did not go down for several hours, and for days the organ was extremely sore. The woman recovered rapidly, and seemed none the worse. (Ibid.: 673)

The letter concludes with further observations in connection with Parvin's article. Klawans (1982: 170) sees the realistic description of the case as a satire, aimed at Parvin's article, an indication that the writer of the letter had not taken the views expressed fully seriously.

The story of the couple who cannot loosen themselves from each other during intercourse is one of the most widespread contemporary migratory legends concerning sex. For example, we find it in collections by Ethel Portnoy (1978: 78), Brunvand (1984: 142–

145; 2012 [2002]: 418), Klintberg (1986: 102) and Brednich (1990: 121). Narratives on this theme are reported in Gershon Legman's (1975: 427–430) analysis of sexual humour, *No Laughing Matter*. The subject has also been discussed in several medical articles (Brunvand 2012 [2002]: 418–419).

Something that deserves to be pointed out is that fantasies about couples who get stuck during intercourse in the same manner as dogs are probably very old. Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (2007: 193) in their book *Urban Legends* have a paragraph summarising early versions, and Carl Lindahl (1999) has found the motif in an English poem from 1303. A previously unnoted example can be found in the 13th century chronicle *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus. The event is placed on the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea:

When the men there in the town lay with the women, it often happened to them as with dogs, that they could not come loose from one another, no matter how long they waited; and sometimes both were thrown across a pole and hung there to the scorn and derision of all (Saxo 1909: 145).

Saxo's story is recounted almost verbatim by Olaus Magnus in his *History of the Nordic Peoples* from 1555 (Olaus Magnus 1976: 168).

Thus, "The Stuck Couple" and "The Baby on the Track" are legends from widely different ages. The former is a classic that can be traced back to the Middle Ages, the latter originated in the 19th century when a global railroad net radically changed people's experiences of travelling. However, on closer inspection the stories show many similarities. Both are on the edge of credibility, and both explore subjects that have always interested people: childbirth and sex. Both describe horrifying and embarrassing situations which none of us wants to experience, situations which tickle our curiosity and give us the shudders. Both, finally, belong to the world of the medical profession.

Osler seems to have been endowed with a keen scent for the narrative potential of the two legends. We do not know if his 1886 account is the origin of "The Baby on the Track" or if the story already existed in oral tradition at that time. We can, however, note that he took an active part in its distribution. The case of Osler is an example of the important role an individual can play when collective fantasies are taking form.

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