

THE MATERNAL FUNCTION AND THE NATIONAL LIFE.*

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THE importance of the mother's influence in the formation of the race has been recognised by historians, statesmen, society, and by scientists. The Spartan mother has become a by-word, the Roman matron conjures up in the mind a woman stately and noble both in mind and body, inclined rather to the sterner qualities of nobility and producing sons and daughters of the same firm, unbending strain. The British matron, a good Christian, loving, sensible woman, full of kindness and of good nature, stately withal and thoroughly healthy, a woman who for centuries has reared her young bull dogs and sea dogs in such a way that with a footing in these small islands in the western main they have colonised a large part of the broad earth and dominated the sea. The mothers are the makers and the sustainers of the nation, and motherhood is the grand career for women. Some cynic has said that the function of women is "to suckle fools and chronicle small beer." This is obviously parody in both particulars. Women re-create the race for each generation, and purify and sustain society. To woman alone is entrusted by Nature the entire welfare of the child during its prenatal conditions, and to her especially is entrusted the nourishment of the child during the first nine months of its postnatal existence. After the child is weaned, it is not so dependent on the mother. Husbands, sisters, nurses, corporations, can nurse the nine months' baby up to childhood with success and even with a solicitude and self-sacrifice that may emulate a mother's tender care. Before weaning no one and nothing can efficiently take a mother's place, and in the prenatal period the mother is absolutely indispensable, the human ovum not yet lending itself to the artificial influence of incubators, and so enabling women to evade altogether the pleasures and penalties attached to their sex. It is satisfactory that we may contemplate our decess before incubated men and women occupy these chairs. It follows therefore that a woman who would be a suitable mother requires a thoroughly normal, healthy condition of the body, so that she can afford suitable nourishment during the formation of the child. She requires an equable quiescent and stable condition of mind as well as of body during pregnancy, so that, neither nervous influence nor physical shock may partially or entirely dislocate the growing fœtus from its somewhat precarious attachment to the maternal structures and bring about a deformity, an abortion or a miscarriage. We have still many mothers in this country who are filled with a sacred joy when they feel the indications of another life within their own, and who instinctively and lovingly take every care that the promised fruit of their womb may come forth in due time, a full fledged, perfectly healthy baby. But it seems to me, and this is the burden of my story, that a gradually increasing number of mothers are careless, not only of the prospects but even of the existence of the unborn child. Does a condition of pregnancy interfere with a proposed trip by sea, a series of social engagements, or the pleasures of a festive season? I have known instances where the production of abortion has been contemplated and proposed and even "accidentally" carried out as a solution of the difficulty, and the possible destruction of the fœtus was entertained so lightly, that the mere suggestion of the word criminal in connection with the means employed—viz., a gallop on horseback, or a game at tennis was laughed at by the unnatural though refined mother. In such cases, premature labours and still-births may result long after the indiscretion

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has been forgotten, or if remembered is not recognised as a cause.

I have tried to obtain statistics of the annual number of still-born children and of abortions, but neither are recognised by the Registrar-General and consequently not tabulated in the death registers. The premature births are, however, registered, and in 1902, 18,909 children died from the effects of premature birth, that is, from some defect in the antenatal development or nourishment of the child. The causes of death in still-born and premature children is exactly the same and due to some fault in their environment during the antenatal period. We can only guess at the number of still-born children. In the Liverpool Workhouse Lying-In wards amongst 2,829 children born, 225 were still-born, many of these having died some time before birth. If we take these numbers as a basis, knowing that 948,271 children are born annually in England and Wales we find that 88,752 of these are still-born. This is probably too high an estimate, as the mothers in a workhouse hospital are more frequently diseased and dissipated than those of the nation generally. On the other hand, some of them are strong, vigorous women who are better mothers physically than many in the higher classes of society. As to the numbers of miscarriages and abortions, we can only proceed as before from known figures to the unknown. For instance, in the year 1903, 152 women are reported by the Registrar-General to have died from abortions or miscarriages. The mortality of abortions is very small, certainly not more than half per cent., probably much less. A half per cent. mortality of abortions would give 30,400 abortions and miscarriages annually. We have, therefore, by adding together 88,752 still-born 18,909 premature births, and 30,400 miscarriages, a grand total of 138,061 children who are conceived but who die every year from causes affecting them in the antenatal period. We know that Nature is most lavish in her provision for the continuance of the race, and squanders material in her laboratories in an apparently reckless manner. The mother aborts often in spite of the greatest care to prevent it, nay, in consequence sometimes of too much care and anxiety to prevent such an event, and medical men of the greatest experience often fail to help the mother in such cases. We admit this, and while we may doubt the absolute reliability of the figures given above, which I ask you to remember are put forward only as rough estimates, it will be admitted from everyday experience that at the present time many children are conceived and develop to a certain extent, but perish through maternal carelessness or ignorance, or both; and that multitudes of half-made infants, if we may use the expression, are born to be a weakness to the nation owing to the same ignorance and carelessness.

It should be the business of self-governing communities like ours to see that every member is effective and performs his or her part in maintaining the life of the nation. The industrious and respectable members who support themselves and bring up their children to be strong, healthy, and useful members of the community ought to be protected. They will be overborne if they have also to support an increasing and indefinite number of illegitimate or homeless and unmothered children. It is true that mothers of illegitimate children are tabooed in society and are outcasts, but they continue to have illegitimate children year after year without check or restraint. Our industrial schools are full of them, and the rest are the results of improvident marriages. In a minority of cases, death and sickness or unpreventable misfortune leave the children of decent parents stranded in such a way that only such places will take them in. It would seem to be advisable, and will soon be absolutely necessary, to have what we ought to call a Marriage Board composed of the wisest and best and most honourable in each locality, before whom pairs desiring to enter into the state of matrimony would, as a necessary preliminary, appear and satisfy its members that provision had been made for contingencies during the first

few years of married life; that the man was healthy, of good character, in steady employment for a sufficient number of years, and likely to be a good husband, and that the woman was healthy and vigorous with no hereditary disease, who recognised the responsibilities she was taking upon her in entering into the married state, and that she possessed some knowledge of the nature of her responsibilities and of how to deal with them. A certificate from such a Marriage Board should be given, and a contract, signed and witnessed, should be handed to the clergyman before he performs the sacred rite.

The Marriage Board should, through lady visitors, inspectors, or nurses, keep in touch with the newly-married so as to help them by advice and sympathy where they seem to require it, and with substantial help should misfortune assail the pair during the time of the mother's pregnancy. A pregnant woman should be helped without questions by the purveyors of public charity. Should she be undeserving, the unborn child is always innocent and deserving. A single woman should only be allowed to have one illegitimate child without interference. She may have been deceived, being innocent and inexperienced in the ways of men, but the same excuse will not avail twice. After the second time she might be sent to an institution to be kept out of harm's way, and be required to work for her living and that of her children under supervision. The father, if known, should be taxed to the same extent as legitimate fathers are for the keep of his illegitimate child.

During the antenatal nine months the onus of supplying nourishment to the mother and child rests upon the husband. The mother has only to nourish herself generously, and Nature passes on its due share to the child. When the child is born Nature has provided an inexhaustible source of suitable diet for it well preserved and well protected from contamination in the mother's breast. This is the birthright of every child, a birthright that places it above risks resulting from the ignorance or selfishness of the mother.

The nursing of a child necessitates the giving up by the mother of many things that she has loved. Her diet must be taken with an eye to the child's welfare. She cannot leave the child for long, and her duties to society must be subordinated to her nursing duties. To fashionable people the nursing of children becomes an intolerable nuisance. The child is delegated to the nurse and the bottle, and many mothers bring up their children in this way with apparent success by the aid of science, more or less specious, and much expenditure of money on advertised infant foods.

However much doubt there may be about the number of children that die in a prenatal condition, there is no doubt about the numbers that die in the first year after birth, that is, during the nursing period, when the child should be still dependent on the mother. The mortality of the new-born during the first year is 133 per thousand for the most recent year an approximate total of 126,117. This includes the 18,909 deaths from premature labour, but does not include the 119,152 still-born and abortions that might be imagined to have died during the prenatal period. The total number of children who die while in the mother's care is 245,269 annually, or in round numbers a quarter of a million. Now, the loss of prenatal children does not call forth any pity for the sufferings of the deceased. They were not conscious and could not realise what they failed to become. The number (18,909) of children prematurely born, however, died early with the usual pangs, modified no doubt by the imperfection of their constitutions. Indeed, I believe that the Creator has so arranged matters that helpless babies die off more easily and painlessly than older people, otherwise the thought of upwards of one hundred thousand who die annually before their first birthday would be more appalling than it is. Many, no doubt, die from disease, in spite of every effort on the part of their parents. But ignorance and imperfect diet, drink, neglect and thriftlessness carry off numbers that may be counted by

thousands. Let us hope the new Royal Poor-law Commission will take up the cause of these helpless children and thriftless vicious mothers, and see that the Poor-law hospitals are not used, as they are at present by depraved women, for their own convenience, but will so arrange that women who bring children into the world and fail to look after them, and who kill them by neglect, carelessness, or intemperance, will be liable to punishment, and that the child may be rescued from the mother and protected from its earliest infancy. The mother should be deprived in some effective way of the opportunity of having more children, as surely the nation does not wish the continuation and the gradual increase of such a race. Let us look for a moment at the extent of the mischief. Taking the statistics of the Liverpool Workhouse Hospital for a recent year, 1904: Out of 389 births in that year, 158 were single women who were delivered there of illegitimate children. Of these 106 were confined of their first child, 31 of their second child, 16 of their third, 13 of their fourth, 3 of their fifth, and we have known some cases of the half dozen. Let us think for a moment of the extent of illegitimate births in one of the workhouses of Liverpool only, and there are two others. In one year 158 mothers brought forth as many illegitimate children into the nation, both mothers and children being fostered and cared for during their confinement with all the grand results of science in a way that the mothers of even middle-class independent and hard-working people cannot command.

Here we have the source of the deterioration of the race, of the decadence of the nation, of the ever increasing floating population who prey on the effective citizens and weigh down the prosperity of the community. It may be said that the majority of these 158 babies die within the year, and that such deaths are a merciful dispensation of Providence. It would be well were it so. But I have followed up 304 such babies born in 1903, until a year after their birth, and find that only 88 died of various diseases. That is 216 every year live to pollute the population out of one city parish, and there are several hundreds of such parishes. Their death-rate is at present 289 per thousand, rather more than twice the average. Not a word can the authorities say to these women. The foremost aseptic conditions are prepared for their confinement in the wards of most of the workhouses, and hard working men and women in the country have to pay to support them and their children not only during the infancy of the latter, but as tramps and criminals into which they degenerate for the whole of their lives.

My conclusions are:—

1. That the prosperity of the nation depends on the "annual output" of healthy vigorous children, whose parents are independent and perform their legal duties to their offspring, nourishing them and bringing them up to be sturdy fellow citizens like themselves.

2. Members of the community who do not possess the brains, the vigour or the health to make a place for themselves in the land, who cannot in other words build a nest for their young, should not be allowed to marry. They themselves are so much dead weight in the country, swelling the ranks of the unemployed and the criminals, they propagate their kind readily and rapidly, and, owing to a sympathetic and generous Poor-law, safely, assisted by the many overlapping agencies that make it easy to evade the old Scriptural law, which saith: "He that will not work, neither shall he eat."

3. That the nation should insist on mothers nursing their children. It is, as was said before, the birthright of the child, and as soon as the child is born it is under the protection of the community who should insist upon its having its birthright where it is possible.

The Fellows of the British Gynecological Society can, by their great influence and knowledge promote these objects, help to increase the vigour and force of the nation, and proportionately to diminish the human rubbish which is now being propagated at such a rate as to threaten to retard the onward march of humanity.