

A Simple Talk on Infant Mortality.

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The following little address was prepared for a Mothers' Meeting in Nottingham, a city where there is much female labour, and where a great many children are brought up by hand. It may, perhaps, prove useful to other Health Visitors or Nurses who are asked to give a simple "talk," and who have not much time to spare for preparation.

There is a subject which has been receiving a great deal of attention lately, and about which almost everyone must have heard some talk, the subject of *Infant Mortality*, or the great number of deaths among babies, generally of less than a year old. It has been calculated that as many deaths take place under one year old, as between 1 and 18 years; so that in every 100 deaths under 18, 50 would be children under a year old. It is also said that in large towns a quarter of all the babies born die before they are a year old. Now this seems terribly sad, and the worst of it is that things do not seem to be getting much better. Our greater knowledge of what is necessary to keep us well and strong has made the death rate for *grown-up* people less than it used to be, but it does not seem to have made much difference about the babies. So a great deal of interest has been taken in the question lately, and meetings have been held to talk things over and see what could be done. One of these meetings was held in London last summer, and I want to tell you something that was said then by the man who took the chair. He is a man about whom there has been plenty of talk lately, a man who has worked his way up to a high position—John Burns. Now, John Burns is a *working man*, and the son of working people, and he knows by experience what the lives and circumstances of working people are like. Also he is a man who takes a great interest in this question of Infant Mortality. Well, what did he say? In part of his speech his words were: "I believe that at the bottom of Infant Mortality, high or low; is *good or bad motherhood*." Let us have *good mothering*, then we shall have healthy, happy, children."

This seems to put a great deal of responsibility on the *mothers*, and we all know that they have a great deal. A mother's influence is greater than any other influence, and has more effect than anything else, not only on the bodily health, but on the minds and characters of the children. And John Burns showed that he realised this, for he told the

people at this meeting a few things about his home life, and the way in which he was brought up. He told them that he was one of a large family, of whom nine were still alive, that he had a good father and a good mother, who brought up their children plainly and well. He said that his father and mother did not drink; his mother nursed her babies herself, and she did not go out to work, but stayed at home and looked after the house and children. And to this state of things at home John Burns said he was sure that he owed his health and strength, and his present good position in the world.

Now in what he says we may notice three things, which seem to have a good deal to do with this subject of Infant Mortality: (1) Drink, (2) Food, (3) Whether it is well for the mothers to go out to work. Let us think a little about each of these.

(1) Drink. Whether we are teetotallers or not, we cannot deny the dreadful harm and misery that is caused by drink. If we see a bright cheerful home, with the children clean and well cared for, we can feel quite sure that the parents do not drink—at any rate, that the mother does not. On the other hand, when we see a dirty, untidy home, and children who are ragged and neglected, do we not say at once, "I expect Mrs. So-and-So drinks?" And what is the effect of drink on the *babies*, as we are thinking especially about them? It has been found that babies born of drunken mothers are often puny, delicate little things, more difficult to rear, and more likely to have convulsions and rickets, and, perhaps, to inherit a liking for drink which may be their ruin in later life. Children born of drunken parents may go on all right until they are grown up, and come in the way of the temptation to drink, and then the inherited weakness may show itself, and perhaps quite suddenly they give way and become drunkards. There is also another way in which a baby runs a great risk if it has a drunken mother, and that is the danger of *over-lying*. I am afraid that very often, when inquiries have been made about these deaths, it has been found that the mother was either really drunk, or had taken enough drink to make her stupid and heavy.

Now you may be thinking that I am looking at the very black side, and that there are plenty of mothers who take a little to drink, but who would never think of getting really drunk. That is quite true, but it is really better for the babies if the mothers take *nothing*. Ideas have changed very much lately about the good of beer and spirits, and so on. Doctor's ideas have changed, too, and many doctors who might order alcohol at

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