

The Midwife.

The Feeding of Mothers.

Two of the most serious problems with which the nation is confronted are infantile mortality, and physical deterioration, and both are due to a considerable extent to the same cause, the insufficient feeding of women when carrying and nursing their children. Is it possible that a child should be vigorous, or grow up into a healthy man or woman, when the mother has been half starved while the child is still unborn, or that when born her milk should nourish it, when the food she takes for the support of two lives is not sufficient for her own wants?

Many points indeed centre round this question of food. It has been asserted that the drink problem has its origin to a great extent in the food problem, for the craving for drink is especially strong in those who are insufficiently fed, and this again is a factor affecting the physical and mental stability of the child.

It is probable that the importance of the food question would have been recognised before now, but for the uncomplaining patience with which women of the poorer classes accept privation as a matter of course, and their righteous independence, so that it is often difficult to get them to accept the food so essential to them and their offspring. Even if they are induced to do so, if sent to them in their own homes mothers will frequently deny themselves that other members of the family may be better fed, so the action of the St. Pancras School for Mothers in providing mothers' dinners at 1½d. a head at the Mothers' and Babies' Welcome, 6, Charlton Street, Euston Road, N.W., to be eaten on the premises, is an example worthy of imitation, and one in which midwives should interest those in a position to spread the good work throughout the country.

The small payment meets the objection that the women are being "pauperised," which is heard when "free dinners" are suggested. But how comes it that we press our hospitality on our well-to-do neighbours, and insist that if we feed our poorer ones they must at least make a payment sufficient to cover the actual expenses, we are so afraid of pauperising them? "Thank you, mum, but it sticks in your throat if you can't pay for it," was the invariable reply of the mother of a young infant, whose husband was out of work, when urged to accept free dinners at the Babies' Welcome. The husband had an excellent character, but

could get no regular work, and the baby will in all probability carry to its grave the stigmata of its mother's privations.

Physical deterioration—infantile mortality—is it any wonder that they are becoming a national peril when mothers are half-starved, when they work hard up to the day of their confinement and leave hospital at the earliest possible moment because their husbands are out of work, and the family must starve until they once again take up the task of bread-winners.

But are such women anxious for "pauperisation" in the way of free dinners? Listen again to the experience of "The Welcome."

"One of our greatest difficulties has been to persuade the most deserving mothers to come at all when they cannot pay for themselves. It is the commonest occurrence first to have excuse after excuse offered for non-attendance, and then, at last, the truth 'I don't like eating food I can't pay for,' sometimes with the addition, 'I can't enjoy my dinner anyway when I know they've got nothing at home.' When such women do come there is naturally a great inclination to bring the 'next baby' with them, and then to get portions of their own dinner into the little hungry mouth." Surely help may be extended to such women by their more fortunate sisters without incurring the charge of "pauperising" them. Is it not an honour to help those who struggle so bravely, unselfishly, and uncomplainingly with adversity, at a time when those in better circumstances are surrounded with every care and comfort? Can we not prove that we understand something of the sacredness of motherhood, and that we consider it a privilege to help those who are bearing life's burden so bravely.

And, indeed, it may not only be a privilege, but an imperative duty, to see that the mothers of the nation are properly fed while they are "having their babies." It is to their offspring that the country must look for national defence, and if the infant mortality remains as high as at present, if the children who survive grow up stunted, weakly, and physically unfit the nation will be in a perilous condition. The instinct of self-preservation, if no higher motive, should compel us to make tardy reparation to the underfed and starved mothers who are bearing the burden of Empire. We must see to it that they can rear healthy children, not those who are half-starved and physically unfit.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)