

# MOTHERHOOD IN BEING

*In which a plea is made for deeper regard for the "mothers in the ranks" and an argument is made for a better "selection of parents."*

By DR. C. W. SALEEBY, F.R.S.

IT is the selection of parents that alone has raised us from the beast and the worm. This continuous and apparently invincible thing, human life, which began so humbly and to the sound of no trumpets, in Southern Asia or the neighbourhood of the Caspian Sea, but which has never looked back since its birth, and is now the dominant fact of what might well be an astonished earth, depends in every age and from moment to moment upon here a baby, there a baby, and there yet another. If but one of all the "hungry generations" that have preceded us had failed to secure the care and love of its predecessor, the curtain would have come down, and a not unpromising, though hitherto sufficiently grotesque, drama have been ended for ever. It is, thus, to the conception of parentage as the vital and organic link of life that we are forced. No generation, whether of men, or animals, or plants, determines or provides, as a whole, the future of the race. Only a percentage, as a rule a very small percentage indeed, of any species, reach maturity. These it is who, in the long run, make history.

It is possible that a concrete case, common enough, but wonderful nevertheless, may help us to realise afresh the conditions under which human life actually persists. Forced inside a motor-omnibus one evening, for lack of room outside, I found myself opposite a woman, poorly clothed, with a wedding ring upon her finger and a baby in her arms. The mother's face roused in me feelings which a sonnet of Wordsworth's might have expressed, or a painting by some artist with a soul, a Rembrandt or a Watts, such as we may look for in vain amongst the be-lettered to-day. Here was the spectacle of mother and child, which all the great historic religions, from Buddhism to Christianity, have rightly worshipped, the spectacle which more nearly symbolises the sublime than any other upon which the eye of any man, himself once such a child, can rest; the spectacle which alone epitomises the life of mankind and the unalterable conditions of all human life and all human societies, reminding us at once of our individual mortality, and the immortality of our race; the spectacle which alone, if any can, may reconcile us to death, the spectacle of that which alone can sanctify the love of the sexes; the spectacle of motherhood in being; the supreme duty and supreme privilege of womanhood.

## EXHAUSTED MOTHERHOOD.

THIS woman, utterly unconscious of the dignity of her attitude and of the contrast between herself and the imitation of a woman, elegantly clothed, who sat next to her, giving her not a thought nor a glance, nor yet room for the elbow bent in its divine office, was probably some thirty-two or three years old, as time is measured by the revolutions of the earth around the sun. Measured by some more relevant gauge, she was evidently aged, her face grey and drawn, desperately tired, yet placid, not with due exultation, but with the calm of one who has no hope. She was too weary to draw the child to her bosom, and her arms lay upon her knees; but instead she bent her body downwards to her baby. She looked straight out in front of her, not at me nor at the passing phantasms beyond, but at nothing. The eyes were open, but they were too tired to see. The face had no beauty of feature nor of colour, nor of intelligence, but it was wholly beautiful, made so by motherhood, and I think she must have held some faith. The tint of her skin and of her eyeballs spoke of the impoverishment of her blood, her need of sleep and rest and ease of mind. I could have stood up and cursed aloud the whole scheme of things. She will probably be killed by consumption within five years, and will certainly never hold a grandchild in her arms. The pathologist may lay this crime at the door of the tubercle bacillus, but a prophet would lay it at the reader's door and mine.

While we read and write, play and prattle and prose, this woman, and myriads like her, are doing the essential work of the world. "The worm waits for us as well as for her and them; and in a few years her children and theirs will be Mankind." If

there be a poet or a painter alive who is more than an applauded prostitute, and who has the genius that is "the clearer presence of God Most High in a man," let him leave unsung or undepicted and undisplayed the ephemeral subject and the trivial dexterities which serve merely to make visible the darkness of what is called art in this barren time, and tell us how the Deity within him regards such a spectacle as this; or if he can learn nothing from childhood and motherhood dethroned let him be silent—he has nothing to say that men and women need to hear. Let him cry aloud and spare not. Let him tell us that if this is the fate of mothers in the ranks which supply the overwhelming proportion of our children, our nation may number Shakespeare and Newton amongst the glories of its past, and the lands of ancient empire amongst its present possessions, but it has no future; that if, worshipping what it is pleased to call success, it has no tears nor even eyes for such failures as these, it may walk in the ways of its insensible heart and in the sight of its blind eyes, yet it is walking not in its sleep, but in its death.

## THE DOOM OF NEGLECTED NATIONS.

LET him say that in such a state a country is already doomed and damned almost past recall; and that, if it is to be saved, there will avail not "Broadening the basis of taxation," nor teaching in churches the worship of the Holy Mother and Holy Child, whilst motherhood is blasphemed at their very doors, but this and this only—the establishment, not in statutes but in the consciences of men and women of a true religion based upon these perdurable and evident dogmas: that all human life is holy, all mothers and all children; that history is made in the nursery; that the individual dies; that therefore children determine the destinies of all civilisations; that the race or society which succeeds with its mammoth ships and its manufactures but fails to produce men and women, is on the brink of irretrievable doom; that the body of man is an animal, endowed with the animal instincts necessary for self-preservation and the perpetuation of the race, and that, if the possession of this body by a conscious spirit, "looking before and after," is anything more than a "sport" of the evolutionary forces, it demands that, the blind animal instincts notwithstanding, the desecration of motherhood, the perennial slaughter and injury of children, the casual unconscious birth of children for whom there is no room or light, or air, or food, and of children whose inheritance condemns them to misery, insanity, or crime, must cease; and that the recurrent drama of human love and struggle reaches its happy ending not when the protagonists are married, but when they join hands over a little child that promises to be a worthy heir of all the ages.

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTAGE.

WE are assuredly as responsible for posterity as any parent for any child. Before the nineteenth century this fact could be realised by very few. To-day, when the truth of organic evolution is a common-place, and when the plasticity of the forces of evolution is slowly becoming realised, we must face our tremendous responsibility and privilege in a spirit worthy of those to whom such mighty secrets have been revealed. Parentage and birth—in these the whole is summed. At the mercy of these are all past discovery, all past achievement in art or science, in action or in thought. The human species, secure though it be, is only a race after all; only a sequence of runners who—*quasi cursores, vita lampada tradunt*—hand on the lamp of life, as Lucretius said. This it is which, to the thoughtful observer, makes each birth such an overwhelming event.

It is a great event for the mother and the father, but how much greater if its consequence be only half realised? Education in its full sense, "the provision of an environment," as I have defined it, is a mighty and necessary force, for nothing but potentiality is given at birth; but no education, no in-

fluence of traditional progress, can avail, unless the potentialities which these must unfold are worthy. The baby comes into the world. The fate of all the to-morrow depends upon it. Hitherto its happening has depended upon factors animal and casual enough, utterly improvident, concerned but rarely with this tremendous consequence. Fate may be mistress, but she works only too often by Chance, as Goethe remarked. Fate and Chance hitherto have been at work determining—for progress, to death of the individual makes imperative; and forces have been at work determining—for progress, to some extent, but most imperfectly—the parentage of these headlong babies. Yet the human intelligence cannot remain satisfied with their working, and much less so when it realises how they can be controlled, how effectively, and to what high ends.

## THE PRODUCTION OF A SUPERIOR RACE.

IF these babies differ immeasurably from each other, as they do; if these differences are, on the whole, capable of prediction in terms of heredity; if the future state of mankind is involved in these differences, which will in their turn be transmitted to the children of such as themselves become parents; and if this business of parentage will be confined to only a small proportion of these babies, "of whom one-half will be dead within five years"; if these things be so, cannot these babies be chosen in anticipation? There would thus be effected an enormous vital economy, and the human intelligence would so make its supreme achievement—the ethical direction and vast acceleration of racial progress. What man can do for animals and plants, can he not do for himself? Give imagination its fleetest and strongest wing, it can never conceive a task so worth the doing. This, and this alone, is what requires to be brought home to the general reader and the reformer alike. Says Mr. H. G. Wells: "It seemed to me, then, that to prevent the multiplication of people below a certain standard, and to encourage the multiplication of exceptionally superior people, was the only real and permanent way of mending the ills of the world. I think that still."

## THE GREAT IDEAL.

SO surely as this belief, which is the crowning and practical conclusion to which all the teachings of modern biology converge, comes to life in men's minds, so surely the difficulties will be met, not only on paper, but also in practice. I am prepared to deny that there is anything, either in the character of the individual man and woman, or in the structure of society, that makes the ideal of race culture impossible to-day; and to deny as well, that we must wait for further knowledge of heredity. Little though we surely know so far, we have abundance of assured knowledge for immediate action in many directions. But it is public opinion that governs the world. If it were, as it will be one day—which may this article hasten—an elementary and radical truth, as familiar and as cogent to all, man in the House or man in the public-house, as the fact of the earth's gravitation—that racial maintenance, much more racial progress, depends absolutely upon the selection of parents, if the establishment of this selective process in the best and widest manner were the admitted goal of all legislation and all social and political speculation—who can question that the thing would be practicable and indeed easy? Without the formation of public opinion this is as hopelessly utopian and inaccessible an ideal as words ever framed; public opinion once formed, nothing could be more palpably feasible.

Before we dictate courses of procedure, and even before we can expect profit from scientific investigation, this public opinion must be formed. The idea of eugenics, or good breeding, must be instilled into the conscience of civilisation like a new religion—a religion of the most lofty and austere, because the most unselfish, morality—a religion which sets before it a sublime ideal, terrestrial indeed in its chosen theatre, but celestial in its theme. If the intrinsic ennoblement of mankind does not answer to this eulogy, where is the ideal that does?