

Doctor Said It Was Malnutrition; One Baby ‘Batty,’ Another On the Way

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Read This Story of Hunger and Heartache and See How Much Respect You Have
Left for a System That Locks Food Away from People.

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Walk up five flights of stairs of the dirtiest and the oldest house on 2d street, past the dirty barber shop on the ground floor, where the two barbers play, for lack of something better to do, on the mandolin and banjo; past the first floor, where a prolific woman with no figure sits surrounded by her brood all day and finishes pants; past the room on the third floor where another woman sits and sews and never looks up, because there is nothing to look at; past the room on the fourth floor, where the little Italian woman bursts into song now and then, forgetting herself and her sorrows when she looks at the clouds that are tinted like the breast of a dove; and then up to the top floor, where the rooms are cheaper.

All the way up the stairs the music from the barber shop haunts you, and the farther up you get the more heart-breaking and mocking and shallow it sounds. You have to stop a few times on the way, because the steps are steep and there are no windows and you lose your breath. And each time you stop the music bears in on you. And each time you stop you get whiffs, not whiffs of food. You wish that they were whiffs of food. But the only thing you can associate with them is washing.

Home Neat and Clean

Having reached the top floor, you knock on the door, and a dull voice says, “Come in.” It is 6 o’clock and the mother is home from work. Had you come an hour earlier, the husband and baby would have been alone, and the windows would have been closed, and the baby would have had a dirty dress on. But, because the mother is home, the window is open and the little flat smells fresh and the baby is clean.

The three of them sit around an oil-cloth that has a picture of Theodore Roosevelt on each of the four corners and a picture of the White House that does not wash off. Or perhaps they never get the cloth dirty.

At the head of the table sits a man who is dying of consumption. The doctor has given him two months. He was in jail once and has never since been well. He fastens his dull gaze on his wife at the foot. She is tired. There are circles around her eyes and her face is drawn. She has the kind of a face that impels the ordinary observer to think, “Why doesn’t she mask

her emotions?” she does not look at the husband. She fastens her gaze on the baby that sits between them.

If you look at the baby, you will notice that it does not look at anything in particular, but that its eyes are cloudy and wandering. Its head is shapeless. It does not have the peculiar bulging forehead that characterizes most infants. Its head does not protrude in the back. And, if you could not tell by inference, the mother could tell you that the baby was blind and an idiot.

Never Enough to Eat

“I never had enough to eat,” said the mother. “So, instead of killing me, God took it out on the baby. He was born blind and an idiot. It’s too bad he doesn’t die. But the doctor says that he is perfectly healthy and that he will live till he is 90. They say that we must put him in an institution. But my husband is dying and he wants him till he is gone. He can’t quite believe that he’s batty. I’d just as [illegible (lieve?)] take care of it. I love the child. But another is coming, and it takes all that I earn to feed this one. He’s awfully fat, you see, and he eats lots.

“But I’m afraid—and I get more afraid every day, that the kid that is coming—we expect it in four months—will be like this one. Because, with prices so high and my appetite so bad, I never get enough to eat. I can’t eat the kind of food that I get in the shops. It’s horse meat mostly. And the bread’s all puffed up with something that they put in the flour to make it go farther. We can’t afford anything better. So I am as hungry now as I was before the other was born. And the doctor said that it was malnutrition that did it.”