LETTERS

to

THE PEOPLE

ON

HEALTH AND HAPPINESS.

by

CATHARINE E. BEECHER.

NEW YORK:

HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS,
FRANKLIN SQUARE,
1855.
LETTERS TO THE PEOPLE
ON
HEALTH AND HAPPINESS.

LETTER FIRST.

MY FRIENDS:
Will you let me come to you in your work-shop, or office, or store, or study? and you, my female friends, may I enter your nursery, your parlor, or your kitchen? I have matters of interest to present in which every one of you has a deep personal concern.

I have facts to communicate, that will prove that the American people are pursuing a course, in their own habits and practices, which is destroying health and happiness to an extent that is perfectly appalling. Nay more, I think I shall be able to show, that the majority of parents in this nation are systematically educating the rising generation to be feeble, deformed, homely, sickly, and miserable; as much so as if it were their express aim to commit so monstrous a folly.

I think I can show also, that if a plan for destroying female health, in all the ways in which it could be most effectively done, were drawn up, it would be exactly the course which is now pursued by a large portion of this nation, especially in the more wealthy classes.

At the same time, I can present facts showing that the results of such a course have been an amount of domestic unhappiness and of individual suffering in all classes in our
land that is perfectly frightful, and that these dreadful evils are constantly increasing.

You have read often of the Greeks. Some twenty centuries ago they were a small people, in a small country; and yet they became the wisest and most powerful of all nations, and thus conquered nearly the whole world. And they were remarkable, not only for their wisdom and strength, but for their great beauty, so that the statues they made to resemble their own men and women have, ever since, been regarded as the most perfect forms of human beauty.

The chief reason why they excelled all nations in these respects, was the great care they took in educating their children. They had two kinds of schools—the one to train the minds, and the other to train the bodies of their children. And though they estimated very highly the education of the mind, they still more valued that part of school training which tended to develop and perfect the body.

In the family, too, although the higher classes took care that their children should improve the mind, all, from the highest to the lowest, were earnest in efforts to train the rising generation to have healthy, strong, and beautiful bodies. And when these people met at their national festivals, they not only read or recited history and poetry before these great assemblies, but they still more delighted in games and sports, which exhibited the beauty, strength, gracefulness, and skill of the human body.

But the American people have pursued a very different course. It is true that a large portion of them have provided schools for educating the minds of their children; but instead of providing teachers to train the bodies of their offspring, most of them have not only entirely neglected it, but have done almost everything they could do to train their children to become feeble, sickly, and ugly. And those who have not pursued so foolish a course, have taken very little pains to secure the proper education of the body for their offspring during the period of their school life.

In consequence of this dreadful neglect and mismanagement, the children of this country are every year becoming less and less healthful and good-looking. There is a great change in reference to this matter within my memory. When
fathers and mothers seldom have strong and healthy children. And when one parent is well and the other sickly, then a part of the children will be sickly and a part healthy.

Thus the more parents become unhealthy the more feeble children will be born. And when these feeble children grow up and become parents, they will have a still more puny and degenerate offspring. So the case will go on, from bad to worse, with every generation. What then, if what I state be true, are the prospects of this nation, unless some great and radical change is effected?

Such a change is possible. The American people have far better advantages than the Greeks had to train their offspring to be strong, healthful, and beautiful, while the means of retrieving the mischief already done are in their hands. Nothing is needed but a full knowledge of the case, and then the application of that practical common-sense and efficiency to this object, which secures to them such wonderful success in all their business affairs. It is with the hope of doing something to effect such a change that this book has been prepared.

I have been led to this effort by many powerful influences. More than half of the mature years of my own life have been those of restless debility and infirmities, that all would have been saved by the knowledge contained in this work.

More than half the families where I have visited in all parts of the land, seem under a cloud of dim anxiety or sorrow from the failing health or recent death of some beloved member, who has been a victim to similar ignorance.

The many establishments for the restoration of health which I have frequented, are thronged with sufferers from all classes, who bring mournful testimony of the decay of health and vitality in all the circles in which they move, while the statistics of health and disease, which in various ways have been furnished to me, show that the sad impressions made by the above circumstances are more than sustained by unquestionable facts. And surely if any thing should "cause the ear that heareth to tingle," it is some of the facts which these pages will present.

All these evils are suffered chiefly because the people are ignorant of that which, above all earthly knowledge, they must need to acquire; so that it may truly be said, in the words of Holy Writ—"The people do perish for lack of knowledge."

It is impossible that the evils referred to should be remedied until they are known, and their causes fully understood. And it is impossible to make them comprehended except by giving clear ideas of the construction of certain portions of the human body, the end designed by these organs, and the methods for securing these ends. This is what is first proposed in this work; and in attempting it, the aim will be to avoid all that is not strictly practical, and all the technics of science that are needless. It also will be the aim to write in so clear and simple a style that even children can understand every sentence; and to make the work so short, that even American men of business can be induced to read it.

The following is an outline of the plan:

The first part contains a brief description of certain organs of the human body most important to health and happiness, and which are most injured and abused by the American people.

The second part shows what is the proper treatment of these organs in order to secure the most perfect health and physical happiness.

The third part points out the various methods in which these organs are most frequently injured.

Part fourth shows the many evil results of such abuse and mismanagement.

Part fifth points out the remedies for these evils.

In regard to the first portion, it is feared that some who are familiar with physiology may pass it over. This is earnestly deprecated. All that follows is so intimately connected with the first part, that none of the work can be fully appreciated after such an omission.

It is a very small book; it will not take over two or three hours to read it.

I beseech you for your own sake, for the sake of all you love best, to read the whole.
LETTER TWENTY-THIRD.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

We have now reached the final portion of this work, in which is to be suggested more definitely the remedies for the evils that have been set forth.

In pursuing this, it is clear that the undertaking is equalled in importance only by the difficulties to be overcome. To change essentially the habits, customs, and daily practices of a whole nation, in regard to exercise, ventilation, food, drink, amusements, medical treatment, and modes of training the young, certainly is a most Herculean undertaking; and yet nothing less than this will at all meet the case.

But then the American people never fail in any thing they choose to undertake, and they would feel a pride and pleasure in accomplishing a wonderful and beneficent change, and one, too, that would in all respects set them at the head of the human race.

For it is granted by all physiologists and naturalists that the mingling of races is the surest mode of securing the highest physical developments of the human family. The superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race is always traced to the happy combination of the British, Celtic, Saxon, and Norman races. In America a new development is to be made, by the union of almost every civilized race, and the eventual result must be the highest type of human physical development, so far as this single cause shall have its influence.

If, in addition to this, the American people could become enlightened as to the true modes of physical training both of themselves and their offspring, and should excel all nations in customs and habits conformed to the laws of health, both of body and mind, what a glorious development of humanity would ensue! And why not this be hoped for, and undertaken as a direct and practical aim? What human undertaking ever was started that so directly appealed to the personal interest of every individual of a nation, and yet, at the same time, was so free from all antagonistic influences and combinations?

The first thing suggested then is, that appropriate means be taken to make the whole people understand this subject, as presented in this work. If suitable measures for this end were adopted, in a few months every man and woman in this nation who can read, might have this little book placed in their hands. The labor of simplifying and condensing a subject usually so enveloped in technics, and thus putting it in reach of the most ordinary capacity, has been what few can understand, and was done with this very end in view.

Men never can be made to obey what to them are empiric rules of health. They must understand the construction of their bodies, the functions of the several organs, and their modes of healthful action. They must understand the nature of the atmosphere they breathe, and of the food they eat, and the influences of their habits, customs, and employments on the various organs and functions of their bodies. When this is secured, reason, conscience, self-love, domestic affection, and religion, furnish motives of obedience to laws perceived to be wise and necessary, and whose penalties are inevitable.

They also must have clear and practical ideas of the exact course each one individually should pursue, in remedying the evils here presented. In reference to this, more exact and minute details will now be set forth, under the main topics.

PURE AIR AND VENTILATION.

This topic takes the lead of all others in importance and difficulty. The fact that the Greeks lived most of the year out-doors, and that in their houses they never breathed any but pure air, gave them an advantage in developing the beauty, strength, and health of their children, which it would be difficult to secure with our climate and habits,
And the steady and equable climate of the old countries, which has led their inhabitants to out-door life, and thus to acquire vigorous constitutions, gives them also a great advantage over us.

But then our difficulties can be met and overcome. Every man who is a householder should be sure that every member of his family breathes pure air, not only all day but all night, by this simple arrangement: In every room of his house let at least one window be let down at the top two inches, and one door have an opening of two inches over the top. Let this be done in such a way that no person can alter it. For if ventilators are fixed so that they can be closed, they will be, in the majority of cases, by the ignorant, or timid, or falsely economical.

A house thus arranged will require more fuel to warm it, but the additional expense of this will not be a tenth part of that which would result from the loss of labor and health consequent on the debility and disease always resulting, more or less, from the habitual inhalation of impure air.

In a house thus arranged, stoves—though less healthful than open fires—would still be far less injurious than they now are.

And here one common prejudice against "night-air," resulting solely from ignorance, must be met. It has been shown that every pair of lungs vitiates a hog's head of air every hour, by withdrawing from it one half its oxygen, and replacing it with the same quantity of carbonic acid. Now, at night, the inmates of a house must either breathe pure air, that constantly flows in from without and thus drives out the impure air within, or they must keep on breathing over and over again the confined air of the house, that every hour grows more and more poisonous and debilitating.

The popular objections to night-air are, that it is cold, or damp, or loaded with unhealthful miasmas. But if a person has bed-clothing enough to keep warm, the colder the air the better every way. And if the air is damp, so as to render the atmosphere of the room damp also, still no harm is done, provided the body is kept warm. Remember that the most delicate patients in health establishments sleep for hours with wet sheets packed around them, without the least evil or danger. A damp night-air never can harm the most delicate person if every part of the body is covered so as to be duly warm. As to the effect of damp air taken into the lungs, well educated people know that there is no time when there is more water held suspended in the atmosphere than in a hot day. When the air becomes cold this dampness becomes sensible to the eye and feeling, but there is really not so much water inhaled into the lungs in breathing a cold, damp air, as in breathing a warm and apparently dry atmosphere.

No reason, then, exists for excluding the night-air from the lungs when cold and damp; but more clothing is required, and more care to avoid a draft on any exposed part of the body. Of course, where lungs are diseased, any extremes in temperature must be avoided.

As to unhealthful miasmas in the night-air, nothing can be worse than the exhalations of decaying bodies, as sent forth from the lungs and skin of sleepers. It is precisely the same evil as is found in proximity to grave-yards and decaying carrion. The effluvia from the lungs and skin is precisely the same as that from carrion, only more diluted by the atmosphere. Those who have entered the pent-up sleeping rooms of persons who do not wash their skins or breathe a pure air, very well understand the close resemblance.

In the summer season, while vegetation is in life, it is true that the leaves of all trees and plants are respiring; giving out oxygen and taking in carbonic acid by day, and then at night throwing out carbonic acid and taking in oxygen. But this respiration of vegetable nature outside of our dwellings, and all the effluvia of decaying vegetation at any period of the year, are never so effective in destroying the healthfulness of the air around our dwellings, as the lungs of the inhabitants within them.

Let it also be considered that the air we do breathe—unless the house is air-tight, which no house can be—must be night-air, more or less mixed with the portion which has been breathed over and over again through the day and evening. So that every body does breathe night-air, or what is worse.
These things are presented in order to remove that baseful prejudice and fear that so many ignorant persons indulge toward their best friends, air and water.

To return: let every person who has charge of a family make some sure arrangements thus to secure to every person in their house an abundance of pure air for their lungs and skin both by day and night, and the grand cause that above all others, is gradually deteriorating the vigor, health, and beauty of the American people will disappear.

Add to this, appropriate care that all the school-rooms in the land have the same arrangement made to provide pure air for the pupils. Keep the tops of the windows down both in winter and summer, and pay for the increase of fuel instead of the doctor and grave-digger. In every community where there are colleges and seminaries, as well as the public schools, there ought to be inspectors appointed, the same as other civil officers, to go around and see whether any parent or teacher is poisoning the rising generation with impure air. Oh, how many families, and schools, and boarding establishments have come within my circuit in which this evil, even to this hour, is perpetuated!

No parents, no guardians of the young should ever retire to rest till fully assured that every one under their care is furnished with the full supply of pure air for the night. And all employers, in all kinds of business, should be taught that they are committing a great sin against the life and welfare of those they employ, if they force them to labor in impure air. Every minister of the gospel should, in the first place take care that his own spiritual concerns, and those of his hearers are not checked and interrupted by brains stupefied by bad air; and next, he should teach his people their obligations in this matter, both to themselves and to all under their care. The physician, too, is especially bound to use all his influence in a community in the same direction.

**Exercise and Amusement.**

Next to pure air, healthful exercise and amusements are the most important remedies for the evils set forth.

The modes for securing these are not so easily indicated. A great part of the American people exercise certain portions of their muscular system too much, while their intellect has little activity, and their spirits are rarely cheered and animated by amusements. Another portion keep their brain in constant labor, without the balancing influence of muscular activity, or the relief of recreation. And still another portion give up their whole being to pleasure-seeking and amusement, without any useful activity either of body or mind.

There are various measures which might be adopted, that each in its place would tend to a better adjustment of this difficult matter. To illustrate what might be done, let it be imagined that, for the sake of an experiment, funds were provided, and the inhabitants of a community should all agree to give the method here suggested a fair trial.

In the first place, a course of lectures should be given, for the purpose of making the people fully understand the evils to be remedied, and the benefits to be secured.

Next, a central site should be provided, on which should be erected a large and beautiful building—a Temple of Health. Around it should be every variety of pleasant walks, and shades, and flowers, to attract and please in the summer months, and other arrangements provided for outdoor sports and exercises in winter. Within the building should be arranged a great variety of apparatus and accommodations for in-door amusements that exercise the muscles, and those which in most cases could be performed in measures and to the sound of music. These exercises should be under the direction of scientific and medical men, and no one should be admitted to these premises except on condition that they would strictly obey the direction of these managers.

All persons attending should then be examined in regard to their daily avocations, their diet, the ventilation of their sleeping and business rooms, the defects of their physical system, and any disease they may suffer, and advice appropriate be given. Then a course of exercise, fitted to each case, should be marked out, and superintendents appointed to see that all these directions are obeyed. The aim should be, not only to secure exercise, but that kind which is appropriate to each case, and also that which would prove exhilarating and