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The Overshading of our Homes.



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BY



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THE OVERSHADING OF OUR HOMES.

In searching for information in preparing this paper as a protest against the overshadowing of our homes in towns and villages, I am surprised to find that so very little has been written on this important subject.

Dr. Vaughan's admirable essay, published by the American Public Health Association ("Healthy Homes and Foods for the Working Classes"), sums up in a few words of caution the dangers from damp soil and insufficient sunlight; but it seems to me that more particular attention should be directed toward the value of sanitary details in the surroundings of our homes.

The duties of the medical profession are mostly confined to the relief of immediate suffering and disease. The surgeon and the physician are actively engaged in the effort to save from impending death; and advice concerning hygiene is by no means so frequently sought as it should be, although a great improvement in this respect is very noticeable. The labors of hygienists and sanitarians are being more and more appreciated by the public, and the great work of the American Public Health Association and of our state and local boards of health is doing incalculable good for the nation, and increasing health and comfort and length of life. Sanitary science has robbed disease of much of its strength and terror. The great work accomplished may not have received the commendation it has deserved, but it is, nevertheless, a comforting fact for those who have toiled for the public good that a certain amount of success has attended their unselfish efforts. The study of sanitary science and the faithful discharge of the duties we owe to the public at large are never lost sight of by the medical profession; and when we consider that most of this advice and labor is a gratuitous gift to the people of the communities in which they live, and that often ridicule and blame are the only return for it all, we have a right to feel that our profession is a noble one, and our calling worthy of our most faithful efforts.

The sanitary surroundings of our homes, where our families live and are reared, ought to be as nearly perfect as it is possible to make them. The grounds should be well graded, drained, and free from stagnant water, and sufficiently dry and wholesome; and trees and bushes should be well thinned out, lest they be the means of preventing the free access of sunlight, without abundance of which no family can be either truly healthy or happy. Every bed-chamber must, if possible, be so situated that abundance of sunlight can enter it for some hours daily, in clear

weather; and especially is this true of the nursery, where the greatest amount of sunshine is needed, and where its life- and health-giving rays will most surely make its value recognized in cheerful dispositions and in healthy bodies.

¹The considerable increase of numbers means always war upon those pristine conditions of purity which exist in the elements before man's interference upsets the regulating and well balanced alchemy of nature.

²Men are so accustomed to look upon disease as an unavoidable evil, that the idea of preventing it by any means of their own seems to have never distinctly occurred to them until within comparatively modern times. Preventive medicine, as it has been called, is one of those things that are theoretically approved and too often practically neglected. No one doubts its importance.

³An important difference between men and animals is found in the extent to which man will sacrifice a present pleasure or convenience to secure a future good or to avoid a future evil. This is especially the case as regards matters affecting health. When a man begins to take special precautions as to his diet and exercise, having in view rather his future health than his present comfort or tastes, he has in most cases already begun to suffer from the effects of his imprudence, and does not commence a hygienic course of life as a perfectly sound and healthy person. The same is true for a community. It will not usually submit to the burden of taxation necessary to secure needed reforms until the neglect of these things has resulted in such an amount of disease and death as forcibly to call attention to the matter. The result is, that the burden is far heavier than it would have been had the work been undertaken in proper season. When a state or municipality has so far advanced in civilization as to consider it desirable to take measures to protect the public health by preventing individuals from polluting the air or water liable to be used by their neighbors, the services of the medical profession are usually called upon.

This subject is one of national importance, and concerns not only the prosperity of the people in a pecuniary sense, but is of greater importance in relation to sanitary matters and the general protection of health. Concerning the preservation of our forests it would be difficult to write too much; and everywhere there should be a desire to preserve and protect them. We are witnesses this year of the terrible calamities resulting from the wholesale destruction of our forests; but perhaps we do not sufficiently consider that the general climate suffers from this cause, and that indirectly much of disease and death results from the wanton destruction of the trees, so essential in the general condition of healthful landscape. It has been hoped that the government would make some practical efforts to protect the forests.

For many years our people have given considerable attention to this

¹ Dr. Ames's "Some Sanitary Problems of Massachusetts." Boston. *Medical and Sanitary Journal*, July 6, 1882.

² Dr. Tracy in Ziemssen's *Cyclopedia of Medicine*, vol. xix, p. 573.

³ Pepper's *System of Medicine*.

subject of forest culture, but instead of exercising their influence in the direction of forest protection and increase where it is most needed, many seem to content themselves with planning "arbor days," and employing our school-children in planting trees and shrubs in parks and school grounds and streets of our cities and towns. To witness the faithful efforts of our children as they plant the trees where sunlight is most needed, one cannot help feeling that oftentimes these efforts are sadly misdirected, and that the theory taught is not the true one. This love for the beauty of foliage is right, and it is natural, and, properly guided, is to be encouraged, but it has undoubtedly been only too often extravagantly bestowed; and the societies formed for this purpose are not always under the direction of the wisest, and the planting from a sanitary point of view has not yet received much attention. To set out as many trees as possible seems to be the object, and this is limited only by the means and the amount of land at their disposal. The poem, "Woodman, spare that tree," has won a strong place in the hearts of the people; and while whole forests disappear as if by magic, in ruthless waste and in serious menace of health and life, the tree in the town, whose roots are bathed in poisonous soil, and whose branches are filled with deadly vapors, and whose leaves repel God's glorious sunshine, stands triumphantly, a delusive ornament and a dangerous menace. So much has this natural love for the beauty of foliage been misdirected, that many sicken and die from overshadowing, even as many must also suffer from the wanton destruction of our forests.

Where the grounds about our country houses are extensive, the luxury of shade-trees can be indulged in; but healthy shade without perfect ventilation and circulation of air is impossible. The soil, to be fit for man to live upon, must have the rays of the sun to bathe it, and the fresh warm air to come in contact with it. A soil, damp and overshadowed to such an extent that the sun never reaches it, is unfit for a play-ground for our children, or as a retreat for adults: indeed, such a place is a veritable death-trap for many infants and weakly persons, both in summer and in winter. Such soil surrounding human habitations is most unsuitable, and is always a menace to health and life. Every physician has had an opportunity to express his disapproval of yards, undoubtedly unhealthy for strong men, yet offered to the sick as a place where they may hope to obtain air and gain strength.

From the Atlantic to the Pacific, from our lake towns to the homes upon the gulf,—go where you will, it is universally noticeable that our towns are dangerously overshadowed. As one who has spent months in the camp, or in the open life of a military campaign, suffers seriously upon moving into barracks or houses, and feels as if he could not breathe the foul, close air of our homes, as we commonly find them, so one who lives in some open country resort, new and comparatively free from shade, is aware of the unhealthy closeness of the air as he enters the overshadowed streets of an American town or village. I experienced this very perceptibly myself recently on a visit to a famous summer resort, suffer-

ing severely from the close, unhealthy air of overshadowed streets to such an extent that I could hardly articulate a word, so great was the injury to throat and air passages from the effects of the stifling air; and all this was owing to the neglect of man. Nature had given the locality an atmosphere and climate unequalled on this continent in many respects, but man had jeopardized it all by the heedless planting of trees, resulting in overshadowing and consequent injury not only to houses and lands, but also seriously threatening the lives of the inhabitants of an otherwise natural health resort.

The past nine months of this eventful year of 1889 have been remarkable in the lessons they have furnished for sanitarians and hygienists. As might well have been expected, the past ten or twelve weeks have furnished a large death-rate from causes preventible, which must act as a warning for all who are interested in the welfare of the country. I do not hesitate to affirm that this death-rate is owing to the overshadowing of our homes, in very many instances. Each community has its proportionate share of value in health and homes. Whatever diminishes this value is a direct injury to that community.

Overshading is a serious fault, and directly lessens the value of real estate, and noticeably increases disease and shortens life. These facts should receive careful and positive attention.

Vegetation produces a great effect upon the movement of the air. Its velocity is checked; and sometimes, in thick clusters of trees or underwood, the air is almost stagnant. If moist and decaying vegetation be a coincident condition of such stagnation, the most fatal forms of malarious diseases are produced. A moist soil is cold, and is generally believed to predispose to rheumatism, catarrh, and neuralgia. It is a matter of general experience that most persons feel healthier on a dry soil. In some way, which is not clear, a moist soil produces an unfavorable effect upon the lungs. A moist soil influences greatly the development of the agent, whatever it may be, which causes the paroxysmal fevers. In ground which has been rendered dryer by drainage, Buchanan¹ has shown that there has been a diminution in deaths from phthisis.

Houses overshadowed are not healthful, no matter how commodious or well built they may be. Too many trees near sleeping- and living-rooms exercise a very injurious influence, and induce various diseases, notably rheumatism, heart disease, consumption, general debility, and anaemia. It would seem as if these truths must be too well known to need any statement, and undoubtedly the members of this Association, at least, have long been familiar with the evils I am endeavoring to picture. But it has seemed to me, in view of the increasing foliage of our towns, necessary to call them again to your remembrance, and to ask you to consider the whole subject as one well worthy the attention of those interested in American public health. A journey through many of our towns during the past nine months, and an experience covering twenty years of professional investigation, have convinced me that this most undesirable con-

dition of overshadowing is only too common, and has become a positive injury in almost every direction. The bad results are, in point of fact, much more serious than most people seem to be aware of; indeed, the ignorance or indifference generally noticeable is deplorable whenever sanitarians make a move in the interests of public health.

A soil loaded with roots and densely shaded is unfit for man to live upon constantly, and is certainly no place for a permanent home. The air entering the bed-rooms and living-rooms from such surroundings is chilly and dead, and is not at all suitable for respiration. Such an atmosphere cannot bring health to invalids, and is dangerous to the well. It is invariably productive of sickness, and even death, especially among children and those of feeble constitutions.

This condition of overshadowing is very noticeable in our New England and Middle States towns; indeed, it is to be found everywhere in our land. In New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas, where trees grow only after considerable attention and care from those who would have them, and where often expense and tiresome labor must be given to rear them, even there one finds the houses seriously overshadowed. The climate is indeed health-giving, and nature affords everything desirable, and the atmosphere is pure and strengthening; but man, dissatisfied and complaining, or actuated by mistaken notions of health, at once attempts to hide his home by the densest shade possible, thereby cutting off the supply of pure air, and hiding his house and his family from the life-giving sunshine. It is, of course, in many instances desirable to interpose trees as a barrier against prevailing winds, and as a means of affording shelter against cold; but too often the trees are placed so close to the house that the good which is sought is overbalanced by the injury attained. The earth, which is found in a healthful condition of virgin purity of soil, he loads with impurities, and, having prevented the disinfection of these unsanitary surroundings by pure fresh air and sunlight, soon berates the new climate for the inevitable sickness and death which must soon follow from conditions so unfavorable.

To those of us who are used to the scorching sun of our Western deserts, a healthful, pleasant shade is worthy the poet's song, and is indeed a pleasure highly appreciated; but how much to be preferred the scorching sun of the prairies, than the damp, dead atmosphere to be found in so many of our Eastern yards!

The white faces and sickly appearance of so many of our people,—men, women, and children,—are largely attributable to overshadowing, and suggest that medical men should call attention to the growing evil—overshading.

The axe would be a great benefactor if freely used about countless thousands of our overshadowed homes. We are all personally acquainted with many such places. It would be well for the public if medical men would bear this in mind, and govern themselves accordingly, frankly stating to their patients, in assuming the professional care of the sick, that improvement will be much more reasonably anticipated when some

of the superfluous trees in the yard of the house, or in the immediate vicinity, have been removed. Trees preventing the incoming of God's sunshine, which He in His wisdom has given us for our health and life, should be cut down and carried away; and the soil would then be allowed some chance to dry, or, as one might say, "to breathe." The earth, to be healthy, needs, just as the animal needs, the warm, dry air and life-giving rays of the sun.

As man pales, sickens, and dies without the blessing of the sunshine, so, too, the earth deteriorates and becomes unfit as a safe resting-place for man, if it is deprived of the requirements of nature. It frequently happens that physicians are called to prescribe for ailing people who seem to possess every comfort and luxury, and yet who are really perishing because their houses and grounds are overshadowed. The people who live in such houses are always cold and miserable, needing extra clothing, and expending great quantities of fuel in order to obtain the needed warmth and to dispel the deadly chill. Artificial heat can never be compared, reasonably, with the pure, life-giving sunshine; and human science can never discover a substitute for the divine light of health and life.

Where houses are overshadowed, the nervous system also suffers as well as the general bodily health. Mental disturbance, melancholy and madness, are to be apprehended from such dreary surroundings.

No one will pretend that the sanitary conditions of the majority of our summer resorts are at all equal to what they should be, or to what the public has a right to demand. As a local board of health has a right and a duty to close a house injurious or dangerous to health and life, and forbid its occupancy until reasonable sanitary requirements have been observed and causes of danger removed, so it would almost seem, as a reasonable inference, that a national board of health should have power to discipline summer resorts and other localities, and prevent the seekers for health and pleasure from risking their own and their children's lives in places desperately neglected, unhealthful, and dangerous. Many such places exist where overshadowing is the greatest obstacle to needed sanitary reforms, and where, indeed, little can be accomplished for the future sanitary improvement of the place until the axe has been given full sway, and sunlight admitted to disinfect the foul earth.

"Oh! that one ray of golden light
Could pierce this never ending night—"

so cries the prisoner in his dark and dreary dungeon. Can we not, as physicians, feel the warmest pity for those who are deprived of the blessed sunlight? Do not the stories of the captives and the victims of Russian cruelty appeal to us more strongly when we think of their dark and sunless existence? Light and life are the divine gifts; death and darkness the portion of those who hate the light.

We must admit, then, that the evils to which we have referred cannot be overestimated, and they are certainly serious enough to arouse the atten-

tion of the medical profession to contend against them. We can readily understand that the beauties of the foliage, which are so justly admired, are often attained at great loss of health, and even loss of life itself; and undoubtedly consumption, that most cruel and dreadful disease of these latitudes, is caused in countless instances by overshadowing our homes, our house yards, and our streets.

Every intelligent man, who loves his family and recognizes his duties as the responsible head of a household, must occasionally ask himself whether or not the house he is occupying is safe for those he loves better than himself. All should be keenly alive to the importance of proper sanitary surroundings, and nothing should be neglected, and no vigilance spared, to make the home as secure against disease as against the intrusion of burglars. A happy, healthy home, with God's glorious sunshine within and without, and the sunlight of children's smiles at the fireside, is a reward for our vigilance and duty worthy of our most constant devotion.

Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the Sun.

—Eccles. x : 7.

