

## A. B. P.: About to Marry

A. B. P., *About to Marry: A Chat with an Old Friend* (London, Victoria Press, [185?]). Reading University Library: Pamphlet Book T611.

The exact date of this slim volume, initialled A. B. P., is unknown. The archive catalogue states the publisher as the Victoria Press, which was founded in 1859. Although publication date is not exact this text comes between the health reforms of the 1840s and the Public Health Acts of 1872 and 1875, making it a key text in the dissemination of public health issues to the poorer classes. Although not directly attributed to the Ladies' Sanitary Association, the anecdotal style and pamphlet form, along with references to other books published in their name, positions it within the genre of such work. The Association was formed under the umbrella of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (NAPSS) and distributed pamphlets such as this to working-class women in order to disseminate the developing knowledge on hygiene and health. Advocating the management of health as well as management of home shows a concern with a need to elevate domestic standards, still evident when Smiles published *Character* in 1871.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the knowledge necessary to maintain and promote health is seen as extensive, with this story serving as a general introduction with references for further, subject focused, reading.

The narrator of the story indirectly addresses the reader, who witnesses a conversation between a teacher and a former pupil. This rhetorical strategy creates an air of intimacy in stark contrast to Freeling's authoritarian *The Young Bride's Book* (see above, pp. 1–134), which directly addresses the reader. *About to Marry* includes women in education and progressive reforms whereas Freeling's text acts as an authority that excludes women from that process, even as it instructs them.

The young bride-to-be is a servant, but the emphasis on good health practices is extended to all classes; the ranks of the privileged (represented by the girl's previous employer) are shown to be knowledgeable in maintaining health and the poorer classes are presented as able to follow good practice if they are educated to do so. The responsibility for the health of self, husband and future children is placed firmly at the door of the intended wife. The story capitalises on the pervading acceptance of a woman's occupation in the domestic sphere. How-

1 Samuel Smiles, *Character* (London: John Murray, 1871), p. 61.

ever, rather than dogmatically prescribing a wife's place within the home, this text acknowledges that women contribute financially to the household economy. Indeed, by arguing that 'everyone' should have pertinent knowledge of domestic issues, this text accepts a different domestic structure in the working classes than that expected in the middle classes.

This pamphlet emphasises the maintenance of health through practical education, rather than through moral conduct. Although degeneration of one's health is a sin against God, this sin is often committed through ignorance rather than intent. The biblical story of Adam and Eve provides a powerful allegory that unites good sanitary practice with a familiar story, emphasising that poor sanitation is ungodly; social science and religious duty work in partnership with each other.

This practical approach interpellates working-class women into a domestic role that is acceptable to the hegemonic middle-class understanding of domestic order. Furthermore, advocating that a woman from any class can maintain her health by the application of appropriate knowledge indicates that a woman's fragility and predisposition to illness was not seen as entirely pathological.

Setting the story in the country rather than the growing industrial city taps into the cultural memory of the new industrialised populace. Although the city is not mentioned, its absence is striking given that the promotion of personal health in this work (and others like it) was generated by a legislative response to poor sanitary provision in the developing cities.

*About to Marry* suggests an intimate dialogue between the classes with the aim of promoting better personal and family health amongst the working class specifically. However the interclass tensions cannot be entirely written out. The prospective bride becomes symbolic of the hegemonic order's expectations of her class: a capable people who should recognise the uses that practically applied learning can bring to their lives. This to an extent infantilises working families, although the advocacy of self-help – urging working-class women to explore further pamphlets – recognises the potential liberal autonomy of women. The counterarguments to pursuing good personal health (seen as excuses rather than a class-related genuine lack of time and resources) are resolved within the text by a reasoned application of social science and religion. Ultimately, however, the intimate mode of address the story adopts, and the outward cross-class unity of purpose, suggests a tension between the classes that the NAPSS tries to bypass.

## ABOUT TO MARRY:

### A Chat with an Old Friend.

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“WHY, Jane, how busy you are this morning!” exclaimed Mrs. Carter, as she stood watching a neat-looking young woman, hard at work, cutting out a gown. “I thought you were still in service, but perhaps you are only come home for a holiday; and glad enough your mother must be to see you again.”

*Jane.*—“So she is, Mrs. Carter, but I am soon going to leave her and get a home of my own. In a fortnight’s time I hope to change my name, and there’s plenty to do before then, almost more than I can manage. I shouldn’t have been so behindhand with my work, but mistress was ill, and I did not like to leave her with a stranger till she was about again.”

Now, Mrs. Carter, who had been schoolmistress for years in the little village of Stoke, had known

Jane Temple from a child, and having always found her an obedient and affectionate girl, though not very quick at her book, she felt interested in her welfare, and anxious to know all about her future prospects. Jane was ready enough to answer Mrs. Carter's questions, and proud to think that an honest industrious man, like William Morgan, would be sure to please her. It was harvest-time, and Mrs. Carter's little scholars were scattered about in the fields far and near, gleaning the ripe ears of corn; so her school was closed, and having her time to herself, she, always ready to do a kindness when it lay in her power, asked Jane if she should stay, and help her forward with her work. The offer was gladly accepted, especially as Jane really wanted to have a chat with her old friend.

"I am glad to see you looking healthier than you used to do," began Mrs. Carter; "it is but a poor look out for a man when he binds himself for life to a sickly woman. A wife who is always ailing, let her strive never so hard, can scarcely be called a helpmeet."

*Jane.*—"I am much stronger than I was, thanks to my dear mistress, who took a great deal of trouble about me. You know, I was but weakly

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when I first went to service ; I suppose the dress-making didn't agree with me, though my mistress would have it that my bad health was partly my own fault ; and she talked to me a great deal, about fresh air, and washing, and such like. However, when I'm married it will be different : I cannot be expected to have time for such things, I must get along as I can."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Shame upon you, Jane, to talk in that way ! I thought you had more sense. You used to be a careful girl, and not fond of waste. I well remember your mother saying to me, before you went to service, 'Jane will make a good wife some day, for she never throws anything away that can be turned to use ;' yet here you are talking of wasting and throwing away your health, just as though it were not worth taking any trouble to keep ! We are all sorry enough when we lose it, and it is hard indeed to get back again. You will find the old saying, 'Waste not, want not,' holds good even in this."

*Jane.*—"Oh ! how well I remember working that on my first sampler, and you telling us a story about it afterwards."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Did I ? I had forgotten that ; but as I was saying, your mistress was quite

right, when she said you had bad health partly through your own fault ; and now, when you begin to know better, if you leave off your good habits you will have only yourself to thank if illness comes again."

*Jane.*—" I suppose every body must be ill sometimes, and it's time enough to think about one's self, when one is forced to lie by."

*Mrs. Carter.*—" That's not my way of taking it, Jane: in health, as well as in shirts and stockings, ' a stitch in time saves nine ; ' and to prevent an evil, is far better than to cure it. Besides, you seem to forget all that follows if you lose your health, even for a day. In the first place you are not so happy, if your head aches, or your stomach aches, or your back, or your teeth ache, and then you are not so strong and active for work, or so cheerful as a companion. You may try hard, as many a poor body does, and bear a great deal without much complaint, and work on, feeling thankful that you are no worse ; but it is surely a pity to have an ache, even for an hour, if it can be helped."

*Jane.*—" Well, it's not pleasant, certainly."

*Mrs. Carter.*—" God, who made us, has given to each of us a body, which it is His loving will

that we should take good care of, for our own sakes, and the sake of all who have to do with us. So whenever we wilfully do anything which will harm that body, we sin against Him."

*Jane.*—"Why, Mrs. Carter, I declare you have just the same notions about these things that my mistress had! She used to tell us, that it was a duty to take care of our health; and that we ought to try and learn how to do it, just as we learn to do other things, like reading and writing at school."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"And she never said a truer thing. The longer I live, and the more I see of sick folks, and even of folks who call themselves well, the more I feel sure it is everybody's duty to learn to take care of health. There's a great talk now-a-days about sending children to schools where they may learn grammar, and geography, and history, and such things—I do not say they are not all very good in their way, but I am quite sure they are not a quarter so useful as a knowledge of the rules of health. If everyone, and especially every woman, had this knowledge and acted up to it, this would be a much happier world I am sure. I say every *woman* because it is not the husband but the wife who has most

to do with these things. It is the wife who has to keep the house sweet, clean, and airy; to choose good food, and to cook it properly. It is the mother who must attend to her own health, so that her children may at least have a chance of being born strong; and it is by her good management and help afterwards, that they can by God's blessing grow up so. It is very sad to see how many poor little babies die, and children grow up to suffer all their lives in different ways, because their young mothers, or nurses, have learnt nothing about the right way of managing them. I read only the other day, that more than thirty babies out of every hundred born in England die before they are five years old, and more among the poor than the rich; and that this is chiefly through the ignorance of the mothers. I am sure this should stir us up to learn to do better; and every girl who can read, should try to get books to teach her. It has been said that any woman may, if she chooses, save several lives in the course of a year. What a grand thought that is! When that accident happened on the river last spring, and poor little Johnny Brown was so nearly drowned before any one could reach him, do you remember that fine dog of Mr. Bell's going into

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the water and dragging him out? I was standing by at the time, and I shall never forget the poor mother's look of joy and gratitude when her little one was once more safe in her arms; the dog has been like a friend to her ever since, and she saves a bit of her dinner every day to feed him with. Yet Mr. Bell said this dog had only been doing its duty; it had been taught to plunge into the water at the word of command, and thus had been the means of saving several lives at that dangerous spot. I have often thought since that if that poor dumb creature could be taught to save precious lives, how shameful it would be if we could be taught to do so too, though in a different way, and did not even care or try to learn. These laws of health are God's laws and not man's, and therefore we cannot break them without sin: if we don't keep them they bring their own punishment. The doctors say that at least one hundred thousand people die every year in this country from neglecting them. Is not that terrible? Should we not all try, then, first to learn what they are, and attend to them ourselves, and then help our neighbours to do the same? You, my dear Jane, are kind-hearted and thoughtful; and I shall look to you,

as I used to do in old times at school, to set a good example in this matter. It makes my heart ache to see so many of our neighbours and their children sick and suffering, and to know that it is often for want of a little knowledge.”

*Jane.* — “ I thought it was only doctors and gentlefolks who understood these things rightly: though to be sure if a baby has a fit, or anything is the matter suddenly, there’s old Betsy, down the lane, always ready to give some of her physic.”

*Mrs. Carter.* — “ Old Betsy means kindly, but it would be far better for the poor babies if her physic went down the gutter instead of down their throats. No physic can undo the harm which children too often get from mothers and nurses, who don’t know, and won’t learn, how to manage them properly. As William Morgan is a gardener, he can tell you how much difference right or wrong treatment makes in the growth of a plant; without air, water, light and heat, given properly, it cannot grow up strong and healthy, but must be weak and sickly, or even die. So it is with a little child; and as William, in order to be a good gardener, has taken pains to learn how to manage his flowers, so ought we,

if we wish to be good mothers, to learn how to manage our children. It does seem cruel that the poor little things should not have as good a chance as the flowers. When the gentlefolks buy fruit and vegetables, they like the finest they can get. They won't give their money for poor, stunted things which an idle, ignorant man has not cultivated properly, but they choose such kinds as have been brought to perfection. They are ready to give a fair price for what they know has cost both labour and skill to rear. If, therefore, William, by his labour and skill earns money enough to give you a comfortable home, the least you can do is to strive to make that home a happy and healthy one. Only try, for his sake and your own, and when once you have settled into good habits, you will be surprised to find how easy it comes to do things in a right way, and how much it saves too. A girl about to marry is more than ever bound to be thrifty and to take care of her health, that she may save doctors' bills, save time, save strength, save temper; and remember, as is the mother so is the child; you will reap a blessing, perhaps, all your life, from what you do now."

*Jane.*—"But, Mrs. Carter, how is one to learn

these things? I always thought they would come somehow, naturally; and, I am sure, none of the girls who marry ever give them a thought."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"I am afraid not, and that is just what I complain of. They give a great deal too much thought to fine clothes, and to things which might as well be let alone, while the great duty of learning the rules of health they quite neglect."

*Jane.*—"Well, I should like to do my best, and start right if I could. How did you get to know so much?"

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Why, being a mother you see, Jane, and having, besides, so much to do with other people's children, I used to think a good deal about these things: and, 'where there's a will' to learn, one generally finds a 'way.' It is easier now to learn, for there are several little books written which most girls who know how to read can understand, and which may be bought for a few pence.\* These teach us what we most

\* The following little books on the preservation of health are recommended:—

*The Worth of Fresh Air.* Price 2d.

*The Use of Pure Water.* Price 2d.

*The Value of Good Food.* Price 2d.

need to know about our health, and how to keep it; the reasons why pure fresh air is better than foul; why washing the body all over every day is more healthy than only washing face and hands. Then there is a great deal to be learned about cooking; how to buy the best food according to our means, and make it go farthest; and about our clothes, why it is so easy to make ourselves ill, by wearing them tight or not warm

*The Influence of Wholesome Drink.* Price 2d.

*The Advantage of Warm Clothing.* Price 2d.

*Never Despair; and other Household Verses on Health and Happiness.* Price 2d.

*The Sick Child's Cry; and other Household Verses on Health and Happiness.* Price 2d.

*Work and Play; Household Words for Children on Health and Happiness.* Price 2d.

*The Health of Mothers.* Price 2d.

*How to manage a Baby.* Price 2d.

*The Power of Soap and Water; A Dream that came true.* Price 1d.

*When were you Vaccinated?* Price 1d.

*The Cheap Doctor: A Word about Fresh Air.* Price 1d.

The above books have been prepared under the direction of the Committee of the Ladies' Sanitary Association. Published by the Association at their office, 14A, Princes Street, Cavendish Square, W.; and for the Association by Jarrold & Sons, 47, St. Paul's Churchyard, E.C. May be obtained through any bookseller.

enough. But you will be tired if I run on in this way, and fancy I am overfond of teaching."

*Jane.*—"No, that I shall not. It's very kind of you to help me; and perhaps you'll come and see me when I'm settled, for our cottage won't be above a mile from the town, and William can easily come round here, when he's been to market, and give you a lift back in his cart. I wonder what you'll think of our cottage; it is but a little place, and looks very small after Mrs. Bright's, where I've been in service."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"I dare say you will find it plenty big enough for two or more, if it is kept in good order; but sickness comes in many a room in many a larger house, through disorder, dirt and foul air. Wherever you live, try to get plenty of pure fresh air, and pure fresh water. These are the two most important things to be thought of in taking a house, and I do wish poor people would be more particular about them."

*Jane.*—"But how can they afford to be particular? When one can only pay a little rent, one must put up with many inconveniences."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Ah, Jane! I know that too well; but still I think that if we really set a right value on health, and looked upon it as a duty to

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do all we could to keep it, we should soon get better houses. We, who have to earn our bread, ought to know that health is a blessing worth taking some trouble to keep; and depend upon it, Jane, though when we are ill we must ask the doctor to come and help us to get well, we can do a very great deal to help ourselves and him, by the way we live, and the things we do, every day and hour of our lives."

*Jane.*—"And sickness costs so much, too. I remember when father was ill, three years ago last Christmas, it took all the little money he had in the savings bank to bring him through, and then he lost eighteen weeks' wages beside. Mother said, if he had been ill only a little longer we could not have kept our house over our heads."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Ah! Jane, we need not go far to find folks who have lost money by sickness. Only look now at my brother John and his wife; they would have been rich people by this time, if they could but have put their money in the bank, instead of in Dr. Jones' purse. They have spent almost a fortune in doctors' bills; and as for their little boy, I feel sure they are physicking him into the grave."

*Jane.*—"Poor little fellow!"

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Well, Jane, what I wish is, that we could all think more about this duty of preserving health. In this, as in all other things, we shall never get right till we follow our blessed Lord's example more closely. I like to remember how much value He set upon life and health; how He honoured human flesh by taking it upon Him, and how He went about doing good, not only to the souls, but also to the bodies of the people. But many of us, instead of following His example, scarcely pass a day without causing weakness and disease to ourselves and others, by our ignorance and bad habits."

*Jane.*—"Well, that sin shan't lie at my door, if I can help it; and if William wouldn't like a sick wife, I am sure I should think myself badly off with a sick husband; so if you'll kindly help me, and teach me some of your nice ways, I'll see what can be done to make my new home and my new life a healthy one. Why, I declare we've worked so hard that my gown is nearly done, all but setting in the sleeves! I don't think I shall ever put it on without remembering this talk about health."

*Mrs. Carter.*—"Then it will certainly be the

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most useful of all your gowns, as everything is, how ever homely, which serves to remind us of a duty. No, thank you, Jane ; don't set a cup for me ; I can't stop for tea now, but I shall come and see you by and by in your new home, where, with God's blessing, I hope you and William will have many years of health and happiness."

A. B. P.

