

Fasting and the Mind

The reader will observe that I discuss this fasting question from a materialistic view-point. I am telling what it does to the body; but besides this, of course, fasting is a religious exercise. I heard the other day from a man who was taking a forty-day fast, as a means of increasing his [\[Pg 75\]](#) "spiritual power." I am not saying that for you to smile at—he has excellent authority for the procedure. The point with me is that I find life so full of interest just now that I don't have much time to think about my "soul." I get so much pleasure out of a handful of raisins, or a cold bath, or a game of tennis, that I fear it is interfering with my spiritual development. I have, however, a very dear friend who goes in for the things of the soul, and she tells me that when you are fasting, the higher faculties are in a sensitive condition, and that you can do many interesting things with your subliminal self. For instance, she had always considered herself a glutton; and so, during an eight-day fast, just before going to sleep and just after awakening, she would lie in a sort of trance and impress upon her mind the idea of restraint in eating. The result, she declared, has been that she has never since then had an impulse to over-eat.

There are many such curious things, about which you may read in the books of the yogis and the theosophists—who were fasting in previous incarnations when you and I were swinging about in the tree-tops by our tails. But I ought to report upon one fasting experiment which resulted disastrously for me. Earlier in this book I told how I had been able to write the greater part of a play [\[Pg 76\]](#) while fasting. Shortly afterwards I plunged into the writing of a new novel, and as usual I got so much interested in it that I wasn't hungry. I said that I would fast, and save the eating time, and the digesting time as well. So I would sit and work for sixteen hours or more a day, sometimes for six hours at a stretch without moving. After two or three days of this I would be hungry, and would eat something; but being too much excited to digest it, I would say, "Hang eating, anyhow!"—and go on for another period of work. I kept that up for some six weeks, and I turned out an appalling lot of manuscript; but I found that I had taken off twenty-five pounds of flesh, and had got to such a point that I could not digest a little warm milk. I cite this in order that the reader may understand just why I take a gross and material view of fasting. My advice is to lie round in the sun and read story-books and take care of your body, and leave the soul-exercises and the nervous efforts until the fast is over. But all the same, I know that there will be great poetry written some day, when our poets have got on to the fasting trick—and when our poets care enough about their work to be willing to feed it with their own flesh.

The great thing about the fast is that it sets you [Pg 77] a new standard of health. You have been accustomed to worrying along somehow; but now you discover your own possibilities, and thereafter you are not content until you have found some way to keep that virginal state of stomach which one possesses for a month or two after a successful fast. It must mean, of course, many changes in your life, if you really wish to keep it. It means the giving up of tobacco and alcohol, and a too sedentary life, and steam-heated rooms; above all else, it means giving up self-indulgent eating.

A couple of years ago my wife and myself made the acquaintance of a young lady patient in a sanatorium, who was in a much run-down condition, anæmic and nervous. We persuaded her to take a fast of five or six days, and afterwards take the milk diet, as the result of which she went back to her home in Virginia with what she described as "smiles and dimples and curves and bright eyes." She was so enthusiastic about the cure that she proceeded to apply it to all her family and her friends; and some time afterwards she wrote my wife a most diverting account of her adventures. After some persuasion I secured her permission to quote her letter, having duly omitted all the names. It makes clear the thorny path which the fasting enthusiast has to travel in this world.

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I will try in a very limited space of time to tell you what keeps me a slave here at home. I got Mr. X— down from — to put papa and mamma on the fasting cure—papa had a bad case of grippe—mamma had indigestion. My oldest married brother is in dreadful health, and his wife and baby are not well. I wore myself nearly out trying to get them well, and at the same time trying to pick up some threads of long neglected social duties. People were beginning to call me "stuck-up" (horrid vulgar term), so unless I wanted to make enemies of the wives and daughters of papa's and brother's business friends, I had to go to a few parties and pay some long-neglected calls. I did it all, and then decided to have Mr. X— come to help me. I got papa and mamma and M— and her baby(!) on a fast—and then woe is me—I had to get them off again! They had various and alarming symptoms due to their ignorance of the methods, and the wild interest of the town medicine-men. The family doctor gave me a "straight talk" and asked me if I was going to try to kill my father and mother. Papa would not give up his cigarettes, and a "toddy" now and then. M—'s baby lost four pounds while his mother was fasting. All the doctors' wives came to call, and beset me with questions—and I had the d— of a time. But I stood by my guns. When the overfed, self-indulgent family all got to vomiting at once, my hands were full, and I nearly had nervous prostration before I got order out of the bedlam I had stirred up.

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Well, they got over the fast and on to the milk. Then I had to tend to the milk myself or they refused to drink it. Finally mamma got to feeling so well that she sat up, and planned big course dinners and invited people to eat them. She began to order new clothes for the kids, new furnishings for the house, and started in to live her disorderly, ungodly "Southern hospitality" life all over again. Our senator died and mamma got into politics in the new election; and Cousin J— got drunk, and I had to go with him to the Keeley Institute, etc., etc. Surely there is a heaven for saints

like me. I did not fly the roost as I was tempted to do, but I answered midnight calls of the spoiled, nauseated ones, and fixed hot-water bags, quelled riots among the meat-eating servants and hungry children—and swore I'd win! I did. Well, I got things going in fine order at last, with papa cured of his grippe and an old case of kidney trouble. Mamma is now comfortably eating boiled ham and stuffed peppers, and fruit cake and cherry pie, and green olives and what not at the same meal. She is well, though. But of course she will get sick again. Papa, the only sane member of our family, is still holding on to the milk, taking four quarts of buttermilk a day, and he is flourishing, thank heaven! M—— is still bilious, having broken her fast with hard-boiled eggs and pork chops. And I am still living, in spite of having been to Keeley, and incidentally having danced all night (with a low-neck, short-sleeved gown on!) at the — Club ball, sat through several dinners and bridge parties[Pg 80] into the "wee sma' hours," and had two men propose to me with the prelude, "You are the nicest, most refined, and most lovable girl in the world if you are a crank." Wasn't that a nice beginning for a proposal of marriage? I accepted them both on condition that I be allowed to remain a crank.

Well, the next chapter began with an old lover who had married another woman. He came to see me and said he had a tape-worm! Ye gods—such romance! His wife had stomach and intestinal trouble. I turned Mr. X—— over to them, and them over to Mr. X——. The lady got along, but the poor man with a wild beast inside him got so sick after an eight-day fast that he wanted to have me mobbed, sent for two trained nurses and four doctors—this is no exaggeration—the doctors looked at me, and looks were as plain as words—"You little devil! You did it for pure meanness." For three days my poor friend had the doctors giving him hypodermics, and he never stopped vomiting until we were all nearly dead. Then he quieted down, got well, ate a beef-steak with a few dozen oysters and mushrooms, and took me riding in his new automobile. The grim humor in the whole thing is that if I had not gotten my roses and dimples and curves and bright eyes back by fasting, this man would never have taken me riding in his new automobile. Take a tip from me—all the good nursing and friendly efforts in behalf of the health of my friends did not endear me to them one half as much as the plump, rosy smile I wore with my[Pg 81] new silk gown. The first day our sick friend went out in his car—alas for the ways of human nature—masculine human nature, I mean—I told him so. And he agreed with me and ended by saying, "Darn an ugly woman—I'll forgive a pretty one anything."