

THE HUMORS OF FASTING

At the time of writing these words, it has been just six months since I published my first paper upon fasting, and I am still getting letters about it at the rate of half a dozen a day. The tent which I inhabit is rapidly becoming uninhabitable because of pasteboard boxes full of "fasting-letters"; and the store-keeper who is so good as to receive my telegrams over the 'phone, is growing quite expert at taking down the symptoms of adventurers who get started and want to know how to stop. I could make quite a postage-stamp collection from these letters—I had one from Spain and one from India and one from Argentina all in the same day. I am sure I might have kept a sanatorium for those people who have begged me to let them come and live near me while they were taking a fast. One woman writes to ask me to name my own price to take charge of a case of elephantiasis which has been given up by all the experts in Europe!

Also, I could fill an article with the "humors" of these letters. One woman writes a long and anxious inquiry as to whether it is permissible to[Pg 54] drink any water while fasting; and then follows this up with a special delivery letter to say that she hopes I will not think she is crazy—she had read the article again and noted the injunction to drink as much water as she can! And then comes a letter from a man who wants to know if I really mean it all; do I truly expect him to eat nothing whatever—or would I call it fasting if he ate just nuts and fruit now and then? Quite recently I was talking with a physician—a successful and well-known physician—who refused point-blank to believe that a human being could live for more than four or five days without any sort of nutriment. There was no use talking about it—it was a physiological impossibility; and even when I offered him the names and addresses of a hundred people who had done it, he went off unconvinced. And yet that same physician professes a religion which through nearly two thousand years has recommended "fasting and prayer" as the method of the soul's achievement; and he will go to church and listen reverently to accounts of a forty-day fast in the wilderness! And he lives in a country in which there are sanatoriums where hundreds of people are fasting all the time, and where twenty or thirty-day fasts occasion no more remark than a good golf-score at a summer hotel!

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If you have any doubt that such fasts are taken, you can very quickly convince yourself. Less than a year ago I saw a man completing a fifty-day fast; I talked with him day by day, and I knew

absolutely that it was all in good faith. The symptoms of fasting are as distinct and unmistakable as are, for instance, those of smallpox; you could no more persuade an experienced person that you are fasting when you are not fasting, than you could persuade a bacteriologist that you had sleeping-sickness when you were merely lazy.

When I was a very small boy, I recall that a Dr. Tanner took a forty-day fast in a museum in New York; and I recollect well the conversation in our family—how obvious it was that the thing must be a fake, and how foolish people were to be taken in by so absurd a fake. "He gets something to eat when nobody's looking," we would say.

But then what about his weight? Here is a man, going along day by day, year in and year out, weighing in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty pounds; and now, all of a sudden, he begins to lose a pound a day, as regularly as the sun rises. How does he do it?

"Well," we would say, "he must work hard and get rid of it."

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But how can a man do that, when he had no longer enough muscular tissue left to support his weight? And when his pulse is only thirty-five beats to the minute?

Then, says the reader, perhaps he goes to a Turkish bath, and sweats it off.

But ask any jockey how he'd like to take a Turkish bath every day for fifty days! And how he would stand it when his arms and thighs were so reduced that you could meet your thumb and forefinger around them, and could plainly trace the bones and the blood vessels! And then again, there is the tongue. If you take a fast and really need the fast, you will find your tongue so coated that you can scrape it with a knife-blade. And if you break your fast, your tongue will clear in twenty-four hours; nothing in the world will coat it again but several days more of fasting. How would you propose to get around that difficulty?

Such ideas have to do with fasting as seen by the outsider. I recollect reading a diverting account of the fasting cure, in which the victim was portrayed as haunted by the ghost of beefsteaks and turkeys. But the person who is taking the fast knows nothing of these troubles, nor would there be much profit in fasting if he did. The fast is not an ordeal, it is a rest; and I have[Pg 57] known people to lose interest in food as completely as if they had never tasted any in their lives. I know one lady who, to the consternation of her friends and relatives, began a fast three days before Christmas and continued it until three days after New Year's; and on both the holidays she cooked a turkey and served it for her children. On another occasion, during a week's fast, she "put up" several gallons of preserves; the only inconvenience being that she had to call in a neighbor to taste them and see if they were done. I myself took a twelve-day fast while living alone with my little boy, and three times every day I went into the pantry and set out a meal for him. I was not troubled at all by the sight of the food.

The longest fast of which I had heard when my article was written was seventy-eight days; but that record has since been broken, by a man named Richard Fausel. Mr. Fausel, who keeps a hotel

somewhere in North Dakota, had presumably partaken too generously of the good cheer intended for his guests, for he found himself at the inconvenient weight of three hundred and eighty-five pounds. He went to a sanatorium in Battle Creek and there fasted for forty days (if my recollection serves me), and by dint of vigorous exercise meanwhile, he got rid of one [Pg 58] hundred and thirty pounds. I think I never saw a funnier sight than Mr. Fausel at the conclusion of this fast, wearing the same pair of trousers that he had worn at the beginning of it. But the temptations of hotel-keeping are severe, and when he went back home, he found himself going up in weight again. This time he concluded to do the job thoroughly, and went to Macfadden's place in Chicago, and set out upon a fast of ninety days. That is a new record—though I sometimes wonder if it is quite fair to call it "fasting" when a man is simply living upon an internal larder of fat.

It must be a curious experience to go for three months without tasting food. It is no wonder that the stomach and all the organs of assimilation forget how to do their work. The one danger in the fasting treatment is that when you break the fast, hunger is apt to come back with a rush, while, on the other hand, the stomach is weak, and the utmost caution is needed. If you yield to your cravings, you may fill your whole system with toxins, and undo all the good of the treatment; but if you go slowly, and restrict yourself to very small quantities of the most easily assimilated foods, then in an incredibly short time the body will have regained its strength.

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My experience has taught me that it is well not to be too proud at such a time, but to get some one to help you. And it ought to be some one who has fasted, for a person at the end of a fast is an agitating sight to his neighbors, and their one impulse is to get a "square meal" into him as quickly as possible. Quite recently there was one of my converts camping on my trail in New York City, and he called at the home of a relative of mine, an elderly lady, who does not take much stock in my eccentricities. I shall not soon forget her description of his appearance—"I thought he was going to die right there before my eyes!" she said. And no wonder, since the poor fellow had climbed four flights of stairs to the apartment. "I know you'll get into trouble," added my relative, "if you don't stop advising people to do such things!"

I was interested enough in the question of fasting to spend some time at a sanatorium where they make a specialty of it. One can see a sicker looking collection of humans in such a place than anywhere else in the world, I fancy. In the first place, people do not take the fasting cure until they are looking desperate; and when they have got into the fast they look more desperate. At the later stages they sometimes take to wheelchairs; and at all times they move with [Pg 60] deliberation, and their faces wear serious expressions. They gather in little groups and discuss their symptoms; there is nothing so interesting in the world when you are fasting as to talk symptoms with a lot of people who are doing the same thing. There are some who are several days ahead of you, and who make you ashamed of your doubts; and others who are behind you, and to whom you have to appear as an old campaigner. So you develop an esprit de corps, as it were—though that sounds as if I were trying to make a pun.

All this may not seem very alluring; but it is far better than a life-time of illness, such as many of these people have known before. I never knew that there was such terrible suffering in the world until I heard some of their stories; they would indeed be depressing company, were it not for the

fact that now they are getting well. The reader may answer sarcastically that they think they are. But every Christian Scientist knows that this comes to the same thing; and I have talked with not less than a hundred people who have fasted for three days or more, and out of these there were but two or three who did not report themselves as greatly benefited. So I am accustomed to say that I would rather spend my time in a fasting sanatorium than in an ordinary "swell"[Pg 61] hotel. The people in the former are making themselves well and know it; while the people in the latter are making themselves ill, and don't know it.