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Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac  
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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain  
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# **Fasting Girls Their Physiology and Pathology**

William Alexander Hammond

# Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: William Alexander Hammond  
Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany  
ISBN: 978-3-8472-1383-3

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FASTING GIRLS;  
THEIR PHYSIOLOGY AND PATHOLOGY

BY

WILLIAM A. HAMMOND, M.D.

PROFESSOR OF DISEASES OF THE MIND AND NERVOUS SYSTEM IN THE  
MEDICAL DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE CITY OF  
NEW YORK, AND IN THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT. ETC.

"There is no new thing under the Sun."

— *Eccl.* I, 9.

"Nil spernat auris, nec tamen credat statim."

— Phædrus.

NEW YORK

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

182 FIFTH AVENUE

1879

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1879.

Transcriber's Note: Hyphenation and punctuation have been standardised. Variant spellings have been retained. Greek text appears with a mouse-hover transliteration, *e.g.*, Βιβλος.

## PREFACE.

In issuing this little book I have been actuated by a desire to do something towards the removal of a lamentable degree of popular ignorance.

It seems that no proposition that can be made is so absurd or impossible but that many people, ordinarily regarded as intelligent, will be found to accept it and to aid in its propagation. And hence, when it is asserted that a young lady has lived for fourteen years without food of any kind, hundreds and thousands of persons throughout the length and breadth of a civilized land at once yield their belief to the monstrous declaration.

I have confined my remarks entirely to the question of abstinence from food. The other supernatural gifts, the possession of which is claimed, would, if considered, have extended the limits of this little volume beyond the bounds which were deemed expedient. At some future time I may be tempted to discuss them. In the meantime it is well to call to mind that a proposition (*see* Appendix) which I made solely in the interest of truth was disregarded, ostensibly with the desire to avoid publicity, when in fact the daily press had for weeks been filled with reports in detail, furnished by the friends of the young lady in question, of the marvellous powers she was said to possess.

A portion of this essay, which bore upon the matter discussed, has been taken from another volume by the author, published several years ago, and now out of print.

William A. Hammond.

43 West 54th Street,  
March 1st, 1879.



## FASTING GIRLS.

### I.

#### ABSTINENCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

Among the many remarkable manifestations by which hysteria exhibits itself, for the astonishment of the credulous and uneducated portion of the public, and — alas, that it should have to be said, — for the delectation of an occasional weak-minded and ignorant physician, the assumption of the ability to live without food may be assigned a prominent place. I am not aware that this power has been claimed in its fullest development for the male of the human species. When he is deprived of food he dies in a few days, more or less, according to his physical condition as regards adipose tissue and strength of constitution; but if a weak emaciated girl asserts that she is able to exist for years without eating, there are at once certificates and letters from clergymen, professors, and even physicians, in support of the truth of her story. The element of impossibility goes for nothing against the bare word of such a woman, and her statements are accepted with a degree of confidence which is lamentable to witness in this era of the world's progress.

The class of deceptions occasionally induced by hysteria, [2] and embracing these "fasting girls," has been known for many years, though it is only in comparatively recent times that the instances have been taken at their proper value. Görres [1] gives a number of examples occurring among male and female saints and other holy persons, in which partial or total abstinence from food was said to have existed for long periods.

Thus Liduine of Schiedam fell ill in 1395, and remained in that state till her death, thirty-three years subsequently. During the first nineteen years she ate every day nothing but a little piece of apple the size of a holy wafer, and drank a little water and a swallow of beer, or sometimes a little sweet milk. Subsequently, being unable to digest beer and milk, she restricted herself to a little wine and water, and still later she was obliged to confine herself to water alone, which served her both as food and drink. But after nineteen years

she took nothing whatever, according to her own statement made to some friars in 1422, she averring that for eight years nothing in the way of nourishment had passed her lips, and that for twenty years she had seen neither the sun nor the moon, nor had touched the earth with her feet.

Saint Joseph of Copertino remained for five years without eating bread, and ten years without drinking wine, contenting himself with dried fruits, which he mixed with various bitter herbs. The herb which he used for Fridays had such an atrocious taste, that one of the brethren, by simply putting his tongue to it, was seized with vomiting, and for several days thereafter everything he ate excited nausea. He fasted for [3] forty days seven times every year, and during these periods ate nothing at all except on Sundays and Thursdays.

Nicolas of Flue, as soon as he embraced the monastic life, subsisted altogether on the holy eucharist. The pious Görres in explanation of this miracle says:

"In ordinary nourishment he who eats being superior to that which is eaten, assimilates the aliments which he takes, and communicates to them his own nature. But in the eucharist the aliment is more powerful than he who eats. It is no longer therefore the nourishment which is assimilated, but on the contrary, it assimilates the man, and introduces him into a superior sphere. An entire change is produced. The supernatural life in some way or other absorbs the natural life, and the man instead of living on earth, lives henceforth by grace and by heaven."

This is about on a par, as regards lucidity and logic, with the explanations which we are given of the alleged case of prolonged fasting in Brooklyn.

Doubts arose in regard to Nicolas, and the bishop had him watched, but without detecting him in fraud. Finally he ordered him to eat a piece of bread in his presence. Nicolas did as he was commanded, but at the first mouthful he was seized with violent vomiting. The bishop inquired of him how he thus managed to live without eating, to which the brother answered that when he assisted at mass, and when he took the holy eucharist, he felt a degree of

strength and suppleness like that derived from the most nutritious food.

Still the doubters continued, and the inhabitants of Underwold, where Nicolas lived, appear to have been at first very [4] much inclined to suspect him of deceit. But they were finally converted, for having during a whole month guarded every approach to his cabin, and having during that time detected no one in taking food to him, they were convinced that for that time at least he had lived without food. The sceptical reasoner of the present day would probably regard the test as insufficient.

In 1225, Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, having heard that there was at Leicester a nun who had taken no nourishment for seven years, and who lived only on the eucharist, which she took every Sunday, gave at first no faith to the story. He sent to her, however, fifteen clerks, with directions to watch her assiduously for fifteen days, never for an instant losing sight of her. The clerks reported to him that they had strictly obeyed his commands; that she had taken no nourishment, and that yet she nevertheless preserved her full strength and health. Whereupon the Bishop declared himself convinced, "as," adds Görres, "it was proper for a sensible man to do."

Among others of the holy persons who acquired the power of living on the sacramental bread, may be mentioned St. Catharine of Sienna, Saint Rose of Lima, Saint Collete, Saint Peter of Alcantara, and many others.

But if saints and other holy people were able, through miraculous power, to live without food, the same ability was claimed for those who were under the influence of demons and devils. Görres [2] states that a person possessed by a devil often loses all taste for food of any kind, and can retain no nourishment in his body. Another symptom is a disgust which is [5] formed for the companionship of other persons. Thus a man was tormented by a demon, who forced him to fly into the forests, where he hid himself from mankind. One night he quit his house, and concealed himself in a cavern, remaining there entirely without food for sixteen days. Again he remained in the woods twenty-four days, neither eating nor drinking during this period. Finally his children found him, and taking him to a priest, had the devil exorcised, and he was cured.

Saint Prosper, of Aquitaine, speaks of a young girl possessed by a devil, and who went seventy days without eating. Notwithstanding this long fast, she did not become emaciated, because every night at twelve o'clock a bird sent by the devil took a mysterious nourishment to her.

An astonishing feature in the cases of the diabolical abstaining from food, is that, as in the holy instances, they exhibit various manifestations of hysteria. Görres, with a charming degree of simplicity, details these symptoms and failing, under the influence of the predominant idea which fills him, to recognize their real character, ascribes them without hesitation to devilish agency. Thus he says:

"The functions of the organs of nutrition are sometimes profoundly altered in the possessed, and these alterations are manifested by violent cramps, which show the extent to which the muscular system is affected. The hysterical lump in the throat is a frequent phenomenon in possession. A young girl in the Valley of Calepino had all her limbs twisted and contracted, and had in the œsophagus a sensation as if a ball was sometimes rising in her throat, and again falling to her stomach. [6] Her countenance was of an ashen hue, and she had a constant sense of weight and pain in the head. All the remedies of physicians had failed, and as evidences of possession were discovered in her, she was brought to Brignoli (a priest) who had recourse to supernatural means, and cured her."

Strange to say, the ability to live on the eucharist, and to resist starvation by diabolical power, died out with the middle ages, and was replaced by the "fasting girls," who still continue to amuse us with their vagaries. To the consideration of some of the more striking instances of more recent times the attention of the reader is invited, in the confidence that much of interest in the study of the "History of Human Folly" will be adduced.

## FOOTNOTES:

[1] *La Mystique Divine, Naturelle et Diabolique*. Paris, 1861. t. I., p. 194, *et seq.*

[2] *Op. cit.* t. IV., p. 446.

## II.

### ABSTINENCE IN MODERN TIMES.

Among the more striking cases under this head, is that of Margaret Weiss, a young girl ten years of age, who lived at Rode, a small village near Spiers, and whose history has come down to us through various channels, but principally from Gerardus Bucoldianus, [3] who had the medical charge of her, and who wrote a little book describing his patient. Margaret is said to have abstained from all food and drink for three years, in the meantime growing, walking about, laughing, and talking like other children of her age. During the first year, however, she suffered greatly from pains in [7] her head and abdomen, and, a common condition in hysteria—all four of her limbs were contracted. She passed neither urine nor fæces. Margaret, though only ten years old—hysteria develops the secretive faculties—played her part so well that, after being watched by the priest of the parish and Dr. Bucoldianus, she was considered free from all juggling, and was sent home to her friends by order of the King, "not," the doctor adds, "without great admiration and princely gifts." Although fully accepting the fact of Margaret's abstinence, Dr. Bucoldianus appears to have been somewhat staggered, for he asks very pertinently: "Whence comes the animal heat, since she neither eats nor drinks, and why does the body grow when nothing goes into it?"

Schenckius [4] quotes from Paulus Lentulus the "Wonderful History of the Fasting of Appolonia Schreira, a virgin in Berne." Lentulus states that he was with this maid on three occasions, and that, by order of the magistrate of Berne, she was taken to that city and a strict guard kept upon her. All kinds of means were set in operation to detect imposture if any existed, but none was discovered, and she was set at liberty as a genuine case of ability to live without food. In the first year of her fasting she scarcely slept, and in the second year never closed her eyes in sleep; and so she continued for a long while after. [8]

Schenckius also advances the case of Katharine Binder, of the Palatinate, who was closely watched by a clergyman, a statesman, and two doctors of medicine, without the detection of fraud on her part.

She was said to have taken nothing but air into her system for nine years and more, as Lentulus reported on the authority of Fabricius. This last-named physician told Lentulus of another case, that of a girl fourteen years old, who certainly had taken neither food nor drink for at least three years.

"But," says Dr. Hakewel, [5] "the strangest that I have met with of this kind, is the history of Eve Fliegen, out of Dutch translated into English, and printed at London, *anno* 1611, who, being born at Meurs, is said to have taken no kind of sustenance for the space of fourteen years together; that is, from the year of her age, twenty-two to thirty-six, and from the year of our Lord 1597 to 1611; and this we have confirmed by the testimony of the magistrates of the town of Meurs, as also by the minister who made trial of her in his house thirteen days together by all the means he could devise, but could detect no imposture." Over the picture of this maid, set in front of the Dutch copy, stand these Latin verses:

"Meursæ hæc quam cernis decies ter, sexque peregit,  
Annos, bis septem prorsus non viscitur annis  
Nec potat, sic sola sedet, sic pallida vitam  
Ducit, et exigui se oblectat floribus horti."

Thus rendered in the English copy:

"This maid of Meurs thirty and six years spent,  
Fourteen of which she took no nourishment;  
[9] Thus pale and wan she sits sad and alone,  
A garden's all she loves to look upon."

Franciscus Citesius, [6] physician to the King of France and to Cardinal Richelieu, devotes a good deal of space and attention to the case of Joan Balaam, a native of the city of Constance. She was well grown, but of bad manners. About the eleventh year of her age she was attacked with a fever, and among other symptoms vomited for twenty days. Then she became speechless and so continued for

twenty-four days. Then she talked, but her speech was raving and incoherent. Finally she lost all power of motion and of sensibility in the parts below the head and could not swallow. From thenceforth she could not be persuaded to take food. Six months afterwards she regained the use of her limbs, but the inability to swallow remained and she acquired a great loathing for all kinds of meat and drink. The secretions and excretions appeared to be arrested. Nevertheless she was very industrious, employing her time in running errands, sweeping the house, spinning, and such like. This maid continued thus fasting for the space of nearly three years, and then by degrees took to eating and drinking again.

Before coming to more recent cases, there is one other to which I desire to refer for the reason mainly that in it there was probably organic disease in addition to fraud and hysteria. It is cited by Fabricius [7] and by Wanley. *Anno Dom.*, 1595, a maid of about thirteen years was brought out of the dukedom [10] of Juliers to Cologne, and there in a broad street at the sign of the White Horse exposed to the sight of as many as desired to see her. The parents of this maid affirmed that she had lived without any kind of food or drink for the space of three whole years; and this they confirmed by the testimony of divers persons, such as are worthy of credit. Fabricius observed her with great care. She was of a sad and melancholy countenance; her whole body was sufficiently fleshy except only her belly, which was compressed so as that it seemed to cleave to her back-bone. Her liver and the rest of her bowels were perceived to be hard by laying the hand on the belly. As for excrements, she voided none; and did so far abhor all kinds of food, that when one, who came to see her privately, put a little sugar in her mouth she immediately swooned away. But what was most wonderful was, that this maid walked up and down, played with other girls, danced, and did all other things that were done by girls of her age; neither had she any difficulty of breathing, speaking or crying out. Her parents declared that she had been in this condition for three years.

A great many more to the same effect might be adduced, but the foregoing are sufficient to indicate the fact that belief in the possibility of such occurrences was quite general, and that if doubt did exist in regard to their real nature, it was not so strong as not readily to be overcome by the tricks and devices of hysterical women.

In the following instances of more modern date the reader will perceive the view which is taken of them by physicians of the present day, and will doubtless discover their real nature. [11]

About sixty-five years ago, a woman of Sudbury, in Staffordshire, England, named Ann Moore, declared that she did not eat, and a number of persons volunteered to watch her, in order to ascertain whether or not she was speaking the truth. The watch was continued for three weeks and then the watchers, as in other instances, reported that Ann Moore was a real case of abstinence from food of all kinds. The Bible was always kept open on Ann's bed. Her emaciation was so extreme that it was said her vertebral column could be felt through the abdominal walls. This sad condition was asserted to have been caused by her washing the linen of a person affected with ulcers. From that time she experienced a dislike for food, and even nausea at the sight or mention of it.

As soon as the watchers reported in favor of the genuineness of Ann's pretensions her notoriety increased, and visitors came from all parts of the country, leaving donations to the extent of two hundred and fifty pounds in the course of two years. Doubts, however, again arose, and, bold from the immunity she had experienced from the first investigation, Ann in an evil moment, for the continuance of her fraud, consented to a second watching. This committee was composed of notable persons, among them being Sir Oswald Mosley, Bart., Rev. Legh Richmond, Dr. Fox, and his son, and many other gentlemen of the country. Two of them were always in her room night and day. At the suggestion of Mr. Francis Fox, the bedstead, bedding, and the woman in it were placed on a weighing machine, and thus it was ascertained that she regularly lost weight daily. At the expiration of the ninth day of this strict watching, Dr. Fox found her evidently sinking and told her [12] she would soon die unless she took food. After a little prevarication, the woman signed a written confession that she was an impostor, and had "occasionally taken sustenance for the last six years." She also stated that during the first watch of three weeks her daughter had contrived, when washing her face, to feed her every morning, by using towels made very wet with gravy, milk, or strong arrowroot gruel, and had also conveyed food from mouth to mouth in kissing her, which it is presumed she did very often. [8]

In a clinical lecture delivered at St. George's Hospital, [9] Dr. John W. Ogle calls attention to the simulation of fasting as a manifestation of hysteria, and relates the following amusing case:

"A girl strongly hysterical, aged twenty, in spite of all persuasion and medical treatment, refused every kind of food, or if made to eat, soon vomited the contents of the stomach. On November 6th, 1869, whilst the girl was apparently suffering in the same manner, the Queen passed the hospital on her way to open Blackfriars Bridge. She arose in bed so as to look out of the window, although up to this time declaring that every movement of her body caused intense pain. On December 29, the following letter in the girl's handwriting, addressed to another patient in the same ward, was picked up from the floor: 'My Dear Mrs. Evens,—I was very sorry you should take the trouble of cutting me such a nice piece of bread and butter, yesterday. I would of taken it but all of them saw you send [13] it, and then they would have made enough to have talked about. But I should be very glad if you would cut me a nice piece of crust and put it in a piece of paper and send it, or else bring it, so that they do not see it, for they all watch me very much, and I should like to be your friend and you to be mine. Mrs. Winslow, (the nurse) is going to chapel. I will make it up with you when I can go as far. Do not send it if you cannot spare it. Good bye, and God bless you.' Although she prevaricated about this letter, she appears to have gradually improved from this time on, and one day walked out of the hospital and left it altogether. She subsequently wrote a letter to the authorities expressing her regret at having gone on as she did."

One of the most remarkable instances of the kind, is that of Sarah Jacob, known as the "Welsh Fasting Girl," and whose history and tragical death excited a great deal of comment in the medical and lay press in Great Britain a few years ago. The following account of the case is mainly derived from Dr. Fowler's [10] interesting work.

Sarah Jacob was born May 12th, 1857. Her parents were farmers and were uneducated, simple-minded, and ignorant persons. In her earlier years she had been healthy, was intelligent, given to religious reading, and was said to have written poetry of her own composition. She was a very pretty child and was, according to the testimony of the vicar, the Rev. Evan Jones, a "good girl." [14]

About February 15th, 1867, when she was not quite ten years of age, she complained of pain in the pit of the stomach, and one morning on getting up, she told her mother that she had found her mouth full of bloody froth. The pain continued, and medical attendance was obtained. Soon afterwards she had strong convulsions of an epileptiform character and then other spasms of a clearly hysterical form, during which her body was bent in the form of a bow as in tetanus, the head and heels only touching the bed. Then the muscular spasm ceased and she fell at full length on the bed. For a whole month she continued in a state of unconsciousness, suffering from frequent repetitions of severe convulsive attacks, during which time she took little food. Mr. Davies, the surgeon, said in his evidence, that she was for a whole month, in a kind of permanent fit, lying on her back, with rigidity of all the muscles. For some time her life was despaired of, then her fits ceased to be convulsive and consisted of short periods of loss of consciousness with sudden awakings. For the next two or three months (till August, 1867) she took daily, from six, gradually decreasing to four, teacupfuls of rice and milk, or oatmeal and milk, which according to her father's account, was cast up again immediately and blood and froth with it. During this time the bowels were only acted on once in six or nine days. "Up to this time," said her father, "she could move both arms and one leg, but the other leg was rigid."

By the beginning of October, 1867, her quantity of daily food had, it was affirmed, dwindled down to nothing but a little apple about the size of a pill, which she took from a tea-spoon. At this time she made water about every other day; she looked [15] very bad in the face, but was not thin. On the tenth day of October, it was solemnly declared that she ceased to take any food whatever, and so continued till the day of her death, December 17th, 1869, a period of two years, two months, and one week.

"Of the veracity of the assertion in respect of *the one week*," says Dr. Fowler, "there is unfortunately plenty of evidence. To the absurdity of believing in the barest possibility of twenty-six months absolute abstinence, it is sufficient to reply that when to our knowledge, she was completely deprived of food, the girl died! The parents most persistently impressed upon every private as well as official visitor, both before and during the last fatal watching, that

the girl did not take food; that she could not swallow; that whenever food was mentioned to her she became as it were, excited; that when it was offered to her she would have a fit, or the offer would make her ill. The sworn testimony of the vicar, the Rev. Wm. Thomas, Sister Clinch, Ann Jones, and the other nurses, is sufficiently confirmative on this point. Furthermore, the parents went so far as to expressly forbid the mere mention of food in the girl's presence."

Towards the end of October, 1867, the case had attracted so much attention that the inhabitants in the neighborhood first began visiting the marvellous little girl.

"In the beginning of November of the same year, the Rev. Evan Jones, B.D., the vicar of the parish, was sent for by the parents to visit Sarah Jacob. He was at once—by the mother—told of the girl's wonderful fasting powers; it was admitted she took water occasionally. He was also informed of the [16] extraordinary perversion of her natural functions (the suppression of urine and faecal evacuations.) He found her lying on her back in bed, which was covered with books. There was nothing then remarkable about her dress. The girl looked weak and delicate, though not pale, and answered only in monosyllables. 'The mother said her child was very anxious about the state of her soul, that it had such an effect upon her mind that she could not sleep.' I asked her myself if she had a desire to become a member of the Church of England? She said, 'Yes!' She continued to express that wish until July, 1869. At this time the reverend gentleman did not believe in the statements relative to the girl's abstinence. 'Every time,' he says, 'that I had a conversation with her up to the end of 1868, the parents both persisted that she lived without food, and continued their statements in January and February, 1869. I remonstrated with them and dwelt upon the apparent impossibility of the thing. They still persisted that it was a fact.'

"Even as late as September, 1869, the vicar reiterated his ministerial remonstrances. When, in the beginning of the spring of 1869, he observed the fantastical changes the parents made in the girl's daily attire, he told them about the remarks made in the papers about this dressing and dwelt upon the impropriety of it. They replied, 'She had no other pleasure—they did not like denying it to her.' During

the following summer, finding that the girl looked more plump in the face and that her general improvement was more conspicuous, he said, 'Sarah is evidently improving and gaining, and you say she takes no food; you are certainly imposing on the public.' I then dwelt on the sinfulness of continuing the fraud on the [17] public. I said there were on record several cases of alleged fasting, some of which had been put to the test and had been discovered to be impositions; that those families would ever be held in execration by posterity, and such would be the case with them whenever this imposture was found out. The mother then assured me no imposition would be discovered in that house, because there was none."

The father and mother both said that the Lord provided for her in a most natural way, and that it was a miracle. The father always talked about the "Doctor Mawr," meaning God Almighty; that she was supported by that "Big Doctor."

Then soon began the custom of leaving money or other presents with the child, till at last every one who visited her, was expected to give something. Open house was kept and pilgrims came from near and far to see the wonderful girl who lived without food.

When money was not forthcoming, presents of clothes, finery, books, or flowers, appear to have been substituted. Advantage was taken of these presents to bedeck the child in every variety of smartness. At one time she had a victorine about her neck and a wreath about her hair, then again, ornaments and a jacket on, and her hair neatly dressed with ribbons. At another time she had a silk shawl, a victorine around her neck, a small crucifix attached to a necklace, and little ribbons above the wrists. She had drab gloves on and her bed was nearly covered with books.

Notwithstanding the alleged fasting, Sarah Jacob continued to improve in health.

And now comes an astounding feature of this most remarkable [18] case. The vicar became convinced that the instance was one of real abstinence. A little hysterical girl twelve years of age, by her perseverance in lying, had actually succeeded in inducing an educated gentleman to accept the truth of her statements! The following letter which was published on the 19th of February, 1869, speaks for itself:—