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Diet can be Fun



by Daniel A. Lord, S. J.

*A QUEEN'S WORK
PAMPHLET*

Deacidified

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By Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

W EIGHT LIFTING, in recent years, has become quite a competitive sport. I suggest the possibility of turning weight losing into something at least as interesting, exciting, and useful. For if it is fun to raise bars of iron into the air and "put it on," it is just as much fun not to raise forks and spoons of silver and steel to one's mouth and "take it off."

In my youth, a great comedian, the hefty Maclyn Arbuckle, popularized the phrase, "Nobody loves a fat man." I can still see him sitting in his cowboy's outfit, gazing disconsolately after the romantic couples in the play, *The Round Up*, as I recall it, and uttering his immortal line. Around the same period — a period, by the way, in which two out of three persons over forty-five were expected to be heavily upholstered — another bit of philosophy was thrown into form: "A fat man has to be cheerful; he's not strong enough to fight and he's too heavy to run away."

Never did I in those remote and salad-green days dream that some day I, too, would be a fat man. But time and carelessness about food work horrors to one's waistline. And the Fatty Forties await us all. The calories will get you if you don't watch out.

It may well be that you think it strange that a priest should write of so mundane a thing as taking off fat. Yet, to me, fundamental to all our thinking is the great truth: "Man is a creature composed of

body and soul." The Greek ideal of a sound mind in a sound body — *mens sana in corpore sano*, as the Latins retranslated it — is one to which any Christian may well subscribe. As priests, we know what it means to deal with sick minds. And the close relationship of body and soul makes it difficult for the soul to attain the heights when it is dragged downward by a sick body.

Once on a time, a fat body was looked on as a healthy body. "He's a fine figure of a man," said our forefathers about a great bloated fellow with a huge beer-and-bread-swelled paunch.

FAT BODIES . . . SICK BODIES

Nowadays we know that fat bodies are sick bodies. Or they are bodies that are the easy victims of sickness. Pneumonia, penicillin notwithstanding, plays hob with a fat man. Surgeons hate to operate on a man who is notably overweight. Fat puts on the heart an extra strain that means heart attacks and sudden deaths. Fat taxes the digestion. Fat replaces muscle. Recently, doctors have discovered that "fathead" is not merely a child's term of contempt. The brain, too, can get fat and, like all things fat, grow sluggish, lazy, and slow to fulfill its normal functions.

I had a wonderful Novice Master of whom I have often written. His rule for food was one that with years impresses me more and more: "Always rise from the table a little hungry," he said. "The best meal is one that leaves place in your digestive system for more than you have eaten." He himself ate too sparingly. Yet most saints I have actually known in life (and I have known surprisingly many who will not

reach canonization but who might easily have deserved it) fasted wisely without overdoing it. Like one lovely saint who was my youthful companion, they even regarded a well-spread table with delight. It seemed to them a sign of God's bounty and foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

The Church has been amazingly wise about fasting. Few people would need to diet for health if they observed the Church's laws regarding Lent and the other fasting periods of the year. Contemplative nuns who follow the major fasts — from Septuagesima Sunday till Easter — live long and healthful lives. The Trappists, with their rigorous fasts, have a record of hard work and little need for doctors' care.

"Americans eat too much," is a modern truism. We eat too much and we eat much too richly. That is why old Doc Grogan, Mr. Dooley's immortal confidant, could add to Father Kelly's comment: "Lent is good for the soul." "Lent is good for the body," said old Doc Grogan. And if Catholics, instead of using any or every excuse to get out of fasting, observed the laws of the Church, they would be a healthier race with shorter waist circumferences and much longer life lines.

WHY BOTHER?

One can diet for the sole purpose of regaining youth and vigor. One can diet to increase the health of the body for the service of God. A sick man is a drag on those around him. A sluggish man is a tiresome, dull fellow. An overfed human is likely to be one addicted to over-sleeping. And a soul finds it hard to climb to heaven when the elbows are on the overloaded

board and the hands are running a chain-and-bucket routine to the groaning digestive tract.

As a priest, I know that the athletes of the race-course and of the spiritual arena may well be on the lean side. No fat horse or fat boxer ever won his match. And in the race of life, dragging along an extra forty or fifty pounds is like trying to climb Jacob's ladder carrying a pair of loaded suitcases.

I am writing of my own happy experiences for two main reasons: First, I should sincerely like to help others who find themselves similarly overweight. Second, knowing how easy it is to slip back into careless ways with food, I should like to put myself on record. Then if I, too, start to fall by the wayside (or fall into flesh), this public confession may serve to bring me back to my gastronomic senses.

I'd like to help others. But I'd like to commit myself for many a long, healthy, but possibly tempted day ahead.

For a time, I consoled myself that weight, any man's or woman's weight, was a form of predestination. I had watched companions who could tuck away enormous meals and retain their pole-vaulter's figure. In fact, they even rivaled the pole. That, however, was only partially true; for, in case after case, I saw how with years those meals caught up even with the skinny. One good friend who was a scant hundred and forty pounds for years suddenly attained an added hundred almost overnight. The pie and whipped cream and rich gravies and layer cakes and soft drinks finally ganged up on him and took over.

HOPELESS STRUGGLE?

A Chicago restaurant in my college days specialized in two diets: a menu called "Eat and Grow Fat," and another called "Eat and Grow Thin." We used to say jokingly the management changed the title each week, and the menu for the reducers was given to the skinny, and the menu for the overweight was given to the fatties. "If you are going to be fat, you're going to be fat," we argued.

Oddly, it was the women rather than the men who shot holes in that argument for weight predestination. When the svelte, slim figure became vogue, the women lost interest in fatty foods. Their grandmothers might regard Lillian Russell's ample proportions with envy; they thought her a mess and sighed for lines like the emaciated models who, in George Ade's ancient crack, hesitated to drink from a straw for fear of falling through.

It was that same George Ade who wrote the immortal *Slim Princess*, to ridicule the Oriental idea that fat was beautiful, and to contrast American taste for willowy girls with the Turkish delight in waddlers.

Yet it was briefly comfortable to pull a chair up to a three-men's sized meal, and after stowing away enough to feed a squad going into battle or a scrimmage, to sigh, "If God wants me to be fat, I'm going to be fat."

A THIN YOUNGSTER

As a youngster, I was always too thin to play football. When, at the age of twenty-one, I graduated from college and entered the Jesuits, I was five feet ten and a half, and did not quite shade 150 pounds. The wholesome food of the novitiate brought a

brief added five pounds, which rapidly were worn off in the grind of turning a very worldly kid into some semblance of a religious.

Till I was thirty-two, I remained 145 pounds. And that surely looked like predestination. For I was a hearty trencherman then as now, only then I gave my appetite loose rein. During one attack of typhoid, I was subjected to the starvation diet that was the brutal cure of those days. I went down to slightly above the hundred mark; and then ate myself back to my hundred and a half within three months. Who says food doesn't affect weight?

My falling off of weight at thirty-two to 142 pounds told the doctors something was wrong. Something was; TB of the lungs, to be exact. Once more returned to our Jesuit Novitiate, I was forced-fed for three solid months of cream and milk (half and half), corn bread under a heavy thatch of butter, and wheat in every conceivable form. I puffed like a carnival balloon and, when I was pronounced cured, the scales showed 175 pounds and I felt slightly gross.

The hard study of theology kept my weight at that figure or my figure at that weight. I have always been of the school which doubted that the greatest of the theologians, Thomas Aquinas, was a mammoth man. Theology is hard diet on which to grow fat. Recently, when in a Dominican chapel I saw Thomas in a stained-glass window looking almost sylphlike, I asked and was given a Dominican's word that the Divine Doctor has been grievously maligned. "He cut that hole in the table not to stow his paunch, but to create a circular space which brought more books within easy reach

as he studied and wrote." And my own static 175 pounds as a theologian made me feel this was the truth.

ADDING WEIGHT

Early years of priesthood and meals taken often enough on the fly, sandwiches picked up at odd times, and milk shakes substituting for supper added another ten pounds.

Then, like all stout people, I began to create for myself a dream world. I stepped on the scales to find that I weighed a plump 185 pounds and determined that that was a nice, comfortable, healthy weight to maintain for life. I did nothing about keeping it; I just stayed off the scales. From that day on, I always gave my weight as "around a hundred and eighty-five pounds." Many a time a questioner regarded me with sceptical looks. But whether I was getting an auto license or a passport or registering for the draft, I stuck to that happy and soon highly fictitious weight.

Until one fatal day.

Some friends gathered round the scales to get their weight. I had no way of escaping; so I, too, mounted the platform and watched with horror while the arrow swung accusingly up to 200 pounds.

That was horrible! I was shocked. But what shocked me still more was the fact that my companions and friends did not laugh. No one cried, "Oh, those scales are crazy." They just knew I was a bloated 200 and were not in the least surprised.

A GREAT MISTAKE

Next I made one of the great mistakes of my whole experience with weight. I decided to take it off by the simple process of not eating.

So, like many a person determined to get the nasty job of reducing over in a hurry, I just abandoned food. For fifteen days I lost a pound a day. I drank a little fruit juice without sugar. I sipped broth. I ate a bit of raw vegetable without salt and some fruit without sweetening, and after fifteen days I was back to my beloved 185.

I had lost weight all right; but I had in the process also lost my disposition.

Literally starving myself, I took my diet out on other people. I practiced the crime against which I have since often warned dieters: "Don't inflict your diet on others. If you've got to diet, diet alone. Let your sufferings be your own." Christ had said some stern things about ostentatious fasters of his day. And too many people on a diet make those around them share, if not the actual diet, at least the consequences of their fast.

For, during those fifteen days, I had reduced the circle of my waist and the circle of my friends.

FALSE DILEMMA

I grew nervous. I snapped at people. I found nothing funny any more and ceased to laugh. I was on short rations, so I took it out in short answers. I growled over my work and did it badly. In general, I became intolerable to live with and a nasty sort of person to have around.

That was all a great mistake. So, for years after that sorry experience, I went on with my overeating, palliating my indulgence with: "Better to go on eating than to lose what good disposition I have. You've a choice: want to see me fat and cheerful or lean and irritable as a Pekingese?"

I had reached that stupid conclusion that so many have: dieting is fine for the body but rotten on the disposition. You can be fat and cheerful or slim and obnoxious. And nothing, it turns out, can be farther from the truth than that dilemma. That was not a complete disjunction. There was another pleasant alternative: a person can remain or become reasonably slim, healthy, and yet remain good-tempered. And this is true, however much he may be predisposed to overweight.

BY HERITAGE

Comfortably, I had lazily and in slovenly illogicality persuaded myself that (part of the predestination heresy) I was by heritage predisposed to fat. My mother and father had both been, in the fashion of wholesome Victorians and contemporaries of William McKinley, William Jennings Bryan, William Howard Taft, and the beauties of the *Black Crook*, pleasantly plump. I had had a wonderful great-aunt, whose laugh was the most echoing sound of joy on Chicago's West Side, and she had been an example to the world of genuine holiness, a wonderful disposition, a great love of good food, and comfortable padding.

So I came of a line of stout people, said I to myself. Yet periodically, as I saw the scepticism in the face of those to whom I stated that my weight was 185 pounds, I went on my own absurd diets. Self-dieting without scientific direction is the world's most complete sacrifice of time and effort. For a long period of my working life, I went without breakfast and then tucked away twice as much lunch. I put sternly aside bread and potatoes and had double helpings of *pie a la mode*. I said a stern "no" to a

little dab of salad dressing — to make raw vegetables palatable — and then drank two chocolate ice cream sodas. The nonsense committed by otherwise sane people in the name of dieting would fill some fat volumes of medical case history. My name might well lead all the rest.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

Perforce I had to acknowledge that my weight was "close to two hundred." And I began to notice that it was men whom I had always regarded as grossly fat who greeted me with, "Gosh, you're getting enormous!" "How much have you taken on?" "What are you weighing now? You're bigger than I am." You see, nothing makes a fat man happier than to find another fat man whom he can taunt with that last crack. "Bigger than I am" is a phrase of infinite consolation and delight.

Then three events in quick succession brought me face to fact with my girth and ponderous weight.

During a lecture tour of Canada, I had the privilege of being photographed by the great portrait artist, Karsh. The genius, Karsh, worked for two hours on me and took an ample variety of pictures. And when I saw the proofs, I felt that I had seen the proof of the pudding. The pudding indeed was myself. Even Karsh couldn't hide the bulk. I was blimpish. I was simply beyond excuse. Never again did I dare suggest that I was "slightly under two hundred pounds."

It was on the trip back from Canada that I occupied a roomette with a full-length mirror in the door. Rising in the morning, I suddenly caught a glimpse of myself in

the mirror. At first I thought it was two other people, possibly an exaggerated pair of Siamese twins. But I forced myself to take in the object the glass returned for my humiliation. And I knew something had to be done about what I saw.

AN ALTERNATIVE

Shortly after, I used the electric traction line that comes into St. Louis. My car was very late and, when I reached the station, redcaps had disappeared and no elevators were working. So I had to climb two flights of stairs, lugging a heavy suitcase, a briefcase, and a typewriter. I stopped painfully on every landing. Halfway up, I knew I felt not the sixty-two I then was but eighty-five years old. And when I finally gained the street level, I put down my bags, sat on the suitcase, mopped my brow, and waited for my heart to stop its tap-dancing and go back to its normal waltz movement. That took quite some time. My heart was kicking up the kind of row that could only mean trouble. And I knew something was going to have to give, my heart or my weight. That was not a pleasant but an easy alternative.

The date was just before Christmas. Perhaps wisely, perhaps in cowardly fashion, I knew that it was foolish to go on a diet with the Christmas festivities dawning over the bright horizon. So I set my date: On January 6th, I shall start to diet in right earnest.

And on January 6th, lovely day in the calendar of the Church year, I began my assault on weight, my flight from fat, my recarving of my waistline, my return to something approaching normal.

My own personal and privately directed attempts at dieting had, of course, been ridiculous, wasteful and, in the main, futile. So this time I decided to do it right.

I dusted off my Blue Cross card of hospitalization, went to my beloved St. John's Hospital in St. Louis (where the Sisters of Mercy combine the atmosphere of a charming home with the scientific skill of a great institution of healing), and summoned my faithful and almost miraculous doctor, Dr. A. P. Munsch.

A POUND A DAY

He knew me well and had brought me through illnesses that were serious enough. So he was patient and even laughed a little as I said, sternly and with a command directed to myself rather than to him, "I want to take off thirty pounds in thirty days."

He looked dubious.

"It can be done, but can you do it?"

"I can," I hastened to reply staunchly.

"You'll go on what's practically a starvation diet for a time," he answered. And I bowed my head to the self-chosen inevitable.

For I listened while he explained exactly what my situation was and would be. Fat accumulates like a heavy weight around the body. It is almost as if one tied sandbags to his belt and then walked with them dragging him down. The fat over the heart becomes fat around the heart, and the heart beats protestingly against the mean hug of the intruder.

"For a time," Dr. Munsch explained, "you will be living largely off your own superfluous weight. We will feed you hardly

more than was fed to the prisoners in Hitler's concentration camps. But we'll watch you carefully. We'll give you the vitamin pills that will supply for normal food; and such other medicines as you will need.

"You see, a sudden and forced diet can be very bad for you. Men decide to cut down their food to the starvation point and put such a strain on all their organs, notably their hearts, that they die as a result. Women are dying of starvation all the time around us; they take up their own kinds of diets, grow slim, right enough, but make themselves so weak that any germ finds them a pushover."

I mentally recalled some cases of my own experience.

TRAPS FOR THE UNWARY

There was the magnificently trim athletic man of middle years who suddenly collapsed and was shot to the hospital. He proved to be almost dead from starvation. He had for years eaten with his waistline in mind, had prescribed his own diet, had forgotten to take care of the essentials of life, and had kept his figure and almost lost his life.

An associate of mine had started taking reducing drugs. He was grossly oversized; and the drugs worked like a charm. Thyroid mostly, I believe. He was soon down from 275 to 200 pounds; then down to 175. But when he tried to stop the falling off, he found that the thyroid didn't work like water in a tap. He stopped the medicine but he didn't and couldn't stop the loss of flesh. He went down to 160, to 150, and when he hit a scant 135, he was rushed to the hospital, where he had to be rebuilt to some degree of health.

"Now," said Dr. Munsch, "slip into a dressing gown and go down and take your weight."

Never shall forget the shock of those scales. With a light dressing robe about me, I tipped the scales at 221 pounds. I slipped off the scales before the nurse in attendance could read them. But she was quicker than I; and my weight went down on my record, something to be eternally ashamed of; something to rid myself of, no matter what the sacrifice.

TOUGH DAYS

I will not pretend that the first days of the diet were other than tough. The dietitian who sent up my trays was a literal-minded young person; and the 800 calories I had been allotted were dished out to me exactly right. And let me assure you, in case you have never been through the experience, that 800 calories were just enough to keep slave laborers on their feet, but not enough to keep them from shrinking to skin and bones or from dreaming all night long of Thanksgiving dinners.

After three days, I was quite dizzy.

After four days, I found that the work which I had brought along with me to the hospital was getting scant attention. My mind wandered and my eyes didn't seem particularly to focus. I was tired. Life had little enough savor.

Yet I was one of those lucky people who from the first day began to lose weight. The scales triumphantly told the story. A pound a day slipped off and each day the scales tipped a little less accusingly. Life had suddenly become a winning contest between me and the scales. I was like a man

on the golf course, each day taking one stroke off his once paralyzingly shameful score. Down and down went the record, 219, 217, then a proud 210. The dizziness had disappeared. I found that I could do my work without trouble. The vitamins and the other prescriptions had taken hold and were supplying for the calories no longer transforming themselves into fat. And I had around my waist a marvelously well-stocked larder — how apt the word; “larder” right straight from the cruel word “lard” — on which to draw.

LEARNING THE RULES

One morning the scales showed no falling off.

I turned in bewilderment to the nurse. “And last night I didn’t even eat the supper I’m allowed. I went out with some friends and while they stowed away steak and French fries, I drank two glasses of orange juice.”

She laughed while I got one of my important lessons: “Orange juice happens to be chock-full of calories. If you had two tumblers of orange juice, you had as many calories as four Scotch and sodas, two big slices of bread covered with butter, or a couple of chocolate bars.”

I crawled back abashed to my room. I had prescribed my own orange juice and that was the last time I decided on what to eat or drink without expert guidance.

CALORIES

You have to be calories-conscious.

It is a quarter of a century since I wrote a little play for high-school students, one scene of which was mild comedy built around the students’ current craze for dieting.

“Count! Count! Count with care!
Count your calories and then beware!”

I had swung the scene up around that little chant.

Now, in no comic spirit but in grim earnest, I found myself chanting the refrain. Calories had become a preoccupation. For calories are the little units of heat in food which are burned up if digestion (or combustion) is correct, but which turn to fat if you take too much. I came to think of my stomach as a wonderful furnace, with the calories as the coal I stoked into it. If a man pours too much coal into his furnace, all he gets is a bad fire and quantities of ugly black smoke. So if he pours too many calories into his stomach, he gets not healthy warmth for his body but an excess of heat and a lot of ugly fat.

One has to learn the trick of combining the right number of calories with the right kinds of food. A person might cut down his calories by eating nothing but lettuce. He'd soon get sick if he did. He could drink just broth and stay on the safe side of the calorie problem. But he would shortly find to his dismay that his strength was gone.

The art was getting enough calories and still enough food.

Thus far the hospital had managed it for me. I had an egg and two strips of bacon, dry toast and skimmed milk for breakfast. For lunch there was a small apple, a piece of meat with no gravy, one vegetable without dressing or butter, and gelatin without sugar. And so on.

But what would happen when I came out and returned to my own choice of food?

Calories became a preoccupation with me, an intense study.

Then everything suddenly fell into place: for counting calories and keeping my own score became a wonderful game. I'll explain that as I go along.

IMPORTANCE OF MATHEMATICS

I have always believed that mathematics is just about the most important of sciences. No time to go into that now; but my belief suddenly went to work.

When I bade farewell to the hospital and went back to my full normal life, I had reached a round 200 pounds. That was wonderful, but merely a challenge. I had my eyes set on my dear old familiar 185 and was determined that that would be the goal. Once a week I returned to the hospital for a check. With me I carried my vitamins and medications. But I was now on my own. No exact dietitian would measure out my three meals and send them up to me weighed to the precise gram and last calorie. I was like a million dieters before me, with the diet strictly up to me. Thus, for a time, life was to be a juggling of figures.

I had a total of 800 calories to eat during the course of a day.

I could, of course, break down and scrap the whole contest. I could fight the Spartan regime and make myself and everyone around me miserable. I could do the thing so badly that I would be ill and my work would suffer. Or I could make it a game.

So I turned it into a game. And dieting became fun.

SAVORING VICTORY

The first time I really savored victory was when a generous friend took me to dinner at an excellent restaurant.

From the start I had determined not to inflict my dieting on others. As a priest, I have always believed that my breviary was my personal Office, so I should not pester my associates by constantly bemoaning the fact that I must leave and say it, or that now I had to retire and get the burden off my soul. I felt about dieting as I have felt about my Office. It is my responsibility and others should not be expected to help me shoulder the burden.

But, since he was himself overweight, my host was curious about what I was doing and how I was feeling.

"I don't see why I gain weight," he protested. (He was back in the no-breakfast and twice the amount of lunch period). "I don't eat one bit more than most men."

We ordered our dinners and, when we finished, he pushed back his dessert plate and said: "There! We ate just about the same quantity of food. Yet you claim to be on a diet and I don't. You're losing and I'm gaining weight."

Out of my new-found knowledge I could not resist the possibilities of a lecture.

"Let's analyze our dinner. You started with cream of tomato soup and I ate clam broth. Quantity the same; calories about two hundred apart. I ate shrimp with tomato sauce. You ate two pork chops. I had fruit salad; you ate avocado with Russian dressing. Shrimp has very little caloric value; tomatoes almost none. Pork chops are rich in calories. Fruit is low and I used

no dressing; avocado is very high and that Russian dressing was caloric murder. At the end, I had lime ice; and you had coconut cream pie. Your dessert was equal in calories to my whole meal. You didn't eat much more; but you ate everything that was going to put fat on you . . . and put it on fast."

A WONDERFUL GAME

I was in Detroit, I remember, when my scales indicated the beloved 185 pounds. But I had in the interval looked up the proper weight for a man of my height and age, and found I should be between 165 and 175 pounds. If I had been able to hit 185, why not 175? Let that be the new goal!

Now I confess that, in this game, I had one advantage. There is very little in the way of food that I don't enjoy. In a way, that is a handicap. For, liking everything, one is tempted to eat everything that comes to the table. Yet, liking everything, I was able to pick and choose. And some foods, I found, were bursting with calories, and other foods, equally delicious and wholesome, had no calories to explode once they had been launched into my digestive tract.

CHANGES IN DIET

Actually, dieting meant a lot of changes in my diet. Take sandwiches, for example — and I have been ready to take sandwiches any time and every time they came my way. In fact, I had among my friends something of a reputation as a sandwich maker — and inventor. I have always regarded the late Lord Sandwich as one of humanity's greatest benefactors; and I have blessed the card game which was so fascinating that he could not leave for meals and insisted on being served meat between slabs of bread.

"I have seen you make a sandwich," once observed a good friend of mine, "of everything except soup and spaghetti."

"I never made a sandwich of green peas or noodles," I countered.

Well, one can't go on a diet, stay within 800 calories, and eat sandwiches. Each slice of bread, toasted or untoasted, is a hundred calories; and a hamburger sandwich, two slices of bread, meat fried in grease, and a bit of butter on the bread, is half of one's total allowance . . . more than half, really; for unless the hamburger is the size of a silver dollar, the sandwich totals 450 calories. That doesn't leave a man with 800 for his par much more to make the course.

There is the medical story of the young lady who asked her physician: "Doctor, I usually take a chocolate milk shake and a hamburger sandwich for lunch. Is that enough for me?" His answer was, "My dear young lady, what makes you think you need the milk shake, too?"

At any rate, sandwiches had become for me a dietetic luxury. And that was not easy. In general, the rest was.

IMPROVING THE SCORE

Once dieting had become my game, it was wonderful watching the score improve. No golfer breaking his first 100 and then 95 and then 90, and one day an incredible 85, ever had more inner thrill and satisfaction than I when the scales hit that 185 and then a reassuring 180 and after a long interval 175. Finally one happy day, as I stepped from the shower, the scales (I hoped they were not just flattering me) registered 172, and I felt content.

So Dr. Munsch smiled his benign approval and back I went on what for a man my age and height is considered normal: 1,500 calories a day.

After 800 calories, let me assure you, a diet of 1,500 was being put back on the meals of Lucullus or Diamond Jim Brady. I had earned the right to end my starvation diet; and all the training of those days of stringent substitutions had paid off.

For, after all, I had learned the hard way that dieting is not nearly so much a matter of going without food as of selecting the foods that don't run to a high number of calories and hence to waste — and waist — fat.

I cannot pretend that there ever was a time in my life when I was not food conscious. God gave me a relish for food and a curiosity about food. Anyone who knows me also knows the pity I feel (not untouched with condescension and a brush of contempt) for people who constantly cry, "I don't eat that. I never touch that. I don't like this and I never have liked that." Indeed, I find it hard to keep my irony off people who regard any unusual or new or out-of-the-ordinary dish with, "What's that? Oh, I never heard of that; I'm sure I wouldn't like it." Adventuring in food has seemed to me one of life's most exciting experiences. In strange countries, I relish strange foods native to the land. As I move about the country, I ask what is the popular food of the district and sample it. My most accustomed gesture when I pick up a menu is to look for some dish I have never tasted and order that.

But the need for dieting gave me a new kind of food consciousness.

GOD'S FOOD AND CHEFS' FOOD

I suddenly made the discovery that there were God's foods and chefs' foods. I cannot for a moment deny that chefs have a way of vastly improving tastes. But God seemed to have the right way of packing foods with what was needed, all that was needed, and not more than was needed.

I discovered that God's food was likely not to be fattening; chefs' food was. So fruit of itself didn't make one stout; but when fruit had been heavily sweetened — a plain case of gilding the lily, as I also discovered — fruit meant fat. The meat of the animals was likely to be lean meat; but chefs insisted that the animals be kept from roaming the plains, corralled in fences that restrained them from exercise, and fattened. So fat animals finally meant fat humans.

Wheat contains in itself a perfect miracle of nutrition. When a land is hit by famine, generous neighboring countries send in shipments of wheat. Just wheat alone in any of its simple forms is enough to keep a nation alive. But the bakers, the chefs' competitors in stepping up the taste of food, play tricks with wheat. They add quantities of sugar and butter and fats. They do not give a nation simple bread but "enriched" bread. For bread itself, wheat at its best, they substitute cake. And they lay high upon the cake frosting and, between the thin layers, they tuckpoint with thick layers of cream and sugar and flavoring.

Wheat of itself is nutriment; to wheat is added all the elements that mean calories and fat.

There is much good nourishment in a chicken. Boiled or broiled or roasted, it gives strength without much fear of fat. But the chef creams his chicken, and thus turns it from nutriment to a hearty fattener. Oysters are marvelous food, solid nutriment with almost no fattening elements. The chef, dissatisfied with nature, serves them creamed and with great slathers of butter. Or the chef drops the chicken or oysters into heavy batter and then into deep grease, deep fat. Instantly the food changes from nourishment to a swift fattener. Actually the chicken, when fried, doubles its normal calories. From being a non-fattening food, the oysters, fried or creamed, have become dangerously fattening. And whereas a baked potato leaves little residue on waist or hips, French fried potatoes (which the French loudly disclaim) merit the famous rhythm: "Five minutes in the grease; ten minutes on your plate; on your hips for the rest of your life."

I soon learned the difference between simple foods as God had made them and foods when the chef had turned them into a direct bearer of fat.

FOOD OF GROWTH

Milk is nutritious, wonderful for growing children. There seems a decided question these days among dietitians whether milk is good for the normal grown-up. For almost by its nature it is the food of growth.

Young calves and young colts grow strong from milk as nature had intended. With some degree of maturity, they turn from milk to meadows. They have attained their growth and the food of growth has been literally outgrown. But humans take

a different attitude; as they grow older, they skim the richest and most nutritive element from the milk and gorge on cream. They eat great slabs of butter. They go in for plates of ice cream. They take cream in their coffee and pour cream over their cereal. For the sick, this is wonderful. For the growing person or the one who does heavy work that wears off the fatty elements and consumes the heat, this is excellent. But as milk is the food of growth, when the adult has reached his up-and-down growth, milk may very likely mean that he continues his growth around the circumference. And when, as we Americans do, he lays away great quantities of the very essence of calories, cream — whipped cream, cream cakes, chocolate creams, cream puffs, creamy cheeses, extravagances of butter poured over everything — he need not be surprised that, since he has no place to grow upward, he promptly and unrestrainedly grows outward.

PUSH-UPS VS. PUSH-AWAYS

One of the legends about overweight is that you can work it off with exercise. I imagine that, had one the money, as the Hollywood stars have, you could easily lose weight by hiring a masseur to do your exercising for you — by literally pounding the weight off with iron palms. We now know that most exercise has little enough effect on the man who overeats. Dancers are frequently quite stout; as are swimmers. Indeed, stout people are often excellent dancers. But research indicates than one can walk a brisk twenty miles on a warm day and not lose a full pound. That's a lot of exercise for so small a return in loss of poundage.

As the ironic joke has it, the exercise to cure fat is not a push-up but a push-away — pushing the plate of food back far, far out of reach. And the best of all exercise for a person reducing is the vigorous shaking of the head back and forth as one says “no” to food.

Fat is sometimes a matter of glands. In that case, little that I learned from experience had any real importance. Only a doctor and the skillful use of the modern medicines which control glandular action are helpful here. But in fat which is due to simple overindulgence, to overeating and overdrinking, the only corrective is right eating and moderate drinking.

And again, I repeat, it is less a matter of what one eats than of the quantity of the fat-producing food one eats.

Once I had left the hospital and was on my gastronomic own, I decided not to become a food crank. I would not lift my hand in a stern “no” to anything that was offered to me. But each day I would start off with my bank account of 1,500 calories, and by the end of the day I would have used them all up, but only that thousand and a half. That was precisely what made it a wonderful game. Each day, to return to golf, I was playing against myself and against par for the course. I would not deny myself a sweet roll if one appeared on my breakfast table. But I would eat one sweet roll (a hundred and fifty calories) and not three sweet rolls (450 of the fatal and fatty ingredients). I liked breakfast bacon; but I would eat my bacon crisp, (three slices, 100 calories) and not greasy and fat (three slices, 300 calories). I would not forego my morning juices; but I’d drink

unsweetened grapefruit juice (50 calories) and not sweetened orange juice (perhaps 200). Coffee remained an essential; but coffee in itself had not a single calorie. The calories came when one added that liberal dash of cream (100 to 150 calories) and that teaspoon of sugar (100 calories if it heaped).

STRICT ACCOUNTING

Toasting bread, I discovered, had no real effect upon the calories. So the man who kidded himself into thinking that white bread (100 calories a slice) became non-fattening by thrusting it into the toaster, was no guide for me. If I needed and wanted bread, then I simply subtracted that 100 calories from the 1,500 which totaled my day's allowance. If I added butter, I took 50 calories out of my food bank for every pat I used. If I stuck to berries as God made them, I had added little to my indebtedness; if I took them in the form of jam or jelly, or saturated in sugar (powdered or granulated) or drenched in cream, I had to be honest and admit there was not nearly so much left for me to eat during the rest of the day.

I did not deny myself cake (chocolate cake, 250 calories for a normal slice), but cut myself a sliver and ate it slowly. Pie was a real temptation. But a normal slice of apple pie could be 450 calories out of my day's allowance. So, if I had to have pie, I took a small arc, and lingered over it. Cheese could be heavily costly. But there were cheeses like Roquefort and its adopted cousin, Blue, that had small caloric content. These I substituted for the heavily caloric cream cheeses of various kinds.

CHARTING A COURSE

Soon I became like a kid spending his Christmas money. I had 1,500 calories a day to spend. I could eat a very hearty breakfast and use up only 250 out of this total. Eggs were a Godsend; boiled or poached, two eggs cost me only about 100 points. Fried, of course, they jumped to 200.

I learned to relove fruits and vegetables with salt and not great tidal waves of salad oil. Vinegar was largely without calorie content. And, oh, thank God for tomatoes! There was the real delight of the man on a diet. He could tuck them away without fear or threat of extravagance.

As the game continued and I found myself having a lot of fun working on my course (perhaps literally on my courses), I realized that I needed more professional help than my doctor in his busy day could give me, or guesswork would permit. So in a Chicago bookstore I picked up one of the hundred-calorie charts which are ready for anyone who cares to use them. Since here were the rules of the game, the points and the penalties, I was set.

Frankly, I had never been impressed by those "Thirty Day Diets," and those dieting meals offered so lavishly by the experts. They tied a person down too tightly. For instance, when they recommended lamb chops and he couldn't get or afford lamb chops, he was left with a menu already out of reach.

In my game of learning to count up to 1,500, I needed exactly what the calorie chart gave me. If I wanted sausage for breakfast, the chart told me two sizeable

cakes had taken one hundred and fifty of my day's points. But if I wanted sausage, I ate sausage and made up for it during the day.

The chart taught me a lot of precious facts about food, and I have memorized most of them for my constant use. (Yet the chart has gone with me on many a long journey and will continue to companion me for months to come.)

DAGWOOD SANDWICHES

It turned out that the great American custom of snacks was what really put weight on us as a nation. When Dagwood raids the icebox at night, he is laying away calories that some day will turn his lean caricature of a frame into a waddling walrus. A ham or chicken sandwich counts up to 300 calories, and add 100 more for every tablespoon of mayonnaise painted on the meat. Two bonbons have as many calories as that slice of bread—a full hundred; and one plain chocolate bar—the former 5c size—is 250. Add almonds and you add another 150. And peanut butter! No wonder growing boys love it. A small sandwich is 300 calories, only slightly less than a tuna sandwich; and for once the fish trick us. Normally, fish are low in calories; but the tuna sandwich jumps to 350, and with mayonnaise added, tops 400.

It was fun pitting what skill I developed against the pervasive and invading calories. But God was good. Most of his natural foods would not get inside and start to push me around—and out. Lean meats were all low in calories and rich in nourishment. Only the fat of beef and lamb and veal was threatening. Supposedly rich foods like

chicken and lobster and crab and shrimp were actually non-fattening. Over the listing of vegetables, the expert could write: "Eat all you wish of these." Only the avocado — to me a highly artificial vegetable, delicious though it is — was a danger. God's fruits won't make the most susceptible person stout, except bananas and dates, and dried figs, prunes, and raisins.

Beware nibbling on nuts! The most harmless of them is a bomb that will explode within you. God meant them for travellers lost in the woods. And when the human love of sweets put sweets into concentrated form, instead of leaving them in the natural fruit canes and honeys of God's creation, fat impended; candy is for the young or for those who need its concentrated strength; or for those who can remember that one caramel is 100 calories; one lump of maple sugar candy is 150, and four innocent little cream mints (one can tuck away a dozen or so while sitting at a luncheon table) are a round century of calories.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

I learned to eat gravy without the addition of flour. It's better natural. I chose thin soups instead of the thick creamed or floury soups. Like a real lover of salad, I ate it with salt and pepper and vinegar and a dash of oil, instead of drenching it in heavy salad dressings, made still more fat with cheeses. If I ate spaghetti, it was no longer that bowl "out of which," as a wit once observed, "you could easily knit a sweater." Fish was a Catholic's salvation, now in more than just the supernatural sense; the shellfish were invented by nature with dieting in mind. The canneries, I found, had learned to put up fruit in "heavy

syrup" for those who need not care. (Two tablespoons of heavy syrup are a hundred calories). But they also put it up unsweetened, and pineapple needs no help from the sugar refinery to be a delicious delicacy. Grapefruit was as flavorful with a dash of salt as with a rain of sugar. And thank heaven for the flavor and wholesomeness of berries, in season or frozen.

A reformed alcoholic cannot afford to boast.

Neither can an overweight overeater who has put the groaning trencher away from him.

Yet the thing that has delighted me about my dieting has been the simple fact that it was not difficult. It was really easy. And once I made a game of it, it was actually fun. Watching that falling scale was a thrill. Starting the day with 1,500 calories and reaching dinner time with a decent breakfast and sustaining lunch behind me, and still 800 to 1,000 calories to "blow in" on the evening meal, was like making the first eight holes all under par and having a few shots to waste on the long and difficult ninth.

There are Catholics who make Fridays, all Fridays, and Lent and Ember Days, for themselves a torment and for those who have to listen to their groans and murmurings, the source of endless annoyance.

There are Catholics who have trained themselves to like fish and who do not need the slaughter of the animal kingdom to make contented their meals. They have come to enjoy dairy products and vegetables and fruits and cheese and all the wonders of God's variegated larder.

GIVING UP THE FIGHT

Some people simply regard their superfluous fat with humorous resignation. If it means a longer waist and a shorter life-line, Kismet! They drink not one bottle of beer but half a dozen; and do not eat one sandwich but wolf four Dagwoods. They heap the ice cream glacier high on a half moon of pie, and let the calories take their abounding course.

Some people realize that diet is demanded, and diet grimly, sourly, angrily, resentfully. They make life miserable for themselves and can cause their normally eating friends to want to leave the dinner table. It's no fun to listen to a dieter moan and groan and then jibe at you for eating your normal meal.

But some people can learn to make diet fun and a game.

For in a healthy, somewhat trim body, our souls will be able to serve God with more sprightliness. Not for any desire to beat us down did the Church take God's command seriously and impose our days of fast and abstinence.

RACE CONSCIOUSNESS

With something of an athlete's training, we can run more easily the race course that is life.

And by making our diet a game, we can trim away the superfluous, regain something of youth's fatless vigor, and strengthen our wills by practicing on food and drink the strong "no" which any decent man must learn to say over and over again during the course of a tempted life.

So anyone who can count up to fifteen can diet easily.

You see, most of the calorie counts are in units of 100; the extra zeroes don't make your problem of adding and subtracting one bit difficult. Instead of having 15 calories to eat, you have 1,500; instead of saying that a piece of bread is one calorie, you say it is 100. And that makes a pat of butter 50 calories instead of half a calorie. None of us likes fractions.

Easy, then, if you can count and if you are one bit interested in developing that good old American and Christian virtue of self-control. Who doesn't need self-control? And what possibly easier way to practice it than in the presence of food? We like people with strong wills; and I think all of us are a bit ashamed of our lives when our self-control and our will disintegrate in the presence of a mound of chocolate ice cream or a second glass of wine.

Beyond that, the Christian can "offer it up." If we are taught to think of fasting as good for the soul, the very fasting that is good for our body can help our soul as well . . . help it to a higher place in heaven.

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71