

# FOOD FADS AND FANCIES

By Dr. Elizabeth Bryson (1)

**T**O-DAY we are becoming very food-conscious. We are at the mercy of the diet specialist and the faddist. We are bombarded with advertisements of slimming foods and health-giving foods, and our ears are deafened with talk of vitamin C and vitamin D.

It is good to remember that some people can eat anything and live to a healthy old age, just as it is good to remember that it is possible to live to a healthy 90 without ever having a bath. Centenarians invariably have a different recipe for long life and health. One told us the other day that he reached his century because he never did anything regularly—he always ate and drank just what he liked and when he liked. Another declared his long healthy life was due to his regular habits and abstention from alcohol and tobacco. Another tells us quite frankly that it was “beer and a pipe” that kept him fit and happy. There is no rule; there is no magic. Every kind of diet has its advocates and every belief can be exploded by some example.

## Sword-Swallowers and Lettuce-Eaters

There are people who try to live on nothing but lettuce leaves. But like the Irishman's donkey, when they get down to one lettuce leaf a day they will probably go and spoil the effect by dying! Nor must we forget the sword-swallowers, and the gentlemen who appear to flourish on a diet of nails and broken glass, who eat with apparent relish electric light bulbs and gramophone needles. There is an authentic account of a man who spent his life alternating between periods of indulgence on this kind of diet and periods of residence in various London hospitals where the unabsorbed residue of his indigestible meals was removed from his body by operation. Eventually he had to his credit something like 20 operations at many different hospitals. He was still alive when last reported on.

## The Slimming Craze

The slimming craze, affecting young girls, adolescents at the rapidly growing age, and young women in their prime, came in, I think, with cropped hair and outdoor activities. The mannish figure was a natural accompaniment of short hair and athletic prowess, with cigarettes instead of sweets. On the whole the manifestation was a thoroughly healthy one.

But most good movements are spoiled by extremists and we did go through a period, happily now almost past, when real harm was

done by unwise slimming. Because slimness was fashionable, some had to be ultra fashionable and slim away not only unnecessary and unwanted fat, but also necessary flesh and blood. There was evidence of increased tuberculosis incidence among adolescent girls during the worst period of the slimming craze. Under-nourishment, from deliberate denial of essential food, resulted naturally in debility and proneness to disease. There is



S. P. Andrew photograph

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a definite connection too between the craze for thinness and the falling birthrate. Extreme thinness is the repudiation of womanhood. It is a manifestation of nervous fear. Perhaps with to-day's return to curves, the birthrate will rise. It ought to if appearances are a true psychological indication of an inner change of heart.

It is good for young people as well as older ones to guard against the fattening effect of our excessively starchy habits of food; to have an abundance of vegetables and fruit and milk and eggs, the valuable protective foods, in their diet; and to keep down to a very moderate allowance their sweets and chocolate and bread and cakes. But thinness and slimness should not be confused.

## No Slimming Food

But it is where the older women congregate that we hear most about slimming foods and fattening foods. Let me say at once that *no food is slimming*. This is doubly true. It

is true that “*no food*” in the sense of “*taking no food*” is very slimming. It is also true that “*no food*” is slimming, meaning that there is no such thing as a slimming food. It is not the food we eat that is slimming, no matter how cleverly advertised it may be as “starch-free” or “starch reduced” or “guaranteed to reduce weight,” it is the food we do not eat, the food we do without, that is the real slimming food.

## Habit and Age

The truth is that we get fond of certain foods; we get into the habit of consuming certain quantities of food; and as we get older our food habits remain the same while our habits in regard to work and exercise tend to alter. Sooner or later we begin to show and to feel the effects of too much food—even a very slight excess taken every day for months and years will eventually tell its tale in increased weight and decreased vitality.

We have to remember also that the life processes slow down with age—we cannot eat so much and “get away with it” as we could when we were younger. If we insist, we get indigestion and gall stones and rheumatism. We begin to feel less fit and we say to ourselves, a little indulgently, a little pityingly—“Well, I'm not so young as I was—and I have worked pretty hard all my life.” And so we go on—still a little too much food and a little less active exercise and a little less ability to deal with the excess of food taken habitually, and so we build up the picture, and suddenly one day a candid friend says brutally, “Oh, you are getting the middle-aged spread!” Then we know that what we had suspected but had hoped to hide, and to deal with some day by really careful “dieting,” is no longer a secret sorrow but an open shame. We are middle-aged; we are getting fat; we must diet.

It is then that the advertisements of slimming foods catch our eye. They sound very attractive. Here is the balm for our sorrow. Here is salvation without effort. Sometimes we try them and when there is no visible immediate improvement, we become discouraged, unsettled, unduly interested in the question of food. We become intrigued by the advice and opinions and theories of friends who are “dieting,” and who discuss the merits of different foods and diets, over the afternoon tea-table while they consume the seductive savouries and cream cakes that are so tiny and so delicious as to be “really quite harmless.” We hear that lemons are very slimming, that bananas are fattening, that “starchless” bread is slimming, that potatoes are fattening; that white bread is fattening, “but of course, my dear, I always eat brown bread. I get so weak unless I have my brown bread.”

So it goes on till our brain reels and our imagination boggles at the jumble of fattening and slimming, and good and bad foods; and if we are simple minded and fairly normal in size, we go home and decide to carry on as usual, and if we tend to get fat, we will eat less, and if we are getting thin, we will eat more. And we will leave the diets to the dietitians and the fads and fancies to the faddists.

(To be continued)