

# AN EASY FAST

A Short Story

By Sholem Aleichem

THAT which Doctor Tanner failed to accomplish, was effectually carried out by Chayyim Chaikin, a simple Jew in a small town in Poland.

Doctor Tanner wished to show that a man can fast 40 days and he only managed to get through 28, no more, and that with people pouring spoonfuls of water into his mouth, and giving him morsels of ice to swallow, and holding his pulse—a whole business! Chayyim Chaikin has proved that one can fast more than 40 days; not, as a rule, two together, one after the other, but 40 days, if not more, in the course of a year.

To fast is all he asks! Who said drops of water? Who said ice? Not for him! To fast means no food and no drink from one set time to the other, a real four and 20 hours.

And no doctors sit beside him and hold his pulse, whispering, "Hush! Be quiet!"

Well let us hear the tale!

CHAYYIM CHAIKIN IS A VERY POOR MAN, ENCUMBERED WITH many children and they, the children, support him.

They are mostly girls and they work in a factory and make cigarette wrappers, and they earn, some one gulden, others half a gulden a day, and that not every day. How about Sabbaths and festivals and "strike" days? One should thank God for everything, even in their out-of-the-way little town strikes are all the fashion!

And out of that they have to pay rent—for a damp corner in a basement.

To buy clothes and shoes for the lot of them! They have a dress each, but they are two to every pair of shoes.

And then food—such as it is! A bit of bread smeared with an onion, sometimes groats, occasionally there is a bit of taran that burns your heart out so that after eating it for supper, you can drink a whole night.

When it comes to eating, the bread has to be portioned out like cake.

Thus Chaïke, Chayyim Chaikin's wife, a poor, sick creature, who coughs all night.

"No evil eye," says the father, and he looks at his children devouring whole slices of bread and would dearly like to take a mouthful himself, only, if he does so, the two little ones, Fradke and Beilke, will go supperless.

And he cuts his portion of bread in two and gives it to the little ones.

Fradke and Beilke stretch out their little thin, black hands, looking into their father's eyes, and don't believe him: perhaps he is joking? Children are *nashers*, they play

with father's piece of bread till at last they begin taking bites out of it. The mother sees and exclaims, coughing all the while:

"It is nothing but eating and stuffing!"

The father cannot bear to hear it and is about to answer her but he keeps silent—he can't say anything, it is not for him to speak! Who is he in the house? A broken potsherd, the last and least, no good to anyone, no good to them, no good to himself.

Because the fact is he does nothing, absolutely nothing; not because he won't do anything or because it doesn't benefit him, but because there is nothing to do—and there's an end of it! The whole townlet complains of there being nothing to do! It is just a crowd of Jews driven together. Delightful! They're packed like herrings in a barrel, they squeeze each other close, all for love.

"Well-a-day!" thinks Chaikin, "it's something to have children, other people haven't even that. But to depend on one's children is quite another thing and not a happy one!" Not that they grudge him his keep—Heaven forbid! But he cannot take it from them, he really cannot!

He knows how hard they work, he knows how the strength is wrung out of them to the last drop, he knows it well!

Every morsel of bread is a bit of their health and strength—he drinks his children's blood! No, the thought is too dreadful!

"DADDY, WHY DON'T YOU EAT?" ASK THE CHILDREN.

"Today is a fast day with me," answers Chayyim Chaikin.

"Another fast? How many fasts have you?"

"Not so many as there are days in the week."

And Chayyim Chaikin speaks the truth when he says that he has many fasts and yet there are days on which he eats.

But he likes the days on which he fasts better.

First, they are pleasing to God and it means a little bit more of the world-to-come, the interest grows and the capital grows with it.

"Second," he thinks, "no money is wasted on me. Of course I am accountable to no one and nobody ever questions me as to how I spend it, but what do I want money for when I can get along without it?"

"And what is the good of feeling one's self a little higher than a beast? A beast eats every day but I can go without

food for one or two days. A man *should* be above a beast! "Oh, if man could only raise himself to a level where he could live without eating at all! But there are one's confounded insides!" So thinks Chayyim Chaikin, for hunger has made a philosopher of him.

"The insides, the necessity of eating have made a pauper of me and drives my children to toil in the sweat of their brow and risk their lives for a bit of bread!

"Suppose a man had no need to eat! Ai-ai-ai! My children would all stay home! An end to toil, an end to moil, an end to 'striking,' an end to the risking of life, an end to factory and factory owners, to rich men and paupers, an end to jealousy and hatred and fighting and shedding of blood! All gone and done with! A paradise! A paradise!"

So reasons Chayyim Chaikin and, lost in speculation, he pities the world and is grieved to the heart to think that God should have made man so little above the beast.

THE DAY ON WHICH CHAYYIM CHAIKIN FASTS IS, AS I TOLD you, his best day and a *real* fast day like the Ninth of Ab, for instance—he is ashamed to confess it—is a festival for him!

You see, it means not to eat, not to be a beast, not to be guilty of the children's blood, to earn the reward of a *Mitzveh* [blessing], and weep to heart's content on the ruins of the Temple.

For how can one weep when one is full? How can a full man grieve? Only he can grieve whose soul is faint within him!

The Ninth Ab is the hardest fast of all—so the word has it.

Chayyim Chaikin cannot see why. The day is long, is it? Then the night is all the shorter. It's hot out of doors, is it? Who asks you to be loitering about in the sun? Sit in the synagogue and recite the prayers of which, thank God, there are plenty.

"EH, REB CHAYYIM, YOU ARE GREEDY FOR FASTS, ARE YOU?"

"More fasts, more fasts!" says Chayyim Chaikin and he takes it upon himself to fast on the eve of the Ninth of Ab as well, two days at a stretch.

What do you think of fasting two days in succession? Isn't that a treat? It's hard enough to have to break one's fast after the Ninth of Ab, without eating on the eve thereof as well.

One forgets that one *has* insides, that such a thing exists as the necessity to eat, and one is free of the habit that drags one down to the level of the beast.

The difficulty lies in the drinking! I mean, in the *not* drinking. "If I," thinks Chayyim Chaikin, "allowed myself one glass of water a day, I could fast a whole week till Sabbath."

You think I say that for fun? Not at all! Chayyim Chaikin is a man of his word. When he says a thing, it's said and done! The whole week preceding the Ninth of Ab he ate nothing, he lived on water.

Who should notice? His wife, poor thing, is sick, the

elder children are out all day in the factory and the younger ones do not understand. Fradke and Beilke only know when they are hungry (and they are always hungry), the heart yearns within them and they want to eat.

"Today you shall have an extra piece of bread," says the father and cuts his own in two, and Fradke and Beilke stretch out their dirty little hands for it and are overjoyed.

"Daddy, you are not eating," remark the elder girls at supper, "this is not a fast day!"

"And no more *do* I fast!" replies the father and thinks: "That was a take-in, but not a lie, because, after all, a glass of water—that is not eating and not fasting either."

WHEN IT COMES TO THE EVE OF THE NINTH OF AB, CHAYYIM feels so light and airy as he never felt before, not because it is time to prepare for the fast by taking a meal, not because he may eat. On the contrary, he feels that if he took anything solid in his mouth, it would not go down, but stick in his throat.

That is, his heart is very sick and his hands and feet shake; his body is attracted earthwards, his strength fails, he feels like fainting. But fie, what an idea! To fast a whole week, to arrive at the eve of the Ninth of Ab, and not to hold out to the end! Never!

And Chayyim Chaikin takes his portion of bread and potato, calls Fradke and Beilke, and whispers:

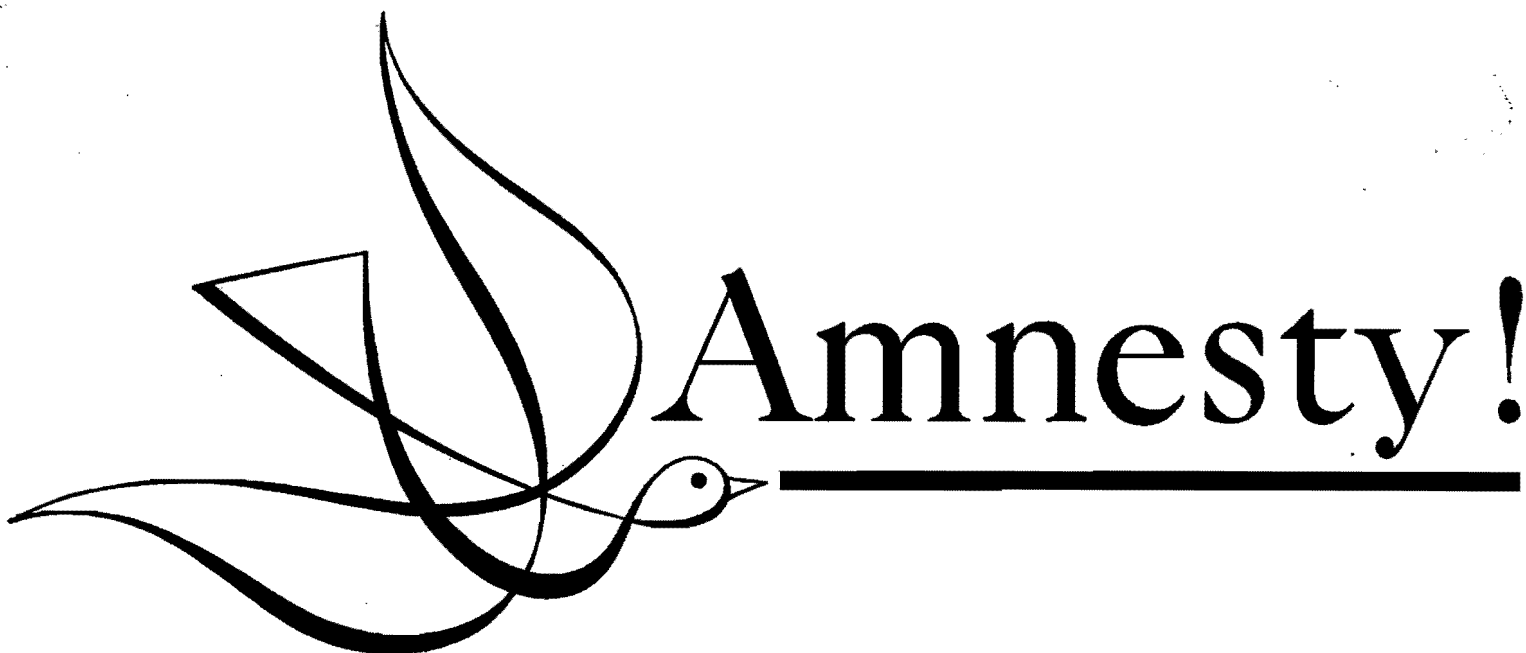
"Children, take this and eat it, but don't let mother see!"

And Fradke and Beilke take their father's share of food and look wonderingly at his livid face and shaking hands.

Chayyim sees the children snatch at the bread and munch and swallow, and he shuts his eyes, and rises from his place. He cannot wait for the other girls to come home from the factory but takes his book of *Lamentations*, puts off his shoes and drags himself—it is all he can do—to the synagogue. He secures a seat next to the reader and provides himself with a bit of burned-down candle, which he glues with its drippings to the foot of the bench, leans against the corner of the platform, opens his book, "Lament for Zion and all the Other Towns," and he closes his eyes.

A bright sunbeam has darted through the dull, dusty windowpane, a beam of the sun which is setting yonder behind the town. And he shuts his eyes again but still sees the beam and not only the beam but the whole sun, the bright beautiful sun, and no one can see it but he! Chayyim Chaikin looks at the sun and sees it—and that's all! How it is? It must be because he has done with the world and all its necessities—he feels happy—he feels light—he can bear anything—he will have an easy fast—do you know he will have an easy fast!

CHAYYIM CHAIKIN SHUTS HIS EYES AND SEES A STRANGE world, a new world, such as he never saw before. Angels seem to hover before his eyes and he looks at them and recognizes his children in them, and he wants to say something to them and cannot speak—he wants to explain to them that it is not his fault! How should it, no evil eye, be his fault, that so many Jews are gathered together in



## *Free the Victims of War Hysteria*

**A**T A TIME when the tide is rising against McCarthyism and the winds of peace are blowing through the world, we must turn our attention to an important barrier to the success of these trends—the continued imprisonment of the Communist leaders convicted under the Smith act. It is nearly two years since eight Communist leaders went to jail as part of the attempt to impose thought control. In that period it has become more and more clear that it was not only the Communists, but all dissenters to the left of McCarthy whom the thought controllers are out to muzzle. As part of the campaign against McCarthyism it is imperative that a drive be carried on to obtain amnesty for the imprisoned Communist leaders. This is, of course, nothing new in our history: the names of Eugene V. Debs and Tom Mooney recall instances of amnesty in this century whose effect was to reinforce freedom. The National Committee to Win Amnesty for Smith Act Victims (667 Madison Avenue, New York City 21) has designated June 4 to July 4 as Amnesty Month. We urge our readers to join in this campaign. Write to President Eisenhower to grant amnesty to those who have been victimized by the Smith act as a consequence of their fight against thought control and the policies that threaten war. **And** get your union and all other organizations to send the President a resolution for amnesty.

one place and squeeze each other, all for love, squeeze each other to death for love? How can he help it, if people desire each other's sweat, other people's blood? If people have not learned to see that one should not drive a man as a horse is driven to work, that a horse is also to be pitied, one of God's creatures, a living thing?

When Ber the beadle, a redhaired Jew with thick lips, came into the synagogue in his socks with the worn-down heels and saw Chayyim Chaikin leaning with his head back and his eyes open, he was angry, thought Chayyim was dozing and began to grumble:

"He ought to be ashamed of himself—reclining like that—came here for a nap did he?—Reb Chayyim, excuse me, Reb Chayyim!"

But Chayyim Chaikin did not hear him.

The last rays of the sun streamed in through the synagogue window, right into Chayyim Chaikin's quiet face with the black, shining, curly hair, the black, bushy brows, the half-open, black, kindly eyes and lit the dead, pale, still, hungry face through and through.

I told you how it would be: Chayyim Chaikin had an easy fast!

*(Translated from the Yiddish)*