

# Confessions of a Young Lady Laudanum-Drinker

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Dear Sir,

Perhaps you may remember a lady calling on you with her daughter about the middle of August, to ask you if there was any way of curing the habit of taking opium, which the girl had contracted. I, who write, am that same girl, and think you may perhaps be interested to hear how I got on. It is hateful to me to think of that horrible time, and one of my chief reasons for writing to you is to beg you to try and make known by every means in your power, what a terrible thing opium-eating is. If people only knew of the consequences sure to follow on such a habit, of its insidiousness, and the difficulty of leaving it off, surely they would never touch it.

Perhaps it is rather soon for me to imagine myself cured, but I do not think I can ever feel more horrified about it than I do now. There was no excuse for me taking it, brought up by such a mother, and with such a constant example of unselfishness before me in the rest of the family. All my tastes and fancies were gratified; as mother says, when I take a whim into my head, the whole house is turned upside down. When I came home from school I insisted on practising seven hours a day, and the family put up with it, though it was a great infliction to them. It would have been better for me had they not done so, for I was naturally so tired-out at night that I could not sleep, and knowing that sleep would come easily with a little laudanum, it was difficult to resist taking it.

Of course, it didn't become habitual all at once; the first time I got it was at school, after a concert, when its effects were so soothing, that it became quite usual for me to get it, mixed up with quinine, which I was forced to take, though there was not the slightest necessity for it, as nobody could be stronger than I am. Thank goodness, we have all inherited splendid constitutions, and would almost think it a disgrace to the family to have anything the matter with us. I am quite sure I would never have had neuralgia, if it had not been for stewing up for exams. Mother was always writing to tell me not to do them, but I did not feel it my duty to obey her on that point, as what does one go to school for if not to learn; and to own one's self beaten by a headache would surely show a very weak mind.

I'm just mad at myself for having given in to such a fearful habit as opium-eating. None but those who have as completely succumbed to it as I did, could guess the mischief it would do. Even you, with an experience which must be extremely varied, being as you are, in such a good place for studying people's brains (or rather their want of them), cannot know the amount of harm it did to me morally, though I must say you did seem to have a pretty fair idea of it. It got me into such a state of indifference that I no longer took the least interest in anything, and did nothing all day but loll on the sofa reading novels, falling asleep every now and then, and drinking tea.

Occasionally I would take a walk or drive, but not often. Even my music I no longer took much interest in, and would play only when the mood seized me, but felt it too much of a bother to practice. I would get up about ten in the morning, and make a pretence of sewing; a pretty pretence, it took me four months to knit a stocking!

Worse than all, I got so deceitful, that no one could tell when I was speaking the truth. It was only this last year it was discovered; those living in the house with you are not so apt to notice things, and it was my married sisters who first began to wonder what had come over me. They said I always seemed to be in a half-dazed state, and not to know what I was doing. However they all put it down to music. Mother had let me go to all the Orchestral Concerts in the winter, and they thought it had been too much for me. By that time it was a matter of supreme indifference to me what they thought, and even when it was found out, I had become so callous that I didn't feel the least shame. Even mother's grief did not affect me, I only felt irritated at her; this is an awful confession to have to make, but it is better to tell the whole truth when you once begin, and it might be some guide to you in dealing with others. If you know of anyone indulging in such a habit, especially girls, just tell them what they will come to.

Of course its effects differ according to one's nature, and it's to be hoped few get so morally degraded as I did. This much is certain, few would have the constitution to stand it as I did, and even I was beginning to be the worse for it. For one thing, my memory was getting dreadful; often, in talking to people I knew intimately, I would forget their names and make other absurd mistakes of a similar kind. As my elder sister was away from home, I took a turn at being housekeeper. Mother thinks every girl should know how to manage a house, and she lets each of us do it in our own way, without interfering. Her patience was sorely tried with my way of doing it, as you may imagine; I was constantly losing the keys, or forgetting where I had left them. I forgot to put sugar in puddings, left things to burn, and a hundred other things of the same kind.

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One thing I would like to know, and that is - whether you could tell that I had not left off laudanum that day we called. Surely you must know the state one gets into when suddenly deprived of it; they could no more sit up and speak as I did than fly. By that time I had brought myself down to a quarter of an ounce a day, and as you had put mother on her guard, I had no means of getting any more (I hate having to own that I tried to do so) so the day after we saw you was the last I had any. Then began a time I shudder to look back upon. I don't like owning to bodily suffering, but will not deny that I suffered them. I wonder if leaving off opium has the same effect on everyone! My principal feeling was one of awful weariness and numbness at the end of my back; it kept me tossing about all day and night long. It was impossible to lie in one position for more than a minute, and of course sleep was out of the question. I was so irritable that no one cared to come near me; mother slept on the sofa in my room, and I nearly kicked her once for suggesting that I should say hymns over to myself, to try and make me go to sleep. Hymns of a very different sort were in my mind, I was once or twice very nearly strangling myself, and I am ashamed to say that the only thing that kept me from doing so was the thought that I would be able to get laudanum somehow. I was conscious of feeling nothing but the mere sense of being alive, and if the house had been burning, would have thought it too much of an effort to rise....

However, I gradually got over that, and now am perfectly well, with the exception of my hack, which has that nasty aching feeling now and then. Our medical man, who is a bright specimen of the country doctor, said "it might be anything," and when asked to explain what that meant said "perhaps her corsets are too tight." This was indeed a bright idea as I don't happen to wear corsets at all. Those country doctors are fit for nothing but measles and teething. What I think so very queer when was taking laudanum is that though my memory was going for other things, it was as good as ever for music; I could pick up by ear and play off even better than before. I often think had that faculty gone it would have alarmed me so much that perhaps I would have been able to stop my evil habits, but it's unlikely.

Oh, why do you doctors not try prevention as well as cure! You have it in your power to warn those who take laudanum now and then for toothache or headache, what an insidious thing it is, and how easily they may become the victims of it. I began that way, and see what it came to. Even now I often wonder if I've quite got over its effects. Does anyone who has gone up to three or four ounces a day, and is suddenly deprived of it, live to tell the tale! I can hardly believe it. My own sufferings were bad enough, and I had got down to a quarter of an ounce. I'll end this by alluding again to the object of my writing, namely, the prevention of people getting into such a state as I was: if they were to know the state of moral idiocy to which they would in the end be brought, would they ever allow themselves to once begin the habit! They need not say to themselves "Oh, we can stop it when we like"; opium takes away their power to do that. There can't be a more determined person than I am naturally, and what good did that do me! I determined a hundred times to stop it, but never succeeded, and at last I got that I didn't care a rap what became of me, all the reasoning and affection expended on me, being a mere waste of time and love. You doctors know all the harm those drugs do, as well as the "victims" of them, and yet you do precious little to prevent it. If that subject were to be taken up instead of some so often spoken of in the health-lectures which are now given, it might do some practical good. Well, I wonder at myself being able to write such a long letter on a subject which is so repugnant to me that I try never even to think of it. I can hardly finish up in my usual style which is "hoping to see you soon again"; because I certainly don't hope so, and if I ever do have the pleasure of seeing you again, let us hope it will be under very different circumstances.