

*A Fasting-artist*

Public interest in exhibition fasting has suffered a marked decline in recent decades. While one used to be able to make good money by mounting independent productions of this kind on quite a large scale, today that is quite impossible. Times have changed. In those days the fasting-artist was the talk of the town; from day to day of his fast enthusiasm grew; each day everyone wanted to go and see the fasting-artist at least once; during the later stages people with specially reserved seats used to sit in front of the little barred cage all day long; there were even showings at night as well, by torchlight to heighten the effect; on fine days the cage was carried out into the open, and it was then in particular that the fasting-artist was shown to the children; while for the grown-ups he was often no more than a joke, in which they took part because it was fashionable, the children stood open-mouthed, holding one another by the hand for safety's sake, and watched him as he sat there on the straw that had been spread for him, for he spurned even a chair, a pale figure in his black leotard, ribs grotesquely protruding, now nodding politely, now answering questions with a laboured smile, sometimes even stretching an arm through the bars for them to feel how skinny he was, but then withdrawing completely into himself again and paying attention to no one, not even to the striking of the clock, which meant so much for him and was the only piece of furniture in his cage, but merely staring ahead of him through half-shut eyes and taking an occasional sip from a tiny glass of water to moisten his lips.

Apart from the spectators who came and went there were also permanent watchmen there, men selected by the public – strangely enough they were usually butchers – whose task it was, operating three at a time, to observe the fasting-artist by day and night and make quite sure that he did not, perhaps by some kind of secret device, take nourishment after all. But this was a pure formality, introduced to reassure the masses, for the initiates knew well enough that the fasting-artist during the period of his fast would never, under no circumstances, not even under compulsion, have eaten the smallest morsel; the honour of his art forbade it. Not every watch-

man, of course, was capable of understanding this, there were often groups of watchmen on the night shift who were very lax about the watch they kept, deliberately getting together in a corner and absorbing themselves in a game of cards, with the obvious intention of allowing the fasting-artist a little refreshment, which in their opinion he could obtain by drawing on some kind of secret supply. Nothing was more of a torment to the fasting-artist than such watchmen; they reduced him to misery; they made his fasting hideously difficult; sometimes he would summon up what strength he had and sing during their watch, for as long as he could keep it up, so as to show these people how unjust their suspicions were. But that was of little use; they were merely amazed by his skill in being able to eat even while singing. Far more to his taste were the watchmen who sat close up against the bars, who were not satisfied with the dim night lighting in the hall, but kept him in the beams of the electric torches which had been issued to them by the manager. The glaring light did not bother him at all, he was unable to sleep in any case, and he could always doze a little whatever the light or the hour, even when the hall was crammed full of noisy people. With such watchmen he was quite prepared to spend the entire night without sleep; he was prepared to exchange jokes with them, tell them stories of his wandering life and then listen to their tales in turn, anything just to keep them awake, to demonstrate to them over and over again that he had nothing to eat in his cage and that he was fasting as not one of them could fast. But he was happiest when the morning came and a lavish breakfast was brought them, at his own expense, on which they flung themselves with the appetite of healthy men after a weary night's vigil. There were even people who tried to represent this breakfast as an attempt to exert undue influence on the watchmen, but that really was going too far, and when they were asked if they would care to take over the night watch without breakfast, just for the sake of the cause, they soon drifted away, though they stuck to their insinuations all the same.

But this was just one example of the many suspicions that are quite inseparable from fasting. After all, no one was capable of spending all his days and nights keeping an unbroken watch over the fasting-artist, so no one could know from his personal experience

whether the fast had really been an unbroken and faultless performance; only the fasting-artist himself could know that; only he, therefore, could be at the same time the completely satisfied spectator of his own fast. But he again was never satisfied, for a different reason; perhaps it was not his fasting at all that had made him so extremely emaciated that many people, to their sorrow, had to forego his performances because they could not bear the sight of him; perhaps what had so emaciated him was simply dissatisfaction with himself. For he alone knew, something that no other initiate knew, how easy fasting was. It was the easiest thing in the world. He made no secret of this, either, but people would not believe him, they put it down at best to modesty, but mostly to publicity-seeking, or they even took him for a fraud, for whom no doubt fasting was easy because he knew how to make it easy, and he even had the audacity to half admit the fact. He had to put up with all that, indeed as the years went by he had grown accustomed to it, but inwardly this dissatisfaction of his kept gnawing at him, and not once, not at the end of a single fasting period – so much one had to grant him – had he voluntarily left his cage. His business manager had appointed forty days as the maximum time for fasting, beyond this he would never allow a fast to run, not even in the great cities, and there was a good reason for it. Experience had shown that in any town interest could be spurred on for about forty days, by gradually stepping up the publicity, but then the audience fell away, a substantial drop in attendance was recorded; naturally there were small variations in this respect as between the different towns and regions, but it remained the rule that forty days was the limit. So then, on the fortieth day, the gate of the flower-bedecked cage was opened, an enthusiastic throng of spectators filled the amphitheatre, a military band played, two doctors entered the cage to carry out the necessary measurements on the fasting-artist, the results were announced to the audience through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies stepped forward, overjoyed that the lot had fallen to them, with the intention of leading the fasting-artist out of his cage and down a few steps, where a carefully chosen invalid meal was laid out on a little table. And when this moment arrived the fasting-artist always resisted. He would go so far as to surrender his bony arms to the outstretched

hands of these ladies, as they bent solicitously down to him, but stand up he would not. Why, after forty days, should he call a halt now? He could have kept going for much longer, for infinitely much longer; why stop just now, when he was at the very best pitch of his fasting, indeed when he had not yet even reached his best? Why did they want to rob him of the glory of fasting on, not just the glory of being the greatest fasting-artist of all time, which he probably already was, but the further glory of surpassing himself to achieve the inconceivable, for he felt that his capacity to fast was boundless. Why must this crowd which claimed to admire him so much have so little patience with him; if he could put up with more fasting, why should not they? And besides, he was tired, he was sitting comfortably in the straw, and now he was supposed to hoist himself up to his full height and proceed to a meal, the mere thought of which provoked such feelings of nausea that it was only with great difficulty, out of regard for the ladies, that he could avoid giving expression to them. And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies, so friendly in appearance, so cruel in reality, and shook the head that weighed all too heavily on that feeble neck. But what followed then was what always did follow. Up came the manager; silently – for the band made speech impossible – he raised his arms over the fasting-artist, as if he were calling on heaven to look on its handiwork down here on the straw, on this pitiable martyr, which indeed the fasting-artist was, though in quite another sense; grasped the fasting-artist round his meagre waist, seeking by his exaggerated delicacy to make plain how frail an object he had to deal with; and passed him over – not without a covert shake or two, so that his upper and lower parts lolled helplessly about – to the care of the ladies who had now grown pale as death. By this stage the fasting-artist had submitted completely; his head lay on his breast, as if it had rolled there and inexplicably come to rest; his body was all hollowed out; his legs were pressed tight together at the knees, by some instinct of self-preservation; yet his feet were scrabbling at the ground, scrabbling as if this ground were not the real one, the real ground was what they were seeking; and the whole, admittedly modest weight of his body rested on one of the ladies, who, looking around for help, with her breath coming in gasps – this was not how she had envisaged her

position of honour – first stretched back her neck as far as she could, so as to prevent her face from coming into contact with the fasting-artist, but then, when she found this impossible, and her more fortunate companion did not come to her aid, contenting herself instead with carrying before her in her trembling hand that little bundle of bones that was the hand of the fasting-artist, then she burst into tears, amid the delighted laughter of the audience, and had to be replaced by an attendant who had been posted in readiness well in advance. Then came the meal, with the manager spooning a little food into the comatose, almost unconscious fasting-artist, to the accompaniment of a cheerful patter designed to distract attention from the artist's condition; and after that a toast to the public was proposed, a toast that had allegedly been whispered to the manager by the fasting-artist; the band set the seal on everything with a great fanfare, the whole company dispersed, and no one had any cause to feel dissatisfied with the show, no one, that is, save the fasting-artist, always just him alone.

So did he live for many years, with regular little rest periods, in apparent glory, honoured by the world, yet for all that mostly in sorrowful mood, which became increasingly sorrowful because no one was able to take it seriously. And indeed, how could they have comforted him? What more had he to wish for? And if once in a while some kindly soul came along who felt sorry for him, and tried to explain to him that his sadness was probably the result of his fasting, then it would sometimes happen, especially if his fast was well advanced, that the fasting-artist responded with an explosion of rage, and to universal alarm began to rattle like a wild beast at the bars of his cage. But for such outbreaks the manager had a means of correction which he was fond of employing. He would apologize to the assembled audience on the fasting-artist's behalf, would admit that the fasting-artist's behaviour could only be excused by the irritable condition brought on by his fasting, a condition by no means easy for well-fed persons to understand; and he would go on in that connection to speak of the fasting-artist's claim, which also required some explanation, that he was capable of fasting for much longer than he did fast; he would praise the high aspiration, the admirable intentions, the great measure of self-denial undoubtedly

implicit in such a claim; but he would then seek to refute this claim by the simple enough means of producing photographs, which were simultaneously offered for sale to the public, for these photographs showed the fasting-artist on the fortieth day of one of his fasts, lying in bed almost at his last gasp from utter exhaustion. This perversion of the truth, which though familiar enough to the fasting-artist always sapped his strength anew, was too much for him. What was the consequence of the premature ending of his fast was here presented as its cause! To fight against this obtuseness, against this world of obtuseness, was impossible. Up to that point he always clung to his cage, listening eagerly and in all good faith to the manager, but each time the photographs appeared he would leave hold of the bars to sink back with a sigh on to his straw, and the now reassured public could approach again to inspect him.

When a few years later those who had witnessed such scenes recalled them to mind, they often found their own behaviour incomprehensible. For in the meantime that reversal already mentioned had taken place; it had happened almost overnight; there may have been deeper reasons for it, but who wanted to discover them; at all events one day the pampered fasting-artist found himself deserted by the pleasure-seeking crowds, who went streaming off to other exhibitions instead. For one last time his manager went chasing round half Europe with him, to see whether something of the old interest might still be found here and there; all in vain; as if by some secret agreement a positive revulsion against exhibition fasting had set in everywhere. In reality, of course, it cannot have come about so suddenly, and people now remembered with hindsight a number of warning signs that had been inadequately noted and inadequately dealt with in the intoxication of success, but by that time it was too late to take any countermeasures. Of course one day the time for fasting, like other things, would surely come round again, but that was no comfort to the living. What, then, was the fasting-artist to do? The man who had been acclaimed by thousands could not appear as a sideshow at village fairs, and as for taking up another profession the fasting-artist was not only too old but above all too fanatically dedicated to his fasting. So he took leave of his manager, his associate throughout an unparalleled career, and found himself

an engagement with a great circus; in order to spare his own feelings he did not even glance at the terms of the contract.

A great circus with its vast quantity of personnel and animals and contrivances, all constantly balancing one another out and supplementing one another, can find a use for anybody and at any time, even a fasting-artist, assuming of course that his demands are sufficiently modest, and furthermore in this particular case it was not just the fasting-artist who was being engaged but also his old and famous name; indeed, in view of the peculiar nature of this artistic skill, which does not decrease with increasing years, one could not even say that here was a superannuated artist, past his best, seeking refuge in a peaceful circus job; on the contrary the fasting-artist maintained, and there was every reason to believe him, that he was fasting just as well as ever; in fact he even claimed that if they let him have his way, and this was promised him without hesitation, he would actually begin to produce justified amazement in the world for the first time, although this claim of his, considering the current mood, which the fasting-artist was apt to forget in his enthusiasm, provoked no more than a smile from the experts.

Fundamentally, however, the fasting-artist had not become blind to the real circumstances and he accepted it as perfectly natural that he should not, for example, be placed with his cage in the middle of the ring as a star attraction, but instead accommodated outside, in what was moreover a most accessible site close to the menagerie. Large, brightly coloured placards surrounded his cage and proclaimed what was to be seen there. When the public came thronging out during the intervals of the performance to look at the animals, they were almost bound to pass the fasting-artist's cage and stop there for a moment; perhaps they might even have stayed longer had not those pressing behind them in the narrow gangway, who could not understand this blockage on their way to the keenly awaited menagerie, made any more protracted and leisurely inspection impossible. That was also the reason why the fasting-artist, though he naturally longed for these visiting hours as the justification of his existence, trembled at their prospect as well. At first he had hardly been able to wait for the intervals; he had watched enraptured as the crowd came surging up, until it was all too soon borne in on him —

even the most obstinate, almost deliberate self-deception could not obscure the fact — that the entire crowd consisted, at least as far as their intentions went, every single time, without exception, of people on their way to the animals. And that first sight of them from the distance always remained the best. For as soon as they came up to him he was deafened by the shouting and cursing of the two contending factions which kept forming: those who wanted — and the fasting-artist soon found this group the more distasteful — to be allowed a quiet stare at him, not from any real interest but from pigheadedness, just to satisfy a whim, and on the other hand the group who wanted to push straight on to the menagerie. Once the main flock had gone by, along came the stragglers, but in fact these, with nothing to prevent them from stopping for as long as they liked, hurried past with long strides, with hardly a sideways glance, so as to be sure of getting to the animals in time. And it was an all-too-rare stroke of luck if some father of a family turned up with his children, pointed a finger at the fasting-artist, explained in detail what it was all about, told stories of earlier years when he had witnessed similar, but incomparably more splendid performances, and when the children then, owing to the inadequate preparation that school and life had given them, still indeed remained uncomprehending — what was fasting to them? — and yet, by the brightness of their inquisitive eyes, revealed a glimpse of new, future, more merciful times. Perhaps, the fasting-artist sometimes said to himself, everything might be a little better after all if he were not located so very close to the animals' cages. That made the choice too easy for people, to say nothing of the fact that the stench emanating from the menagerie, the restlessness of the animals at night, the carrying past of raw lumps of flesh for the beasts of prey, the roars at feeding time, all distressed him and weighed on him constantly. But to complain to the management was more than he dared; after all, he had the animals to thank for the troops of visitors, among whom there might always just be one who was destined for him; and who could tell where they might hide him away if he tried to remind them of his existence, and hence of the fact that he was, strictly speaking, no more than an obstruction on the route to the animals.

A small obstruction, admittedly, an obstruction growing smaller

all the time. It was becoming a habit to think it strange, nowadays, for anyone to claim attention for a fasting-artist; and with that habit his fate was sealed. He might fast as well as only he knew how, and so he did, but there was no longer anything that could save him; people passed him by. Just try to explain to someone what the art of fasting is. No one who does not feel it can be made to grasp what it means. The beautiful placards became dirty and illegible, they were ripped down, no one thought of replacing them; the little board showing the tally of days fasted, which at first had been scrupulously changed each day, had now long stayed unaltered, for after the first few weeks the staff had grown weary of even this little task; and so the fasting-artist did indeed go fasting on, as he had once dreamed of doing, but no one counted the days, no one, not even the fasting-artist himself, knew how great his achievement was, and his heart grew heavy. And if once in a while some casual passer-by should stop, ridicule the outdated number on the board and talk about fraudulence, that was in its way the stupidest lie that ever indifference and inborn malice could invent, for it was not the fasting-artist who was cheating, he was working honestly, but the world was cheating him of his reward.

But again many days went by, and there came an end to that too. One day an overseer happened to notice the cage, and he asked the attendants why this perfectly good cage, with rotten straw in it, should be left unused; no one could say until somebody, prompted by the tally-board, recalled the fasting-artist. They poked around in the straw and they found the fasting-artist underneath. 'Are you still fasting?' the overseer asked, 'when on earth are you going to stop?' 'Forgive me, everybody,' whispered the fasting-artist; only the overseer, with his ear to the bars, could understand him. 'Of course,' said the overseer, tapping his forehead to indicate to the others the state that the artist was in, 'we forgive you.' 'I always wanted you to admire my fasting,' said the fasting-artist. 'And we do admire it,' said the overseer obligingly. 'But you shouldn't admire it,' the fasting-artist said. 'All right, we don't admire it then,' said the overseer, 'but why shouldn't we admire it?' 'Because I have to fast, I can't help it,' said the fasting-artist. 'Whatever next,' said the

overseer, 'and why can't you help it?' 'Because,' said the fasting-artist, and he lifted his head a little and spoke, with his lips pursed as if for a kiss, straight into the overseer's ear, so that nothing might be missed, 'because I could never find the nourishment I liked. Had I found it, believe me, I would never have caused any stir, and would have eaten my fill just like you and everyone else.' Those were his last words, but in his failing eyes there still remained the firm, if no longer proud conviction that he was fasting on.

'Now then, clear things up!' said the overseer, and they buried the fasting-artist, straw and all. Into the cage they then put a young panther. It was a relief that even the dullest sense could feel to see this wild creature leaping about in the cage that had been barren for so long. He lacked for nothing. The food that he liked was brought him by his keepers, without much reflection; he seemed not even to miss his freedom; that noble body, furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom itself around with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to be hidden; and the joy of life glowed so fiercely from the furnace of his throat that the onlookers could scarcely stand up against it. But they mastered their weakness, surrounded the cage, and simply refused to be dragged away.