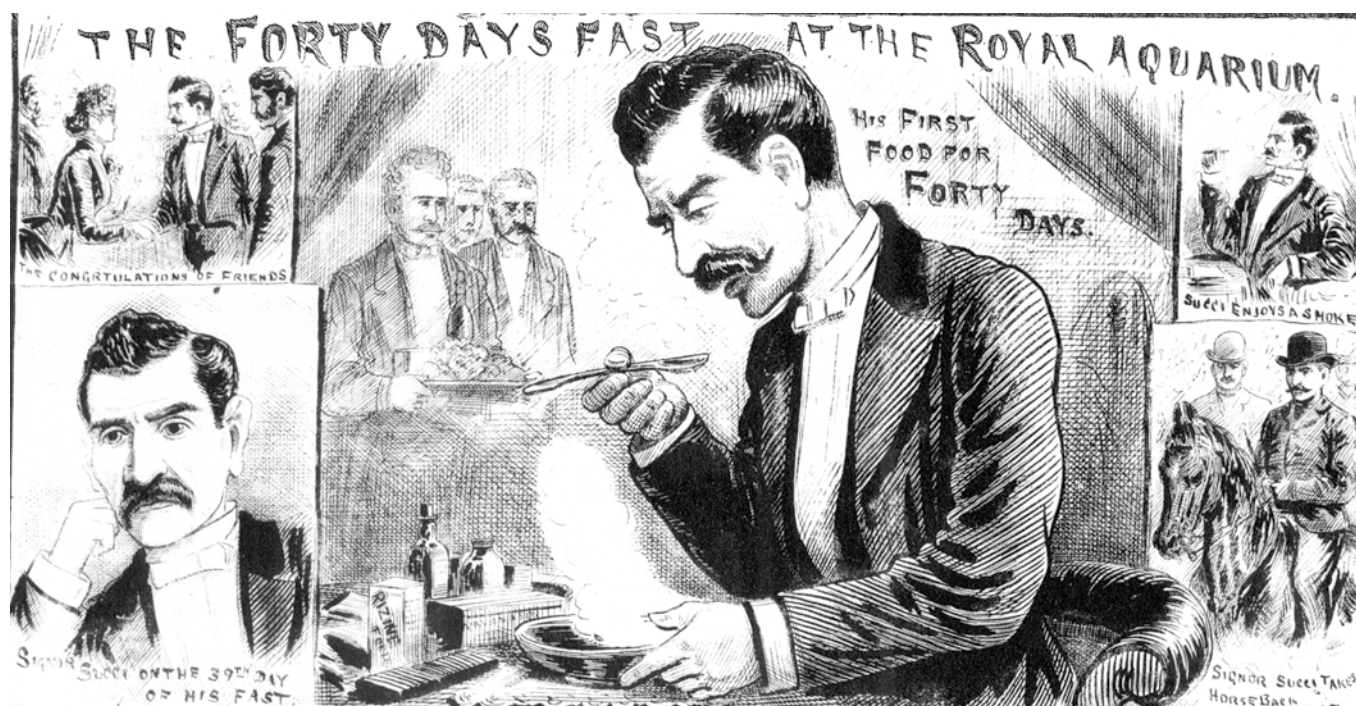


HUNGER GAMES

LIVES OF THE FASTING ARTISTS

Fasting doesn't sound like much of a spectator sport, but – long before modern-day 'endurance artists' such as David Blaine made the headlines – Victorian and Edwardian audiences flocked to see champion fasters do their thing, as **JAN BONDESON** explains.



FACING PAGE: Signor Giovanni Succi the Fasting Man appears at London's Royal Aquarium, from the *Illustrated Police News*, 26 April 1890. **ABOVE:** The end of Succi's 40-day-fast, and his first meal, as recorded in the *Illustrated Police News*, 3 May 1890.

That great pioneer in the annals of fasting, Signor Giovanni Succi, was born in the coastal town of Cesenatico, Italy, in 1853. His early career was uneventful, and he became a bank clerk in Rome, but in the 1880s he travelled as a commercial agent in Madagascar and East Africa, and claimed to have discovered an elixir that enabled him to fast for extended periods of time without any ill effect. To prove that his elixir worked, he made himself available to the medical profession in Italy and France. Experiments began in Paris, where Succi fasted for 14 days and nights. In August 1886, he completed a 30-day fast in Milan, and in December the same year he won a bet for 15 000 francs by repeating the same feat in Paris. In 1888, he was awarded a diploma by the Medico-Physical Academy of Florence after

Succi made a comfortable living showing off his fasting prowess

successfully completing another 30-day fast.

'Fasting Artists' were considered quite a novelty in the 1880s and 1890s, and Succi could make a comfortable living travelling round Europe to show off his fasting prowess. A short, black-haired man with typical Italian looks, he was agile and muscular, and an excellent fencer. In March 1890, he came to the Royal Aquarium in

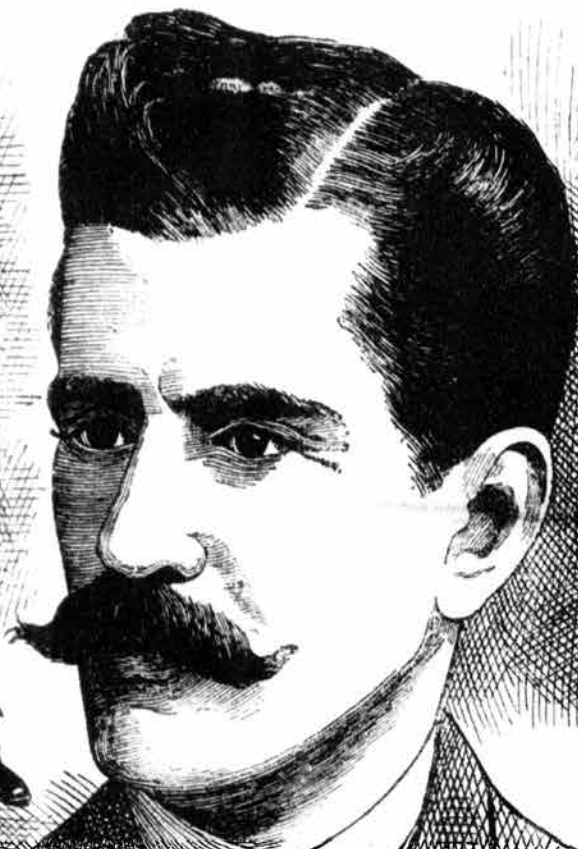
Westminster, where he wanted to complete a 40-day fast. There was immediate interest from Londoners, who took a keen interest in fasting artists, as well as from the medical profession, who saw a golden opportunity to study the physiology of fasting first-hand. After beginning to fast, Succi took neither solid nor liquid nourishment; he drank only water, and regularly sipped small quantities of his elixir. He smoked one or two pipes each day, and occasionally a cigar or cigarette. On the 40th day of fasting, he remained in good health: his pulse was regular and fairly firm, and his heartbeat, though feeble, was distinct. He had lost more than 34lb (15kg) in weight – more than 26.5 per cent of his original body mass.

His 40-day fast made Giovanni Succi the most famous fasting artist in the world. He was paid £3,000 for his ordeal, and had no shortage of other offers. Later in 1890, he

SWORD EXERCISE.



SUCCI IN AFRICA.



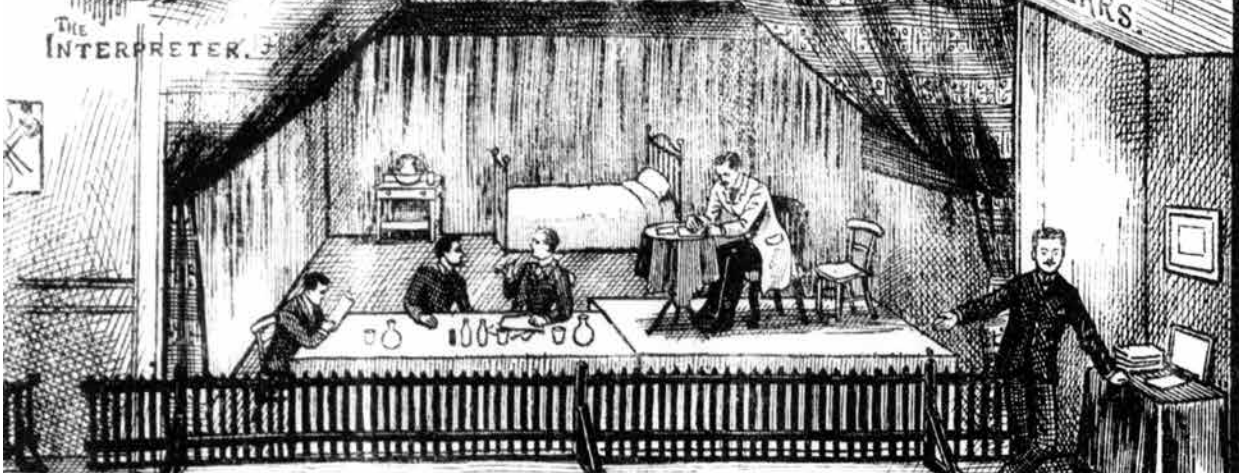
Succi THE FASTING MAN.



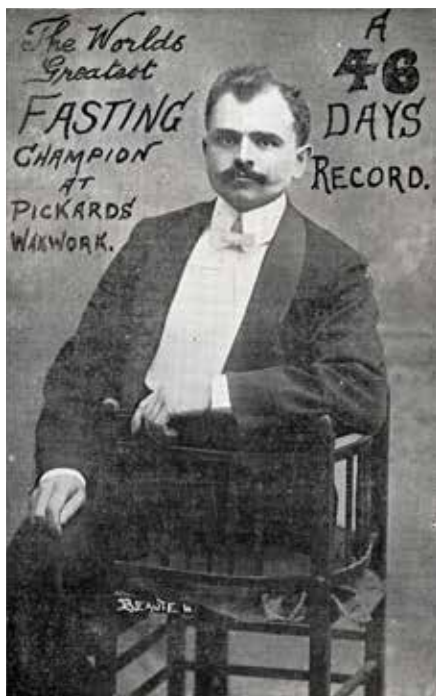
AS HE NOW APPEARS.



THE INTERPRETER.



Succi AT THE ROYAL AQUARIUM.



ABOVE LEFT AND BELOW: A postcard celebrating Beauté's 46-day fast at Pickard's Waxworks in Glasgow, with an interesting message on the back. ABOVE CENTRE: A signed postcard showing Giuseppe Sacco-Homann ABOVE RIGHT: A signed postcard showing Ricardo Sacco; each Sacco denounced the other as an impostor.

completed a 45-day fast in New York. In 1892, he was back at the Royal Aquarium for an intended 52-day fast, but he felt very ill on the 44th day and had to take nourishment. When he came to Vienna, disaster struck: during a 50-day fast, it was discovered that he had nourishment smuggled in to him. This exposure did not end his career, however: in Verona, he was bricked up inside a small prison without windows, and in Florence, he was imprisoned in a cell without food. In December 1896, when Succi was performing at a music-hall in Paris, he went stark raving mad and broke everything in his room. When two police constables appeared on the scene, the frenzied Italian threw empty champagne bottles at them, until he was eventually secured and tightly bound. Succi fell on evil times in the 1900s. In Vienna, he was paid only £20 for a 30-day fast. According to a newspaper article from 1908, he was working as a male nurse at the asylum in Nanterre outside Paris, commenting that "Fasting does not feed the faster!" It would appear that he died destitute in Florence in 1918.

EDWARDIAN FASTERS

The Victorian craze for fasting artists started by Giovanni Succi continued into Edwardian times, in spite of the similarity of the fasters and the drabness and boredom of their 'performances'. Going to the local pier or amusement parlour to check out the progress of the Fasting Man on show was still considered excellent entertainment among Edwardian working people. Various contenders emerged to compete for the title of Britain's leading fasting artist.

The earliest of them was Victor Beauté, a native of Switzerland, who made his debut in Paris in 1903. In February that year

In December 1886, when performing in Paris, Succi went stark raving mad

he fasted for four weeks at the Brighton Aquarium, locked into a little hut to prevent any attempt at cheating. He took his first meal before a large and admiring audience: two cups of strong cocoa, some broth, an egg, some bread and butter, and some raw beef finely minced. In November 1906, he completed a 38-day fast at Glasgow,

subsisting on mineral water and cigarettes alone; towards the end, doctors wanted to end the fast prematurely, since Beauté was too weak to even smoke, but the hardy Swiss held out until the end. There was much interest among the Glaswegians in this extraordinary fasting artist, and Beauté became quite famous. There were at least three picture postcards celebrating his achievements. In April 1907, he set a new world record by fasting for 48 days at Stewart's Waxworks, 164 High Street, Edinburgh. In June the same year, he completed a 32-day fast in Dundee, returning in September for a 35-day fast at Humber's Waxwork and Novelty Saloon. When the fast was completed, he had lost 31lb (14kg) in weight; the people of Dundee rewarded him with a standing ovation and a silver cup. In February 1910, Beauté completed a



38-day fast at the Exhibition Hall in Bristol. In April the following year, he fasted for a month at Bostock's Jungle in Sheffield, being allowed two pints of mineral water and a dozen cigarettes per day. In June 1912, he wanted to fast for 40 days at the Panopticon Exhibition in Belfast, but the fast was ended prematurely after doctors declared that his life was in danger. After this dismal failure, Victor Beauté left Britain, for good.

There was room for more than one fasting artist on the Edwardian stage, and in January 1906, an Austrian who called himself Giuseppe Sacco-Homann made his debut at Hengler's Italian Circus in London, completing a 45-day fast. Not less than 2,000 medical men, and a great number of ministers of religion, had been invited to witness the contest. A *Daily Mail* journalist was also present when the fast was completed: "Forty-five days without food is the record of Herr Sacco, who entered a sealed chamber at Hengler's Circus on January 18 and emerged on Saturday afternoon. It was a robust man of 14 stone who entered the little chamber at the circus. The man who came out and greeted the crowds who had gathered to witness the release was a 10-stone piece of hunger. The dress which fitted Sacco perfectly when he commenced to fast hung as loosely on him as a bag..." A few years later, Sacco-Homann set a new world record, fasting for 52 days at the King's Hall in Birmingham. He remained active in 1913, completing a 50-day fast at Leicester. In May 1914, he wanted to fast for 60 days in Sunderland, but on the 39th day he desperately smashed his way

out of the glass cage in which he had been confined. At the outbreak of World War I, he probably returned to his native land.

It is curious that in 1908, there were two fasting Saccos at large in Britain: a writer in the *Sheffield Daily Independent* found it droll that, as Giuseppe Sacco-Homann was completing a 34-day fast in Birmingham, an individual who called himself Ricardo Sacco was fasting away in Sheffield. Both Saccos made bombastic statements to the newspapers, each denouncing the other as an impostor, and claiming sole right to the honoured name of Sacco. Both issued picture postcards to advertise themselves. Ricardo Sacco was also a proficient faster. Already in 1907, he had completed a 38-day fast in Scarborough, and the following year he fasted for 42 days in Newcastle, losing three and a half stone (22kg) in weight and consuming 1,500 cigarettes. In 1913, he was sealed up in a glass chamber for a 35-day fast at the New Exhibition Hall in Dover. He went abroad in 1913 and was gone until 1928, when he attempted a 58-day fast at the Kursaal in Southend; after a valiant effort, the fast was interrupted on medical advice after 47 days. Undaunted, the now 48-year-old Sacco wanted to beat the world fasting record by completing a 65-day fast at Blackpool in September 1929. After a Herculean effort, he succeeded, going from 11 stone 2lb (70kg) in weight to 8 stone 2lb (52kg). He had declared that this would be his final fast, and here he was telling the truth: the celebrated fasting artist never recovered, and died from exhaustion the following month. The

coroner's inquest returned a verdict of death by misadventure. Posthumously, 'Sacco' was revealed to have been the Dutch baker Richard Hans Jones.

Alf Wilson, a young Stockport railway worker, declared that he was Sacco's rightful heir. In 1930, he fasted for 65 days at Butlin's Amusement Park in Skegness, subsisting on soda-water and cigarettes alone. The following year, his world record was beaten by the New Zealander Raymond Tac, who fasted for 68 days inside a sealed cabinet on Clacton Pier. Undaunted, Alf made plans for a 70-day fast at the Hessle Road Amusement Centre in Hull, locked inside a glass cage fitted with electric light and an emergency bell. A short, insignificant-looking young man, aged 29 and weighing just 9 stone (57kg), Alf was nothing much to look at, and many people doubted he had what it took to reclaim his world record. But Alf managed to prove them all wrong, completing his 70-day fast in January 1932. By this time, there was very little interest in fasting artists, and it is not known whether his record still stands today. At least, no newspaper ever mentioned the competitor Raymond Tac reclaiming it.

THE FASTING WOMEN

There were also at least five female fasting artists. Madame Christensen, said to be a native of Sweden, was active as early as 1898, when she was advertised as fasting for 30 days at the Royal Aquarium in London. Her portrait in the *Illustrated Police News* shows a sturdy dame looking far from



ABOVE LEFT: A postcard signed by Alf Wilson, the Stockport fasting wonder. ABOVE CENTRE: Miss Marie Buschart, the 'Continental Lady Fasting Champion'. ABOVE RIGHT: Agnes McDonald at Stewart's Waxworks in Edinburgh (from the collection of Mrs M Mekie and reproduced by permission).

half-starved. Mme Christensen would be under observation throughout her fast, and there was light-hearted newspaper speculation that some German-speaking joker would try to tempt her by speaking about the delicious *Frankfurterwurst* and *Rothkraut* she was missing out on. There were regular bulletins to the press once the fast had begun, and the first 15 days were completed in good order. But after 18 days of fasting, Mme Christensen's medical attendants recommended that she should throw in the towel and start taking nourishment again. This was an anticlimactic ending to this much-publicised fast, but Mme Christensen continued performing. She was still at the Royal Aquarium in 1902, when she was said to have completed a 35-day fast. Her later activities have remained unrecorded.

In July 1907, a Fasting Woman named Marie Buschart made a brief appearance in Great Yarmouth. An Austrian by birth and 25 years old, she planned to fast for 28 days, locked into a wooden cage. A postcard shows her looking sturdy and strong; in an interview with the *Yarmouth Independent*, she was quietly confident, pointing out that in her native Austria she had once completed a fast of 33 days.

Locked into the wooden cage, which was tastefully decorated to suit her æsthetic temperament, Buschart occupied herself with translating German into English. She was given free access to mineral water and was visited daily by a doctor. Vast crowds of people came to see her, from 10am until 10.30pm each day, admission 2d. There were regular newspaper bulletins as the fast progressed, the final one dated 17 August, when she successfully completed her 28-day fast; she told the audience that she felt weak but well, and that she very much longed for some nutritious food.

Miss Agnes McDonald, the British Fasting Woman, performed in Dublin in July 1907, and at Stewart's Waxworks in Edinburgh in September the same year. Her career ended in an unexpected manner that October: "That the heart can be full while the stomach is empty has been proved by the announcement of the engagement of Miss Agnes Macdonald, the fasting woman, who is now going through a performance in Edinburgh." Agnes was mid-way through a 33-day fast when she met Mr Frederick Ottley, assistant to the showman, and they began a conversation through the grille of the glass cage to which she was confined. After he had proposed to her and been accepted, he handed her a pearl engagement ring through the grille. A grand engagement party was to be held at the showman's



LEFT: A postcard showing the women's champion faster Irene Clifford

apartments once Agnes had completed her fast. There is nothing to suggest that these two ever married, however, and the whole thing may well have been a publicity stunt.

Miss Irene Clifford, aged just 23, made the headlines in 1932 after completing a 40-day fast for a wager of £100 and setting a new women's world record. Special police had to be called in to pacify a crowd of 500 cheering people outside the Chatham music hall where she was performing. In 1934, after she had married a man named Hobday, with whom she was living in Gravesend, she completed a 50-day fast at the Plymouth Amusement Arcade, subsisting on soda water and cigarettes. When she was released from the glass cabinet where she had been confined, by Harry Roberts, the captain of Plymouth Argyle FC, she looked very pale, thin and weak, and had kept to her bed for the last 14 days of the fast; still, she could delight in once more becoming the world record holder among the female fasting sorority, having beaten the record of a 47-day fast recently set by Miss Deane, of Balham.

LEAN TIMES

Fasting artists quickly went out of fashion after the Great War, and it is not for nothing that one of Franz Kafka's short stories deals with a 'hunger artist' whose career is now in decline and who realises the utter pointlessness of his achievements. The return

of Ricardo Sacco attracted only limited newspaper publicity, although he literally starved himself to death in order to beat the world record. His death, at a comparatively young age, was tragic indeed, but the foolhardy faster had only himself to blame for his premature demise. Alf Wilson, who would have been a celebrity in Edwardian times, was considered merely an eccentric in the early 1930s, in spite of his two fasting world records. Today, the achievements of the humble Stockport railwayman who challenged the foreign fasters are quite forgotten; Wikipedia maintains a chilly silence about Alf's 70-day fast, and not even the omniscient Google has much to tell about his long-forgotten show business career, which remains buried in the files of old local newspapers.

The fasting artists of late Victorian and Edwardian times have had the occasional successor, like 'endurance artist' David Blaine, who in 2003 fasted for 44 days inside a Plexiglas cage suspended at the South Bank in London (see FT178:05). In the 1950s and 1960s, therapeutic fasting was popular in the treatment of morbid obesity and obesity-induced diabetes, with patients fasting for upwards of 200 days to normalise their weight or reduce their insulin dependence. In 1973, a grossly obese young man underwent a supervised therapeutic fast of 382 days in Dundee, reducing his weight from 456 to 180lb (206 to 82kg), and maintaining his normal weight for five years afterwards; but although his fast was accepted by the Guinness Book of Records, the patient was allowed to go home, where he may well have had access to food supplements of some description. Anyway, these medical experiments to make morbidly obese individuals lose weight have little relevance to the exertions of the fasting artists of old, none of whom was overweight to start with.



Extracted from Jan Bondeson's book *The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities* (Amberley Publishing, 2018).

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