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A Short Stay in Lilliput

THE strange experience of "Paddy," an Irishman who drank trichlorethylene instead of beer, and three days later woke up in hospital to find himself "in a land like Lilliput," was told recently in a cable message which passed on the story from the *British Medical Journal*. Under the influence of the drug, Paddy imagined that the hospital ward was its usual length, "but only about two feet high." Nurses and doctors seemed to be no more than 12 inches tall, and the general effect was that everything was seen as if through the wrong end of a telescope. Paddy's reaction, when a tiny nurse appeared at his bedside, was to tell her that he was afraid. And well he might have been.

Oddly enough, a situation like this was used by the author of a novel, *The Devil That Failed*, reviewed a fortnight ago in our book pages. The feelings of a man who woke in hospital to find that overnight he had become a giant were never far from terror. We are so accustomed to the normal look of the world that it is hard to imagine the effect of a sudden and drastic distortion. Change does not matter so much if we share it with others, for human adaptability can transform the abnormal into the normal. If, however, one man is changed, he enters an appalling loneliness. His instincts and feelings are still those of an ordinary man, but he cannot express them with the ease and spontaneity of one who moves freely in his own environment. His transformation is like a physical travesty of non-conformity, with the important difference that he wants to conform, but cannot. And he fears the outcome. H. G. Wells, who was very good with fantasies of this sort, showed in *The Food of the Gods* what can happen to outsized men.

Paddy's hospital nightmare also illustrates the ease with which the mind can be made to construct a new reality. Drugs can relieve pain, stimulate sluggish nerves, promote dreams and visions, de-

stroy the will, and in many different ways loosen the filaments which tie the individual to the world as most men know it. This has led people to ask questions about human nature. An operation on the frontal lobes of the brain can bring a change in personality: the man who has been tormented by anxiety will cease to worry, though sometimes—for there are disadvantages—he may also become tactless and selfish. The chemistry of the brain can be altered, and with it the character of the patient. Where, then, is the true man, if his responses can be artificially stimulated and varied? What becomes of the concept of man as a free agent, working out his own destiny, and shaping his character by thought and action? Some writers, turning the future into nightmare, have played with the idea that rulers of enslaved peoples could organise docility by injection.

It is better, perhaps, to leave such fancies to the atomic imagination. The control of personality is a subject about which much is still to be learnt. We do not know if the changes brought about by surgical or medical treatment are certain to be permanent, or if they are more than alterations of balance which leave a man's fundamental self untouched. Every individual is a private battleground for opposed attributes, and the simplest personality can be described only in broad and misleading terms. Moreover, so-called changes have always occurred, without benefit of surgery: the phenomena of conversion, for instance, have shown that a shift in personality is a relatively common fact in human experience. Yet the foundations of character are deeply set; they are to be found, according to some scientists, even in the skeleton. Men are tied firmly to themselves and to the world. A faint distortion of reality can be soothing; but if, like Paddy, a man has taken a look through the wrong end of the telescope, he will believe thereafter that when the known world slides away from him he is beginning to die.

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