

# THE INNER SYLPH

INSIDE every fat woman there is a thin one screaming for release—or so they say—and the release of this inner sylph has become an important ritual (if not a downright obsessional neurosis) for those who, on the outside, fall short of the ideal or spread beyond it. Pre-occupation with one's weight and waist-line may be a Good Thing, but whatever our reaction to the current emphasis on "vital statistics," the tape-measure and scales have become essential accompaniments of the modern woman's way of life.

Nesta Pain, the BBC writer and producer, has taken a look at this present-day preoccupation in a programme called *Beautifully Less*, which will be heard in the National Women's Session from the YAs and YZs on Wednesday, November 13. She has focused a bright and revealing light upon the foibles of many would-be slimmers and, under-terred, has gone to the experts for some sound advice to the serious.

Her discoveries are related in an atmosphere of optimistic despair, for it would seem that, to coin a phrase, "the thin stay thin and the fat get fatter." The doctors explain this phenomenon by saying that some people vary their rate of burning up the energy in food, speeding up their metabolism to consume double and even triple rations.

These lucky people stay shapely. This has always caused some annoyance to

the others, whose bodies prudently store up surplus energy in the form of fat when they eat more than they need. Some overweight is caused by physical disorders, but most is caused by over-eating. Psychologists explain that some people eat as other people drink, because they are unhappy and food gives them pleasure. Some families, too, have a tendency to overweight.

Whatever way the weight goes on, doctors agree that it can come off, and usually should. The obvious way, since fat comes from eating too much, is to eat considerably less. "Will power, my dear, just will power," say the ones who do not need to exercise it. But most overweight people like food and willingly confess to less than iron wills. Accordingly the search has been for alternative methods of losing the extra poundage. Doctors prefer to rule out drugs—there are only two kinds that really work. The polynitrophenols speed up metabolism and so burn up more calories, but they are dangerous and not often found in use today. Dextroamphetamine is used to reduce appetite, but it has definite drawbacks—a let-down when discontinued, and reaction when used by some people. Glands, unless the conditions are unusual, do not affect weight, so glandular extracts are not of much help to the average slim-

mer. Turkish and foam baths are mainly useful for general toning-up of the system, not for a long-term reduction of weight. Hypnotism has been tried, but constant hypnosis is needed to keep the weight down.

The most popular alternative to dieting has been exercise. Combined with a diet, this can help take weight off certain areas rather than off others, but exercise without diet merely increases appetite. And experts say that a ten-mile walk is needed to cancel out the energy in four bread rolls. With all these methods tried and found wanting, only diet is left. Surprisingly enough, one of the first to diet seriously and to publish the successful diet, was a man, William Banting, a London undertaker. Dietetics being in their infancy, some hundred years ago, Mr Banting made the rounds of doctors who prescribed everything from exercise and Turkish baths to drugs and mineral waters. When he finally found a doctor who prescribed a diet of meat, fish, fruit and wines, the result—loss

of 46 lb. in weight and 12¼ inches in girth—so pleased him that he published the diet in the hope of benefiting other fat people. His motives were not appreciated. He was accused of trying to make a fortune, while doctors said his diet was either "humbug" or "as old as the hills."

It was neither. Today, with diet a matter of universal interest, the variety offering to those who feel in less than perfect shape is wide indeed. For the weaker-willed, one diet offers between-meal snacks; another works to a baby's formula, several times a day; skim milk and oysters has been advocated, or a liquid diet, or a strict diet for every second day. In some countries dieters have formed clubs for a communal effort, while elsewhere they slim to a TV programme. While there is a bewildering variety of fancy diets, the Health Department here has published some that are simpler and safer.

Behind these diets lies considerable research, and some quite surprising results. Starches in a diet, even when the total number of calories (units of heat and energy) is low, keep weight high. Low-calorie diets containing mostly proteins help to lose weight. But low-calorie diets with a high proportion of fats have reduced weight even more quickly. So dieters can eat butter, as long as they do not spread it on bread, or any other cereal product. Amateur dieters should also check up on calorie tables—the scientist-narrator of *Beautifully Less* has some scathing remarks about the woman who re-

fuses oysters in favour of a slice of bread and butter, which has more calories than a dozen oysters.

For her facts, Nesta Pain has gone to Sir Charles Dodds, Professor of Biochemistry at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School in London, and to Alexander Kennedy, Professor of Psychological Medicine at the University of Edinburgh. The part of the scientist-narrator is taken by James McKechnie, and Denys Blakelock plays William Banting.

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BBC photograph

JAMES McKECHNIE, the radio, stage and film actor, who takes the part of the scientist-narrator in Nesta Pain's programme "Beautifully Less"

