

## **Gulliver: The Story of a Tall Man by Thomas Wolfe**

Scribner's Magazine (June 1935)

Someday someone will write a book about a man who was too tall--who lived forever in a dimension that he did not fit, and for whom the proportions of everything--chairs, beds, doors, rooms, shoes, clothes, shirts, and socks, the berths of Pullman cars, and the bunks of transatlantic liners, together with the rations of food, drink, love, and women, which most men on earth have found sufficient to their measure--were too small.

He should write the story of that man's journey through this world with the conviction of incontrovertible authority, and with such passion, power, and knowledge that every word will have the golden ring of truth; and he will be able to do this because that man's life has been his own, because he has lived it, breathed it, moved in it, and made it his with every sinew of his life since he was fifteen years of age, and because there is no one on earth who understands the world, in all its joy and pain and strangeness of an incommunicable loneliness, as well as such a man.

The world this man would live in is the world of six feet six, and that is the strangest and most lonely world there is. For the great distances of this world are the fractional ones, the terrific differences are those we can measure by a hand, a step, a few short inches, and that shut us completely from the world we see, the life we love, the room, the door we want to enter, as if we saw them from the star-flung planetary distances of bridgeless and unmeasured vacancy. Yes, that world we see and want is even more remote from us than Mars, for it is almost ours at every instant, intolerably near and warm and palpable and intolerably far because it is so very near--only a foot away if we could utter, find, and enter it--and we are lashed on by our fury and devoured by our own hunger, captives in the iron and impregnable wall of our own loneliness.

To be a giant, to be one of those legendary creatures two miles high in the old stores--that is another thing. For a giant lives in his own world and needs and wants no other: he takes a mountain at a stride, drinks off a river in one gulp of thirst, wanders over half a continent in a day, and then comes home at night to dine in friendship with his fellow Titans, using a shelf of mountain for a table, a foothill as a stool, and the carcasses of whole roast oxen as the dainty morsels of his feast.

And to be a giant in a world of pygmy men--to be a mile high creature in a world of foot-high men--that is also another thing. For sometimes his huge single eye is blinded by their cunning, he will make the mountains echo with his wounded cries, tear up a forest in his pain and fury and will lash about him with an oak tree, and hurl ten-ton boulders torn from granite hills after the little shops of terror stricken men.

He wakes at morning in a foreign land, his ship wrecked, his comrades drowned, and he forsaken: a regiment of tiny creatures are swarming up across

his body, they shoot their tiny arrows at his face and bind him down with countless weavings of a thread-like cord, and the terrific legend of his life among the pygmies becomes the instrument by which another giant whipped the folly, baseness, and corruption in the lives of men with the scorpion lash of the most savage allegory ever written.

And to be a pygmy in a world of pygmy men, that is also another thing. For where we all are inches tall, our size is only measured by proportion. We live elf-close and midget-near the earth, and desperately explore the tropic jungle of the daisy fields while monstrous birds--huge buzzing flies and booming bees and tottering butterflies--unfurl the enormous velvet sails of their slashed wings as they soar over us. We think we are as tall, as big, as strong as any men that ever lived, if thinking, seeing, makes it so, and in our three-inch world our corn and wheat is good but is no higher than the grass. We wander through the great gloomy forests no taller than scrub pine, there are no Atlantic depths and Himalayan heights, our grandest mountain ranges are just mole-hill high, and if the stars seem far, most far to us, they are no farther than they seem to other men.

Finally, to be one of those poor giants and midgets of the time in which we live--one of these paltry eight- and nine-foot Titans, two foot dwarfs of circuses--that also is a different thing. For now they live the life, and love the lights of carnival, and the world beyond those lights is phantom and obscure. Each day the world throngs in to sit beneath the canvas top and feed its fascinated eye on their deformities, and they display themselves before that world and are not moved by interest, touched by desire, from what they see of it. Instead they live together in the world of freaks, and this world seems to them to have been framed inevitably by nature. They love, hate, play, contrive, betray, and hope, are happy, sorrowful, and ambitious like all other men. The eight-foot giant and the two-foot dwarf are bosom-friends. And three times a day they sit down and eat at table in the interesting and congenial society given charm and romance by The Fat Girl and The Bearded Lady, and piquant zest by the witty repartee of Jo-Jo-What-Is-It, The Living Skeleton, and The Tattooed Man. But that, as well, is not a tall man's world: it is another door he cannot enter.

For he is earthly, of the earth, like every man. Shaped from the same clay, breathing the same air, fearing the same fears, and hoping the same hopes as all men in the world, he walks the thronging streets of life alone--those streets that swarm forever with their tidal floods of five feet eight. He walks those streets forever a stranger, and alone, having no other earth, no other life, no other door than this, and feeding upon it with an eye of fire, a heart of intolerable hunger and desire, yet walled away from the dimensional security of that great room of life by the length of an arm, the height of a head, the bitter small denial of a foot--seeing, feeling, knowing, and desiring the life that blazes there before his eyes, which is as near as his heart, and as far as heaven, which he could put his hand upon at every moment, and which he can never enter, fit, or make his own again, no more than if he were a phantasmal substance of smoke.

It is a strange adventure--the adventure of being very tall--and in its essence it comes to have a singular and instinctive humanity. In an extraordinary way, a tall

man comes to know things about the world as other people do not, cannot know them. And the reason for this lies mainly in the purely fortuitous quality of a tall man's difference from average humanity. In no respect is he less his brother's brother, or his father's son. In fact--astonishing as this fact may seem--the overwhelming probability is that the tall man never thinks of being tall, never realizes, indeed, that he *is* tall until other people remind him of his height.

Thus, when this tall man was alone, he never thought of his great height; it never occurred to him that his dimensions were in any way different from those of most people that he saw around him every day upon the streets. In fact, he was the victim of an extraordinary delusion: for some reason which he could not define, he had a secret and unspoken conviction--an image of himself that was certainly not the product of his conscious reasoning, but rather the unconscious painting of his desire--that he was really a person of average height and size--a man of five feet eight or nine, no more. A moment's reflection would, of course, tell him that this picture of himself was wrong, but his natural and instinctive tendency was to think--or rather *feel*--himself in this perspective. It was, therefore, only natural, that when his attention was rudely and forcibly brought to a realization of his unusual height--as it was a hundred times a day now by people on the street--he should receive the news with a sense of shocked surprise, bewilderment, and finally with quick flaring anger and resentment.

He would be going along the street at five o'clock when the city was pouring homeward from its work, and suddenly he would become conscious that people were watching him: would see them stare at him and nudge each other, would see their surprised looks traveling curiously up his frame, would hear them whisper to each other in astonished voices, and see them pass him laughing, and hear their oaths and words of astonished disbelief, hilarious surprise. When this happened, he could have strangled them. As he heard their scoffs and jokes and exclamations--those dreary husks of a stale and lifeless humor which are the same the world over, which never change, and which have worn their weary rut into a tall man's heart and brain until he knows them as no one else can ever know them--he felt almost that he could *choke* them into wisdom, seize them, knock their heads together, snarl at them: "God-damn you, but I'll show you that I am the same as you if I have to shake you into owning it!"

Thus he was the butt, a hundred times a day, of those clumsy, tiresome but well-intentioned jocularities to which, in the course of time, a tall man becomes so patiently accustomed, so wearily resigned. And his own response to them was probably the same as that of every other tall man that has ever lived and had to weather the full measure of man's abysmal foolishness. At first, he felt only the fierce and quick resentment of youth, the truculent sensitivity of youth's wounded pride, its fear of ridicule, its swift readiness to take offense, to feel that it was being flouted, mocked, insulted, its desire to right and to avenge its wounded honor.

And then he felt a kind of terrible shame and self-abasement: a feeling of personal inferiority that made him envy the lot of the average man, that made him bitterly regret the accident of birth and nature that had imprisoned a spirit fierce

and proud and swift as flight and burning as a flame in such a grotesque tenement. And this feeling of shame and self-abasement and hatred of his flesh is the worst thing that a tall man knows, the greatest iniquity that his spirit suffers. For it is during this period that he comes to hate the body that has been given him by birth and nature, and by his act of hatred, he degrades himself and dishonors man. For this loathing for his body is like the ignoble hatred that a man may have for a loyal and ugly friend whose destiny is coherent with his own, and who must endure. And endure he does--this loyal ugly friend that is man's grotesque tenement--and goes with him everywhere in all his mad and furious marchings, and serves man faithfully like no other friend on earth, and suffers the insults and injuries that man heaps upon him, the frenzy, the passion, and brute exhaustion, the scars, the sickness, and the pain, the surfeits of his master's intolerable hunger, and at the end, all battered, scarred, debased, befouled, and coarsened by his master's excess, is still with him, inseparable as his shadow, loyal to the end--a friend homely, true, devoted, good as no one else can ever be, who sticks with us through every trouble, stays by us through every brawl, bears the brunt of all our drinking, eating, and our brutal battery, reels in and out of every door with us, and falls with us down every flight of stairs, and whom we one day find again before us--as a madman may discover light and sanity again and see the comrade, the protector, and the victim of his madness steady there before him, grinning at him wryly through his puffed and battered lips, and saying with a rueful but an all-forgiving humor:

"Well--here we are again."

It is a strange adventure, a hard but precious education, that a tall man knows. For finally he comes to learn, through sweat and toil and a little aging, a stern but not desolate humanity. He gets a kind of lonely wisdom that no one else on earth can get. And the strange and passionate enigma of his destiny, he is drawn close to man by the very circumstances that shut him out. He enters life through the very door that he once thought was shut against him, is of the earth, more earthy, by the fact of his exclusion. A tall man could not escape from life, or flee the world, even if he desired it: he is at once life's exile and life's prisoner; wherever he goes, life reaches out and pulls him to it, will not let him go. And at the end, he learns the truth of Ernest Renan's bitter observation--that he only thing that can give one a conception of the infinite is the extent of human stupidity. And in the jibes, the jests, the drolleries, that are shouted at him a dozen times a day in the streets because of his great height, in the questions that are asked concerning it, and in the innumerable conversations that it provokes, he acquires a huge and damning accumulation of evidence concerning man's fatal unity, the barren paucity of his invention, the desolate consonance of his rut.

It never changed, it was always the same: it went on day by day and month by month in the narrow crowded streets all around him, and it would go on year after year in a hundred cities, a dozen countries, among the thousand scattered places in all quarters of the world, and it would always be the same--a barren formula endlessly renewed with the unwearied pertinacity of an idiot monotony--it would always be the same.

He never found the slightest deviation in that barren formula. No one ever

made an interesting or amusing observation about his height--and ten thousand people talked to him about it. No one ever said a funny or a witty thing about his height--and ten thousand people had their fling about it. No one ever showed the slightest understand of the nature of a tall man's life, or asked a single shrewd and penetrating question about it--and yet the curiosity that his tallness caused was almost incredible, the conversations that he had, the questions that he had to answer, were innumerable.

The barren formula was so endlessly repeated that at length it had worn its dull grooves into his brain, and he answered without thinking, replied without listening, giving mechanically the answers that they wished to hear, the tried and trusted formula that had served its purpose so many thousand times before, knowing in advance what everyone would say.

Was it wit? Then let the diligent historian of the nation's with give ear and pay attention to these drolleries which were shouted after one tall man's receding figure as he trod the pavements of ten thousand streets:

"Hey-y!"

"Hey-y! Youse guy!"

"Hey-y-y...Holy Jeez! Cheezus! Look ut duh guy!"

"Hey-y, Mis-teh! Is it rainin' up deh?... Cheezus! Ho-lee Chee!... Will yuh look at duh guy?"

"Hey-y--Mis-teh! How's duh weatheh up deh? Hol-lee Chee!

Take a look ut duh size of'm, will yah?"

Such, then, were the evidences of the national humor upon this subject--by a high authority it can be solemnly be affirmed that these evidences were all there were.

Or was it conversing of a more polite and genteel sort--well-bred consolation, soothing affirmations, suave flatteries meant to hearten and give cheer? The formula in this kind of conversation ran as follows:

"You're ver-ree tall, aren't you?"

"Yes--hah! Hah!--yes--hah! Hah!--I suppose I am--hah! Hah!--I suppose you noticed it!"

"Yes, I did--when you got up, it did seem ra-ther overwhelming the first time-- [with hasty correction]--only, of course, one doesn't notice it at *all* later....I *mean* one forgets all about it...I *ree-lee* think you'd be *awf-lee* glad you are that way.. I *mean*, that's the way most people would like to be... it does give you such an advantage, doesn't it? I *mean*, after *all*, everyone would be that way if they could--no one wants to be *short*, do they?...Everyone would much rather be *tall*...I *mean*, it makes everyone look *up* to you, doesn't it...Do you see what I *mean*?"

"Yes... ah-hah-hah!... I certainly do!... ah-hah-ha!... Yes, I certainly do see what you mean...ah-hah-hah! You're right about it...ah-hah-hah!... I certainly do!"

Or was it friendly banter now, a kindly curiosity of a rougher sort, among a simple yet good-natured kind of men? Suppose a scene, then: such a scene as one has found ten thousand times within the labyrinth of night upon the seaboard of the continent. It is an airless groove in an old wall behind blind windows set in rotting birch: within, a slab of bar, its wet shine puddled here and there with rings of glasses; a battered rail of brass, not polished recently; and a radiance of hard

dead light; Leo, the bar-man, with his jowled squatty face of night, professionally attentive; and at the end, the dead stamped visages of night, the rasping snarl of drunken voices, the elbows of the bar-flies puddled in beer slop.

The buzzer rings, good Leo peers with hard mistrust through opened slot, the door is opened, and the tall man enters, to whom at once Pat Grogan, wit by nature, Celt by birth, and now the antic of good Leo's bar-- approaches, with the small red eyes of rheum and murder comically a-stare, ape-shoulders stooped, ape-knees bowed and tucked under, the jowled ape-visage comically turned upward in a stare of ape-like stupefaction--all most comical to see--while good Leo looks and chuckles heavily and all the bar-flies grin. So, now, as follows:

*Grogan* (still crowding): "*Je-sus...Christ!... Ho-lee Jeez!...What's dat guy standin' on anyway?...(Leo and all the grinning bar-flies chortle with appreciative delight, and thus encouraged, Jolly Grogan carries on)... Jee-zus!* (with a slow deliberate lifting of his red-jowled face, he calculates the visitor from foot to head--a delicate

stroke, not lost by any means on grinning Leo and his appreciative clientele)... Say-y!... When I foist saw dat guy, I t'ought he was standin' on a box or somep'n... (turning to Leo with an air of fine bewilderment)... Take a lookut 'im, will yuh? *Ho-lee Chee!*... Who *is* dis guy anyway?... (turning to all the grinning others)... When I foist sees duh guy, I says t' myself...What *is* dis anyway? Is duh *coicus* in town or somep'n? (turns again, gesturing to tall visitor with an air of frank bewilderment)...Take a look at 'm will yuh?... (Satisfied with his success, he rejoins his grinning and appreciative comrades, and for some time further regales them by taking astounded glances at the tall visitor, shaking his head in a bewildered way, and saying in an unbelieving tone)...But *Je-sus!...Take a look at 'm will yuh?"* etc.

And now, Leo, shaking his head slowly to himself with appreciative admiration of his client's wit, approaches the tall visitor, and still chuckling heartily at the recollection, leans over the bar and whispers confidingly:

"Dat's Misteh Grogan... (a trifle apologetically) He's been drinkin' a little, so don't pay attention to anyt'ing he says... He didn't mean nuttin' by it--(with ponderous assurance) Nah-h!... He's one of duh nices guys you eveh saw when he's not drinkin'... he's only kiddin', anyway... he don't mean nuttin' by it... but *Jesus!* (suddenly laughs heartily at the recollection, a heavy, swarthy, and deliberate hah-hah-hah that sets all his night-time jowls a-quiver)...when he pulled dat one aboutcha standin' on a box or somep'n, I had t' laff. Duh way he said it!... Standin' on a box or somep'n--dat's a good one!... Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah!"... (and goes heavily away, heaving with slow nocturnal laughter, shaking his head slowly to himself).

Now, as the visitor stands drinking by himself, the bar-flies cluster at the other end in excited controversy, from which disputatious murmurs may be heard from time to time--such vehement scraps of affirmation or denial as the following:

"Nah-h!...Guh *wan!*...Whatcha givin' me?... Here's more'n dat... I'll betcha on it!... Nah-h! Guh *wan!*... He's oveh *seven* if he's an inch!... Guh *wan!*...I'll betcha

on it! *All right! All right!... Guh-wan and ast him den!... But he's more'n dat, I'll betcha on it!....*

One of the debaters now detaches himself from his disputatious group and, beer glass in hand, approaches the lone visitor...A face not bad, not vicious, not unfriendly: face of a city-man in the late forties--the face of the cartoonist-drawing--lean, furrowed, large-nosed, deeply seamed, a little sunken around the mouth, almost metallicly stamped and wisely knowing, cynically assured--the nerve-ends stunned, the language strident, utterly, unmistakably, the city's child.

*The City's Child* (grinning amiably, a trifle apologetically, lowering his voice, and speaking with a natural tensivity of his lips, out of the corners of his mouth)...

"Podden me, Mac... I hope yuh don't mind me astin' yuh a question...but my frien's and me has been havin' a little oggument aboutcha... an' I gotta little question dat I'd like t' ast yuh... Yuh don't mind do yuh?"

*The Tall Stranger* (grinning mechanically laughing an agreeable and complaisant laugh of utter falseness): "Why, no!... ah-hah-hah!....Not at all!... ah-hah-hah!...Go right ahead, its perfectly all right... Ah-hah-hah."

*The City's Child*: "Because if yuh do, I wantcha t' say so... I guess a lotta guys ast yuh the same question, an' I t'ought mebbe yuh might get tired of hearin' it--you know what I mean?... A lotta guys might get tired of bein' ast duh same question so many times... (with an expression of difficulty on his face, shrugs his shoulders expressively and says hopefully) *You know?*"

*The Tall Stranger*: "Why...ah-hah-hah!...Yes... I think I do...That is to say, go right ahead... ah-hah-hah... it's quite alright."

*The City's Child*: "I guess so many guys have ast yuh dis same question dat yuh can guess already what it is--can't yuh?"

*The Tall Stranger*: "Why, yes--no--ah-hah-ha!... That is to say--*Yes!*... I think I can."

*The City's Child*: "Well, den, Mac... if yuh *don't* mind...if it's all right... I was just goin' t' ast yuh... (whispering persuasively)... just to settle a little oggument I been havin' wit' my *frien's--How tall are yuh?* (lustily)... Now if yuh don't want t' tell me, it's O.K.... Yuh know how it is, *some* guys..."

*The Tall Stranger*: "Not at all--ah-hah-ha...that is to say, *yes--ah-hah-ha*...it's quite all right...I don't mind at all...I'm between six feet five and six feet six...that is, I haven't measured for some time...but I was between six feet five and six feet six the last time that I measured...(apologetically) That's been some time ago, several years ago since I last measured...but...ah-hah-hah it was between six feet five and six feet six and I don't think I've grown much since then...ah-hah-hah...between six feet five and six feet six."

*The City's Child* (with an astonished but somewhat disappointed air): "Is *dat* a fact?... I t'ought yuh was more'n dat!... I t'ought yuh was around seven foot...but anotheh guy oveh heah said you wasn't more'n six foot seven or eight (reflectively)..... I t'ought you was more'n dat!"

*The Tall Stranger*: "No... ah-hah-hah... a lot of people think so.. .but I guess that's right...about six feet five or six."

*The City's Child* (jocularly): "Say!... Yuh know watta a guy like *you* ought to do!...You know what I'd do if I was big as you--"

*The Tall Stranger:* "Why, no... ah-hah-hah--What's that?"

*The City's Child:* "I'd go in duh ring an' fight Dempsey...I'd fight *all* dose guys... Dat's what I'd do...A guy as big as you could hit an awful wallop... an' wit your reach dey couldn't touch yuh... Dat's what I'd do if I had yoeh size! I'd go in duh ring--yes, sir!--Dat's just duh t'ing I'd do if I was big as *you*."

*The Tall Stranger* (rising glibly and mechanically to the occasion): "We'll you'd better be glad you're not... You don't know how lucky you are."

*The City's Child* (in a slow, interested voice): "Oh, yeah?"

*The Tall Stranger* (getting off his little speech rapidly and glibly): "Sure. A guy like me has nothing but trouble everywhere he turns."

*The City's Child* (with awakened interest): "Oh, yeah?"

*The Tall Stranger:* "Sure. They don't make anything big enough to fit you."

*The City's Child* (with an air of slow, surprised revelation): "Say! I guess dat's right, at dat!"

*The Tall Stranger:* "Sure it is! You can't get a bed long enough to sleep in--"

*The City's Child* (curiously): "I guess yuh got to sleep all doubled up, heh?"

*The Tall Stranger:* "Sure I have. Like this, see?" (Here he makes a zigzag movement with his hand, and the City's Child laughs hoarsely).

*The City's Child:* "Wat d'yuh do about clo'es? Guess yuh gotta have everyt'ing made to odeah, huh?"

*The Tall Stranger:* "Sure." (And according to the formula, now he tells his fascinated listener that the one he sleeps on is a foot too short for him, that he cannot stretch out in a berth or steamer bunk, that he cracks his head against the rafters as he descends a steep flight of stairs, that he cannot find room for his knees in theaters or buses--and all the rest of it. When he has finished, the City's Child strokes his head with a movement of slow and almost disbelieving revelation, and then saying slowly, "Well what d'yuh t'ink of dat." he returns to impart the fascinating information he has gathered to the waiting group of his expectant and interested friends.)

So, in ten thousand streets and towns and places of the earth, ran the undeviating formula:--a formula that never changed, that was the same forever--and that showed the tall and lonely man the barren unity of life, and that finally, curiously, in a poignant and inexplicable fashion, gave him faith in man, a belief in man's fundamental goodness, kindness, and humanity, as nothing else on earth could do.