



Incident: 1933

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Sci. Jr.

THE shabby men trudged along the quiet New York street like the last stragglers of a beaten army. They walked like men who counted their steps—a million and one, a million and two, a million and three. Paul watched them come round the turn where the street angled off toward Broadway, and he waited uneasily while they plodded nearer and nearer. And when they came up beside him, walking the level street as tired men climb a hill, expectancy became a tension in him.

But today, as on the days that he had waited before, the men filed by, one every minute or two, in a stretched and broken column, and shambled on between the brownstone walls to the end of the street. Sometimes, when his expectancy had turned to certainty, when the thought, “That *might* be Otto” became “That *must* be—,” the tension gripped hard at Paul’s stomach and clutched him even after the man passed by. Hadn’t the dull eyes lightened ever so little as they looked over at him? Had there been a feeble show of hope, a single spark of interest on the blank desolation of a passing face?

At such times Paul would keep a man in sight to the end of the shadowed street where he emerged into bright sunlight and where the brick-red sky of evening cut squarely down to the pavement and silhouetted him into brief nearness again before he vanished round the distant corner. If he turned to the right, Paul’s excitement left him, for this meant that the aimless plodding really had a goal. Otto wouldn’t know where the Salvation

Army Shelter was, and he wouldn't go there anyway—unless at the last he felt too ashamed.

Every evening this procession dragged by. It started just as the street began to fill with shadow. It continued through that hour when the street became alive with its own briskly walking homebound men and women. It dragged on while the street dined behind drawn shades, dragged on and on until it came home again. At midnight even, after the doors of the Shelter had been closed and locked, a few drunken stragglers still reeled by.

THE description of Otto's soul which Mary's letter had contained was of no aid to Paul. "*He's a poor self-torturing child of a man,*" she had written. But which of these men were not, Paul asked himself. These were the numb men, the stagnant men. Who could tell what went on, if anything did, behind their haggard faces?

A million and four, a million and five, a million and six. A ragged man with ravelled cuffs and broken shoes clumped heavily-footedly toward Paul. A limousine glided by, its motor humming softly, like a fly in a bottle, its tires making a sound of tearing silk upon the dark gray pavement. The ragged man veered away from the curb and came to a swaying halt, blinking after the rolling car. Two brisk men walking together, suddenly parted, circled round him, and came together again, walking hard.

The ragged man stood scratching himself, heedless of the passersby. His head rolled a little but his bleared eyes remained fixed on the sidewalk. Then he squatted down, fumbled in the dust of the gutter, and brought up the flattened end of a cigarette. Smoothing it into shape with a kind of clumsy gentleness, he stuck it between his dry lips and began to search his pockets.

Paul discovered that the muscles of his face had gone tight. Maybe this parade of destitution had affected his nerves. But no—it wasn't that exactly. He could stand the rags and filth, he could even stand the smell of unwashed bodies and the reek of Bowery hooch. Otto could be made clean again if he were dirty. He could even be deloused if necessary. There must be a place in New York where that could be done. But was there in all the world a place to fumigate a soul when the vermin of destitution

had gotten inside a man? That was what sickened Paul, and filled his waiting with dread. However far Otto had sunk, he'd promised Mary—

THAT promise to Otto's wife, when it came to his mind, made him feel set apart from everybody, from the brisk men and the shabby men alike—set *above* them. The thought of it straightened him up, made him refuse to lean with careless indolence against the wrought-iron railing. He began to stroll toward Broadway. The shabby man was exploring the lining of his coat with blunt, groping fingers, looking helpless, as if his hand were caught and he tried to free it. A tall girl, grinding gum, gave Paul a challenging stare as she clicked by, and he realized that he faced Broadway with a smile that she had misunderstood. Four girls together, arm in arm, swung round the turn, filling the sidewalk, and close behind them at a little distance came a man in a battered felt hat, trying to pass. Paul watched him idly as he felt in his pockets and discovered a paper packet of matches. The man in the felt hat took quick, half steps, but the girls cut him off again, not before Paul noticed how his eyes searched the street ahead. Then, on an impulse, Paul swung round and walked back. The shabby man still searched methodically in his bottomless pockets. Paul went up to him. There was just a chance—

“Looking for a match?” he asked.

The man slowly stopped his fumbling, but kept his hand in his pocket. His eyes came up slowly and fixed with drunken insolence and menace upon Paul's extended hand. Paul waited, feeling the smile freeze upon his face, and as he waited, with growing self-consciousness, his eyes sought those of the passersby and read in them, to his surprise, indifference and distaste. In Paul's confusion he feigned indifference as well. He shifted his outstretched arm to a more careless level, and directed his glance into the distance. The four girls, quite near now, still spread across the sidewalk, but the man in the old felt hat swung out upon the pavement and came along with the booted stride of an officer, despite his broken shoes. Paul gave him a brief scrutiny, then brought his attention back. The shabby man had recommenced his fumbling exploration of the lining of his coat. He had simply been unconscious of Paul's offering.

At the end of a long moment a crisp voice broke Paul's confusion.

"I beg your pardon."

Paul turned about.

IT WAS the man in the battered hat. The keen blue eyes that looked at Paul seemed to read his chagrin and to hold a smile in check. A moment later the four girls crowded by, narrowing their column of four and promptly spreading out again.

"If I'm not mistaken," said the man, indicating the brownstone front before them, "this should be number 84. But I see no number." He raised his hands and let them fall limply back again.

Paul said mechanically, "This is 84 all right," but his thoughts were racing. The Oxonian accent, the un-American gesture of mock resignation—these were almost the only clues, and Mary had not prepared him for them. Yet he knew—

"And if I'm not mistaken," he added, "your name is Otto."

In the flash of time before the blue eyes widened with pleasure Paul saw Otto dart a glance at the vagabond, and he knew that Otto, having seen the episode as he approached, had divined his mistake—and at the same time had forgiven him.

"I'm living in barrack style here on the third floor back," said Paul as their hands gripped. "I hope you'll be comfortable with me."

"Comfortable!" exclaimed Otto. "There's no question of—anything! Absolutely anything! Put me on the window-sill if you like, or on the floor. After the trenches anything—"

"I saw you coming," Paul said, "but of course I didn't know. These girls were in your way."

He tried to recapture the lost moments.

"You came along like a major," he continued.

Otto laughed. "And Napoleon said that an army marched on its stomach," he said.

Paul gripped Otto's arm as they mounted the stone steps.

"Napoleon could have used a shorter word," he said.

