

SPRING COMES AGAIN

A CERTAIN tramp sat on a bench in Madison Square. Not a few people were there, as it was a bright, warm morning, but he had his bench quite to himself.

If I call this man a tramp, it is not that he was really of the plodding brotherhood, but that his clothes were ragged, greasy, and shapeless, and his forehead sunk between his bare, hard hands as an outcast's might be.

The day was in February, and the first of the year in which the stir of Spring was truly abroad. The winter had been long and hard: November's snows had their part in the grimy mud and ice that still clung to the old brown grass. But, today, how rapidly these gray snows dwindled, trickling away beside the walks in broad, shining rivulets! Sounds of traffic danced in the light air. How the noisy, crowding sparrows scented the coming magic in earth and air and sun, and how softly the sun's warmth fell on sparrow's wing and pavement, on leafless twig and human cheek! With all this gay thawing and cheeping and coquetry of light and breeze, the very stones of New York must have told themselves they might learn to hope again, if such days continued . . .

From Twenty-third Street came two young girls and sat on the bench where the tramp was. They did not glance at him. They brought a pie in a paper bag to share between them—it was near the end of the noon-hour—and weighty matters were at hand for discussion.

"The skirt is the same as the blue Georgette. Didn't I always look well in that?"

"But where'll you get the shoes for such a dress, Annie? If you could have champagne-colored kid, now . . ."

"Oh . . . Well, I'll have to wear these black pumps, without the spats."

Their words tumbled in a high-pitched, rapid stream; their eyes sparkled; their lips smiled.

One of them glanced at the slouching figure at the end of the bench. Her eyes rested on a felt hat pushed off the forehead by chapped, blunt-fingered hands; on bent and shabby

shoulders; stale tobacco greeted her nostrils, with the odor of sweat and damp woolen things. She turned away a disdainful nose.

"Bum," she said to her companion, and Annie replied: "'S asleep. He's all right."

Not a movement had the man made in all this time. But indeed he was not asleep, and many a drama takes place beneath an unilluminated exterior.

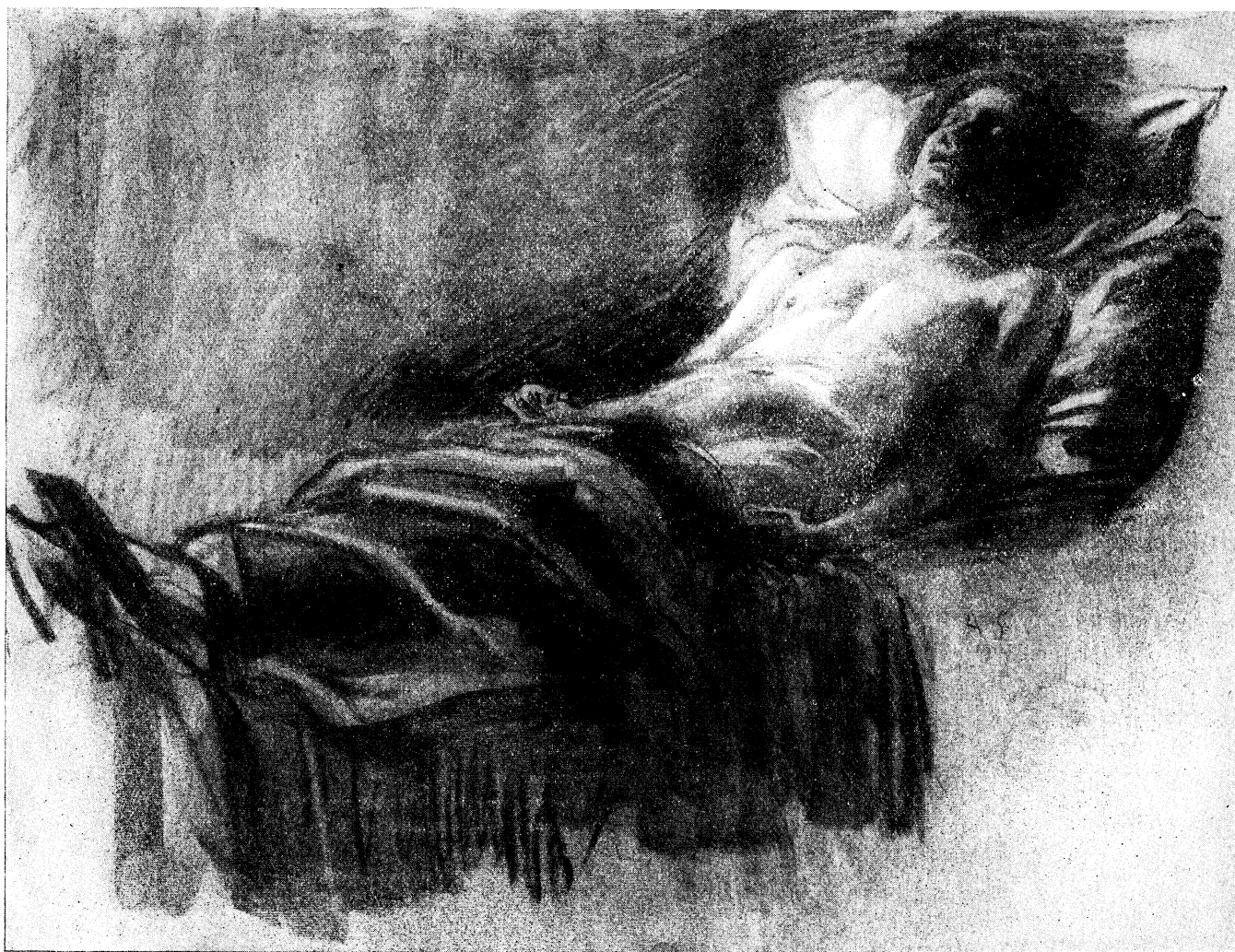
Since six that morning his feet had trod the streets of New York looking for work. He had set out with six advertisements from the morning paper in his pocket, and had answered five of them. Of what use to look further? He was dog-tired. His feet smarted. He was hungry, but if a meal had been put before him, would not have had the heart to eat.

This was not the first winter that hard luck had hit his struggle for a living, nor the first day he had sat on a park bench, dreading to go home. During all the years he had been raising his family the chimera of a steady job had played hide-and-seek with him, in employment and out of it. At such hours as the present it concealed itself and its call was silent.

Last week he had broken ice on the streets with numb fingers and in bitterness of spirit that a man with a trade should have to stiffen his muscles at such a task. Now that the weather had warmed there was no more ice to break. This morning he had set out saying that he would look and not come back until he had found work to do. Many miles of plodding with wet feet had obscured his resolution. As he sat there now he scarcely thought of anything.

The day's rejections beat in and out of his brain as meaninglessly as the tick of a clock. He had stood in line in a shipyard, jostled other ragged elbows in freight-yards, climbed stairs and stifled in offices. He had no tools; he was too old; he had not the experience. Could he force some one to give him work?

He covered his eyes, for he did not want to see. Dull



THE SOUL THAT IS SICK—A Drawing by Albert Sterner

within him was a feeling that he would make no more effort, but would sit there and sit and sit.

The chatter of his two companions on the bench fell upon his ears but not his brain. He was more impervious than a brick wall to the life and stir of the morning.

Then it happened that a bit of pie-crust, the last tid-bit of the feast, slipped from the fingers of one of the girls and fell to the walk. It was the signal for them to explode in giggles and laugh on and on in the inexhaustible torrents of girlhood.

The tramp did not stir, but within him something warm suddenly quickened. A fiber came to life under the rills of laughter his mind scarcely felt. Involuntarily he raised his head from his hands and cast a glance from his tired, blood-shot eyes at the girl near him. A strand of dull black hair, a fat young cheek white with powder—oh much powder! under the crisp green straw of a new poke bonnet. . . . His own girl was prettier.

He had not known the sun shone so brightly. Its light dazzled him as though he awoke from a long sleep. His hat . . . it had fallen in the wet behind him. Through the back of the bench he fished it up, wiped it on the palm of his hand, and settled it on his head.

The girls watched him rather fearfully.

After all it seemed that the winter was broken. This sun was warm; the breeze put life into one. With the Spring he could take heart again, and luck might favor him.

With a final glance at him the two girls got up, shook the crumbs from their coats and walked away with a swing, on their run-down French heels.

This afternoon he would find something and then he would go home holding up his head. How many times had he not slunk in at night with lagging steps, and sat alone in the kitchen, his head between his hands?

That one advertisement he had not answered he would try now. The shop was at Seventy-second Street; he would walk . . . he must, there was but one nickel in his pocket.

He would get a job and all would go well again. Had they not been in worse pinches before, and had not the tide always turned?

Once more the blood flowed in his veins, and he no longer felt the stiffness of his limbs. Courage burned again; hope tried its wings. He buttoned his coat, got up, straightened his shoulders, and set out.

VERA BUCH.