

The Man the World Forgot

by John York Cabot, 1918-1944

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Lucius Beem had never been very strong on personality, but this particular morning something was definitely wrong. Everyone he met seemed to have forgotten him.

Illustration:

Mr. Beem climbed into the radium casket

NONE of the passengers on the eight-twenty paid the slightest attention to Lucius Beem when he climbed aboard the city-bound express. However, Mr. Beem, clad in his usual unassuming gray suit, hat and top-coat, didn't deem it unusual. Few people ever paid any attention to him.

"It is," remarked the drab Mr. Beem as he took a seat, "a fine morning. A very fine morning, indeed."

The occupant of the seat in which Mr. Beem had deposited himself gazed vaguely at the little man.

"Oh, ah, yes, it's a nice morning, Mr.-er-Mr.—"

Mr. Beem sighed resignedly. So few people remembered his name.

"Mr. Beem," he told his fellow passenger. "My name is Mr. Beem."

He decided regretfully it would be no good to remind the man that this was the sixteenth time in the past month that he had forgotten his name; that for ten years they both had been riding to the city on the same train almost always seated together.

"Ah, yes, of course," commented the passenger. "Mr. Dream. How silly of me to forget"

Mr. Beem buried his plain face in his newspaper and gave himself up to a summary of the day's news. Fifteen minutes later he looked up from his paper and once more spoke to the passenger sitting beside him.

"Isn't it strange," commented Mr. Beem, pointing to a column in the newspaper, "that the famous Professor Snell is unable to get anyone to offer himself for radium tests? You'd think there would be someone who was interested enough in the betterment of the world to offer his body to science."

"Uh?" The passenger gave Mr. Beem a vacuous glance. "Did you say something?"

"I said..." Mr. Beem sighed and gave it up. The man had already turned away.

MR. BEEM stepped off the train at his station and wended his drab way through the milling crowds of people to the tiny coffee shop in the corner of the depot. It was a ten-year habit of his to breakfast here daily on rolls and coffee before going to the office.

Mr. Beem slid into a stool at the counter. When Cleo, the waitress, came over to take his order Mr. Beem's plain face broke into what he intended to be an engaging smile. There was something solid about seeing Cleo every morning. As long as he could remember, the girl had been a waitress at that counter.

"Good morning, Cleo," said Mr. Beem warmly. "A fine morning, isn't it?"

The girl's face was blank. "Yeah," she nodded noncommittally. Then: "What'll it be?"

Mr. Beem's voice carried a reprimanding note. "The usual, if you please."

"And what," she inquired sharply, "is the usual?"

Mr. Beem sighed heavily. "Coffee and rolls." He suddenly felt a little lonely. People never noticed him particularly. Things like this had happened many times in his simple, unadorned existence. But this particular morning was worse than any other Mr. Beem had ever experienced. With a doleful eye on the wall clock, Mr. Beem sipped his coffee.

STEPPING into the elevator of his office building, Mr. Beem nodded soberly to the operator. "Morn-in', Tad," he muttered. After cheerfully greeting the other office arrivals by name, Tad favored his drab little passenger with a flat uninterested glance.

It was Tad's boast that he knew the floors, offices, and names of all the building regulars whom he carried throughout the day. Consequently, Mr. Beem eyed him dourly when, once the elevator was shooting upward, Tad turned toward him. "Floor, please?"

But when he stepped into the office of Sharpe and Sholt, where he'd held a small position for the past fifteen years, Mr. Beem completely forgot the other incidents of the morning.

For Lola, the switchboard operator, stopped him at the gate. "Is there someone you wish to see?"

Mr. Beem was not the type of person to be actually aghast. But for the first time in his life he came pretty close to the real emotion.

"Someone I want to see?" Mr. Beem was dazed. "Are you joking, Lola?"

Lola's face was apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir. Evidently you've been here before. But have you an appointment with anyone?"

"I, that is, why, uh, I work here," stammered Mr. Beem.

"Work *here*?" The girl's voice was suddenly a mixture of suspicion and incredulity. "Work *here*?"

Suddenly she began shooting plugs in and out of the board. Lights flickered across its face.

"Mr. Sharpe," she was speaking, "there's a man out here whom I've never seen in all my life. He claims he's an employee; wants to get into the office... What did you say?"

Lola turned to the stricken Mr. Beem. "Mr. Sharpe wants to know your name, sir. He says if it's work you want, please leave your name and we'll call you if anything turns up."

"Tell him," Mr. Beem was growing frantic, "my name is Beem. I don't know what's happened to you, Lola, but surely Mr. Sharpe will know..."

"He says his name is Team," Lola spoke into the phone, "or something like that... What? ... Yes, sir, I'll tell him." She faced Mr. Beem again.

"Mr. Sharpe said he's never heard of you, but if you'll list your qualifications on this application blank," she held out a sheet of paper, "he'll be glad to get in touch with you if anything turns up..."

She stopped suddenly, jaw agape, for the gray, mousy little man was dashing out of the office, running pell-mell down the corridor as if a million devils pursued him.

FOR almost an hour after Mr. Beem left his office, he wandered bewilderedly through the streets, his mind a jumbled haze of half-formed questions, suspicions, answers. During the first part of this aimless wandering, the suspicion was gradually growing on Mr. Beem—the world had gone mad!

But at length he had been forced to discard that explanation, remembering that it is the trait of a lunatic to think everyone but himself insane. Then his mind turned to stories he had read, stories in which men wandered about unrecognized by anyone. Those stories invariably ended by the disclosure that the wanderer was really dead. Was he, Mr. Beem, dead? The thought was horrifying, and Mr. Beem drove it from his mind. No! He was certainly not dead.

Mr. Beem eventually found his footsteps leading him to the depot. Almost without realizing it, he bought his ticket on the suburban train, and sat down to wait for its arrival. His mind was now clear on one point. He was going back to his house. Martha, his wife, would be surprised to see him, since he hadn't come home so early from work since that time when his appendix burst.

It would take a great deal of explaining to Martha to make her realize what had happened, but she was his only chance of comfort, his only remaining stability. Maybe, when she got the doctor for him, it would be decided that all Mr. Beem needed was a long rest from the office. That was it, nerve strain! Turning up the street to his little suburban nest was a comforting feeling to Mr. Beem. The familiar line of poplar trees and white picket-fences gave him a vague sense of assurance. As he opened his own white picket-gate and went up the walk, he actually whistled in relief. It was a tuneless whistle, dreary, flat, off-key.

Martha had never given him his own key, so Mr. Beem was forced to use the door knocker. Mr. Beem strove to register a reassuring smile as his wife came to the door. He didn't want her to be shocked or frightened, thinking he was sick.

He could hear her heels clicking across the floor inside the house. The door swung open. Mr. Beem stepped forward.

"Hello, honey," said Mr. Beem, "don't be frightened. I just felt I'd like to come home today."

But he only progressed a few feet, for Mrs. Beem was looking at him with mingled astonishment and indignation on her face. Before he could step through the door she slammed it against his foot.

"Why, Martha, what's the matter? I'm all right. What's wrong?" Mr. Beem's voice almost lost its drabness and swift, sickening terror assailed his knees.

His wife's voice was high, shrill, carrying almost out into the street. "Whoever you are, salesman or masher, you have a nerve calling me honey and trying to force your way into this house. Get away from here immediately, or I'll call the police!"

Then she delivered a nasty kick on the shin of the leg Mr. Beem still had wedged in the doorway. He withdrew it swiftly, and instantly the door slammed shut. He heard his wife slide a safety-bolt home, then her heels were clicking over the floor again.

For several dazed minutes Mr. Beem stood on the door-stoop of his home, rubbing painfully at his injured shin. Panic was clutching with icy fingers at his brain.

Rubbing the back of his hand across his eyes, the bewildered Mr. Beem staggered down the steps of his home and once more wandered idly through the streets. Moment by moment desperation bubbled to a near explosive pitch beneath the drab exterior of the anguished little man.

Deep in a hidden corner of his brain a voice was persisting maddeningly, mockingly, "You're going crazy, Mr. Beem. That's what's wrong, Mr. Beem. You're going crazy."

Mr. Beem stood stock still in the middle of the sidewalk, bracing himself against the thought. "I'm not," he declared. "I'm not going crazy." He looked up and down the sidewalk but there was no one to contradict this statement. Brushing away a sudden tear, Mr. Beem set off in the direction of the train station...

TWO hours later a distraught Mr. Beem, dressed drably in gray, stood nervously before a door on the twelfth floor of a downtown office building. The inscription on the frosted glass read, *Dr. Clarence Q. Zale, Psychiatrist.*

The plain-faced little fellow coughed nervously, threw back his sloping shoulders, took a deep breath, and entered the office.

He found himself standing in a sort of tiny reception room. Beyond it was another frosted glass door, bearing the simple inscription, *Dr. Zale.*

The second frosted door opened and a tall, bearded, impressive-looking man of about fifty stepped into the reception room to face Mr. Beem. He smoothed the lapels of his Prince Albert coat professionally, gave his ordinary visitor a casual glance, and spoke.

"I am Dr. Zale. Did you wish to see me?"

"Yes," said Mr. Beem, "I wanted to see you. I think I am losing my mind!"

"Tsk!" said Dr. Zale abstractedly, "how unfortunate. Step into my office, please."

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when Mr. Beem concluded the story of his life, the record of the happenings of the morning.

Dr. Zale rose from his desk. "This," he pronounced, "is incredible."

Mr. Beem merely looked at the psychiatrist with a sort of dog-like trust and hope.

"If everything you tell me is true," Dr. Zale continued, "you are the most unique psychological case I have ever encountered. You, Mr. Leem, are the perfect example of the *Negative Personality!*"

Mr. Beem was frightened. "The *Negative Personality?*"

"Exactly. Personality, Mr. Weem, is in reality a sort of vibrant electric aura*) that surrounds the individual. If the vibrancy of the aura is strong, then the individual has what is known as a *Positive Personality.* If the vibrancy is weak, then the individual has a *Negative Personality.*"

The psychiatrist paused to give Mr. Beem time to absorb this, then continued. "From what you have told me of your life, Mr. Deem, you have always had an unusually weak personality wave. People have always had a difficult time remembering you because of this. Lately, your positive vibrancy charge has been growing weaker and weaker."

Dr. Zale's pause, this time, was for the sake of drama.

"Today, Mr. Ream, you stopped emanating your positive personality aura entirely, and instead *began exuding negative personality currents!*"

The horror-stricken Mr. Beem was not too clear on the meaning of the psychiatrist's statement, but the tone of the man's voice was enough to turn him deathly pale.

"No," gasped the unoriginal Mr. Beem.

"Yes," declared Dr. Zale. "With the result that the world has completely forgotten you. As far as people who have met you before are concerned, you've never existed! You make an instant negative impression of great force!"

Mr. Beem sat limply on his straight chair, clasping and unclasping his hands in an agony of despair. There was mute appeal in his drab watery eyes as he fixed them on the psychiatrist.

"But don't fear for your identity, Mr. Jeem," Dr. Zale was saying. "From this moment on you will go down in history. You are the greatest medical phenomenon of all time!"

The doctor's voice was working up to a fever pitch of excitement. His eyes gleamed.

"Stay right where you are," said Dr. Zale. "Don't move an inch. I'm going down the hall to call in four other psychiatrists in the building. They must see you, Mr. Queem."

He dashed to the door, stopped, then returned to Mr. Beem's chair. "Stay right where you are," he directed again, patting the little man on the shoulder. "Don't move out of this office. I'll be back with the others in an instant!"

Mr. Beem sank obediently into the chair.

Dr. Zale practically flew out of his office and into the long corridor. His steps rang along the marble floor for perhaps ten yards. Then they faltered, stopped abruptly.

They sounded again, returning slowly. The psychiatrist walked slowly into the office, crossed to the coat rack and took his hat and coat down. He donned them, muttering to himself, paid no attention to Mr. Beem, and walked out once more.

Puzzled, Mr. Beem stared after him, then sank back in his chair to wait. He waited a long time, fidgeting nervously. Once or twice he rose to his feet and began to walk up and down, then timidly returned to his chair.

But Dr. Zale did not return.

At length Mr. Beem realized the truth. He had been forgotten once more!

AS Mr. Beem sorrowfully departed from the psychiatrist's office, he choked back the lump that rose in his scrawny throat. Why, he wondered with a sort of anguished longing, couldn't he have been an amnesia victim instead of a *Negative Personality*—and a *Perfect* one at that? Then, instead of the world forgetting him, he could have forgotten the world.

But as the little man stepped out into the street once more he knew in his very ordinary heart that this would be slight consolation.

It was dinnertime and, looking wistfully into the windows of the houses he passed, Mr. Beem thought poignantly of his own little green-shuttered abode, and of the supper that Martha was eating. The thought of his wife, who no longer realized she had a husband, was more than Mr. Beem could stand. So he pushed it aside with desperate concentration on more bitter matters. There was the river, for example. It was only a scant few blocks away. It would be a short walk. The bridge rail wasn't high...

Mr. Beem shuddered at the thought. He wasn't a coward. But deliberate suicide was too much like the last resort of a quitter, a beaten man.

"I'm not a quitter. I'm not beaten," Mr. Beem told himself savagely. But even as he did so, the pathetic futility of his situation flooded back on him. What was there to do? Where was there to go?

The world had no place for a man it had forgotten.

Mr. Beem dug his hands into his gray coat-pockets and trudged onward. There was suddenly something determined, something fiercely combative in his chest. It was something he couldn't quite put into words. He merely knew that somehow,

some way, he was going to make the world conscious of his identity. And not just as a man, but as a great man, an everlasting figure in the eyes of posterity.

Living or dying, both were unimportant in the face of this new determination that burned in the breast of the negative Mr. Beem. It no longer mattered to him what happened to the physical Mr. Beem, just so long as the immortal Lucius Beem, Hero, carried on in his wake.

"And there will be an immortal Beem!" the drab little man said aloud. Even as he spoke, a thought which had been hammering at the door of his subconscious for the past few minutes suddenly became crystal clear.

The news item of the morning. The one he had read to the passenger beside him. The piece about the scientist who sought a human guinea pig for his radium experiments! Surely this was Fortune smiling on Mr. Beem. Here was the chance he wanted, the opportunity to impress Lucius Beem upon the world in such a fashion that he would be remembered as long as time existed.

He would be the man of the hour. His name would forever be imprinted on the ledgers of science and progress! Then he would have identity. Being!

Tiny icicles of excitement ran up and down the little man's spine as he stood there under a streetlight, contemplating on the magnitude of such an act. Then a swift unpleasant thought jarred him from the rosy world he'd entered. Supposing the scientist had already gotten a subject?

No, it couldn't be. Fate couldn't play such a monstrous trick on Mr. Beem! But time was essential. One never could tell when someone else might decide to offer himself for the experiment.

THERE was a newsstand at the corner, and Mr. Beem drew up panting before it a moment later. Then, stepping under a street lamp, the little man paged frantically through the newspaper, searching for the item concerning the scientist's radium experiment. At last, he found it on the second page, buried in a small column on the bottom. It was a condensation of the morning item, merely stating that Professor Snell was still unable to find a volunteer for his experiment.

Clutching the newspaper in one hand, Mr. Beem wildly signaled a cab with the other. As the taxi drew up before him, Mr. Beem glanced hastily at the address of Professor Snell as the paper gave it.

"Forty-nine, sixty-six Vine Street," he blurted to the driver, "and hurry!"

The cabby slammed the door behind his passenger and threw the hack into gear. Then they were shooting down the illuminated boulevards. It was fifteen minutes later when, with a screech of brakes, the taxi drew up before the address Mr. Beem had given the driver. The cabby didn't have a chance to open the door for his passenger, for Mr. Beem was out of the car like a shot, digging in his pocket for his wallet.

"What do I owe you?" he said breathlessly.

A frown of perplexity creased the cabby's brow. Swiftly he wheeled about to glance in the back seat. Then, jaw hanging open, he looked at Mr. Beem.

"Well," snapped the little man impatiently, "what do I owe you?"

"Look," the cabby blurted hoarsely, "is this a joke or sumpin?" Mr. Beem started to reply, but the driver continued. "Are youse the guy I picked up, or am I goin' "

nuts? I never seen youse before in all my life. Don't remember what the guy I picked up looked like, but I coitenly ain't never seen youse before!"

Mr. Beem could waste no more precious moments. He shoved a bill into the bewildered driver's paw and ran up the steps of the home of Professor Snell.

A short, plump, energetic little man admitted Mr. Beem to the house. His bright, button eyes swept in every drab feature of the breathless visitor, then he spoke. "I am Professor Snell. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Professor," panted Mr. Beem, "I read about your need in the papers."

"Ah, yes," the plump scientist agreed sadly. "At the climax of my investigations into radium possibilities, I can find no volunteer to serve as final proof of my conclusions."

Mr. Beem took a deep breath. "Professor Snell—I am your man!"

A light flashed into the scientist's eyes. But as he spoke his voice was careful, calm. "Do you understand what it implies, this experiment in radium?" He went on before Mr. Beem could interrupt. "You might come out of it all unscathed. Then again—" he shrugged expressively—"you might never come out of it."

Mr. Beem heard his own voice answering hoarsely. "I understand that part of it. But it makes no difference to me. All I care for is my duty to posterity, and the fact that my slight contribution shall be remembered."

The Professor crossed to Mr. Beem, took his hand. "You are a brave man. No matter what comes of this, your part will always be remembered, never fear. I shall see to that."

There was mistiness in the drab little chap's eyes as he gripped the scientist's hand in his own. At last. Here was positive assurance that Mr. Beem would return to the minds of the world never to leave again!

"We might as well start immediately," he said huskily.

Professor Snell was suddenly the man of science. "Good. I'm glad you prefer it that way." He reached for a tablet of paper on the table beside them. "Please," he said, handing the tablet to Mr. Beem, "write your name there. And the names of people whom I can notify..." He broke off significantly.

"There are no other names besides my own," said Mr. Beem. Then, glowing with a deep, burning pride, he scrawled his signature on the pad...

THEY were in the laboratory of Professor Snell.

Everything surrounding Mr. Beem was white and efficiently scientific. The plump little professor was busily arranging various instruments about a large, coffin-like box. Mr. Beem was gazing at the box when Snell explained. "You will be sealed into that radium cask," he declared. "Your stay inside the cask depends on split-second timing. That clock," he pointed to a delicate instrument beside the box, "is set going the moment the cask is sealed. From it I can tell when the precise number of hours and seconds has arrived for you to be taken forth again."

Minutes later Mr. Beem, lying on his back in the radium casket, heard the terse "Luck" spoken by the professor, the lid sliding across the top of the casket. Then darkness surrounded him...

"Three hours and thirty-seven seconds should be correct," muttered Professor Snell, setting the time gadget on the side of the cask. There was a vibrant excitement in his voice. He looked for a moment at the cask, then turned and

stepped swiftly out of the room. There were some telephone calls to be made to his associates.

EARLY the following morning, as Professor Snell tinkered with his radium casket, vaguely wishing that he could find a volunteer for his experiment, his sharp eyes noted the thin film of dust that lay inside the casket. "Hmmm," murmured the scientist. "I wonder how that got there?"

Mr. Beem had been forgotten again.



*) Many psychologists hold that personality powers of otherwise unprepossessing people are due to some indefinable magnetism, but there is no actual proof as yet that this is a fact. However there is no proof against it either.