

A Toast to the Future

Ralph Walrod

THE first time I saw Ernie was when he came to the Salvation Army Harbor Light Center. He was one of the many alcoholics, but out of the whole group he had something about him that made me feel he did not belong there. About thirty-five, with a good

four week's beard, he was badly in need of a haircut and a new suit. His manners were crude; he did not hesitate to spit on the floor. He had no cooperation with his stomach. His gray hair was matted and tangled with objects found usually in gutters and doorways. The face was the picture of a broken man, wrinkled under strain. His appearance told the tale of a useless life, and the attitude of staying that way. But underneath, there were the sharp blue eyes and the voice of a smart man. I sent him downstairs to clean up and then to return to my office in the evening.

When he entered the room that night, he looked like an entirely new man. I asked him if he would mind telling me how he had got on the road of drink and ruin. He sat down and looked at the wall as if there he could grasp the beginning. Then from his feeble lips came his pitiful story. It was in the second world war that his nerves were stretched to the breaking point: and when his wife died and his son was found selling narcotics, something snapped inside and he turned to the broken man's friend—the bottle. I told him, honestly, that with a few months of painful treatment accompanied by a good rest and shelter, he could once more be the man he had been.

It was a long hard fight, but in four months Ernie, although still nervous and jumpy, was ready to leave. As I shook his jittery hand, he forced a smile and walked out of the shabby building into a new life. Somehow I felt that his case was still in need of help, but if he got the breaks and found work plus the aid of a good woman, he might realize a complete recovery.

Several years passed and I had almost forgotten Ernie, and then one day I looked up from my desk straight into his wistful blue eyes. He was still nervous, and his hands still trembled. He told me that he had found a good job in a coal mine and had married. Ernie tried to seem happy, but I could see in his eyes the lingering desire for an outlet. He said he wanted to thank me for what I had done, but I knew his heart was not in it. We chatted a while, and as we talked I noticed his dirty hands, fingernails untrimmed, and the same strain still in his face. He said that he was doing fine, but when he asked me for money I saw the desperate emotion he was trying to conceal beneath his casual request. Giving him the money, I smiled interestedly and said, "Glad to see that you are making a success of your life. Say hello to the wife and children." For a moment he stood looking at me, the money trembling in his hands. It was as if he wanted to tell me something more, but the hesitation did not last long. With a half-hearted smile he was gone.

Weeks passed without word from Ernie. It was not until the phone rang one day that I realized he was in jail. He had asked the chief to call me to bail him out. I arrived to find Ernie worse than I had ever seen him before. It was hard to be sympathetic. He was

a changed man, changed for the worse. He was ungrateful to me even after all I had done for him, but seemed willing to accept my services once more. I became firm, saying, "Ernie, don't you realize you will never succeed in life if you remain such a weakling?" Ernie coughed and spat in the corner.

"The world's against me. I've tried, tried hard. I worked twenty hours a day and have been sick for months. Even Imogene and the children deserted me," he sobbed.

For a moment I almost became soft-hearted. My eyes penetrated his, which reflected the sorrows of a beaten man—a failure in society—yet a product of that society. Having made my resolution, I turned and slowly walked away, my steps echoing aimlessly along the dirty brown floor. Outside the sun was breaking on a new day.

A Special Fishing Trip

Norman Wilkens

THE roar of the motor as we sped through the night seemed to add to the excitement of the evening. With every turn of the wheels I was coming closer to an experience which I had dreamed about for many years. I was going fishing at Reelsfoot Lake, Tennessee.

We arrived at 5:00 a. m. I was ready to start fishing right there and then, but my dad said that we had better get some sleep first. I thought that I was wide awake, but it didn't take long for the bed to take its effect, even though my two bed partners sounded like busy sawmills.

At 7:30 we were up and ready to go. Our breakfast consisted of tomato juice and Vienna sausages. Who cares about eating when good fishing is at hand?

Each person had a guide to show him the best spots to fish and how to catch the big ones. A person really needs a guide down there because the lake is nothing more than a swamp flooded with water from the Mississippi. The guides were combination philosophers, fishermen, hunters, explorers, and politicians, not to mention experts on the American language. My guide's name was Paul. He was the only guide for miles with a college education, but I believe that he had forgotten everything that he had learned. His language was not much more than a drawl, and his clothes looked as if they hadn't been washed in years. But considering everything, it would have been very hard for me not to like him, for he was the type of man one likes at sight.

Bass fishing is the main sport at Reelsfoot, and Paul and I were throwing everything but the kitchen sink at those bass. We worked