

Toward Paradise

By James Knapp Reeve

IN the life of every man—at least, of every man who really has known the true meaning of life—will be found a dead wall in which there is no open door. Behind that wall are written the things of which, perhaps, he may be neither ashamed nor afraid to have the world know, but any knowledge of which he yet will admit only to his own heart.

Erbeson had known life, so it is not strange that in his life was such a dead wall. Early in my acquaintance with the man, it came to me to know that there were certain things about which I must not question him. Although he was one of the most genial and affable of men, one whom, through years of close companionship, I grew to know and value as a friend and to love as a brother—to know as one who placed more than an empty meaning upon the word "friend"—I found that he would not brook, even from me, any prying query as to the years of his younger manhood.

wall in his life, his wife was a stranger woman still.

I will not use empty, meaningless phrases in describing her. It may be said that she was beautiful. I do not know whether she was so by accepted standards, and at best the word is a weak one to apply to a woman such as she. But she had a pure olive skin, such as I have never seen upon any other woman, except now and then among the high-born dames of Andalusia. Under it at times was a glow of fire, as the blood coursed through the veins and surged to the surface of her oval face, that made me think of her as a living opal. I have never seen other eyes so deep as hers. In their depths one lost himself, and wondered if it were not the very soul he saw looking out at him from those deep black living wells. Nor have I ever seen other hair so black, nor in which vitality seemed to so abound.

Nor was this all her charm. I have had speech with many nations of the



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We were gold-hunters by profession. A fine, free, adventurous life it is, which lets one see every nook and corner of this round world, to know its hopes and fears, its joys and sorrows, the enthusiasm of hope and the rapture of expectation fulfilled, as well as the darkness and disaster of drear despair. Rich today, and tomorrow too poor to own a place wherein to lay one's head, it is not a bad life for a man who is filled with the wine of youth; but it is not a life for a married man, unless one is born under a fortunate star that makes him certain of luck wherever he goes.

It was early in our companionship when I learned that Erbeson had a wife; and it was at once matter of surprise for me that he did not abandon such a roving career as our occupation forced upon us, and settle down to the quiet life of the home. It is true, from my point of view, he would have missed much by so doing. For the freedom of that life gets into one's blood, and a man who has known it cannot well brook restraint or be hedged within narrow bounds.

But Erbeson was no longer master of his fate, as I was; and he could afford the home, for he was the luckiest gold-hunter I ever knew. But this same luck made him able to take his wife with him wherever he journeyed, and to establish her in quarters made comfortable and enriched with all that love and liberality could suggest. So it was that sometimes in the mining camps appeared a little oasis of civilization, and in that oasis a woman, who seemed little less than an angel to the rough miners, unaccustomed to the presence of femininity in their environment.

If Erbeson was a strange man, reticent, and ever stoically keeping prying eyes from looking beyond that dead

earth, but, rack my memory as I might, I could not tell what tongue it was that gave her that soft, caressing accent, that made every rough, harsh word of our uncouth English take upon itself a new meaning, that made one's pulses throb as though she had called one by some endearing name.

We were ten days out from San Francisco, we three—Erbeson, his wife and myself—bound for the Solomon Islands. We had direct information (how it had been obtained I need not tell you) of the new discovery of yellow metal in one of the smaller islets of that group, and we were bound to be among the first there. Erbeson never was a laggard, and perhaps to that fact was due the other one to which I have already called your attention—that luck was never far distant from him. And I profited by his wisdom, and by the kindness that this older and more earnest man extended toward the youth whom he had made his friend.

As we neared the line the weather became intensely hot, and we attempted little in the way of exercise or recreation except to loll all day under the awnings, with pipes between our lips and unread novels in our hands. It was too hot to read, too hot to talk. The sea looked to us like a vast expanse of molten silver. Its surface was unstirred by any ripple, absolutely quiet except for the long swell upon which we rolled gently forward. No breath of air moved, no cloud marred the sky of brass above us. All nature was inert, and man, following her lead, but existed. For days we had been too dull to talk. We but waited, while the successive revolutions of our wheel drove us speedily nearer and nearer our goal.

Erbeson seemed even more inert than any other. Usually active and vigor-

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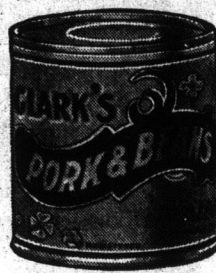
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