

The Free Press Short Story

THE FUGITIVE

By G. E. WALLACE

EVER since he had struck into the high hills Ward Powell felt easier. "So far so good," he panted as he pushed onward and upward towards the rugged uplands. He had avoided the roads, the rocky, rutted, deserted roads of the back country, his feet instinctively following the woodland trails that he had not trod for years.

Once when a woodsman's axe had been heard, Ward had crouched down, rested as motionless as a scared rabbit. His mind had been on the direction of the sound determined, carefully, craftily, slipping from tree to tree, he edged his way around the man, and as soon as he was sure he would not be heard, sped swiftly upward. He must make the Bear Mountain foldings!

As soon as he reached a level spot, he paused for breath. Below, far below, a mere blur, a small weather-beaten homestead nestled by a shoulder of the hill. Uncertainly he paused to look down at it. Gone for the time being, was the hunted look in his eyes, gone the hardness of his set features. Only a soft, tender glow lit up his face. There lay his mother's home!

The boy started down. He would see his mother. With a start he halted. He must not go! She would be questioned! She would be the first one the men who were following him would ask regarding his whereabouts and she must not know! For the first time the full realization of all he was doing swept over him.

On the road, far below, an automobile panted. It looked like the one Neyland drove. Neyland was President of the bank where Ward Powell worked. For a moment fear gripped the youth again. The officials could not be coming—coming to his mother's home so soon! The faint chugging died away. They would wait until he should be back from his vacation!

For the last three months, now Ward looked back on it, he might have seen the catastrophe coming. Until then he had worked hard. There had been no need to tell him it was quite a position for a "hill billy" to hold. He knew that; and he had tried to give satisfaction. Lately from one position to another in the Elm Grove Bank he had been shifted. Nothing definite was said, and no dissatisfaction openly expressed. Only an official would appear, the vice-president, or Neyland, or some other, and say, "Powell, do this now! Let that job be done! You've done it long enough, and then to the new task he would be transferred. This constant changing had bothered him. If they had only told him they did not want him, but they had not. They had held secret conferences, for he had seen them. He had sensed their furtive observations!

The wind blew cold. The fugitive must push on. Up on Bear Mountain above the timber line, he knew of a cave. Once there he could rest and think. Yesterday his employers had given him a leave of absence for a week. This morning they had spoken openly, for they had not thought he was around! He had gone back to get some personal papers he had forgotten. Neyland spoke to the other officials who were sitting in his office. His words came distinctly over the ground glass partition. "Powell is the man!" One of the others mumbled something that ended "And I've figured it out—one hundred thousand!" There was silence. Ward remembered how he stood frozen with horror, white faced. The officials were talking of him, Powell and one hundred thousand!

"Yes," another interrupted. "Powell! I've said so for a month. Don't you remember how I insisted we ought to change him from position to position to make sure! And now we know it!" "But—but—" Several spoke at once. "Oh," it was Neyland again, "he has nerve. Come here a regular hill billy—then—not take it. We will make him! Again words came indistinct, jumbled. "Ward had clenched his hands. "One hundred thousand—take it!" He started forward. He would crash open that door and confront them!

"Vacation," he heard them continue, "he ought to be gotten! He can take a vacation later," some one laughed. "The sheriff will find him—boys together, or his mother." Even if he faced them and proved that they were wrong, it would be the end! He knew there would be apologies, and later he would be dismissed. He could not fight against, suspicions. He had been shifted from position to position—to prove it. They would "make him!" The words were ominous. They had determined that he had taken the money!

He turned and quietly, softly, crept out. He must get away! Once away he could change his name. He knew his capacity for work; then he could start anew making something of himself! "Furtively he had left the town, instinctively he had turned toward the hill district. There, once there he could hide, for he knew every mountain path, he would be safe. Later he could slip away!

Below, the rocky road twisted and turned, a mere ribbon hanging on the mountain face. Standing on the cliff's edge among the loose boulders, Ward Powell leaned forward to look. There was a gray horse, clump, clumping up the road. He rubbed his eyes. He ought to know that horse! Samuel Bowers! Samuel, the sheriff!

Like a flash young Powell dropped to the ground. The sheriff was coming. The officials were not going to wait until he came back from his vacation. They had come to his mother's home. They had suspected he was going to the hills to hide, and the sheriff had been sent for him!

With narrowed eyes the fugitive watched the slow approach of the carriage. He had played with Samuel when a boy, not that he had particularly liked him. Nearer, nearer the plodding horse came up the steep incline. A little more and the rig would be passing under the cliff. Ward crouched low. He must not be seen! It would be harder to hide than he had thought if Samuel was on his trail. He must not be seen! His hand trembled. A loose stone struck his hand, shoving over the cliff's edge and bounded to the road below. Ward peering forward, fascinated, saw Samuel glance sharply upward.

For a second Ward hesitated. His eyes sought a massive boulder with one push would dislodge and it would bound down, carrying death! He trembled; then he would be safe! Landslides occurred often in this district. His hand reached towards the rock, then withdrew. He would not commit murder!

As the horse sprang forward, Samuel, his face still upturned towards the cliff's edge, was caught, unawares. One wild tug he gave, then another, and the rein broke. At a gallop the horse made the steep incline, swept along the small level, the buggy swaying wildly.

Samuel was standing up! He would jump. With a crash the wheels crumpled as they scraped along the cliff's rocky wall. The rig thumped and thumped before it splintered and the man shot backwards and over the road's edge and down Eagle Cliff.

For an instant Ward stood stupefied. All had happened in an instant. At first he wanted to shout! No one could fall down Eagle Cliff and not be injured or killed. Without doubt the other had recognized Ward as he stood erect out-wardly against the sky. The men would spend weeks searching the hills, and he could be far away!

Suddenly his mother's words came to him. "Make something of yourself! Don't be a coward!" The words kept ringing in his ears. In his eagerness he started to run. "Make something of yourself." He would yet! "Don't be a coward." One drop of cold rain struck him. He looked at the lowering, heavy clouds that were piling up from the northwest. A sleet storm was coming with squalls of snow and icy sleet. The mountains would be shut in. It made it all the safer for him! With the sheriff out of the way, he would have no trouble. The thought of Samuel injured, mangled, lying helpless out in a bitter sleet storm came so forcibly to Ward that he stopped. "Coward! Don't be a coward!" He was doing a cowardly thing, running from an injured man, leaving him alone, helpless, alone to face death!

"I can't! Those men are the cowards!" He stood perplexed. "He wished he was a child again. If—if I go back, then his mother's disappointment he could guess. Her ambition for him had been so great! She had sacrificed and toiled so he could advance and be somebody. "Mother!" Suddenly there flashed into his mind a picture of a little boy, afraid, and her words to that little fellow, her advice, her scorn, he recalled. "Afraid," she had said, "face it, son, face it! It's easier then. Don't be a coward!" His mother was a fighter, not a coward!

He had turned. Even now her advice was good. His decision once made, it did not seem to matter much what others did. Far below he matted out the dark bulk of the sheriff sprawled out grotesquely held by a stunted pine tree. "Easy, easy!" Once his fingers slipped and he nearly fell. "Easy," he told himself. The rocks tore his hands, the ice scratched; but he clambered down towards the huddled figure far below. The ascent was even harder. Slowly, ever so slowly, he gained the top of the cliff. On the road his burden was easier to handle. He must hasten, for Samuel moaned. At the house he could telephone for aid. He thought for a moment of flight after that was done, but only casually. He was done; yet it did not seem to matter. Only the injured man mattered and the fact that he, Ward, had done what seemed right.

"Mother," he had gained the house and she had telephoned for aid. "Mother, you don't like a coward, do you?" There was pathetic eagerness in his tone. "Mr. Neyland was here this morning after you." His mother seemed excited. "I've heard things about you!" "You do not like a coward?" "Why?" his mother seemed puzzled. "Then maybe you won't blame me." Now it was over he could hardly keep back tears. His mother seemed frail, bent with work, and he was a failure! There could be no new start now! "At least—least—I was not a coward! Mother!"

"A coward, Ward!" There was puzzled indignation in her voice. "Coward!"

After scaling Eagle Cliff! Why, Ward, what are you talking of!" Then "and, son, Mr. Neyland says you have been shifted from place to place, tried out, and made good in each one! Says you stand correction, have improved in every way, developed. Says you must take the position as officer, must! You see," she was full of her subject, "you see she men not only think that you deserve it but know that you will draw the money that's poured into this hill district to their bank. When I tried to thank Mr. Neyland, he laughed. Said that they had figured it out as a business proposition, for it meant an increase of one hundred thousand a year in business to them at least."

"Take it, one hundred thousand." Ward's mouth dropped. "Why—why—" "What is the matter?" The boy told. Baldly, shamefaced, he said, "I—I was running away—and—and—" Suddenly he sprang up. He laughed. He had been running from his opportunity! It was funny in a way. "Mother," he laid his hands on the little woman's shoulders. "Mother, I guess," his voice trembled, "guess I'd not have amounted to much if it had not been for you!"

INSPIRED BY A SNEER.

Everybody knows the story of Disraeli's failure when as a member of parliament he attempted to make his first speech. You have heard how the other members laughed and hooted, and how he said he-never clenched teeth that he would come when they would listen. A wealthy western manufacturer had an experience very similar, for he was discharged from his first position, and told he would have to make a living by brawn rather than brain, that he had not enough of the latter to help him much. Then and there the boy resolved to make a success that would dwarf that of the men who felt for him such contempt; and he did.

Some young men and women collapse like a pricked balloon when ridiculed or sneered at. If that is the way they take it, the contempt is probably deserved; but there are others who are inspired by a sneer. Contempt stirs them to do their best. At the forces of their nature rally to refute this one who dismisses them as of no account; but when a young fellow finds inspiration in a sneer, it is pretty hard to beat him.

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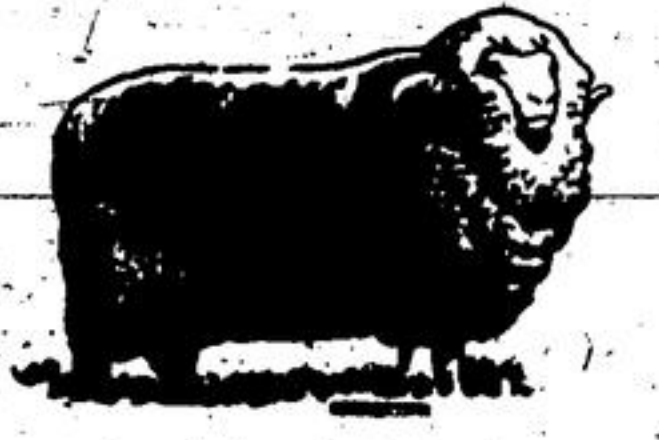
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THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

FOR SUNDAY, JUNE 12

JUDAH THE TRUE BROTHER

Golden Text.—Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.—Psalm 133: 1. Time.—1706 B. C. Place.—Joseph's house in Egypt. Exposition.—I. Leading Up to the Lesson. Unless the earlier part of the chapter from which our lesson is taken be studied, the general situation cannot be understood. Why is Judah pleading to Joseph for Benjamin his brother? What danger is the lad in? And why is it necessary that Judah offer himself as a bondsman in behalf of Benjamin? Our lesson tells us nothing, and would seem as though room should have been found in the schedule for the quarter for a lesson dealing with these important details. Teachers will do well to preface their lesson by relating to their scholars the circumstances leading up to it:

II. Judah's Patriotic Plea, 18, 25. Judah makes a plea which is very simple, very natural, very pathetic. It is first of all a compliment to Joseph. His greatness and power and high rank are duly considered and fully recognized—"Thou art as even Pharaoh" (v. 18). It is considered, too, in its statement concerning Jacob's peculiar reason for sorrow. And it is very courageous in its announcement of Judah's own responsibility, and of his readiness to be a substitute for his brother. Tenderness and sympathy are exhibited freely throughout Judah's address, and taken altogether, it must be regarded as a brave, tender and manly utterance. The last time Joseph heard Judah speak of his father's favorite was years before when he (Joseph) was in the pit, and Judah, on the edge, was proposing to sell him into bondage. Now he intercedes to save Benjamin FROM bondage. Judah recalls the former visit, and the conversation relating to it (vs. 18-20), and then proceeds to remind Joseph of his command (v. 21), but for which they (the sons of Jacob) had not brought their youngest brother down into Egypt, of their expostulations (v. 22) and of his (Joseph's) inflexibility of purpose (v. 23). Judah then draws a portrait of the old man, away back in Canaan, and describes the long time they bore the pangs of hunger, ere Jacob consented to Benjamin going to Egypt with his brethren. Having hinted at the loss of one son and brother, Judah repeats the final words of the old man—"And if ye take this also from me, and mischief befall him, ye shall bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to the grave" (v. 29). Judah then proceeds to picture the future and how it is likely to be affected by Benjamin's being in Egypt. This he is able to do the better because of his recollection of a previous occasion. Probably that picture of sorrow and wall of agony (ch. 37: 34, 35) had stayed with Judah right through the years. He now records, without a century, the enduring union of his old father and his youngest brother. There was but one life between them. The death or loss of Benjamin would mean the death of the father. He goes on to tell of his having become surety of the safe return of the lad, and ends his appeal by offering himself in Benjamin's stead: "Now, therefore, I pray thee, let thy servant abide instead of the lad a bondsman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brethren. For how shall I go up to my father, and the lad be not with me? Let peradventure I see the evil that shall come to my father." Judah was truly a pathetic as it was a noble plea. The man is thinking of others and not of himself, and thereby exhibited the spirit of true manliness and a final regard, which in some measure atoned for his conduct in earlier days.

III. The Changed Heart, 26-34. As Judah thus earnestly and pathetically pleads for the release of Benjamin, what feelings must there have risen in the heart of Joseph? Chiefly, one supposes, of joy, that Judah is so changed; but, also, of attachment to a father who had mourned his own death so long and truly. The spirit of true brotherliness which found expression in Judah's plea, as well as the tender consideration for their common parent his earnest address exhibited, must have given Joseph to see that the years had wrought good, and not evil, in the heart of Judah. He hears him propose the compromise (v. 33). If one must be held in bondage for this supposed crime, let it be himself who is confessedly innocent, in place of Benjamin, whose guilt is assumed. Judah has wife and children at home, in Canaan, yet will surrender all rather than abandon his brother. He will henceforth be a slave, if only Benjamin may go free. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15: 13; cf. Romans 5: 6-8). Judah's motive, obviously, was to spare his father all needless pain, and in order to accomplish this is ready to accept the position of being less loved than Benjamin. His father might grieve at his loss, as he had at Simeon's, but the loss of Benjamin would affect him more. The test proved to Joseph that Judah repented the past, and this must have been a happy discovery. What can give greater joy to a brother than to see a thorough change of heart in a brother? From this lesson we should learn fearlessly to take the side of the innocent and the aged, to bring forth fruit meet for repentance; to love and honor Him Who became Surety for us!

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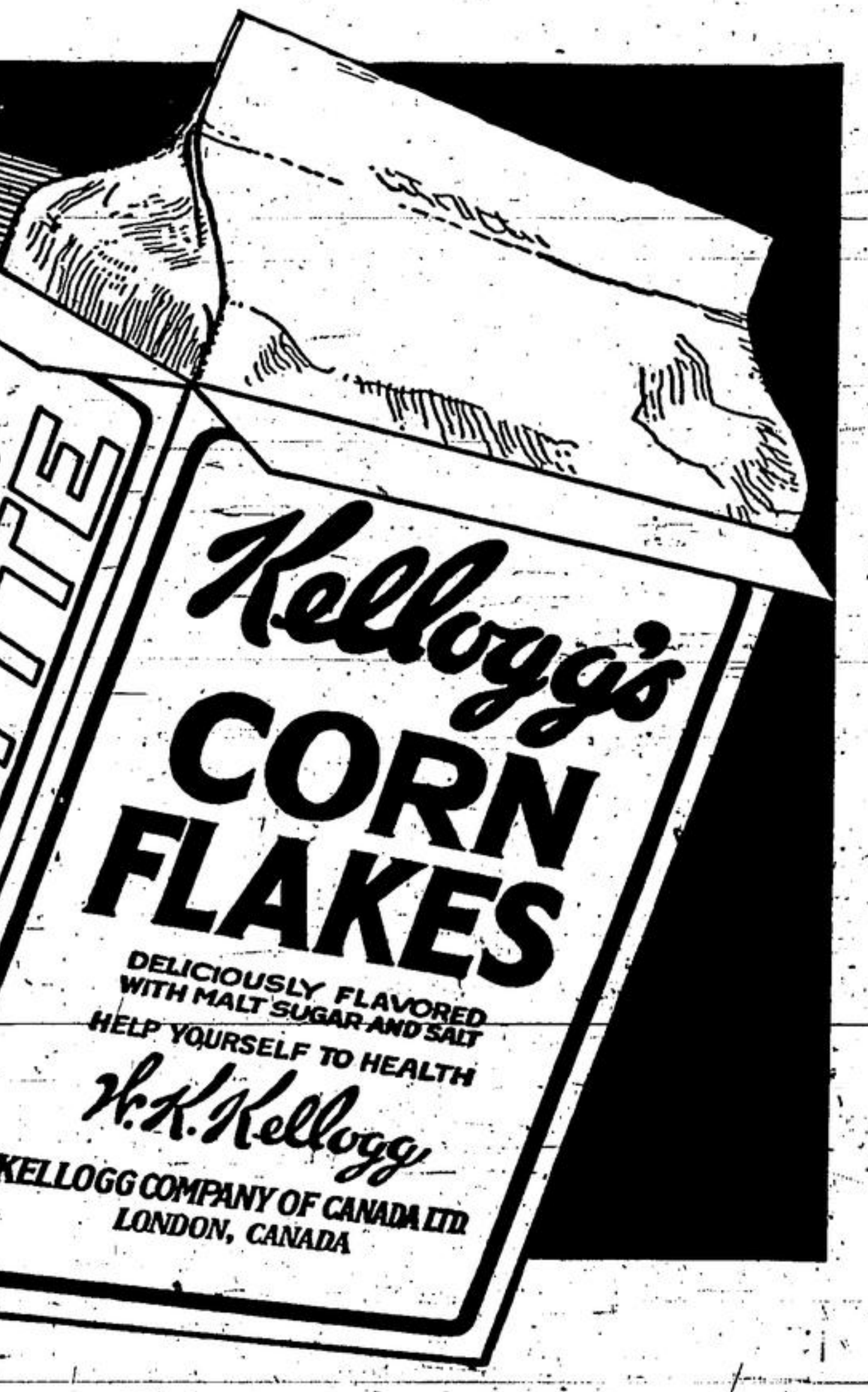
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