

A MOVING STORY OF A MAN WITH A PAST

Second Chance

by HOLLOWAY HORN

Author of "George," "Two Men and Mary" Etc.

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WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

JOHN FINGAL FERGUSON, otherwise Hallett, a man about 35; handsome, prematurely grey. His past history is something of a mystery.

WILLIAM TREVOWE, head of Trevowe's, Ltd., of Mossford. When the story opens Trevowe gives Ferguson a job in the office of his firm.

TEDDY WILSON, otherwise Sternberg, manager of a theatrical company.

MRS. GADDESSEN. A motherly woman with whom Ferguson lodges.

MARY DONOVAN, a secretary on the staff of Trevowe's. She is also a niece of Mrs. Gaddesden.

Lucia Desmond, Principal actress in Wilson's company, and wife of Wilson.

SYNOPSIS John Fingal Ferguson, 35, good-looking, but prematurely grey, is regarded in the office where he works as something of a mystery.

Mary is warned by a Police-Inspector friend-in love with her—not to be too friendly with Ferguson.

There was a curious incident at Trevowe's a week or so after the meeting between Mary Donovan and Ferguson at the mill.

Mr. Foskett's son had called at the office and paid the amount in cash.

Mr. Mumford did his best to placate the angry customer and sent for Mr. Rathbone, who was temporarily in charge of the cashier's office.

Mr. Mumford was in the cashier's department for some time and when he came back he said to Mary: "It's not the first time it's happened."

But Mary Donovan was thinking of the momentary fear she had seen in Ferguson's face.

As it fell out they met on the steps as they left the office that evening and walked along together to the corner of Market Street and London Road.

"That business of Foskett's account seemed to upset you," she said.

"For a moment, I remembered taking the money, but I didn't remember anything else about it."

"I was going to the pictures this evening, although it seems a sin to be indoors," she said.

"I've heard a lot about it; I should rather like to see it, too."

"Then I may be there," he said.

"Here's my bus!" she said.

It was all casual and friendly, but as he walked along London Road he was thinking whether he would go.

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You've sent his account again for seventeen pounds fifteen shillings which he says he's paid."

"Rathbone consulted the ledger," he said.

"Mr. Mumford wants you, anyway," she said.

"Anyway, there's the ledger opening."

"Now what's all this about, Rathbone?" Mr. Mumford demanded.

"May I see the receipt?" That seems in order...

"There's evidently some mistake," Mr. Mumford picked up the 'phone and rang through to the cashier's department.

"Do you mind stepping up here, Mr. Ferguson?"

And a minute later Ferguson came in. Mary Donovan from her desk at the far side of the room was watching him.

"He came in during the lunch hour, I had stayed on."

"But it isn't entered in the ledger," Rathbone pointed out.

"There's evidently some mistake," admitted Ferguson. He was clearly nervous.

"What... what happened?" Mr. Mumford asked.

"The bill was handed over in the usual way to Mr. Jones when he came in."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Foskett, that you should have been occasioned this annoyance," said Mr. Mumford.

"I don't want to cause any trouble," Foskett began.

"It's evidently some slip."

The momentary look of fear Mary Donovan had noticed in Ferguson had left him.

"It's obvious what has happened. It appears in the receipt book and I've no doubt it was duly paid into the tank."

This turned out to be the case, but the flash of fear Mary Donovan had noticed in him worried her.

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why his life should be that of a hermit. Besides, it would attract attention to him if he made no social contacts whatever.

"I'm going to the pictures to-night," Mrs. Gaddesden, he announced when she brought in his tea.

"Do you good, Mr. Ferguson. You shut yourself up with your reading and wireless far too much. It's all very well for an old woman like me."

He smiled and turned to the consideration of the excellent meal she had provided.

In any case, he decided, as he walked back into the town that evening, friendship between a modern man and woman was possible, and could be a fine and valuable thing.

He was not in love with Mary Donovan, nor had he any intention of falling in love.

Moreover, the past was dead and done with; he was a normal human being again with the normal human dread of loneliness.

But, in all probability, he realized as he approached the cinema, he would not see her at all, for the film was an attraction and people were surging into the theatre.

Nevertheless he did meet her.

"So you came after all," he heard her voice suddenly, as she fell in by his side.

"Yes. You on your own?"

"For a change," she smiled.

"Then take pity on my loneliness and sit with me?"

"I shall be pleased to."

"What part of the house do you prefer?"

"The front of the balcony. One and six. You get both tickets, will you?"

"Nonsense. Fifty-fifty. I'm a modern young woman with a job and don't you forget it."

"Just as you say," he laughed.

"I thought that it was one of man's few privileges to pay for the seats at a cinema!"

"I don't believe in privileges at all," she said firmly.

Besides the big film there were two shorter ones and the news reel. The small films were very ordinary, but the chief picture was in a different class.

There were brains behind it and, moreover, what is rare in films, imagination.

Some of the people sitting around them wondered what it was all about, and openly sighed for the films they were used to, the films which made no demand on their intelligence, but Mary Donovan and her companion followed it in silence.

In silence, too, they went out into the starlit night.

"I usually get a bus, but I think I'll walk to-night," Mary said.

"Good. I need a walk too. What did you think of it?"

"I don't quite know. The photography was wonderful, but, particularly towards the end, the characters struck me as being swayed too much by intelligence and reason."

"Can one be?" he hazarded.

"Yes. The way he let his son go off in the space ship to what seemed like certain death, was all very heroic of course, but it wasn't human."

Ferguson nodded in agreement: "You mistrust intelligence?"

"No. Not exactly. But I don't think it's enough; a life that was controlled simply by intelligence would be a very dull affair, don't you think?"

"I suppose it would," he said doubtfully.

"Understanding and sympathy are just as important," she said after a silence.

"But they should be allied with intelligence?"

"Of course. I didn't like the dress the girl was wearing, either. It seemed as if they were straining at an effect. And it wasn't a very practical rig, if you come to think of it. Not as suitable as that of a girl who wears a tweed coat and skirt and sensible shoes in the country."

"But more beautiful, perhaps?"

"And another weakness was the tendency to informality in the clothes. I don't believe that people, certainly not women, would ever dress alike if they could possibly avoid it."

she's been to the pictures or the theatre. "I should like some very much," he said, and noticed that Mary was smiling.

"Well, what was it like?" Mrs. Donovan went on as she watched them drink the cocoa.

"Very good."

"Too much picture-going, if you ask me."

"But we didn't ask you, dear," Mary said with a smile.

"Inspector Garrod was saying the other evening that they do a lot of harm."

"Or was it that he agreed with you, dear, when you said it?" Mary suggested.

"Well, that's the same thing, surely?" "Hardly," Mary smiled.

"You are a Londoner, I hear, Mr. Ferguson?" Mrs. Donovan asked, turning to her visitor.

"Er... I've lived in London," he said.

"And you're settling down in Mossford?" Mrs. Donovan pursued relentlessly.

"Yes."

"By the way, there's a very good show at the Theatre Royal next week, Mary put in, apparently in an attempt to change the subject.

"I suppose most of your friends are in London?" her mother went on, however.

"Yes. Thanks very much for the cocoa, Mrs. Donovan. It's getting late." He rose as he was speaking.

"Aye. It's nearly eleven," Mrs. Donovan said.

"Good-night!" he said. "And thank you."

Mary Donovan went to the door with him.

"You mustn't mind mother," she said. "She's curious about everybody."

"On the contrary, I like her very much."

"But she shouldn't cross-examine people like she does."

"What is the play at the Theatre next week?" he asked.

"It's a revue called 'Laugh and Love,' or something silly like that. But Lucia Desmond is in it."

He started almost as if she had struck him.

"What... what name did you say?" "Lucia Desmond," she said in a wondering tone. "Do you know her?"

"I... I've seen her, of course."

"She was here last year," Mary Donovan went on in a different tone. "She was very good indeed."

"Would you care to come with me one evening? I'm free every evening."

"Yes, I would," she said. "Monday would suit me—to-day week."

"And me. I'll book some seats."

"You'd better. Two and four in the circle are quite good enough. I shall look forward to seeing Lucia Desmond again."

"I once saw her when I was in London."

"I shall look forward to Monday. Thank you very much for coming with me, Miss Donovan."

She watched him go down the steps of the rather old-fashioned house and walk hurriedly away.

"You are right, Mary?" her mother asked when she returned to the sitting room.

"Of course."

"You look tired. Anything upset you?"

"No! Why should it?"

"Does George know you've been out with Mr. Ferguson?"

"The Inspector? He'll probably detect it," Mary laughed.

"He won't like it."

"Then he can do the other thing, mother mine! I'm a free agent. As a matter of fact, it was I who suggested it."

very experienced person, Mary," her mother said warningly.

"No. I wish I were."

"And I think it very unwise to play fast and loose with George. And it's my duty to tell you so," her mother insisted.

"Oh, bother George!" Mary said crossly.

"He's a very decent man and he's very much in love with you."

"But I'm not in love with him a bit, and I've told him so—a hundred times."

"Love!" exclaimed Mrs. Donovan, a little contemptuously.

"I don't suppose I shall marry anybody," said Mary Donovan.

"A woman's better married," said her mother firmly.

"But there's no point in just marrying for a job or a living. I've got a job and a good one."

"You don't want to spend your whole life tapping a typewriter?"

"That's true. Or darning George's socks, either."

"Why you can't go and fall in love with a nice young man like George beats me," her mother exclaimed.

"It would simplify matters, wouldn't it? But apparently I can't."

"Of course, it isn't as if you had to marry; I see that. You'll have my little bit and your aunt's as well when we go."

"Now don't get morbid, mother, and I'll tell George!" Mary laughed and, kissing her mother, went up to her room.

But sleep came to her reluctantly that night. She heard midnight strike and one o'clock. She went over in her mind everything she knew about Ferguson, twisting the facts as she saw them, this way and that.

For a moment, as they had stood at the front door that evening, she had glimpsed beyond the veil which was drawn over his life before he came to Mossford. Somewhere, somehow, in that life, he had come into contact with Lucia Desmond. She was certain of it, as certain as if he had told her himself.

Twice she had seen the actress. Once in London and once, a year before, at the Theatre Royal in Mossford. She had a very attractive, husky voice, and she was very beautiful. It was curious that she should have remembered her so clearly. She had noticed the name that evening on the little bill at the side of the theatre where they gave the following week's play.

But gradually her thoughts centred on Ferguson.

The mere possibility of an imputation of dishonesty had upset him strangely. Why? He must have known that there was no cause to fear anything beyond a mistake.

Curious, too, the way he had put that fish back in the water. He couldn't bear to see anything trapped.

Even her mother, prejudiced as she was in George's favour, had recognized that he belonged to a different class, had spoken of his education.

She was right; it was strange that he had come to a place like Mossford—important as Mossford people were convinced it was—and taken up the position he had done. Stranger still that he should have been glad to be able to do so.

He evidently had influential friends—William Trevowe himself, for example.

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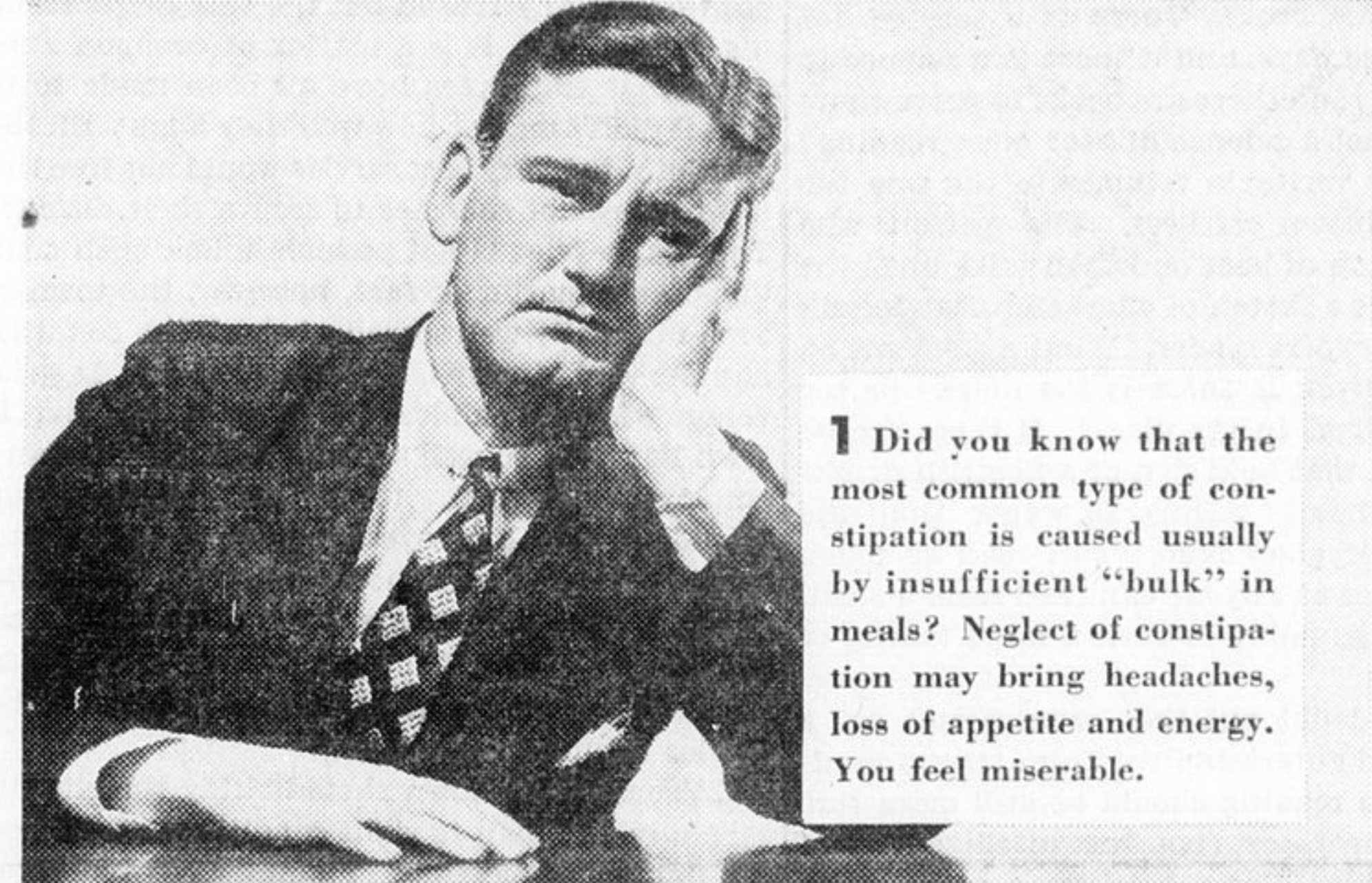
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You could discuss things with him. George just liked a film or he didn't and that was an end of it; but Ferguson could talk about films, and ideas and experiences. One day he would tell her. The thought returned to her. One day she would understand. And until he saw fit to tell her she would never ask him a single question. It was a kind of faith she had in him. A trust. And with that thought she fell asleep. (To be Continued.)

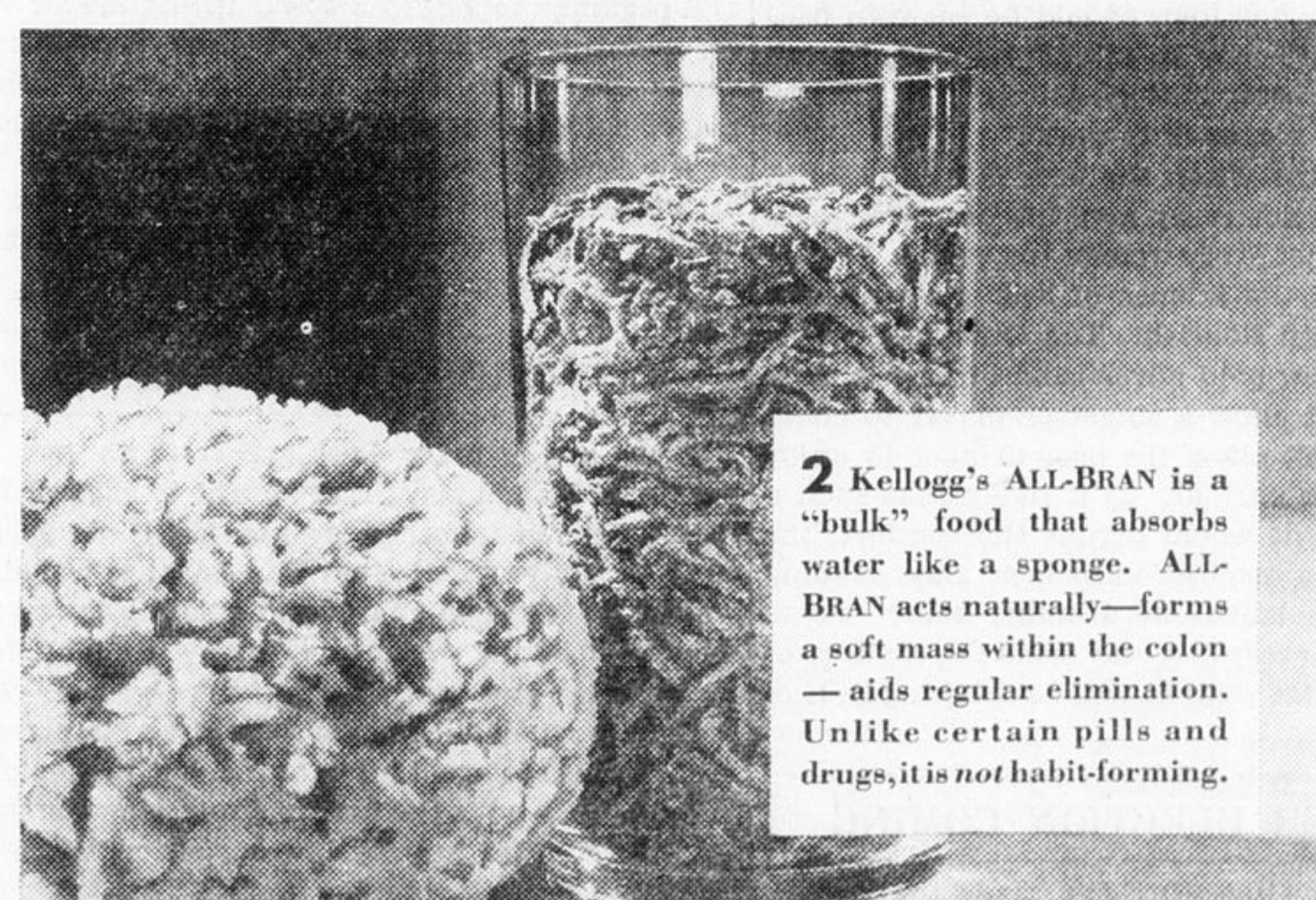
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