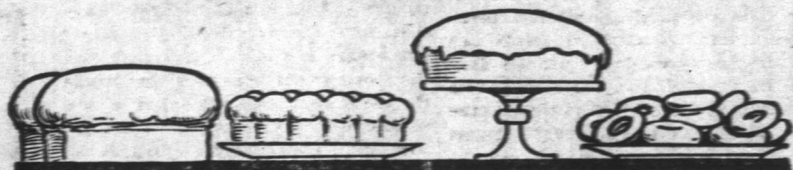
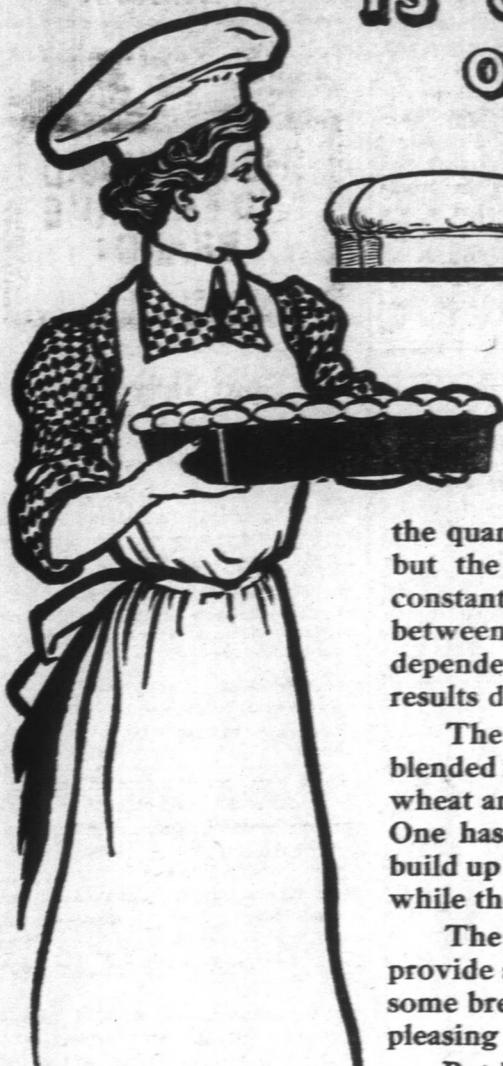


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"The Man Who Disappeared."

CHAPTER III. A READY-MONEY MAN.

But, in the circumstances, no nice consideration of probabilities was necessary to make Larcher the warm partisan of Davenport. He answered, with as fine a derision as he could summon:

"Any unbiased judge, with you two gentlemen before him, if he had to decide which had written that play, wouldn't take long to agree with Mr. Davenport's hallucination, as you call it."

"Mr. Bagley gazed at Larcher for a few moments in silence, as if not knowing exactly what to make of him, or what manner to use toward him. He seemed at last to decide against a wrathful attitude and replied:

"I suppose you're a very unbiased judge, and a very superior person all round. But nobody's asking for your opinion, and I guess it wouldn't count for much if they did. The public has

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long ago made up its mind about Mr. Davenport's little delusion."

"As one of 'the public,' perhaps I have right to dispute that," retorted Larcher. "Men don't have such delusions."

"Oh, don't they? That's as much as you know about the eccentricities of human nature—and yet you presume to call yourself a writer. I guess you don't know the full circumstances of this case. Davenport admits himself that he was very ill at the time I disposed of the rights of that play. We were in each other's confidence then, and I had read the play to him, and talked it over with him, and he had taken a very keen interest in it, as any chum would. And then his illness came on, just when the marketing of the piece was on the cards. He was out of his head a good deal during his illness, and I suppose that's how he got the notion he was the author. As it was, I gave him five hundred dollars as a present, to celebrate the acceptance of the piece. And I gave him that at once, too—half the amount of the money paid on acceptance, it was; for anything I knew then, it might have been half of all I should ever get for the play, because nobody could predict how it would plan out. Well, I've never borne him an ounce of malice for his delusion. Maybe at this very moment he still honestly thinks himself the author of that play; but I've always stood by him, and always will. Many's the piece of work I've put in his hands; and I will say he's never failed me on his side, either. Old Reliable Dav, that's what I call him; Old Reliable Dav, and I'd trust him with every dollar I've got in the world."

He finished with a clap of good-fellowship on Davenport's shoulder, and then fell upon the remainder of his chop and potato with a concentration of interest that put an end to the dispute.

As for Davenport, he had continued eating in silence, with an expressionless face, as if the matter were one that concerned a stranger. Larcher, observing him, saw that he had indeed put that matter behind him, as one to which there was nothing but

weariness to be gained in returning. The rest of the meal passed without event. Mr. Bagley made short work of his food, and left the two others with their coffee, departing in as self-satisfied a mood as he had arrived in, and without any trace of the little passage of words with Larcher.

A breath of relief escaped Davenport, and he said, with a faint smile: "There was a time when I had to say about the play. We've had scenes. I can tell you. But Bagley is a man who can brazen out any assertion; he's a man impossible to out-face. Even when he and I are alone together, he plays the same part: won't admit that I wrote the piece; and pretends to think I suffer under a delusion. I was ill at the time he disposed of my play; but I had written it long before the time of my illness."

"How did he manage to pass it off as his?"

"We were friends then, as he says, or at least comrades. We met through being inmates of the same lodging-house. I rather took to him at first. I thought he was a breezy, cordial fellow; mistook his loudness for frankness, and found something bold and pleasing in his nasal drawl. That brass-horn voice!—ye gods, how I grew to shudder at it afterward! But I liked his company over a glass of beer; he was convivial and told amusing stories of the people in the country town he came from, and of his struggles in trying to get a start in business. I was struggling as hard in my different way—a very different way, for he was an utter savage there, as far as art and letters were concerned. But we exchanged accounts of our daily efforts and disappointments, and knew all about each other's affairs—at least he knew all about mine. And one of mine was the play which I wrote during the

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first months of our acquaintance. I read it to him, and he seemed impressed by it, or as much of it as he could understand. I had some idea of sending it to an actor who was then in need of a new piece, through the fallow year, and he had just produced. My play seemed rather suitable to him, and I told Bagley I thought of submitting it as soon as I could get it typewritten. But before I could do that, I was on my back with pneumonia, utterly helpless, and not thinking of anything in the world except how to draw my breath.

"The first thing I did begin to worry about, when I was on the way to recovery, was my debts, and particularly my debt to the landlady. She was a good woman, and wouldn't let me be moved to a hospital, but took care of me herself through all my illness. She furnished my food during that time, and paid for my medicines, and, furthermore, I owed her for several weeks' previous rent. So I be-moaned my indebtedness, and the hopelessness of ever settling one of the thousand times, day and night, till it became an old song in the ears of Bagley. One day he came in with his face full of news, and told me he had got some money from the sale of a farm in which he had inherited a ninth interest. He said he intended to risk his portion in the theatrical business—he had had some experience as an advance agent—and offered to buy my play outright for five hundred dollars.

"Well, it was like an ear held out to a drowning man. I had never before had so much money at the same time. It was enough to pay all my debts, and keep me on my feet for a while to come. Of course I knew that if my play were a fair success, the author's percentage would be many times five hundred dollars. But it might never be accepted—and one of mine had been, and I had hawked two or three around among the managers—and in that case I should get nothing at all. As for Bagley, his risk in producing a play by an unknown man was great. His chances of loss seemed to me about nine in ten. I took it that in the offer was friendship. I grasped at the immediate certainty, and the play became the property of Bagley.

To be continued.

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