

THE WHEAT CORNER.

By R. H. H. H.

John Sandys, local manager of the Western Union Telegraph Company in the city of Des Moines, sat in his office one afternoon when there was brought to him the card of a lady. Most of Mr. Sandys' visitors were masculine, and the manager, a grizzled man of 60, arched his brows in surprise as he glanced at the card.

"Ask the young lady to come in," he said briefly. He whirled round in his swivel chair and rose from it as a sweet faced girl entered, dressed in black, her whole attire having neatness and distinguishing characteristics. Pausing for a moment at the door, she came swiftly forward to him, extending her hand.

"I don't suppose you will remember me, Mr. Sandys," she began, somewhat breathlessly, "but I thought—perhaps—"

The manager interrupted her, speaking in kindly tones.

"Indeed, Miss Elinor, I remember you very well, although you were only a little girl when I last saw you. You have been so long at school and abroad that a man might well be excused if he failed to recognize you. Many things have happened since last we met, you know."

The manager was a laconic man, and now spoke at greater length than was his custom, for he saw that his visitor had evidently keyed herself up to this interview and was scarcely able to conceal her agitation. A glance at the dark costume she wore recalled to his mind the recent death of her father, and then he felt that his last remark had been somewhat inconsiderate, but being an unready man and not knowing how to remedy it, he made no attempt to do so, contenting himself by pushing forward a chair and asking the girl to sit down.

When Miss McIntosh had seated herself Sandys resumed his position in the swivel chair somewhat uneasily, and for a few moments there was silence between them.

"Yes," she said at last, not looking at him, speaking in a low voice and trying to keep command over it, "many things have happened since then. I came home to find my father dying, and since his death we have learned—doubtless everyone in the city knows it now—how disastrous had been his transactions on the Board of Trade. I have no doubt the worry caused by his fear of leaving mother and me unprotected for did much to hasten his death."

Mr. Sandys, not knowing what to say, murmured that probably this was so.

"It is now three months since father's death," continued the girl, "and immediately after mother and I moved to a small cottage on S. 16th street, where we now live, and to-day I resolved to come up here and have a business talk with you, Mr. Sandys."

For the first time since she sat down the girl looked up at him, and he saw that her eyes were wet and that she was trying to force a faint smile to her tremulous lips.

"I found I had to earn my own living, and so two months ago I bought a telegraph instrument and learned telegraphing."

"But," said Mr. Sandys, "with your accomplishments you do not need to be a telegraphist."

"My accomplishments, although expensive to buy, are not very saleable on the market."

"My dear Miss Elinor," said the manager, "telegraphing is the very last profession I would advise a young lady to take up. I warn everybody against telegraphing. I never open a morning paper but I expect to see an account of some new invention that will abolish telegraphy altogether. In fact, when the telephone was perfected I rather expected it would render us all superfluous, and I am not sure but that eventually will be the case, for the long-distance telephone is only in its infancy. What on earth caused you to learn telegraphy?"

"I will confess the reason with a frankness I ought to be ashamed of," said the girl, with a real smile this time. "I learned it because my father's oldest friend is manager of the Western Union Telegraph Company in this city."

"Oh, I see," said the manager, with a twinkle in his eye. "You thought I would give you a situation?"

"I know you would, Mr. Sandys," replied the girl, confidently. Her certainty did not seem to be shared by the manager, who knitted his brow and drummed nervously on the desk with his fingers.

"You said a moment since that this was a business visit. Now, Miss Elinor, do you want me to talk to you as a business man would talk to an applicant, or am I to treat you as the daughter of a valued and regretted friend?"

"From now on," cried the girl, eagerly, "this is straight business. I only relied on your friendship for my father to gain me admittance here."

"Very well, then, I will begin by saying that the woods are full of telegraphers. Up to a certain point, it seems to me that telegraphers are as common as the sands on the seashore; beyond that point telegraphers are few. It is like shortland and, I presume, like a great many other things. Tele-

graphing, that is expert telegraphing, is a very difficult art. Miss Elinor,—"I know you will excuse me for contrasting you," exclaimed the girl, with animation, "and it isn't a bit polite to do so, but telegraphing is the easiest thing in the world. If you had ever played Robert Schumann or Liszt on the piano you would know what difficulty it is."

"Really?" said the manager, dryly. "You are the first person I have heard say that telegraphing was an easy accomplishment. However, there is nothing like a practical test. Do you think you know enough of telegraphing to fill a situation as operator if I had one to offer you?"

"I think so," answered the girl, confidently.

"Well, we shall see. Would you mind sitting over at this table?"

The girl rose, peeling off her gloves as she approached the table. The manager, placing his finger on the key of a telegraph instrument, rattled off a quick, nervous call, which was answered. Then he proceeded to deliver forth a message to the operator at the other end.

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" interrupted the girl. "Don't say that."

"Don't say what?" asked the manager in astonishment, forgetting for the moment that what was mere instrumental chatter to the lay mind was intelligible to her.

"Don't tell the operator to begin slowly, but ask him to send the message as fast as he can."

The manager smiled.

"Oh, very well," he said,

A moment later the sounder was dining away its short, broken monotony, as if it were a clock-work mechanism that had gone wrong and was rapidly running down. The fine, firm, pretty hand of Miss McIntosh flew over the paper, leaving in its train a trail of writing, the letters heavily made, but as plain as print to read, the style of the writing being that now taught girls in Europe, which is as different as possible from the hairline, angular hand which ladies wrote twenty years ago.

The manager stood by with folded arms, watching sheet after sheet being rapidly thrown off. The silence of the room was unbroken, save by the tin-tin-tin-tin of the jabbering machine. At last he reached forward his hand and interrupted the flow of dots and dashes.

Miss McIntosh looked up at him and said, with some trace of anxiety in her voice:

"Of course I could write faster if I had a fountain pen. I always use a stylo, and the dipping into the inkstand delays me, as I am not accustomed to it."

The manager smiled, but said no thing. He examined sheet after sheet in silence, then put them on the table. Taking up one of the newspapers that lay on his desk he folded it once or twice and, placing his hand on the key, he rapidly transmitted an order to the unseen operator to write out what was about to be telegraphed to him and bring the sheets to the manager's room.

"Now, Miss Elinor," he said, "would you mind telegraphing part of this column and do it as fast as you can?"

The girl placed her right hand on the ebony knob of the brass lever, holding the folded paper with her left in such a manner that she might read clearly the small type on the sheet before her. Under her expert manipulation the words flew over the wire until there came a break.

"Hold on," jabbered back the man at the other end of the wire. "Don't be in such a hurry."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed the young woman, with a shade of annoyance in her voice, as if she feared the pausing would be attributed to her lack of clearness. The manager said nothing, but indulged in a silent inward laugh, as was a habit with him, for, ruling many, he had to keep a stern face to the world and enjoy what much came his way without outward semblance of it. After several breaks, the manager said:

"That is quite enough, thank you," and a few minutes later a young man entered the room with the sheets in his hand, which he gave to the manager, opening his eyes somewhat when he saw seated at the table a slim young girl bewilderingly pretty. When the young man had left them once more alone in the room the manager said:

"I must admit I am astonished at your experience. It may not be strictly businesslike to acknowledge so much to one whom I am about to make the hardest bargain I can with, but perhaps you will not take advantage of the confession. You are a very good telegraphist indeed, Miss Elinor. I must express my admiration of the way in which you have faced the realities of life. We like to think our girls so resourceful that they can fill with credit to themselves any position which fate assigns to them, whether it is in the office of a merchant or the parlors of the White House. You have been suddenly confronted with a very difficult problem, Miss Elinor, and you have set about its solution in a way that commands my deepest respect."

"Oh, Mr. Sandys!" exclaimed the girl, blushing deeply and drawing a long, quivering breath, but quite evidently glowing with gratification at the praise of a man whom she knew to be sparing in his commendation.

"Now, I am not sure," he continued, "but your coming here to-day has settled in the right way a matter that has been troubling me for some weeks past. There is a telegraph situation in this city which has been the cause of more worry to me than any of the other hundred and one under my control; it is the office at the Board of Trade."

"At the Board of Trade?" echoed Miss Elinor, looking at him in some alarm.

"Yes," he answered. "That situation demands qualities, aside from those of key or pen, which I should be loath to think unobtainable, but which I do believe have had some difficulty in securing. What we need there is an absolute secrecy. There must be no suspicion, even, of any leakage from the two wires, because messages come there that make and unmake fortunes. Of course, many of the messages are in cipher, but nevertheless, either or not, the utmost discretion must be observed, so that none, save to those whom the messages are sent, shall get the slightest inkling of their contents. I have changed operators there three times in as many months, and while against the present man I have no direct proof—if I had I would discharge him—there have been complaints and vague rumors of leakage, which are, to say the least, most annoying. I have made up my mind, in any case, to remove that young man to the interior of the State, and the only reason he has not been removed before now is that I can't for the life of me tell with whom to replace him. Until you came in it never occurred to me to give the situation to a woman. It doesn't quite jump with our preconceived notions of things that a woman, of all persons, should be the one to keep a secret, but most of our preconceived notions are wrong, and if you are willing to try the experiment I am. Of course, you would be dealing entirely with men, but I am sure you would meet with nothing but the utmost courtesy from all."

"Oh, I am sure of that," said Miss McIntosh, earnestly. "If you give me the opportunity I don't think you will have reason to regret it."

"Very well, then, we shall look on it as settled. Call here to-morrow morning at 10 o'clock and I will escort you to the Board of Trade. I shall leave one of my assistants in the office with you for a week, and by that time you will probably be familiar with your new duties. Anything you do not understand he will be at hand to explain."

Promptly at the appointed hour Elinor waited upon the manager at his office, and together they walked to the tall building in which was housed the Board of Trade. Mr. Sandys was silent during the greater part of the walk and Elinor's mind was busy picturing the new life about to open before her, so greatly dissimilar to the old. The crisp freshness of the air and the bracing influence of her long walk to the manager's office had exhilarated the girl, who experienced, without knowing it, the glorious prerogative of youth. Added to this was the delicious sense of being about to earn honestly what many also needed—blessed independence! the greatest boon that can be bestowed upon any living creature.

Sandys had pretended the day before that their conference had been based entirely on business principles, but no question of salary arose between them, which would have been one of the first points to be discussed with any one else by the manager after the question of salary was settled. The girl felt no anxiety on this score, being content to leave the amount to her father's old friend, and her confidence was not misplaced. "That is the Board of Trade building," said her companion, speaking for the first time since they set out together.

"Yes," she replied; "I walked around to see it after my talk with you, but I did not go in."

"Well, we will go in now. I hope you have weighed well what I said to you yesterday. There is no doubt in my mind that after you leave the office of the office you will prove quite competent to fill the situation, but you must never forget that the great qualification, equal in importance to your speed at the key, is secrecy—absolute secrecy. Not even in the sanctity of your own home, to your own mother, must you breathe a hint of anything that comes over the wires. You understand that thoroughly, I trust?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Sandys! You need never have the least fear about that. I feel as if I had joined some awful society and had taken a most terrible oath, with perfectly dreadful penalties. I thought about it last night until I fell asleep, and then I dreamed the most frightful things—that masked men, with red hot pincers, were trying to make me tell what your occupation was and what you had said to me, but although I screamed and awoke myself, all in a tremble, I never told."

The manager smiled and said seriously:

"That is the right spirit and here we are at the door of the institution."

At the end of a large hall wide and lofty double doors, standing open, gave a view of the interior of an immense room in which several men were walking about with their hands in their pockets. A man in a sort of uniform guarded the door and sharply scrutinized all comers. Sandys, however, did not enter the huge room, but opened a small door at the right and

went into the telegraph office, Elinor, with fast beating heart, following him. The telegraph office was comparatively small and was practically an alcove of the ample apartment used by the Board of Trade, divided from it by a counter, whose broad, polished oak-top was littered with telegraph blanks and splashed here and there with ink. In the center of the office was a wide table, halved longitudinally by a partition of glass, while cross-wise were other glass bulkheads, parceling out the table top into sections, in each one of which a telegraph instrument occupied the center. As a usual thing one operator was enough to do the business of the office, but in times of stress, caused by a deluge in the market, help had to be called for from the central office, and sometimes the six compartments were in chattering activity.

"Now, Miss Elinor," said the manager, "that is your work room. Johnnie Fielders here will be in charge for a week or as much longer as is necessary, and you will be his assistant. As soon as you are ready to take full control I shall remove him elsewhere, for he is a most useful young man."

Sandys left the room and strolled into the Board of Trade, the door-keeper nodding to him, for the head of the Western Union was a privileged individual. The spacious Chamber of Commerce was rapidly filling up, and a rising murmur of conversation pervaded the air. Now and then some exuberant person with a silk hat on the back of his head yelled out a starting exclamation, which made Miss McIntosh jump the first time she heard it, little dreaming of the pandemonium to which she would later become accustomed. She thought there had been a dreadful accident, but nobody paid the slightest attention, and she learned that this was merely the preliminary sparring for the contest that was to come after, just as athletes in a field limber up before the game commences.

"Hello, Sandys," said a young man, greeting the head of the Western Union. "Acting the unaccustomed part of the squire of dames, eh? Who is the beauty?"

"The beauty, Mr. Howard, is a friend of mine," answered the manager coldly.

The young man laughed.

"So I surmised, curmudgeon, otherwise I would not have sought enlightenment from you. I never deal in second hand information, as some of my distinguished fellow-citizens on this floor are beginning to find out."

"Yes, I understand you are exceedingly successful in your struggles here. Let me advise you to be content with anything. But I say, Sandys, you are never going to place so pretty a girl in the telegraph office?"

"I have already done so, and I have told her, furthermore, that she would find every man she met here a gentleman."

"Oh, you always was an optimist, Sandys. I think you are a bit of a stretch to it, but to call old Grimwood, who is now about to honor us with his presence, a gentleman."

"Merely my own opinion, of course." There was entering as he spoke a man who stooped slightly. His smoothly shaven face made it impossible, at a distance, to guess his age, but closer inspection left no doubt that he was fully entitled to the adjective the young man had bestowed upon him. The lid drooped over the left eye and gave a sinister expression to an impassive face that was at best saturnine. The left arm hung limply by his side, and with the sinking eyelid gave token of a "stroke" that many regretted had, like themselves, encountered the old man in vain. Some one had said that confidence would never be restored in business circles until a second attack gripped old Grimwood with more success than the first, for it had been quickly proven that what was left of the seasoned old speculator was a match for the combined intellect and shrewdness of the otherwise great in the city. Grimwood's workable eye quickly but furiously ranged the room and finally rested on the fair head of the girl, just visible over the polished surface of the counter as she sat at the telegraph instrument. His face showed no astonishment; it was always—presumably, but his eye remained there.

"I thoroughly believe, Sandys, that old Grimwood has bribed you to place the girl here. Such a withered, ancient branch as he is will be the only man unaffected by her presence. It isn't fair to us youngsters, who have to contend with his lifetime or villainy anyhow. I confess I don't want my mind distracted from the wheat quotations just at present."

"I shall give you every assistance to concentrate your mind on that subject, Howard."

"Thanks, old man; I'm infinitely obliged," replied Howard. "But who is she, anyhow? We are bound to know sooner or later."

"She is one entitled to the respect and protection of every man here," said Sandys, slowly. "She is the daughter of your old chief, Silas McIntosh."

"Good heavens! You don't mean to say so?" cried the young man, sobering. "By Jove, there is a sort of poetic justice in her being here—this inferno which ruined the father now supporting the daughter!"

"The Western Union will look to her support," returned the manager,

"Quite so, and we help to support that grand old monopoly. The consumer always pays, you know. But I say, Sandys, I want you to introduce me to Miss McIntosh."

"I don't see the necessity. She is not here socially."

"Oh, that's all nonsense. I've all social equals, and it will do no harm to have a friend on this side of the counter. You can't be always here, you know; besides, if you don't introduce me properly, I shall introduce myself."

Miss McIntosh has not out very bravely to earn her own living and I don't want her interfered with."

"Exactly. I am earning my own living myself, and I not only won't interfere with her, but will prevent others doing so."

The manager looked keenly at the speaker for a moment, but more to the clear gaze of a very honest pair of eyes. At that instant there was a wild rush to the centre of the room, as if the man whom some had been caught in a sudden whirlpool, as indeed many of them were. They gesticulated and shouted together. It seemed as if a madhouse had unexpectedly debauched its contents. Young Howard wavered a moment, seemingly drawn by some unseen force to plunge into the maelstrom; then his gaze wandered toward the telegraph office, where he saw the girl standing with wide open eyes looking at the turmoil, while Johnnie Fielders was quite evidently explaining that there was no danger and that it was not a free fight nor the beginning of a football match.

"Come," said Howard, "now is the time."

The manager, still with visible reluctance, turned and led the way to the telegraph office.

"Miss McIntosh," he said, making his voice heard with difficulty above the din, "may I introduce to you a friend of your father, Mr. Stillson Howard?"

The girl, raising her eyes, saw before her a young man who might be conventionally described as fine looking, with a dark moustache and a firmly moulded, self-reliant chin.

"I am pleased to meet any one who knew my father," she said.

"I not only knew him, Miss McIntosh, but I am indebted to him for many kind words and much encouragement at a time when I had no great stock of either. I was once a clerk in his office. If there is anything I can do to help you here, I hope you will let me know, for I would esteem it a privilege to make at least partial return for the debt I owe your father."

"Thank you," replied the girl, simply.

"Telegram, miss, if you please," said the falsetto voice of old Grimwood, as he leaned against the counter, holding in his hand a written message and fastening his fishy eyes on the group. "I take it, Mr. Sandys, that this lady is going to do the honor of sending, and receiving our despatches, and that will be very nice."

There was something in his tone which said as plainly as words, "I should be much obliged if you would all attend strictly to business."

Sandys frowned, but said nothing. Fielders sprang forward, took the message and rattled it off to Chicago. Miss McIntosh sat down before her compartment at the table and young Howard left the room, followed by the manager, who, once outside in the hall, touched his friend on the arm and spoke in a low voice, seriously:

"If I may say it in all kindness, Howard, I think you will only be a hindrance and not a help to Miss McIntosh if this acquaintance goes farther."

Howard's reply was an impatient malediction on old Grimwood, more terse than polite.

"Oh, no," continued the manager; "Mr. Grimwood is quite within his rights. Our old friend's daughter is there to do her duty and is anxious and well qualified to do it, as I said before, she is not interfered with."

"I'll break old Grimwood's neck for him yet," growled Howard, still harping on the interruption; "in a Stock Exchange sense, of course," he added, seeing the other's look of alarm. "I'm not going to assault a crippled man, you know, but I'll give him a lift in wheat some of these days; see if I don't."

"The bankruptcy courts have been kept busy for years with men who have endeavored to give Mr. Grimwood a lift, as you term it. Better proceed with caution, Stillson."

"That's all right," cried Howard, with the supreme confidence of a young man in his account.

Shaking hands with the manager he entered the Board of Trade room and was speedily absorbed in the tumult there, but nevertheless found occasion now and then to direct his eyes briefly toward the telegraph office.

As time went on Elinor McIntosh's new occupation became less and less strange to her. She quickly mastered the details of her calling, and Fielders departing, not without a nifty sign, the whole duty of the "flow devolved upon her. Messages, code or plain, passed rapidly to and fro under the nimble manipulation of her pretty fingers, and there were no complaints that information now reached ears not intended for it. But even had she done her work less hon-

estly or less expeditiously, he would have been a brave man who found fault with her conduct of business, for the whole Board of Trade, with the possible exception of old Grimwood, was awfully in love with her. Some of the older men said they liked her for her father's sake, but popular as he had undoubtedly been this hardly accounted for the universal admiration bestowed on his daughter, and the Stock Exchange would have been one man to protest against her removal had Mr. Sandys proposed such a thing. For the first time in history an action of the Western Union received unqualified approbation. But they all recognized that Howard had the lead as far as the fair telegraphists was concerned, and that he was the man to keep it. The reluctant introduction which he had practically forced from the manager had given him an advantage, at the beginning, and many of his young rivals maligned their lack that this advantage had not been theirs. Howard sent many telegrams and lingered over the counter as he handed them in, turning away often to find the cold, critical eye of old Grimwood fastened upon him, which made him inwardly wish the ancient broker would attend to his own business, a complaint which few had ever urged against the hardened speculator.

One evening as Elinor was walking home young Howard met her at a street corner and expressed great surprise at the coincidence. He told her he was on his way to see a sick friend who lived on Sixteenth street, and was quite taken aback when he learned that she also lived on Sixteenth street. He made the brilliantly original remark that this was a small world after all, and asked if he might walk with her, as their paths lay in the same direction. He was further amazed to hear that she rarely took a street car, even when it rained, for she was fond of walking, and it turned out that she was a devoted pedestrian.

She believed what he said, as women will when they have a liking for a man, and if his conscience did not check him for his mendacity, it must be remembered that he was a conscience nurtured in the wheat pit, and perhaps somewhat out of working order because of the jars he received there. And before we, who are happily perfect blame him overmuch, it is well to take into account the fact that he was already deeply in love with the girl, and much may be forgiven a young man in that delightful condition.

The illness of Howard's friend proved to be a case that apparently baffled the medical skill of Des Moines, for the young man was complicated often to visit him, and, of course, as the hours when he was free to do so coincided with those when Miss Elinor was on her way home, it was not surprising that the two often met and walked toward Sixteenth street together. At first the girl was seriously alarmed about the illness of the ill-fated friend, for her memory was better than Howard's, and she was astonished when the invalid developed several new maladies each week, bidding fair to become the most complicated instance of human misfortune that ever appealed to harassed physicians in vain. But at last the hapless patient became no longer necessary and was allowed to depart to the oblivion from which he had been conjured, the pleasure of meeting and walking together forming its own excuse for doing so. Once they encountered old Grimwood taking his shuffling constitutional stroll, ordered by his medical advisers, and he leered at them, lifting his hat as they passed with polite ostentation, but nothing he could do seemed acceptable to Stillson Howard, who scowled at Grimwood's perpetual walk and neglected to return his salutation.

"I suppose it's wicked of me," said Elinor, "but I cannot help disliking that man. Perhaps it is because I know it was his opposition that caused the bankruptcy of my father, although that should be no excuse for me."

Howard replied in a rhapsody which need not be here recorded, for he was prejudiced against Grimwood and made no real effort to do justice to the distinguished talents of the shrewd old man, talking instead of the impossibility of angels having anything but loathing for beings of an exactly opposite nature whom it would not be polite to specify.

One day there appeared to be a little flurry in the wheat market, and Elinor was kept more than usually busy in the receiving and sending of telegrams. Most of them were in cipher, and the others might as well have been so for all the impression they made on the mind of the fair operator. But once, when excitement on the Board was at its highest and the noise at its loudest, two words caught her attention, as an abridging mail arrests a trailing garment. She found herself writing the words "Stillson Howard" as the instrument clicked off the letters. Then she read the finished despatch and for a moment her breathing stopped:

C. T. Grimwood, Board Trade, Des Moines; Induce Stillson Howard to get wheat in large quantities. Then we have him foul.

The signature was that of Grimwood's agent in Chicago, from which city the message came. Many times every day since she had been there the