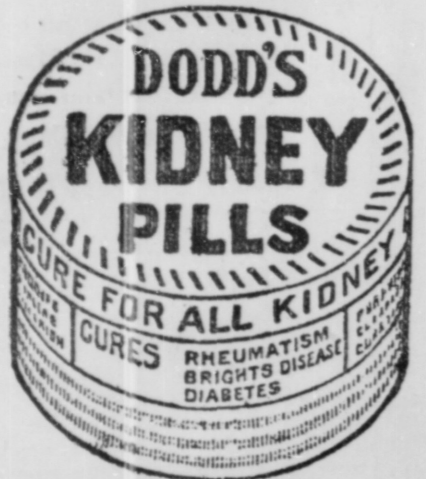


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The Telegraph Message.

By ROBERT BARR

(Continued.)

"I must admit I am astonished at your expertness. 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 today has settled in the right way a matter that has been troubling me for some weeks past. There is a telegraphic situation in this city which has been the cause of more worry to me than any of the other hundreds 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, of late, have had some difficulty in securing. What we need there is absolute secrecy. There must be no suspicion, even of any leakage from the wires, because messages come there that make and unmake fortunes. Of course, many of the messages are in cipher, but nevertheless, cipher or not, the utmost caution must be observed so that none, save those to whom the messages are sent, shall get the slightest inkling of their contents. I have changed operators 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 McClintock 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 tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock, and I will myself escort you to the board of trade. I shall leave one of my assistants with you in the office 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, the only legalized gambling place in the city, where methods differed somewhat from those at Monte Carlo, these differences being entirely in favor of the Mediterranean resort, for there the unscrupulous gambler obtains no advantage over his comparatively innocent competitor, and lies have no special market value. Every city in the land holds up its hands in horror at the mention of Monte Carlo, but points with just pride to its Stock Exchange building. Thus do we honestly acquire the reputation of being a humorous people.

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 money she 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 skill was settled. The girl had 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 learn the ways 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 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 pinchers 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 grimly and said seriously: "That is the right spirit, and here we are at the door of the inquisition."

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 crosswise 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 flitter in the market, help had to be called for from the central office, and sometimes the six compartments were in shattering activity.

"Now, Miss Elinor," said the manager, "this is your workroom. Johnnie Fielders 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 doorkeeper 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 quivered in the air. Now and then some exuberant person with a silk hat on the back of his head yelled out a startling exclamation which made Miss McClintock 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

athletes in a field under 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 that."

"Content? No man is ever content with anything. But I say, Sandys, you are surely 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 were an optimist, Sandys! I think you know you are stretching it a bit to call old Grimwood, who is now about to honor us with his presence, a gentleman. Merely my own opinion, of course."

(To be Continued)

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