

A Corner in Corn

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE ROOKERY BUILDING.

"Has Vance returned yet?" asked Jared Whitemore, a stout, florid-complexioned man of sixty-five, opening the door of his private office and glancing into the outside room.

"No, sir," replied Edgar Vyce, his bookkeeper and office manager—a tall, saturnine-looking man, who had been in his employ several years.

"Send him in as soon as he comes back."

The bookkeeper nodded carelessly and resumed his writing.

"Miss Brown," said Jared to his stenographer and typewriter, a very pretty brown-eyed girl of seventeen, the only other occupant of the room, whose desk stood close to one of the windows overlooking La Salle Street.

She immediately left her machine and followed her employer into the inner sanctum.

Mr. Whitemore was a well-known speculator, one of the shrewdest and most successful operators on the Chicago Board of Trade.

He owned some of the best business sites in the city, and his ground rents brought him in many thousands a year.

Accounted a millionaire many times over, no one could with any degree of certainty say exactly what he was worth.

His plainly furnished office was on an upper floor of the Rookery Building.

He did business for nobody but himself. Jarboe, Willicutt & Co., whose offices were on the ground floor of the Board of Trade Building, were his brokers.

The office clock chimed the hour of five as the bookkeeper, with a frown, laid down his pen, rested his elbow on the corner of his tall desk and glanced down into the busy thoroughfare.

At that moment the office door opened and a messenger boy entered.

Mr. Vyce came to the railing and received an envelope addressed to himself.

He signed for it, tore it open, read the contents, which were brief, with a corrugated brow, and then, with much deliberation, tore the paper into fine particles and tossed them into the waste-basket.

For a moment or two he paced up and down before his desk, with his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, and then resumed his work just as the door opened again and admitted a stalwart, good-looking lad, with a frank, alert countenance and a breezy manner, who entered briskly with a handful of pamphlets and papers.

“Mr. Whitmore wants you to report in his office at once, Thornton,” said the bookkeeper, in a surly kind of voice,

accompanied with a look which plainly showed that he was not particularly well disposed toward the boy.

“All right,” answered Vance, cheerily, turning toward the private office, on the door of which he knocked, and then entered on being told to come in.

“I hate him!” muttered Mr. Vyce, following the boy’s retreating figure with a dark scowl. “He’s a thorn in my path. He’s altogether too thick with Whitemore. I can’t understand what the old man sees in him. For the last three months I’ve noticed that my hold here is slipping away, and just when I need it the most. Just when things were coming my way, too. Now, with a fortune in sight, this boy is crowding me to the wall. Curse him! I can’t understand what it means. Is it possible Whitemore suspects me? Pshaw! Am I not an old and trusted employee? I’ve always been in his confidence to a large extent, but of late he has been keeping things from me—matters I ought to know—especially in reference to this deal he has on. Those corn options are on the point of expiring, and I expected ere this to have been sent West to settle with the elevator people and get the receipts, for corn is on the rise and the old man is ahead at this stage of the game. I strongly suspect he means to corner the market this time. He’s got the dust to attempt it with, and already he holds options on nearly half of the visible supply in Kansas and Nebraska, besides what he has stored here. There is no telling what he has been doing during the last thirty days, as not a word about corn has passed between us during that time. It’s not like Whitemore to act this way with me. Something is up, and by George! I’ll find out what it is.”

Mr. Vyce drove his pen savagely into a little glass receptacle filled with small shot and turned to the window again, after glancing at the clock.

Bessie Brown came out of the inner office with her notebook in her hand and sat down at her machine to transcribe her notes.

In a few moments Mr. Vyce came over to her desk and, taking up his station where he could catch a glance of what she was writing, remarked:

“Are you working overtime to-night, Miss Brown?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Vyce,” she said, covering the paper with her hands, “this is strictly confidential.”

“I beg your pardon,” he said, between his teeth, altering his position. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

“I expect to be busy until six,” she replied, without looking at him.

“I have tickets for McVickar’s,” he continued. “Would you honor me with your company there this evening? It is not necessary that you return home to dress. We can dine at Palmer’s.”

“You must excuse me,” she replied, with a heightened color, “but I never go anywhere without my mother’s knowledge and permission.”

“But you went to the Auditorium two weeks ago with Thornton,” he said, in a tone of chagrin.

“Mr. Thornton asked mamma if I could go, and she consented.”

“You never invited me to call at your home, so I could become acquainted with your mother,” persisted Mr. Vyce, who was evidently jealous of the intimacy which existed between Vance and the young lady.

Bessie said nothing to this, but applied herself more attentively to her work.

“Aren’t you going to extend that privilege to me, Miss Brown?” he continued, fondling his heavy black mustache.

“Mr. Vyce, I am very busy just now,” she replied, with some embarrassment.

The bookkeeper gave her a savage glance and then walked away without another word.

Much to her relief, he soon put on his hat and left the office abruptly, shutting the door with a slam.

At the same moment Vance came out of the private office and stepped up beside the pretty typewriter.

She looked up with a smile and did not offer to hide from his gaze the long typewritten letter on which she was engaged.

Evidently there was nothing there Vance ought not to know.

“Will you please turn on the light, Vance?” she asked, sweetly, her fingers never leaving the keys for a moment.

“Certainly, Bessie,” he replied, with alacrity, raising his hand to the shaded electric bulb above her machine and turning the key, whereupon the slender wires burst into a white glow. “How much more have you to do?”

“Another page, almost,” she answered, with another quick glance into his bright, eager young face.

“I won’t be able to see you to the car to-night,” he said, regretfully.

That was a pleasure the young man had for some time appropriated to himself and Bessie as willingly accorded.

“You are going to stay downtown, then, for a while?” she asked.

“Yes; I shall be here for an hour yet, perhaps. After supper I’ve got to meet Mr. Whitmore in his rooms at the Grand Pacific. I’ve got to notify mother of the fact by telephone.”

Vance went over to the booth in the corner of the office and rang up a drug store in the vicinity of his home, on the North Side.

Outside the shades of night were beginning to fall.

From the windows of the office one could see directly up La Salle Street.

The cars, as they made the turn into or out of the street at the corner of Monroe, flashed their momentary glares of red and green lights, and filled the air continually with the jangle of their bells.

The sidewalks were filled with a dense crowd that poured out continually from the street entrances of the office buildings.

They streamed out of the brokers’ offices and commission houses on either side of La Salle Street, and the tide set toward

the upper end of the thoroughfare, where stood the girders and cables of the La Salle Street bridge.

Vance took all this in with a brief survey from the window, after he had sent his message across the river.

“What do you think?” said Bessie, as he paused once more beside her. “Mr. Vyce asked me to go to the theatre with him to-night. Hasn’t he a cheek?”

“Of course you accepted?” said Vance with a grin.

“Of course I did no such thing,” she answered, pausing for an instant in her work, as she looked up with an indignant flush on her creamy cheeks. “You know better than that, Vance. You just want to provoke me,” with a charming pout.

“That’s right,” he answered, with a quiet chuckle, “but you mustn’t mind me.”

She smiled her forgiveness and went on with her work.

“There, that’s done,” she said, in a few moments, pushing back her chair. “I hope I haven’t made any mistakes,” as she rose to take the sheets into the inner office.

“No fear of that, I guess,” said the boy, encouragingly. “You’re about as accurate as they come, Bessie.”

She paused on the threshold of the door to flash him back a look of appreciation for the compliment and then disappeared within.

Presently she returned and started to put on her things.

“It looks a little bit like rain, doesn’t it?” she asked, glancing at the darkened sky, where not a star was visible.

“You can have my umbrella, if you wish,” Vance offered, “but I guess it won’t rain yet awhile.”

“Never mind; I’ll chance it. Good night, Vance.”

“Good night, Bessie,” and the outside door closed behind her.

Vance returned to his desk and proceeded to make copious extracts from a pile of pamphlets and reports he had taken from a closet.

In half an hour Mr. Whitemore came out of his sanctum with his hat on.

“You’d better go to supper now, Vance. Meet me promptly at eight o’clock at my rooms,” he said, “and bring everything with you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Whitemore left, and the lad, making a bundle of his notes and such papers as he knew were wanted by his employer, turned out the electric lights and locked up the office.

He didn’t know it then, but this was the last time for many days he was to see the inside of the Rookery Building.

Nor did he dream of the tragedy that awaited his return to the office.

CHAPTER II.

BOUND WEST.

Vance went to a Clark Street restaurant and had supper.

It was all right, but the boy did not enjoy it as much as he would have done at home.

The Thorntons lived in a small house, one of a row, on the North Side, which Mrs. Thornton owned.

They had once been wealthy, for Mr. Thornton had at one time been a successful member of the Chicago Board of Trade.

But a few months before his death, which had occurred ten years previously, he had been caught in a short deal and squeezed.

He extricated himself at the cost of his entire fortune.

Everything was swept away except the one little house, the property of Mrs. Thornton, to which the family immediately moved, and a few thousand dollars banked in the wife's name.

After Mr. Thornton's death the widow devoted herself to her children, and when Vance graduated from the public school, she made application to Mr. Whitemore, with whom her husband had had business relations, for a position for her son in his office.

The application being made at a lucky moment, the lad was taken on, and had in every way proved himself worthy of Jared Whitemore's confidence.

Promptly at eight o'clock Vance was shown up to Mr. Whitemore's rooms in the Grand Pacific Hotel.

The corn operator was in his sitting-room before a table that was scattered over with papers and telegraph blanks.

It was a cool evening, but Jared Whitemore was in his shirt sleeves, and, although the windows were down at the top, his face was red and he was perspiring furiously.

A half-smoked cigar projected between his lips, and several discarded stumps lay on a lacquer tray that held one of the hotel pitchers of ice water.

"You have the government report on the visible supply in that bundle, have you?" asked Jared Whitemore, as soon as he became aware of the boy's presence in the room.

"Yes, sir."

"Let me have it," with an impatient gesture.

Vance had it before his employer in a twinkling.

"Your notes, please," said the operator, after he had studied the report for several minutes.

The boy laid them before him.

"Put the pamphlets down there. Now, take the evening paper and go over there by the window and sit down."

Vance did so, and there was perfect silence in the room for the next half hour, when it was broken by a knock on the door.

“See who that is,” almost snapped Whitmore, jerking his thumb in the direction of the entrance.

Vance found a telegraph boy outside, signed for the yellow envelope and brought it to his employer.

Two more dispatches arrived before the little marble clock on the mantel chimed the hour of nine.

Another half hour of almost perfect silence ensued, during which two more cigar stumps were added to the collection on the dish; and Vance was beginning to wonder why he was being held there by Mr. Whitmore, when the operator rose from his seat, mopped his forehead with his familiar bandana handkerchief and then sat down again.

“Vance.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the boy, springing up.

“Come here.”

The tones were short, sharp and incisive.

“Sit down here alongside of me.”

Vance obeyed this order with military promptness.

“When can you start for Omaha?”

“Sir!” said the boy, almost speechless from amazement.

“I asked you when you could leave for Omaha?” repeated the operator, brusquely.

“By the eight o’clock train in the morning, if you particularly wish it,” answered the astonished lad.

“Very well; make your arrangements to that effect. Now, Vance, I want to speak to you. Heretofore I have always closed my dealings with the elevator people through Mr. Vyce. For reasons which I need not discuss with you I am going to send you to do the business for me this time.”

The boy’s eyes expanded to the size of saucers at this information.

It simply meant a most remarkable expression of confidence on Mr. Whitemore’s part in his youthful office assistant.

Confidence not only in the boy’s business sagacity, but even more so in his integrity, for he would be obliged to handle checks signed in blank for a very large sum of money; just how large would, of course, depend on the amount of corn the options covered.

That it ran into several millions of bushels the lad already knew.

“I am taking this unusual course,” continued Mr. Whitemore, lighting a fresh cigar and regarding Vance keenly, “for several reasons. To begin with, since I started this deal I have in hand I have met with opposition from a most unexpected quarter. It could only have developed through information furnished by some one who had an insight to my plans. In order to test the

accuracy of my suspicions in a certain direction I cut off all information from that quarter. The result has been confusion in the ranks of the opposition. I'm, therefore, convinced I can at any time put my finger on the traitor to my interests. To continue the further development of my scheme, I have decided to substitute you for Mr. Vyce, so far as the settlement of my Western corn options are concerned. During the last five or six weeks you have probably noticed that I have employed you on business of a confidential nature. This was to test you for the purpose I had in view. On one occasion I so arranged matters that you were forced to retain in your possession over Sunday a very large sum of money. I had no doubts as to your honesty, but I wished to see how you would proceed under the responsibility. The result was perfectly satisfactory to me. Vance, I knew your father well. We had many business dealings, and I found him a man on whom I could implicitly rely. I believe you are his duplicate."

"Thank you, sir," said Vance, gratefully, as Mr. Whitmore paused for a moment.

"Now to business. Here is a power of attorney, which will give you all the necessary authority to represent me on this Western trip. Here are your general instructions," and he handed Vance the two typewritten pages Bessie Brown had executed just before she left the office for the night.

"You will go to Omaha first, thence to Kansas City, and so on. Here are letters of introduction addressed to the elevator firms. Some of them are personally acquainted with me. These are the vouchers for the options. You will insist on all settlements at the figures given in the options, which, as you will see, are

below the market quotations. Now, as to the payments of the balances, here is a small check-book of the Chicago National Bank. I have made out and signed sixteen checks in blank, one of each payable to the order of the elevator firm; all you will have to do is to fill in the amount after the difference has been computed. Immediately after each settlement you will mail me by registered letter, care of the Chicago National Bank, the firm's receipt for the amount of money represented by the check, together with the warehouse receipt. Now, read your instructions over carefully, and if there is anything you have to suggest, I will listen to you."

Vance went over the two-page letter and found that it covered every emergency, so far as he could see.

The boy was especially directed to visit certain out-of-the-way places, where elevators, reported as disused or empty, were known to exist, and to ascertain by every artifice in his power whether any corn had been received there for storage during the past three months. This was one of the most important objects of his journey.

"Here are a couple of hundred dollars to cover incidental expenses," said Mr. Whitmore, handing Vance a roll of bills. "I hardly need to tell you that I am reposing an almost unlimited confidence in your honor and business sagacity—a somewhat unusual thing to do with one so young as you. But I am rarely mistaken in my estimate of character, and I feel satisfied you will fill the bill to the letter. I may say right here that you have studied the corn market to advantage. Such details as I have asked you to look into for me you have gone over and reduced to practical results with astonishing clearness and dispatch for

one of your years and limited experience with Board of Trade methods. You seem to be a born speculator, like your father. I have long wished to associate with me a young man of nerve and accurate foresight in whom I could thoroughly depend. You appear to combine all the qualities in question. On this trip you are bound to acquire knowledge of the most confidential nature—information that could not but seriously embarrass me if it became known to my business opponents. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Vance, with a serious face.

“You see how much I depend on your loyalty?”

“You need have no fear but I will fulfil your trust down to the smallest degree,” answered Vance, earnestly.

“I am sure of it, Vance. The proof of the pudding is that I am sending you West on this business. One thing your age, and, I hope, your wit and cautiousness, are particularly adapted to, and that is acquiring the information about the possible contents of those elevators reported to be empty. On the thoroughness of your report as regards these properties will depend one of my most important moves on the corn market.”

“I will find out the truth, if that be within the bounds of possibility.”

“Now, Vance, another thing. Your mother will naturally want to know where you are going, but it will be necessary for you to withhold that information, for I have an idea that as soon as your absence is noted at the office she will be approached on the subject by some one interested in tracing your movements.

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