

## JOHN ARMSTRONG

MECHANIC.

FROM THE BOTTOM TO THE TOP OF THE LADDER.

A Story of How a Man Can Rise in America.

## CHAPTER X.

IS HE A GENTLEMAN?

And she fluttered round her mother like a bird, making her comfortable in a dozen different ways, till the old lady, sitting in state, read out by lamplight the following letter:—

MY DEAR MISS MORTON.—After a silence of nearly two years—a silence enforced on my part by the memory of your mother's wise counsel, given with a delicacy I shall never forget—I venture, with a trembling heart, to ask for the privilege of an interview with you to-day evening. Two years ago, I came to this city a poor country boy, and found in yourself and your dear mother the only friends I ever knew who showed kindness to me for the man within me, disregarding the outer husk of manner and speech, thrown round me by my deficiencies of early education. In my ignorance of the inexorable laws of society in those days, I was foolish enough to hope that I might visit at your home on terms of equality, and I might have gone on to this day trying your patience and courtesy, in my stupidly selfish way, had it not been for the frank and fatherly words of our common friend, Mr. Baldwin. Thanks to his assistance, and to your dear mother's courage in telling me the truth, I am no longer the ignorant boor that you remember two years since, but, I hope, a man able to mingle in the society of educated people, without blushing for his own too obvious deficiencies, or causing his friends to blush for him.

To-day I have compassed a darling object of my life. My dear old father returns from Florida, restored to health through the comforts my earnings have procured for his shattered frame. May I hope that the day may be made doubly happy to me by signaling the beginning of a permanent friendship between us? I shall do myself the honor of calling at your house this evening with my dear father to ask an answer in person.

Your obedient servant,  
JOHN ARMSTRONG,  
Mechanic.

As the old lady put down the letter, which she had read a second time, there was a suspicious twinkle in her eyes, and she said, emphatically:

"He has the feelings of a gentleman, at any rate. Well, we shall see." At that very moment the door-bell rang, and Ella started up, all in a tremor, and cried out:

"Oh, there he is, I've been crying! I'm not fit to be seen. I—"

She dashed out of the room in a flurry of haste, and rushed up stairs, as the little maid-of-all-work came to the door, to whom she whispered:

"Don't let them in till I'm safe out of sight, Kitty—for your life, don't!"

Then she disappeared in the darkness of the landing, where she crouched down and peeped through the banisters, as the door opened, letting in a flood of gas-light from the street lamp at the corner, and disclosing a pair of gentlemen.

One of them, the most venerable and patriarchal figure she had ever seen, with a silvery beard falling to his waist.

She heard the other—a tall, handsome young man, ask politely:

"Is Mr. Morton at home? Mr. Armstrong wishes to see her."

Then the high face in her hands, though no one could see her, and trembled all over, as she heard them ushered into the little parlour, where she had left her mother to face the enemy alone.

As for Mrs. Morton, the old lady was perfectly cool, and received the expected guests with a dignity that was tempered with some surprise, as she said:

"Mr. Armstrong! Well, I must admit, I should hardly have known you. I am very glad to see you. And this is your father, of whom we have heard so much! Mr. Armstrong, you have reason to be very proud of your son, sir."

"Thank you, thank you, madam," returned the venerable-looking veteran; "John was allers a good boy, and they make good men, if the Lord don't take 'em away 'arly. You'll excuse me, madam, for askin', but aren't you the lady of Cannel Morton, of the Hundred Ninety-eight, New York?"

The old lady started and looked at him.

"Yes. Did you serve with my poor Harry?"

"I carried the colors at Gettysburg, madam, and the same bullet what laid me out for the rest of the war, flattened on the cannon's belt-plate, answered the old man, with a touch of pride. 'The cannon, he allers allowed I stopped it from killing him. Waal, I'm right glad to see you, madam. I told John it must be so.'"

And the warmth of old associations once awakened, thawed out the old lady's reserve so that she forgot all about it, and it was not till Ella entered the room, ten minutes later, that she, all of a sudden, realized that John the younger had not spoken a word yet, though he had bowed with stiff formality on her first reception of the pair.

But Ella's entrance produced an immediate change, and woke up the old lady's watchfulness to intense keenness. Her brown eyes flashed like diamonds first on Ella, then on John.

## CHAPTER XI.

FENCING WITH WORDS.

Ella came quietly into the room, with the most indifferent of smiles on her face, and the mother's heart beat high as she thought:

"She won't betray herself to him, whatever she may be. She's my daughter."

Then her glance flashed over John and she forgot all about the old man beside her, in her eagerness to watch how the younger man would act. She swept his figure from top to toe, watching for an awkward movement. Her whole being

seemed to be absorbed in criticism of the most jealously searching kind.

And John? How did he stand the test?

He rose up, the moment the door opened, revealing all the grand lines of his figure, his noble, lionine face in profile to the old lady, very pale indeed, with jaw set, as if choking down something.

He waited till the girl's figure was fairly in sight before he moved, and then bowed profoundly before her, without offering to shake hands, and said quietly:

"Good evening, Miss Morton. I should hardly have known you had me met elsewhere. This is my dear father."

And the old soldier had risen, his son's hand on his shoulder, and Mrs. Morton could not help admitting to herself that two greater-looking men she had never seen in all her life. And there was something in the pride and love of the son for the father so touching and noble, that the frost in Mrs. Morton's heart melted away, and her eyes glistened.

She caught and pressed Ella's hand in hers, as the girl sat down beside her, taking refuge under her mother's wing, and Mrs. Morton gave the hand a warning squeeze. But she had no need to fear; for Ella, at that trying moment, comforted herself marvellously well. She avoided any reference to the past of John the younger, and dashed into conversation with John the older, asking about Florida, about old war topics, about everything she could think of, charming the old man to that degree that he forgot all about his society manners, and prattled away as innocently as a child.

And then John the younger took his seat on the other side of Mrs. Morton, without looking further at Ella, and said quietly:

"I hope from your appearance, that your health has improved, madam. This is a charming little house of yours."

"Thank you. I am not nearly so delicate as I was, Mr. Armstrong. I fancy that work is good for us all in moderation; and I have to look after things at home now Ella is away at school. But you look as well as ever."

"Work is good for us all, as you say. I have no cause to complain, though my time is pretty well occupied. I hope to graduate next week."

"To graduate?" she replied, vaguely. "I don't understand. At what?"

"At the college, madam, as civil and mechanical engineer. You see I had some practical knowledge when I began my course, and down the streets they did the degree a needless distinction; but I have my reason for desiring it. If myself and daughter have nothing better to do, I hope you will attend our commencement at the Academy of music next week. There will be speeches and music, and we hope to make it a pleasant affair. These tickets admit ladies and gentlemen."

Mrs. Morton took the handsomely embossed cards, and turned them over in a doubtful way.

"I should be very much interested, Mr. Armstrong, but the fact is that we live so quietly, and have so few gentleman friends that I should like to trespass upon your escort purposes, that—"

She hesitated and looked at him in a searching way. The keen old lady had indulged in a very broad hint to try the young man, and she noticed that his face had paled suddenly, and that his hand trembled slightly, as he absently figured a book on the table beside him. But he said not a word in answer to the hint, and she bridled up concluding coldly:

"I fear we shall have to miss it, unless we can find an escort who will be willing to take care of an old woman like me."

"I could fancy that any gentleman whom you might select, madam, would feel honored by the preference," said John, very quietly. "If I dared to hope that you would accept the escort of my father and myself on that occasion, I should feel that my visit this evening had resulted very happily; but it is a liberty I could hardly take on so short an acquaintance to make the request."

The old lady stared, and thought to herself:

"So, so. My gentleman's proud. He wants me to ask him outright."

Aloud she responded:

"I should hardly like to inflict so much trouble on you both. Perhaps I can find an escort—Ah, by-the-by, do you know young Mr. Stryker, head of the Excelsior Iron Works?"

It was a spiteful question, for the old lady knew John's history well; but if she expected to produce a start she was disappointed, for he answered quietly:

"Yes, madam. He, too, completes his course and will be the valedictorian of the evening. He is a fluent and vigorous speaker, and it is very rare to find a man of his wealth who is such a hard worker."

Mrs. Morton looked surprised.

"Indeed! I thought he had graduated long ago?"

He hid, in some branches. But it was one of the conditions of his uncle's will that he should take all the degrees before entering into full control of the business, which is, at present, in the hands of trustees."

The old lady nodded and observed:

"So that is what has kept him so straight. I thought that he was one of those young men. Do you know?"

She said this carelessly; but, like all her sex, with a great deal of hidden meaning.

John drew himself up a little.

"We are in the same class, madam. The words were uttered dryly, and the old lady actually colored under them; but recovered herself to say:

"And he is to make the speech of the night. Well, now, I feel interested in that. Ella, my love, did you know that Mr. Stryker is to be the valedictorian at the Academy in the Scientific School commencement? Mr. Armstrong has given me tickets, and if we can find an escort, I think I should like to go to hear Mr. Stryker."

Ella had been talking to John's father all this while, but with one ear open to the other side, and she had been secretly exulting in the way in which Armstrong was holding his own under the keen eyes of her mother. Mrs. Morton seemed to be trying all she could to put the young man out of countenance and exasperate him, with no effect.

The girl turned her head slightly to say:

"Is he to speak? I didn't think he had

it in him, mother. Perhaps Mr. Armstrong would take us, if he has nothing better on his hands for the evening."

"I should deem it an honour," said John, quietly, "if Mrs. Morton wishes for the company of my father and myself."

He spoke very distinctly, looking the old lady in the eye all the time, and she could not help saying:

"Very well. If you will be troubled with us, we shall be pleased to go. I am anxious to meet this young man speak. I suppose that is not in your line, Mr. Armstrong—I mean, you are not a speaker?"

"No, madam."

"What a pity! I think every man who aspires to be called a gentleman should be able to make a speech. It is a supreme test of his abilities. This Mr. Stryker must be a man of talent, more than I thought possible."

Then the old lady, satisfied that she had done all in her power to mortify this audacious young mechanic, who dared to come courting the daughter of his father's colonel, turned away to the elder Armstrong and began to question him about Painted Post and other familiar subjects, leaving John alone.

The young man watched her steadily, with a strange expression on his face, and then began to turn over the leaves of a photograph album, where the first face that met his view was James Stryker's in the place of honour.

To say that John Armstrong's heart did not give an unusual throb when he saw this picture, would be untrue. His thoughts glanced over the past; he thought of the first occasion on which Ella Morton had seen that man; of the insult he had passed on her; and now, to find this very man's face in her album, and to hear her mother singing his praises, stung John to the heart. In his increased knowledge he had not failed to gain increased sensitiveness; and he could not refrain from a frown as he turned over the leaf and came to the next picture—that of Ella herself.

He was roused from a somewhat bitter reverie by the girl's voice next to him: "Do you think it a good likeness?"

John turned back to the first page, with affected unconsciousness, asking: "Do you mean this?"

She flushed slightly.

"Oh, no. That is mother's book, you know. I don't see what made her put that in front, except that it is a very handsome picture."

John looked at it steadily.

"All yes, of very handsome men. I don't mind your duty, my boy. I'll mount duty over the common waggons while you're at the front. Some one's got to do it, and I ain't fit for active service no more. Take keer of yourself."

Then John strode away on a cold March morning, took a cross-town car, and landed within a block of the Excelsior Works, at which he proposed to take a look before going to the Vulcan shop.

As soon as he turned the corner towards the Excelsior, he saw that matters were in a bad state. The shop was silent, a clear space had been made on the sidewalk in front, which was patrolled by some thirty or forty policemen, but the opposite side of the street, to the middle of the roadway, was occupied by a dense crowd of men, from which went up a low buzz of voices. Those men were the strikers.

John walked quietly down the street on the open sidewalk, taking his time, and looking about him. The gate of the works was closed, and a little knot of policemen was in front, the men swinging their clubs by the string, and eyeing the crowd on the other side of the street as if longing for an opportunity to use their weapons.

As Armstrong approached, a hush fell on the crowd. He knew that the men recognized him, but he walked on until he came to the gate, where one of the policemen called:

"Go out into the middle of the street. No one ain't allowed here."

John looked at him dryly.

"I beg your pardon. I thought this was the proper place to walk."

"None of your lip. Move on," was the only answer of the knight of the club; and every man of the squad instantly clutched his weapon and turned on the young man with a scowl.

A laugh came from the other side of the street, and a voice cried out:

"Club him well. He's a Socialist."

But as John merely obeyed the order of the policemen without another word, the laugh became general and ended in a hoot of derision, amid which the young man heard the same voice call out:

"Armstrong, the fighter! Coward, by heavens! Ashamed of his pals!"

John knew the voice well. It was that of Birch, once foreman of the Vulcan Company riveters, whose place he had taken. The man had since, as he heard, been taken on at the Excelsior Works, and had become the head of some labor club, of which vague reports were received.

He made no reply, but was going on to his own shop, when a terrible yell burst from the crowd of men behind him, followed by a hubbub that told of some new object of interest, and as he wheeled round he saw them make a general move down the street, while the policemen gathered into a knot and began to flourish their clubs, as if in fear of an attack.

Looking for the cause of it he saw, down the street, another party of police coming, with the tall figure of Jim Stryker in the middle of the group, at whom the crowd were yelling all sorts of abuse.

Then came a rush of the guardian police down the sidewalk, scattering the crowd, and a hurried run of the whole party to the gates of the shop, where the sones began to fly, and the police were finally driven into the works, from which they began to fire into the crowd with revolvers.

"I knew it would end that way," said John to himself. "Hope Handy won't take the same course. Time I was off."

And without more ado he hurried away to the Vulcan Company's shop, hearing the shouts of the rioters growing fainter and fainter behind him.

Ten minutes after he was in front of the Vulcan Company's building, where another crowd was gathered, and where the police were also grouped in force.

As he came up, the strikers began to shout his name, and came running to meet him with a confusion of cries, of which many were decidedly menacing.

John's heart beat quickly for the first

time in months. He saw that the men were much excited, and guessed the cause when he saw the figure of Handy on the office steps, the manager waving his arms wildly to the police, and seeming very angry himself.

He quickly proceeded on his way, however, and as the first man came up, greeted them with a cheerful:

"Good morning, boys. Glad to see you all. What's the trouble? I've been away, you know. What's up?"

They seemed to be rather taken aback by his coolness; for they halted silently and formed a staring ring, in the midst of which he walked forward, a smile on his lips, till the crowd impeded his further advance, when he asked again:

"Well, what's the matter, men? Why are you not at work to-day? Has the company stopped the machines?"

"No, but we've stopped work," cried a voice in the crowd, "and we ain't goin' on again without the rise. Do you hear that? We ain't afraid of you nor old Gimlet Eyes, nor the cops neither. You ain't no better nor the rest of us, if you do put on airs."

John heard a buzz in the crowd, as if the speaker's words were approved, and he answered, smilingly:

"Who said I was any better than you? I never pretended it myself."

"No, nor you hadn't better," answered the voice, which John knew to belong to a hand who had not been in the shop more than a month.

The young man looked over the faces of the crowd, and spied Steve Barker and Mike Hennessy, not far off, both looking as if puzzled what to do. By a sort of intuition he knew that they were on his side, though they had joined the strike. Steve, in the course of the last two years had learned to read and write, by John's solicitation, and had become foreman of the riveters, while Mike Hennessy, had become a fast friend of his hero.

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