

JOHN ARMSTRONG

MECHANIC;

FROM THE BOTTOM TO THE TOP OF THE LADDER.

A Story of How a Man can Rise in America.

CHAPTER VIII. THE LADDER OF LOVE.

'There! Yes, you do. You spoke good enough English there, save that you meant "exactly" for "rightly." I mean this: Your education now is enough to answer for the foreman of a gang; but suppose you were promoted to be head of a shop, could you write a proper business letter? Could you make the calculations for an estimate on an engine? Can you draw?'

'Yes, sir, yes,' interrupted John, eagerly. 'I can draw. I've drawn afore now.'

'Mr. Baldwin looked at his watch. "Well, you're a queer compound. I must say of knowledge and ignorance, shrewd sense and child-like innocence. I've no more to say. If you want to join the night class, it opens next week, and I shall be happy to help you. That's all. Good night."

And he turned away, leaving John in a state of puzzlement which lasted all night, and from which he had not fully emerged next morning when he went, according to promise, to call on Mrs. Morton at 143, Ashley street.

He arrived there about ten o'clock in a bashful mood. His hands and feet had never seemed so large before, nor his clothes so ill made. Not that they were dirty or shabby; for he had spent a good deal of spare cash in smartening up, and looked respectable enough, but he had noticed the difference between the cut of his clothes and those of other men. As he passed No. 81, he saw Jim Stryker, in the carelessly elegant dress of a well-to-do young man, lounging on the steps, apparently recovered from his drubbing of a week before.

John looked so handsome, and was attired so faultlessly, that John's heart sank within him as he thought: "I whipped him, to be sure, but he's above me for all that."

It was in this humble frame of mind that he timidly rang at the basement door of No. 143, and in another moment stood in a darkened room, hat in hand, nodding and smiling awkwardly, before some one he could hardly see after the glare of the street.

But he heard a very gentle voice which welcomed him kindly, found himself sitting on the edge of a chair, nervously answering questions about his home, and at last made out the figure of a very handsome old lady, with snowy hair and large brown eyes, who was talking to him as if she had known him all his life, while Ella Morton, in a plain, neat dress, was sitting by her mother, smiling at him.

'Did you manage to arrange that little matter about sending your money?' the old lady was asking him. 'Ella told me that you were a stranger here, and wanted some information.'

'Yes, ma'am—thankee, ma'am,' stammered John. 'A gentleman showed me—a very kind gent too, ma'am—one Mr. Baldwin. Praps you might know him, ma'am, bein' painted like a horse. When he began to speak the old lady's face had become anxious for a moment, but as soon as he mentioned the name she looked relieved, and observed: "I'm so glad. Yes, I know Mr. Baldwin. He's a very worthy, good man. You could not have a better friend. In fact, he's a friend to every one who needs it. Poor Ella and I owe him a great deal. We have been hard put to it at times, to live on the poor wages of a seamstress; but, thanks to Mr. Baldwin, Ella begins to teach school here in September, as soon as vacation is over. I'm very glad you've found Mr. Baldwin."

John listened with open ears to every word, and then said, timidly: "He seemed to be a nice man, ma'am, but I don't rightly know what he meant—something," he said to me last night. Praps you might tell me, ma'am. Scuse me if I make too free; but somehow I feel as if I were talking to my mother, ma'am—leastwise—that is, I never had no other, ma'am, not to say to remember her, but—"

"I understand you perfectly," she replied, very softly, as she stirred in his agitation. "Poor boy—poor boy! Yes; yes; think of me as if I were a mother, Mr. Armstrong. I love you—we both owe you—so much, that if we can, I'll give you my heart, as well as both of us."

"What did he say?" Then John told her, as well as he could, what Mr. Baldwin had said, concluding: "I put it to you, ma'am, please tell me plain. I ain't got no feelin's to hurt. Do it make you feel bad to hear me talking different to what you do? Do you think I could learn to be a mechanic like you and the old lady?"

The old lady colored slightly, and looked at Ella, who, on her part, had her eyes full of tears, and cried out: "No, no—as you are! Be good, brave, and natural. Who cares for fine speech when the heart's all right? If it isn't true, mother? The contentment I've seen in a poor man like a knight of old times! Just as you are, for yours is a noble, noble heart."

John flushed up and choked, but kept his eyes fixed on the old lady, and said softly: "Don't mind her, ma'am. She's got a heart like a dove. Tell me the thing straight, ma'am. I wouldn't be afraid. Then the old lady fixed her motherly eyes on him, and said gently: "I don't like to speak on a subject like this, Mr. Armstrong. It is extremely delicate ground. But if you insist, then I would say to you only this: Take the advice Mr. Baldwin gave you. He was once a common laborer in the dock, and you have far less to learn than he had."

John Armstrong watched her hungrily, and when she had finished his rose up, looking very pale, saying, in a choked voice: "Thankee, thankee. That's your mother's word. I'll do it."

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than one? There are plenty of hacks here.

The old man laughs.

"Trunk! Catch an old sojer with a trunk, John. No, no; I travel light, boy, so I kin break camp at a moment's notice. I've got my old knapsack, and nothing else. Don't want no hack. The old boys used to march twenty miles a day regular in July, and now I'm well I don't want no hack."

Then he turns to the ship and calls: "Hello, Charley! You sailor man. Heave me that ere knapsack on the rail."

And forthwith comes flying through the air a venerable black knapsack, all bulging out with its contents, with the number 198 on the back.

"That's the regular old thing. How we used to hate it once, and carry nothing but a blanket and a gun, to save weight; but I tell you there ain't no discount on it to hold something more all the time."

And he is about to adjust it, when his son says gravely: "Not now, father. It's not necessary. We don't use them in this city, and folks will stare at us. We'll ride in the hack, if you don't object, for we've two or three miles to drive to our boarding-house."

"All right, John—you know best," says the old man. "But I've cost you a heap of money already, and I thought we might as well save hack here, now I'm well."

His son makes no answer, save a pressure of the arm and a fond smile, as he carries the knapsack himself, and leads his father to a carriage, when they are driven off rapidly up town to a boarding-house very different from the tenement in which John had lodged two years before, and where the old man is soon installed in a large room, with all the modern conveniences, at which he stares, in his simple wonder and awe, in a low tone:

"Oh, John, didn't it cost a heap to live in this grand place?"

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