

JOHN STRONG, CIVIL ENGINEER

Two hundred miles from a railroad—a waste of snow, rock, and timber—sleeping in a rabbit-skin blanket strapped over your shoulder during the day—living on a small store of provisions carried in the same blanket. Does the picture make you shiver? It was a part of John Strong's life before a Pullman could cross the wilderness.

By ALAN SULLIVAN

ANGUS STRICKLAND had a nose for good business. His friends said it admiringly—his rivals grudgingly, and he himself admitted it complacently. It was not only for business—but good business. He had solved to his own satisfaction the commercial fourth dimension, and by some subtle instinct knew along what lines profit lay.

And so, for years, through many channels, dug by himself with unerring judgment, flowed steadily the tide of his fortune. It had all seemed so easy, so logical, almost so natural to him, that when John Strong, Civil Engineer, had calmly announced himself a suitor for the hand of Laura, his only child and daughter, Strickland had received the news with a puzzled look of incredulity. To him, as an up-to-date railway president, an engineer was one who ran survey lines, put in stakes, and squinted through the instrument, at the rate of three hundred dollars per month. He regarded such a one as a necessary adjunct to railway construction, but an adjunct to be dispensed with as soon as possible; and yet he was actually trying to explain to Strong—why, it was laughable. The latter was looking at him with quiet, steady eyes across his library table.

"Look here, Strong," he said, with an almost brutal frankness, "you want to marry my daughter. You make, if you hold a steady job, three thousand dollars a year. Do you know she spends that in clothes? I'm not criticizing you—but the thing is ridiculous, and Laura ought to have more sense."

Strong coloured a little. "I prefer to leave the question of Laura's sense to yourself. She knows my means and my prospects. She doesn't ask anything from you; she is satisfied with what I can do for her."

"She may be," snapped Strickland, "but I'm not. I always thought an engineer was supposed to have common sense—at least that's what I hire them for. Ever work for any of my roads?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"Well, I reckon you never will. Go back to the woods, young man—that's where you belong. I'll attend to my daughter."

Strong had risen, and was holding himself under absolute control: "Is this your last word?"

"I guess it is—want any more?"

"Just one thing, Mr. Strickland—this is the beginning of this matter, not the end of it. Good evening!"

Strickland gazed at the closing door, and almost snorted in astonishment; then he pressed a button beside the fireplace. "Ask Mrs. Strickland if she will come here for a minute," he said to the answering maid, and, in the interval of waiting, stamped up and down the length of the room.

His wife appeared, a bright, well-dressed little woman, birdlike eyes that took in the situation at a glance. "Well, Angus, is it over? Laura told me he was coming."

"Yes, it's over; but there's an idea in that young man's head that it isn't—that's where he makes a mistake. Have you got Laura back to her senses? That was your job."

"No, my dear, I haven't. Laura has adopted a high and lofty tone, which makes me almost apologetic. Mr. Strong has been filling her head with all sorts of things. She says she wants to go out and really live, and see how other people live. She thinks she has been wasting her life in selfishness, and altogether I'm rather lost. Do you know, Angus, she's really in earnest for once in her life, and I'm sorry it's about this."

"She's not the only one in earnest, either; better bring her in to see me."

For the next few minutes Strickland reviewed with growing disapproval all the stock arguments and paternal admonitions which apply to such an interview as he was about to give, and finally, with characteristic independence, determined to proceed along what was, to him, a totally novel line. When his daughter entered, he was relieved to see no sign of undue agitation, for he hated a scene; but

he noted, with a certain misgiving, a quiet air of purpose which had settled on her delicate face. Her big brown eyes looked straight into those of the father she had worshipped all her life, as she said calmly:

"Well, dad?"

Strickland's habitual mode of getting straight at the heart of things asserted itself. He put a hand on the girl's shoulder, and said:

"Laura, you're not fair."

She stared at him, with lifted eyebrows. "Oh, you mean to you, for wanting to leave you?"

"No, I don't, but to Mr. Strong."

"Father, what do you mean? I want to marry him; isn't that fair to him?"

"No, it isn't, daughter. Mr. Strong can no more afford you than he can a French limousine with an imported chauffeur. You would break his bank in six months. His income is three thousand dollars a year; your bill at Corinne's last year was three thousand two hundred dollars. You accept all these things as a matter of course—which it happens they are to you; but they are not to Mr. Strong. That's one of the ways in which I say you are not fair, and there are others."

The girl's face flushed, but she fronted him bravely. "Dad, part of what you say is true, but it's all changed now. Have you noticed Corinne's bills the last six months?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"Well, that's because there weren't any. Listen, dad! I want to tell you, and I do want you to understand. You and mother have been devoted to me, and you would have spoiled me, if it hadn't been for Mr. Strong."

"Much obliged to your friend!"

"Now don't, dad—just listen. A year ago I was the most self-satisfied creature in America, and now I'm ashamed of myself. You and mother gave me a hundred times too much, except in one way—you didn't make me think. My mind was starving, and then Mr. Strong just interested me at first. He talked about things, not about himself; but I realized what a lot there is to be done and how few people to do it, and he—well, when I was ashamed, I began to care, and now, dad, I want to help ever so little, and I want to begin my helping with him."

"You can do more with me behind you than with him, and you ought to see that. If it's money—a very useful article nowadays—you can have all you want; more than you would ever hear about as John Strong's wife."

"Dad, dear, don't you see? I want some one beside me—not behind me!"

"Look here, little girl, it's no use arguing; now, let's be friends. Promise me you won't do anything foolish."

"That depends on what you mean by foolish. Think it over, daddy."

"I've done all my thinking; ask your mother to come here again."

Laura looked at him with appealing eyes, which he somewhat studiously avoided, and, as she went out, said: "Dad, don't forget—I love John Strong."

MRS. STRICKLAND came up to the fireside and stood with her eyes fixed on her husband. Then she said, "Well, Angus, what of it?"

"Nothing, Maria, nothing. I think she's lonely, that's all, and probably this impossible man came along at the psychological time. She'll get over it, if we get her away, and I think you two had better get over to Europe next week."

His wife sighed a little. They had been so much abroad that she had looked forward with delight to this, their first domestic winter for years.

"Angus, dear, I'm tired of Europe, and so is Laura, without you. Can't you come?"

"Simply impossible. I ought to spend all my time at Ottawa; there are big things in the wind, and I can't afford to be out of them."

Mrs. Strickland hesitated a little, and then put her hands on his shoulders, and looked up into his

face. Her lips quivered a little, as her husband smoothed back from her forehead the hair which was just tinged with gray.

"What is it, little woman?"

"Angus, I don't want to go without you. If the boy had lived"—she caught her breath a little—"it would have been all right—he could have gone—but—but, as it is—" And the rest was inarticulate.

Into Strickland's heart rushed the memory of a day which each remembered in sacred silence, and he drew his wife to him.

"Don't worry, dear, don't worry. I'll go."

II.

TWO months later, three men leaned over a flat office table and traced out a faintly dotted line that meandered across a big blue print. The electric lights shone on its surface, and revealed a maze of conjectural lakes and rivers, traversed here and there by straight, uncompromising meridians, that started near the north shore of Lake Superior and ended abruptly some two hundred miles to the north.

Jenkins, one of the three, a small, short man with gray hair and blue eyes, stood up stiffly, put his hand to the small of his back, and groaned. "If it's as hard to explore as it is to look at, it's a terror. But what's the use—the thing is an impossibility! The charter expires in four months, and there is not a mile located, and not a stake driven; and as for that story of Alderson's about copper and pulpwood—well, it's a good story. Call the deal off, boys—life's too short."

Alderson took him up like a steel trap. "Life's what you make it, and the deal's not off. If you have cold feet, say so. I'll buy you out—here and now."

Jenkins smiled good-naturedly. "You're always going off at half-cock, old man; it's a gamble and you know it, and there's good money here in the street if you want it. That summer trip of yours has upset your balance."

The others laughed—for Alderson had skirted the starting point of the proposed railway a few months before, in luxurious comfort. Extra canoes and packers had kept him in fresh butter and other supplies, and he had returned with some samples of native copper, which a guide told him had come from up country. It was true that the charter expired in four months. The four promoters had never regarded it very seriously, and money had been too tight even to move in the matter. But a new transcontinental line had been begun, and the charter was now of value; their road, if it was to be a road, would be a valuable north and south feeder to the trunk line. Of this they were all now aware; but, as Jenkins said, the time was short, and the first frosts of winter were already stiffening the bare and yellow ground.

He went on, speaking this time slowly and seriously: "Alderson, do you consider it possible to locate two hundred miles of railway and file location plans in Ottawa within four months from to-day? No living man has been through that country—it's blank, blind, staring wilderness."

"It is possible—just possible—no more," said Alderson, "and there is one man who has been through—what part I don't know. I only heard of it to-day. That's why I called this meeting."

"Who is the man, and where and what is he?"

"John Strong, locating engineer and explorer, here in the city. He got in from the West yesterday. I heard of him from my son, who worships him dumbly—was on survey under him and speaks of him as the chief."

"Can we get him—will he go?" came from the other two.

"I reckon you can get him at the City Club—at least, he was to dine there."

Jenkins stepped across to the telephone, and, in a few seconds, was talking to John Strong. The speaker was too well known to need any introduction to the engineer, but as the others watched his face they saw a shade of disappointment come over it.

"But, Mr. Strong, it's not a question of terms. We need you for four months; make your own terms—we accept them." He listened a moment, and the corners of his mouth dropped. "Hold the line a moment, please," and turned to the others. "Strong says he's just in from the woods, and that clean linen feels so good he wants more of it."

"One minute," said Alderson. "Tell him you are sorry it can't be done—that you were afraid the time was too short. I know him."

Jenkins did as he was bid. Suddenly his eyebrows went up. "Oh, all right, sir. That's very kind of you. We shall be very glad to see you. Room three twenty-two, Provincial Bank Building,