

JOHN ARMSTRONG, MECHANIC;

OR, FROM THE BOTTOM TO THE TOP OF THE LADDER.

A Story of How a Man Can Rise in America.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOWEST ROUND. "CLANG, clang, clang!! Clangity-clang, clang, clang!!"

The hammers ran on iron plate and rivet-head all over the huge shed that held so many hundreds of grimy workmen, and bore outside, in letters twelve feet high, the legend—

"EXCELSIOR IRON WORKS."

The din was deafening. Men could only talk together by looks and signs, words being useless, unless one bellowed in the ear of the other, when it sounded like a far-off whisper.

All over the shed men were at work, and the only idle person to be seen was a tall, awkward-looking young fellow, who stood at the door, peering into the dark interior of the great workshop, as if he wished he were among the workers.

Outside, in the dusky glare of the street, all was hot and listless; for it was the middle of July. Within, all was dark, save for the red glow of the forge and furnace, while smoke-begrimed men worked amid the fires, like gnomes in a cavern in the lower world.

Yet the man outside wished to be inside. He watched with intense interest the huge cranes that carried masses of glowing metal from furnace to anvil.

When a dozen men, armed with sledges flew at these masses and attacked it fiercely, he positively panted with excitement.

"Wouldn't I like to be one of them!" he muttered. "Oh, if I could only get a job here!"

He looked pale and thin, though his name was big-boned and powerful, and his dress had that indescribable awkward slouch that marks the rough countryman, from the lord of a thousand acres to the day labourer.

"Clang—clangity-clang," went the hammers, louder than ever, when he noticed a man in grey clothes come slowly towards the door, among the engines and workmen, looking right and left under his grizzled eyebrows, not unkindly, but with that indescribable air of preoccupation and care that marks the master of such a complex organization as a modern machine shop; and the loungee said to himself, half aloud,

"That's the boss, I reckon. All on em winks like fury, till he's past, and then squints arter him, like they was afraid he'd turn round on 'em. Wonder if I dare ax him for work?"

And he felt his heart jumping violently, this thin, gawky countryman, as the man in grey clothes approached the door, he keen glance scanning everything as he came.

The loungee at the door fell back a pace and looked hungrily at the man in grey, gulping down his embarrassment, feeling his pulse beat like trip hammers, and murmuring all the while:

"I must ax him—I must. It's my only chance. 'Tain't begun to ax work." But his own words did not prevent him from trembling like a leaf; and when the man in grey came to the door and cast those sharp eyes on him, he flushed scarlet, and could not say a word till the other turned away again, and stood with his back to the loungee, looking at the men inside.

Then the loungee saw the man in grey take out his watch, hold it open in his hand a few seconds, and make a silent signal.

"Who saw the signal he knew not; but in the same instant the loud shriek of a steam whistle pierced the sultry air outside; and, as if by magic, the clang of the hammers ceased with a crash, as the workmen threw them down on the anvils. The whizzing wheels stopped with a harsh, scraping sound on their leather bands, and a low buzz of voices and trample of feet emanated as the men came pouring out of the shop at dinner hour, or hunted up their dinner cans in dark, cool corners of the great shop.

The superintendent looked dryly at him. "You've got quite a tongue, when it gets going, haven't you—what's your name?"

"John Armstrong, sir." "Humph! And you say you're good at forging, John? Used to trip-hammers?"

John answered in monosyllables now, for the superintendent's comment on his talking had shut him up.

"Very well, I'll try what you're made of at once. I've had men come here before with big stories of what they could do. Go and—no, not yet. How did you get to New York?"

"Walked here, sir." "Indeed! Had you no money?" "Not much, sir. I'm only just over my time, and dad bein' sick tuk all my wages as it's like to, for some years."

And John sighed slightly, then looked up. "I wouldn't mind if it kep' me ragged, sir, if there were a chance of his gettin' well; but that's the wurst on it. Doctor sez he'll never get no better, 'thout we kin send him to Florida; and it so be I kin git stiddy work here, mebbe I mout' get a chance."

"What's the matter with him?" asked the superintendent, coldly; for he was prone to disbelieve men, from his experience. "Old wound, sir. Dad fut in the war. I was only a shaver then, so I kin show you I ain't no slouch."

The superintendent bent his brows. "What will you do?" "Mythin' you sets me at, sir."

"What was that?" "Whatever the work's worth, sir. A man in a strange place is like a cat in a strange garret. Got to smell round 'fore he knows where he be."

The superintendent smiled. "I want this shop swept out at night. I'll give you fifty cents a night for the job. It will take you from four to six hours. Do you take the offer?"

John looked round, saw that the work was at least as laborious as the other had described it, and answered:

"I'll take it, sir. Glad to git it. Kin I git any day work too?"

He seemed not at all backward, now he had once begun, and the man in grey gave a short laugh, as he answered:

"It's dinner time now. Did you ever try riveting a boiler?" "Yes, sir. Patchin' 'em. Nothin' more."

"Very well." Then he turned to the shop. "Barker, come here."

A workman rose from his dinner, and came forward, to whom the man in grey said quietly:

"That helper of yours is a slouch. I see several loose rivets in that boiler. It won't b' the inspector, you know."

"Be that all, sir?" "No. I want you to try this young man this afternoon. He says he has worked at patching before. See if he can rivet tight. If he can, send away the other fellow."

Barker nodded, and then eyed John with a sort of sullen disfavor that spoke volumes, as he answered:

"All right, sir. We'll see what he can do. This way, young greeney."

Then he slouched back to his dinner as the superintendent nodded to John and went away, while the other found himself positively engaged at last, in the house of his dreams, a first-class machine shop, where they made boilers, engines, locomotives, steam pumps, and all the multifarious contrivances that go towards the making up of our modern civilization.

Poor John! He felt very lonely and hungry that day. He had eaten no breakfast, for his pockets were nearly empty, and he had to save money enough for a night's lodging. He sat down on a heap of scrap iron and looked wistfully round the shop. A few men were sitting about in groups over their dinner; but most had gone home. He caught more than one glance cast his way, but none were very friendly.

The workman, as a rule, is jealous of a stranger, who dresses differently from himself, and John Armstrong had a "country" written all over his clothing; while there was something in the shrewd expression of his face, despite his homely speech, that made them see might prove a man to rise above others in the shop.

As for Barker, who had recently arrived from the mother country, he was a narrow-minded fellow, and did not deem it a matter of necessity to speak to his new helper beyond a curt—

"Sit there till I want you." At last John noticed a young man some distance off in the shop beckoning; and when he went there, he found three smart, intelligent-looking fellows, evidently above the rest, who greeted him with cordiality. One of them said:

"You look tired and hungry, young fellow. We three always meet together and live well. We've plenty to spare—dig in with us. Brothers of labour should eat together."

John needed no second invitation. The tears rushed to his eyes at the unlooked-for kindness, as he said:

"Thankee, I will. Tell the truth, I hain't eat nothin' since last night, and walked fifteen miles to-day."

Then he fell on a thick slice of bread and meat with a relish that showed he told the truth, and scanned his new comrades, between bites, with satisfaction.

They were all young fellows, like himself, and had a way of speaking unlike men who toiled with their hands alone. Their fare seemed to be quite luxurious for mechanics, and they had a large tin can full of beer, which one of them offered him presently, saying:

"It won't hurt you. It's only lager!" But John shook his head.

"Thankee kindly, but I never tech it. I seen lots of fellers begun on that, as ended up in whiskey, and I don't need it. Guess there's water round, ain't there?"

"Lots of it," returned one of the men. "Over by the tap you can get all you want, such as it is. But I say, what's your name?" "Mine's Armstrong. Jack Munson. This is Tom Wheeler, and that fellow's Jim Stryker."

And my name's John Armstrong," returned our hero. "I reckon we'll be friends. What mout' you work at, may I ax?"

Munson laughed. "Oh, sez, what they call gentlemen."

John looked round cheerfully. "Guess so. But I'll hev to ax the boss to let me sleep in the shop to-night."

"Why?" asked Munson. "Because I won't git through till it's too late to find a boardin'-place. Lucky it's hot weather."

"You can come and board with us, if you like," returned Stryker. "We've got a room with four beds, and they charge us only four dollars a week, if we don't take dinner home. It's only a block."

John flushed up. "You're mighty kind, sir—mighty kind. But I'm only a plain country boy, and you're gentlemen. Mebbe we moutn't agree over well. I ain't one to shove in where I ain't wanted."

Against the young men looked at each other, and Stryker observed:

"As you please. We mean the offer in good faith, and we'll help you clean up the first night, to shorten the work, if you like. Do you take the offer?"

John could hardly believe it, asking:

"Do you young gentles mean it?" "Of course," answered Munson, a little impatiently, "or we wouldn't make it. Do you accept?"

"Gents," said John, gravely, "you're all mighty kind to a stranger—mighty kind. I'll take your offer 'bout the board, and say thankee kindly. But as for helpin' in the sweepin', 'twouldn't be fair, I gets pay for it, and I ain't the man to shirk the work. I'll hev to do that alone."

As he spoke, the whistle shrieked again, and the men began to pour into work. He went back to his place by Barker, and never noticed that Stryker was looking after him with a decided smile on his handsome face.

CHAPTER II. THE LADDER SHAKES.

That afternoon John Armstrong worked hard and earned golden opinions, even from the usually sullen and reticent Barker, whose helper he was.

Barker put him on at once to clinch rivets, making the other helper, whom the superintendent had stigmatized as a "slouch," bring the rivets from the forge. "For some time Barker scowled over his work as usual till the new helper had got to the end of a line of rivets, when he inspected them keenly, and a faint grin crossed his harsh features."

"Just at that same moment the man in grey, who always made his appearance when he was not expected, came up to the side of the boiler, glanced over it with his sharp eyes, nodded approval, and motioned Barker to go on with the work. Then he vanished amid the workmen, and they saw him no more till the six o'clock whistle blew, and the clang of hammers ceased like magic."

Then, and not till then, John began to feel a little wistful and lost, as the workmen washed up and prepared to go home, while he was a stranger to all except the three young men, whom he could now see nowhere.

As he looked round, old Barker, with a sort of gruff cough, asked:

"Got a sleepin' place, mate?" "I think so," that is, explained John, "these three young men take you for their boardin' house. But I don't seem to see 'em just now," he added.

"Barker scowled as he growled out: "Gemmen 'ands. There's no gemmen in this country. Well, have your way. I was goin' to ax you to come to my place, and my place is a better one, as reasonable, 'fore if you want to go with 'em, go. Mebbe you'll wish yourself back wit' Steve Barker."

Without another word he slouched away to the washing-trough, leaving John too much surprised to know what to say. The Englishman seemed to be offended at being thus taken up by a stranger; and when they had found one another, he said abruptly:

"You're a better workman than I thought, Armstrong. You attend to your business, and do one thing at a time. Now, then, about this sweepin'. The night watchman has done it hitherto; but he left us yesterday, and the new man won't undertake the sweepin' alone, as he doesn't understand the difference between scraps and rubbish. Now, I shall have to hold you responsible for this. Last year we lost several hundred dollars worth of scrap iron in the sweepings, and have reason to suspect that there was collusion between the sweeper and some outside party. Consequently, you and the watchman will be here all night. If you like to sleep in the building, I'll let you have the sofa here in the office. It will save you money in board. But—"

Here the old man raised his finger with an air of deep meaning.

"If I ain't trustin' a stranger on the strength of his honest face, if you fail me, it will be bad for you. If you prove a good man, you shall rise. I promise you that. I came to New York forty years ago poorer than you, and now I'm head of this firm. That's all. Now, have you got a boardin' place?"

"I don't," exactly John, sir. And John told him the history of the offer of the 'gentlemen hands.' "What were their names?" asked the other, bending his brows.

"Munson, Wheeler, and Stryker," said John, promptly. "Do you know where they live, sir?"

The superintendent asked the counter question of him:

"Do you know who I am?" "The boss, sir, I s'pose." "Yes, but not names, I mean."

"No, sir."

"I thought not. Well, I am the head of the firm of Stryker Brothers, and that young James Stryker is my nephew, who would be living in my house to-day if he could behave in a decent manner. What did he offer to do? Tell me all."

John began to feel alarmed. "Nothin' but kindness, sir—nothin' in the world. Offered to take me to board at four dollars, and turn to and help me sweep the shop."

"And what did you say?" "Told 'em I were much obliged, and I'd board with 'em; but couldn't take 'em for doin' the work I'm paid to do alone, sir. That's all."

"Very good. Now you'll want to go to your inn. Take the young man's offer. He lives with the other two, at No. 81, Ashley street—the block next to the north of this. After supper come here. The night watchman is called Sheppard. He will let you in. Then, as I said, you can sleep here after work, or go home, as you please. Good night. Ah, stop. You'll get two dollars and a quarter a day as riveter, and fifty cents a night for the sweepin'. We pay twice a month. Next pay day is Saturday, so you need not run into debt. That's all. Goodnight."

And John Armstrong, following his new employer out of the shop, calculating his weekly wages in his head all the way, and feeling quite cheerful over the prospect ahead of him.

Out in the street he found very few people near the shop, and old Mr. Stryker preceded him to the next corner, where he pointed down the street to a house, where some people were sitting on the front steps, and said:

"That's the place. Good night, Armstrong."

"Good night, sir."

And they separated, John going towards the boarding house, saying to himself:

"It's Monday now. That a half a day, I'll hev five days and a half at two twenty-five. That's eleven and a quarter—twelve thirty seven. Then the sweepin'—six nights at fifty cents. That's three more. Fifteen dollars, three shillin'." Take out four for board. That's kinder high. Oughter throw in washin', I reckon. That's seven dollar, three shillin'." I'll hev a deal ten. Oh, glory—ain't I happy!"

And just as he came to the foot of the steps where the three 'gentlemen hands' were sitting, he looked up, to find them all staring over his head at the opposite side of the street, not one of them saying so much as 'Good evening.'

However, John was nowise bafled, so he stopped and said:

"'Good evenin' gents. I've come, so if you hain't no objections, to see 'bout that board as you spoke o'."

Jim Stryker looked down at him with an air of affected surprise.

"Why, it's Armstrong! Let me see—oh, yes, I'd forgotten. Yes, Mrs. Shafer's inside. Guess she's got a room. You can ask her. She's getting supper ready now, I think."

Then he turned his head away, and the three looked across the street again, as if John Armstrong were a fly on the wall, not worth noticing.

Our hero felt as if some one had treated him to a shower bath of ice-water. The change from cordiality to coldness had come so suddenly that he could not comprehend it. He turned red, then pale, and had almost turned away, in his disappointment, when a thin woman, with yellow face and gray hair, came through the passage to open the door, and said, in a tired way:

"Supper's ready, gentlemen. Come in."

The three 'gentlemen hands' got up and strolled in, without saying "Thank you," while Armstrong, a new-born feeling of anger rising in his breast, went up the steps and said to the woman:

"Excuse me, marm. Be you Mrs. Shafer?" She looked at him scrutinizingly.

"Yes, young man. What is it?" "I'm workin' at the iron works," said John. "Kin you take me to board, and what'll you charge for meals? I don't want no room. I sleep in the shop."

"Would you like to have a dinner thrown in as part of the bargain?" "If you please, marm."

"Forty cents a day, young man, and I don't take nothin' out of it hardly. It's a hard time a lone woman has, keepin' a cheap boardin' house now."

John made a mental calculation.

"I'll take it marm. I kin pay you for two days ahead, but after that I'll hev to wait till pay day on Saturday. You kin ax Mr. Stryker if I ain't got a steady job, but I'm kinder out of money jest now, 'owin' to a sick dad as I hev up at Painted Post."

"Painted Post?" echoed Mrs. Shafer, her face changing. "Good gracious, be you from Painted Post? Why, I were raised in Stoboon county. What's your name?"

John told her, and it turned out that she knew his father; so that cordial relations were at once established, and within five minutes Armstrong was eating supper down stairs, with the landlady closely questioning him about the life and fortunes of every man, woman, and child near the celebrated town of Painted Post.

As for John, his heart warmed towards the poor, overworked boarding-house mistress as the first townsman he had found in the wilderness of New York, and he forgot all about the lapse of time till the clock struck seven, and he jumped up, exclaiming:

"Time to git to sweepin', Mrs. Shafer. See you to breakfast, marm. Six, I s'pose. Good night, marm."

Then he hurried away, intending to go to the shop, but hardly got out of the house when he saw Stryker on the sidewalk barring the way of a poorly-dressed girl who was trying to get past him, and looking pale and frightened.

"Don't be in such a hurry, my dear," the young man was saying. "If you will only take my arm, I'll see you safe home—indeed I will."

The girl stopped, panting and glaring at him, as she said, very low:

"Oh, sir, if you are a gentleman, please—"

Stryker stepped before her again as she tried to evade him, and the next moment John Armstrong, who had been looking on as if dazed, suddenly caught the 'gentleman hand' by the collar from behind, dug his knee in the other's back and flung him into the gutter, when he stood aside, without so much as looking at the girl's face, and said:

"Pass on, miss. Please excuse this 'ere young man. He's been drinkin'."

His face was as white as a sheet, his eyes were blazing, and the girl gave one frightened glance at him, then speeded away like a deer. As for John, he was looking at Munson and Wheeler, who had been smoking on the steps. They had risen and were looking angrily at him, and he thought a fight was imminent.

He ran back two or three steps, to get all three in front of him, and saw Jim Stryker rising from the gutter, his evening clothes—for he had doffed his working dress—covered with dust, his handsomeness flushed with passion.

"Let the lout alone, boys," cried Jim, hoarsely. "I'm the man to bring him in to his milk. If I can't do it, the quarrel's none of yours. Now, then, greeney, by heavens, I'll see what you are made of."

And with that off went coat and vest, and he rushed at John, his eyes glittering with rage.

They were a close match in size—Stryker, if anything the taller. John backed away as the other approached, saying earnestly:

"Don't do it—don't do it! You don't know me, Stryker. I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me!" hissed Stryker. "Take care of yourself, you fool. Now, then! With that he struck right and left, as fast as he could send the blows, at the face of the countryman, with a force and precision that showed him to be a boxer of no mean order."

But to the amazement of the lookers-on, the green, awkward countryman kept his head moving faster than the blows, without even lifting his arms to parry, crying:

"Keep off, I tell ye. You don't know me. Well, then, take it if ye must."

And with that last word, they heard a dull 'thud,' like the blow of a rammer upon hard earth, and Stryker dropped both his hands, stood one moment trembling all over, and then fell into a limp heap on the sidewalk, where he lay still, apparently senseless.

Then John Armstrong, looking pale and resolute, said to Munson:

"I call ye to witness, I didn't want to hurt him, boys. I wouldn't ha' fought him for a good deal. The boss's nev'ly! But my dad told me never to let a girl be insulted, if I died for it. Take him in, boys. He's only dazed like. He got it on the jaw. I'm goin' to the shop, if I'm wanted for this."

Then he strode away, leaving Munson at Wheeler lifting up Stryker, who had a foolish, feeble smile on his face, and was slowly trying to move his limbs, as if he had lost all power over them. He came to the shop; found the private watchman there; was admitted, and set to work at once on his hard job of sweeping and shovelling, assisted by the guard-dian of the night.

When the job was at last finished, the clocks were striking ten, and John observed to the watchman:

"Well, that ain't so bad. We'll git through by nine to-morrow, I reckon."

The watchman was in the act of answering, when they heard a loud knocking at the door, and a voice called through the grating:

"Sheppard, open this door. You've got a man called Armstrong in there. He's wanted to answer a charge of assault."

"Why, it's the cops!" exclaimed Sheppard, amazedly. "What have you been a-doin'?"

Armstrong made no reply, but went to the door, where the flashlight shone upon the uniforms of several policemen, who had their clubs drawn.

"I'm the man, gents," he said, quietly. "I'm ready to go with ye. Ye needn't hev got so many. You kin handcuff me if ye like. I ain't that dangerous as you think. Open, Sheppard!"

Then the door opened, and two policemen caught him at once, while two more lifted their clubs menacingly, and a fifth audibly cocked a pistol.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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