

JOHN ARMSTRONG

Mechanic. FROM THE BOTTOM TO THE TOP OF THE LADDER.

A Story of How an Old Man Can Rise in America.

CHAPTER XXI. THE LETTER.

Poor Ella! She had an unhappy time of it that night and the next day. Her mother cut short her explanations, would not see that she had any cause to complain, praised Stryker to the skies as one of the nicest young men she had ever met, and the end of it was mother and daughter separated on bad terms with each other. Ella rebelling against injustice, Mrs. Morton calling her a romantic, love sick girl, who would bitterly regret what she had done when it was too late.

The soldiers lasted over Sunday, and poor Ella went to school with a headache, coming back worn, while everything seemed to go wrong in the quiet little house in Ashley-street. Mrs. Morton had ended by settling her heart on the match Ella had rejected, and seemed to take a deeper dislike to Armstrong every moment that the quarrel lasted.

As for Ella, she was miserable at her mother's anger, and her own face away till she began to wish the thing had never happened, and was thinking seriously of trying to compromise, when, on Tuesday afternoon, the bell rang, and the postman delivered a letter to her mother, marked "Painted Post."

This letter she brought in and gave to her mother, palpitating. The old lady glanced at it, and put it in her pocket with an air of severity that completely broke down Ella's nerves.

The girl burst into tears, left the room, and was found an hour later by her mother lying on her bed in a darkened room, still sobbing. Then the old lady came and set down by the bed, looking awkward, and a long silence ensued.

Ella was watching her mother, half-frightened, half-hopeful. The old lady was trying to make up her mind to speak. At last she said: "Ella."

"Yes, mother." The faintest of voices—the tones of a martyr. Yet Ella was acting, and the best of women cannot help acting, and Ella knew her triumph was coming, so she pretended to be worse than she was.

"Ella," resumed the old lady, melting at the sight of her daughter's suffering, "we have quarrelled long enough. Let's make it up, child. I was angry and jealous. Yes, child, I admit it. I'm jealous of this young man you love so much better than me. I cannot get to like him. I wish you'd taken Mr. Stryker. He's a good man, and would never separate us."

Ella opened her eyes. "Had he, mother? But I didn't love him." "You'd have learned to, after a while. But it's no use thinking of it now. I see you're crazy after the other, and I've just read his father's letter."

"What does it say?" asked Ella, faintly. She did not dare to show interest in it for fear of rousing her mother's jealousy again. The old lady hesitated, and at last drew it out. "I'll read it to you, child."

Then she read aloud: "Honored Madam.—In regard to the questions you write me, I take my pen in hand to let you know this. John and me was passing your house that night, when we heard a shot, and a young man came running by us with a pistol, chased by a gang of loafers, he lost his head, and they had him cornered on the dock and was a-giving it to him hot, when John and me went in and fought them till they ran. John got a stab in the arm as he ain't well of yet, but I was not hurt, to speak of. I went for the police ambulance, and John took the man to your house. I asked the doctor next day if he was hurt bad, and he told me not so bad as he made out. He thought he was putting on a good deal. This is all I know."

the girl to herself. "Poor mother! I wonder if I shall ever feel that way?"

And it was remarkable with what speed Ella's headache vanished. Her mother, coming down a little later, found her in the parlor, dressed and beaming with health, while Kitty, the girl, was in the area-way hailing some one down the street, and Ella was watching the proceeding with such interest that she did not hear her mother's entrance till the old lady spoke rather sharply.

"What's this, Ella?" Ella turned with a charming smile. "Only Kitty calling up a messenger boy, mamma. You know they take letters so quickly and bring an answer."

The old lady was taken aback. She looked sternly at Ella, but could not keep her countenance, and finally handed her a letter, saying: "There, there, goony! Well, of all girls are getting dreadful nowadays."

"And mothers charming," retorted Ella, with a glad smile, when she flew off to deliver the letter, and promised the messenger extra recompense if "he'd run all the way."

"Ned," said the stately youth set off at the top of his speed till he had turned the corner, when he took a leisurely pace, and finally arrived at the Vulcan Works, where he delivered his missive to Armstrong.

The young man looked at it. Mrs. Morton's compliments to Mr. Armstrong, and hopes she will call at his earliest convenience at 143, Ashley-street. John's face lighted up, and he made the heart of that messenger boy leap like a spring lamb, as he handed him a big trade dollar, and said: "Take that. How fast can you get back to Ashley street?"

"Ten minutes, sir." "Very good. Here's your answer." He scribbled it hastily: "Mr. Armstrong will do himself the pleasure of calling this evening at eight p.m."

"Now run, and don't you lose a moment." The grass did not grow under that boy's feet. He came breathless up to Ella, who opened the door in a way that showed she had been waiting, and he panted out: "Here 'tis, miss. Sign the book, please."

"Gent said he'd give me a dollar if I was back in twenty minutes." Ella eagerly grasped the message, and ran off with the note, which she kissed as soon as she was in the passage. All the rest of that afternoon John was restless, and at his boarding house he hardly ate any supper.

"I'll do it," he said to himself, as he turned into Ashley street. "I might never have done it, if the mother had not treated me so shabbily. Now I'll do it. I'll try my fate to-night, and win or lose it all."

And as he said the last words he saw the form of Ella Morton at the parlor window of No. 143.

CHAPTER XXII. A FURTHER BATTLE. The meeting that evening between John Armstrong and Mrs. Morton was a peculiar one. The old lady came into the parlor to find her daughter and John sitting on opposite sides of the room—Ella with a puzzled, embarrassed look on her face, examining the pattern of the carpet, while Armstrong sat by the window, looking partly out, and talking in the most indifferent way about the weather.

Kitty had opened the door for him, and carried a formal message to Mrs. Morton that 'Mr. Armstrong requested the pleasure of seeing her.' When she came down stairs and entered the room, John rose quietly, drew himself up like a soldier on parade, and bowed with great politeness, but equal coldness, as the old lady said: "I am really very glad to see you, Mr. Armstrong. Where have you been all this time?"

She tried to speak easily, this proud old lady, who began to see she had been wrong, but hated to acknowledge it; yet her words ended in a nervous little laugh, and she could not help feeling embarrassed before the man she had called a clown.

And the clown—what did he say? "I received your note, madam," he answered, with a grave bow, "and am here to wait your commands."

As he spoke, he offered her a chair as calmly as if he had been raised in some European Court, and it was the old lady who began to feel a humiliating sense of inferiority in the contest of wits impending.

She sat down however, remarking: "Oh, I can hardly say I have any commands for you. I thought it rather strange that you kept away from us so long."

She hesitated and actually broke down, when John, with a slight smile that made Mrs. Morton feel exasperated all over, answered: "I have had several reasons for not calling, madam, the last of which was removed by your note—though I fancied, from its purport, that you had something to say to me beyond the ordinary courtesies of a short acquaintance."

Ella had been sitting at one end of a sofa, looking half-puzzled, half-afraid, while she heard this, and began to tremble all over. This young man was actually daring her mother to an encounter, and she knew the old lady's temper too well to doubt the challenge would be accepted.

Mrs. Morton's dark eyes flashed a glance over the form of John Armstrong, and then she turned round on Ella. "My daughter," she said quietly, "will you oblige me by seeing if I did not leave my letter from Mr. Armstrong's father somewhere in my room? I think I did."

Ella rose palpitating. She felt that there was a quarrel in the air, with which she dared not interfere between two people whom she dearly loved, in which one of them must be wrong; and she felt frightened to find that she was in her heart siding against her mother, who actually was sending her out of the room.

She went out silently; and as soon as the door closed, the old lady dashed at Armstrong, beginning the battle at once with the privilege of her sex, and hoping to rout the young man by moving on his works with a rush.

"Now, sir," she said, sharply, "perhaps you will explain the singular tone you have adopted towards me, who have only had the pleasure of seeing you twice before in my life. I can excuse a great deal of your lack of breeding, on account of your disadvantages of education, but when you talk to me as if I were anything to you beyond the ordinary works of a chance acquaintance, you are much mistaken. Your father is a worthy and honest person, who served under my husband's orders, and I had a kindly feeling for you as his son, as I have for the children of all my husband's old soldiers. That is all, sir. I wish to treat you kindly still, but you must not imagine that I write notes for any purpose but that expressed on their face. I excuse your mistake on account of your lack of acquaintance with the usages of the society in which I was born, but if you wish to remain on visiting terms at this house, the mistake must not be repeated."

And Mrs. Morton fanned her flushed cheek and looked steadily at the wall, with all the virtuous anger of a woman who knows she is in the wrong, and is determined to fight it out. As for John, he kept his eyes on her face, though she would not meet his glance, all the time she was speaking, with a gravity that nothing could disturb.

When she had finished, he watched her in perfect silence, till she turned her eyes defiantly on him when he fixed her at last with his grave look, as he replied: "I thank you, madam, for your kind lesson on courtesy. I own that I was labouring under a serious mistake. I thought you had seen me three times instead of twice. That was all."

Now he had gained her glance he kept it, and she answered, sharply: "Two or three. What difference does it make? Does that give you a title to ask anything from me but distant acquaintanceship?" John smiled slightly. "On each occasion, madam, you have done me the honor to be extremely frank with me. On the last you accused me openly of a murderous assault on a man whose life I had just saved."

"Oh, no, no—you mistake," she interrupted. "You are entirely mistaken. I did not mean."

She could not proceed under the quiet steady gaze of John, who waited till she had stopped entirely, when he went on, with slow, deliberate emphasis: "I beg your pardon. Your last words to me, standing on your own doorstep, were these: 'I will do my best to save this young man from the consequences of your bad temper. Then you shut the door on me. The young man in question was Mr. James Stryker, whom you had imagined I had assaulted, and who was, in fact, nearly killed on that same night. I was foolish enough to think, madam, that having found out, as I trust you have before this, the mistake you made, you had sent for me to acknowledge it, and make reparation therefore. I am sorry to see I was mistaken; and as I have to right to dictate to you any line of conduct, in my ignorance of the usages of the society, to which, as you say, you were born, though I did not have that good fortune. I will bid you good evening."

And this peculiar young man rose up like a tower before the old lady, made her a profound bow, and was quietly walking to the door, when Mrs. Morton said, in a low voice: "Stop, stop if you please."

John obeyed and came back, when he stood before her, hat in hand, looking pale and determined, his eyes fixed on her mother's face, saying quietly: "I could not find the letter mother—Why, what's the matter?"

For her mother had risen and came tottering towards her, clutching her arm as if fearing to fall, while John remained standing, hat in hand, and the expression on his face showed that the quarrel she had dreaded was in full progress.

"The matter is Miss Morton," he said, in the same stern, icy way, "that I am about to bid you all good evening. A mechanic, I find, in your mother's eyes has no pretensions to be treated other than as one below the society in which you have been born. I bid you good evening and farewell."

For the first time in his life John was angry with a woman, and he had his hand on the knob of the door to leave the house for ever, when Mrs. Morton suddenly cried out: "Mr. Armstrong, for heaven's sake don't be too hard on an old woman like me. I was wrong—I own it. But you have your triumph."

"Not yet, madam," said John, in a very low voice. "As he spoke he came back and looked wistfully into her eyes. 'I wish for no triumph over you. But things have gone so far between us now that I can never visit your house again but on one footing.'"

"And what is that?" she asked, clutching in her daughter's arm involuntarily, while Ella trembled violently.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE BEST STEP OF ALL. John was by no means calm himself

now. The old lady's last words had been like a blow to his heart, cut by her bitter accents at the beginning of the interview, but he felt that a heavier battle still was before him, and one on which his whole happiness had come to depend.

In his modesty he had been perfectly blind to the possibility that Ella might ever come to love him, until the day she had met him in the street, when a glimpse of the marvelous truth had begun again to dawn on him, to return again, in spite of his rejection.

The cutting words of the old lady, when she had tried to ride over him at the beginning of their interview, had for the first time in his life fully aroused him. Failing to crush him down they had stung him to the quick and awakened his conscious dignity and resentment.

"I can never visit at your house again but on one footing," he had said, and the old lady had said: "What is that?"

"To explain it, madam," he returned, in the quietest tones, "I will ask permission to put down my hat, and then you will take your seat with your daughter. On your answer depends the issue whether I shall ever enter these doors again."

He motioned them to the sofa, and they sat down, Ella clinging to her mother now, on the defensive against she knew not what—both looking at this singular young man as if he were a being from another world, but with an expression on his face Mrs. Morton had never seen there before, and under which she actually quailed.

John was bitterly hurt and angry at last, and his hand trembled as he put down his hat on the table. He took no seat, but stood looking down into Mrs. Morton's eyes his own flaming with honest anger as he said: "Mrs. Morton, two years ago, as you are well aware, I paid a visit to your house at your own request. I should not have dared intrude, even then, on any less excuse. Once again I asked permission to call with my father, and was received by you in a manner that plainly showed your dislike to me—for what cause I know not."

The old lady put up her hand in a deprecating way. "Not dislike. Do not say that." "Distrust then, madam, if you wish. It is true I am a mechanic; but for all that, I have learned some of the usages of that society to which, as you have said this evening, I was not born."

She interrupted him again: "Perhaps not, madam, in words; but the implication was unmistakable. Permit me to proceed, I beg. These may be the last words I shall ever say to you in this house."

The old lady drew herself up. "Proceed, sir," she said, coldly. "I submit to your rebuke."

John hesitated a moment; but he was too much incensed to be called off on side issues, and he knew Mrs. Morton was trying to divert his attention by putting him in the wrong. He went on: "The third time I called at your house, the visit was forced on me by events over which I had no control. A man was nearly killed close to your door, and knowing you as the widow of a brave officer, as well as having some experience in cases of severe injury, I ventured a claim on your humanity. The injured man was your friend—my rival."

"Rival!" echoed Mrs. Morton, affecting astonishment. "In what?" "In business, in study, in love, and in aspiring to the hand of a lady I honor and love above any woman in this world, madam," was the bold answer. "I told you that these might be the last words I might ever say to you. I hope to make them so plain as to leave no doubt of the footing on which alone I can ever again enter this house. I thought that, in a case of such gravity, my motives may excuse a brief intrusion. The result we both know. For the mistake under which you labored, forgive me freely, though it hurt me very bitterly, coming from you. The words you then said prevented me from any further intercourse with any member of your family, without your own express permission. To-night, you have shown me plainly, with a frankness for which I thank you, the cause of your too evident dislike."

"Perhaps not," said the old lady, slowly. "I am sorry I said it. I did not mean it, but am apt to be carried away by my nervous temperament. You know I am an invalid, John."

Had a thunderbolt fallen it would hardly have astonished him more than to hear her call him "John."

The old lady's tones were broken and appealing, and they melted him at once. He even felt ashamed of his own plain talk, and cast a look at Ella, when to his intense amazement he saw that the girl's face was all lighted up with joy, and that she gave him a look actually encouraged him to go on as plain as looks could speak.

What was it that John Armstrong thought the meaning of that look? Hard to say. Ella was almost the only woman with whom he had ever exchanged three words of more than passing import.

With a hardness that surprised himself, he said, distinctly: "Then, Mrs. Morton, I forgive you all you have said, on one condition."

She looked up piteously. "What is it, John? Oh, don't take her away from me, dear boy."

John could not stand that. The cry of a woman in distress made him as weak as a baby. He gave a deep sob, and turned away to the table, saying: "I know I am not good enough for her; but—Well, good-bye. I'll always love

you for her sake, though you can't let her go from you. Good-bye."

And he was actually going, this simple-hearted fellow in his innocence, with all his knowledge, when Ella gently raised up her mother and led her across the room, where the old lady laid her hand on the young man's arm, and said, coaxingly: "Don't mind me, John—don't mind me. I am a poor, jealous old woman, and I'm her mother."

John turned round, his eyes full of tears, and he said, simply: "Ay, I forgot. You see, I never had a mother to remember. I wish—oh, how I wish you would be my mother! I'd try hard to please you, if you wouldn't hate me too much."

And then the old lady broke down, too, for she put both hands on his shoulders and said brokenly: "Oh, John, you're a noble, noble man, and you've won my heart at last. I will try to be a mother to you."

But he stopped still at the door. "Will you give her to me freely?" he asked. "Will you let me ask her before you? I've no right to ask a daughter to disobey her mother."

The old lady smiled faintly. "Yes, John, you can ask her."

Then he turned to Ella very quietly. "Miss Ella, he said, with a certain honesty gravity that was almost pathetic. "I was only a poor mechanic when I first saw you, and in my humble way I loved you then. For love of you I studied hard to educate myself. For love of you I learned to do things I never dreamed I could do. I owe to you all I am. You made me. Had I never seen you, I should still be plain, illiterate John Armstrong, mechanic. You have shown me a higher life, in which I have learned to love you as a lady should be loved. I know I am not worthy of you yet, but I hope some day to make you proud of me. Will you—will you—marry—me?"

His voice broke at the last words, for he felt his heart beating like a trip hammer at the risk he ran. "And Ella—what did she say?" "Yes, John, I will. Why, I'm proud of you already, and so is my mother. Only—you must promise not to part with me."

And that was the quiet, comradely way in which John Armstrong won his little wife; for married they were a month later.

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