The Ambition of Mark Truitt

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This story epitomizes, in the life of one big man, his big foes and big friends, the strife, the hopes, and the aspirations of modern America. Involved with his ambition is the ambition of the laborer, of the capitalist, of the progressive, of the humanitarian, of the socialist, of the society woman, and of the woman who gives all for love.

CHAPTER I.

Dreams.

He drifted into the delectable land that lies between sleep and waking, tasting the fleeting savor of his dreams—the epic visions of full-blooded youth. They had passed just beyond memory, leaving a confused yet glowing sense of sharp combats waged, of victories won. A golden haze enveloped him. Through it filtered a dwindling resonance, as of some noble processional sung by a departing far-distant choir.

A wave of delight rippled over him. Then the thought that, not sharing his slumber, had painted his colorful dreams, worked to the surface.

"My last day here!"

He awoke slowly. Before him, seen through the unshuttered window, lay a world somber enough to one tugging against its restraints, lovely when it was to be left behind. He saw the September sun peep over the hills at the head of the valley, rise majestically and swing clear, a golden disk hung in the sky, symbol of the reward of men's struggles; its radiance, streaming into the little room, dispelled shabbiness with a mellow glow he could almost feel. The matin sounds arose, according finely with the lingering echoes of his dream music. He reveled in a new perception.

He was twenty years old.

He was not one to loll. He sprang from bed and stood naked; supple beautiful youth, too slender for great strength but with the unconscious grace of the wild animal.

He dressed and stood by the window in the attitude of a listener. Intently he sought to define the faint other-world resonance that still seemed to vibrate about him. But the theme eluded him.

His illusion was effectually shattered. Into the subdued melody of the Sabbath morning thrust a profane intruder, the jerky wheezing notes of a cabinet organ in the day's hymns, played by some one who aspired beyond endowment.

He frowned, then threw back his head and laughed silently—a trick he had sometimes—at the absurd anticlimax.

"I'm still in Bethel. It's a long way from here to—there." He drew a long deep breath.

A question halted him. "There—where?"

He shook his head vigorously, as though to throw off the query, and went down to the kitchen.

The odor of frying ham saluted his nostrils; he sniffed it hungrily. A man, apparently old, was placing heavy, chipped ironware dishes on the table. He nodded briefly in response to the youth's blithe greeting.

"I'll be ready," he said in a dull flat voice, "time ye're back from the stable," and continued his slow precise setting of the table.

In a few minutes the other returned, the horses fed and his own hands and face scrubbed in cold water from the cistern. They sat down without speaking. The youth ate eagerly, gulpingly.

When the first keenness of appetite was gone, burning to talk of the great hour at hand, he broke the silence. "Well, father, this is my last day in Bethel."

The old man merely nodded, keeping his eyes on his plate.

Boyishly the son began to set forth his plans and hopes and expectations; they were not small. But the old man maintained his silence. The youth conceived him to be an unsympathetic audience.

"Guess you're not interested," he said a trifle sulkily.

"Yes, I'm interested, Mark," the father answered, "but there ain't anything to say." He raised his glance to the window. "Guess I couldn't say anything that'd help much."

The sweep of the youth's anticipation faltered before a quality in the old man's words. Old, "old Simon;" so his neighbors called him. Yet he was not really old, but in the noonday of life wore the gray mantle of age. For he, too, had dreamed his big golden dreams. Below the village stood a dismantled rotting forge, monument to their futility. After his failure he had returned to his shop and trade, shoeing his neighbors' horses, mending their wagons and plows, a dull-eyed, taciturn, spiritless plodder.

Simon Truitt rose and began to clear the table. The son moved toward the door. There he paused, vaguely sensible of a sorrow to which some soothing word was to be said. But the word would not come to lips unschooled in such tender office. He went slowly out into the sunshine.

In the stable he curried the horses, lingering over the pretty brown mare—latest and finest trophy of his horse-trading—until her coat shone satiny. This labor of love ended, he lighted a pipe and sat in the stable doorway.

He sat there until from across the town came a flat unmusical clamor, the cracked church bell calling the faithful—that is to say, all Bethel save one—to worship. He rose reluctantly. Soon he emerged from the little house, shaved to the blood and clad in the discomfort of Sunday clothes.

Always on warm Sabbath mornings Simon Truitt was to be found sitting on the stoop, and always facing the north; the dismantled forge lay to the south. He was that one for whom the cracked bell tolled in vain; he was supposed to be an atheist.

"Goin' to church?" he asked in the expressionless tone that was his habit.

"I guess so," answered Mark. "Unless," with sudden understanding, "you'd like me to stay."

Simon hesitated, then shook his head. "No, ye'd better go same as always. Courtney'd want ye to."

"I owe him a lot."

Simon nodded. "More'n to—anyone else here. Think a good deal o' him, don't ye?"

"Yes. Sometimes he's kind o' queer, though."

Simon nodded again. "D'ye," he asked unexpectedly, "d'ye believe what he preaches?"

"Why, yes!" said Mark. "Yes, I s'pose so," he amended.

The dull glance momentarily sharpened. "Not very much, I expect. Better believe it hard—or not at all. It's most time fur church."

Mark swung heavily down the path. The father's eyes followed him wistfully.

Mark joined the straggling procession that moved, stiffly decorous, toward the house of worship. Once, during the short journey, a spring wagon overtook and passed him; a girl in the rear seat turned and nodded. A wave of red surged into his dark face. Until the wagon drove into the churchyard, his glance clung to the mass of yellow hair under the pink hat. Unconsciously his step quickened.

He found an empty pew near the door, and entering, leaned back, half closing his eyes. He followed the congregation as it rose and sat in hymn and prayer and lesson; but he moved mechanically, without thought of worship. His glance sought the far corner where a shaft of morning sunshine had set a mass of yellow hair ashimmering. The sight and his dreams gave him a new and daring resolve. The hour sped swiftly.

He went quietly from the church; in the yard he took a station by which the farmer folk must pass to their vehicles and there, as he had resolved, boldly, in the eyes of all, he waited for her.

She appeared, a slender girl who, as she moved slowly around the church, wove a spell over the betrousered portion of Bethel, even where she had not the subtle aid of dreams. She was not small, but, neatly made, gave an effect of daintiness not characteristic of the maids of that valley. Unity was supposed to be "delicate," hence was spared those arduous tasks that leave so little time to study of beauty hints and fashions. If there were some to suggest that "Squire Martin's family let Unity make fools of 'em," at least no males were among these critics.

"To the City? For Good?"

Self-conscious to the finger-tips but not betraying it, she picked her dainty way among the gossiping groups, tossing gay little smiles to this and that intoxicated youth, blissfully deaf to an occasional feminine titter in her wake.

She came to a halt beside Mark, looking up with a smile that made him forget curious observers.

"Good morning, Mark!"

"Unity!" His voice was low, tense, as though he announced some tragic happening. "I'm going away tomorrow."

The vivacity fell from her face, leaving it very serious.

"To the city? For good?"

"To the city. For good."

"I am glad."

"Glad!" he stammered. "I thought—I wanted you to be sorry."

"Yes," she nodded emphatically. "I'm glad—for you," she added more softly.

He remained silent, an unreasoning, indefinite disappointment lingering. Something he wanted—he could not say what—was lacking in her words.

"Aren't you glad?"

"Yes, but—" He dismissed the doubt. His eagerness returned. "I'm going driving this afternoon."

She became girlish again. "Is that an invitation?" with a demure little smile.

"If you want to go."

"Of course, Mister Solemn! Aren't you—" She stopped, apparently overcome with confusion for her boldness.

"Say it!" he besought thirstily.

There was a delicious moment of uncertainty, a breathless little laugh.

"My lover. There! I'll be waiting for you, just after dinner." And the butterfly fluttered away.

He went from the churchyard and followed the street past the point where it returned to its native state of dusty, weed-flanked, country pike. He came to a place where the road rose sharply and fell again. Mounting to the crest, he threw himself on the roadside and waited; thither Richard Courtney would come on the after-service walk that was his custom.

Up the rise, village-bound, leisurely creaked an ancient top buggy. In it slouched a middle-aged man upon whose face were written humor and patience, qualities of which he had great need just then. His horse labored heavily at its task, head hanging low; not the bellows in Simon Truitt's smithy puffed louder or harder. At the crest it stopped without urging. Mark frowned impatiently. Then he noted the sad state of the horse and a grin displaced the frown.

"Hear you're going away," "Doc" Hedges remarked. "For the good of the town?"

Mark nodded, the grin widening. "Maybe you'd like to help pay my fare?"

"I have helped," the doctor rejoined dryly. "Going to get rich, ain't you? They all think that."

"It happens sometimes."

"You might, though. Any man ought to get rich that could sell me this—would you call it a horse?"

"Hmm!" Mark considered the animal judicially. "Well, it has four legs."

"So's a billy goat," drawled the doctor. "Goat'd be more use to me, too."

"What did you buy it for, then?"

"I ain't squealing. Pretty slick customer, ain't you?"

The grin returned. "I can sell horses," Mark modestly admitted, "to some people."

"Humph! Only a fool'd buy 'em of you," the doctor agreed. "What'll you take for the brown mare?"

"The brown mare isn't for sale."

"Any horse is for sale," the doctor insisted, "at the right price. Give you a hundred and fifty."

"I wouldn't sell her for two-fifty."

The doctor sighed and clucked to the weary horse.

Out of the dusty cloud trailing behind the creaky buggy emerged a tall stooping figure, clad in the rusty black of the country clergyman. He walked slowly, and when he came to the rise, with a slight effort; evidently he was a frail man physically. At the crest he stopped, breathing hard.

"Taking a good-by look at it?" he asked between breaths.

"No. Just waiting for you."

The preacher smiled faintly; the worn dispirited face lighted up a little. He turned his glance to the valley.

"It's worth a farewell. You'll be homesick for it sometimes—I hope. Shall we walk a bit farther?"

At his lagging pace they tramped along the road, constantly rising and descending but always reaching up toward a higher level. They kept the frank silence of those who have been companions often.

Ten years before Richard Courtney had resigned the city congregation that was steadily withering under his ministry and had come to shepherd the little flock of Bethel. It proved to be a life sentence, but in the end he stayed, if not gladly, at least with such Christian fortitude as a quivering sensitive soul could summon; having found—so he put it—a need to which he could minister. In the early days of his new service he had discovered a neglected, unlettered, moody youngster suffering under the blight of his relation to Simon Truitt, who, for his supposed atheism, was accounted a little less than respectable. Some quality in the boy caught the preacher's fancy. Tactfully he sought to win into Mark's heart, not a very difficult task once the lad learned that ministerial conversation was not confined to graphic pictures of eternal torment. And then, not quite realizing how this new interest eked out the Christian fortitude just mentioned, he set about to make Mark over. From Richard Courtney the blacksmith's son had his Vergil and Xenophon and Homer, his Euclid and Quackenbos. What may have been best of all, he had had Richard Courtney.

In the intense, imaginative, quick-brained lad Courtney thought he discerned a rare spirit fitted to be a chevalier of the Lord, a fighter of others' battles, a bearer of others' burdens; thus we may read what Richard Courtney would have made his own life. He, the exile, had failed; but in the larger life from which he had been banished he would live again and be felt through a fine strong man of his making. For ten years he had jealously surveyed the prospect, patiently toiled and prayed that it might be.

But now, when the day for which he had prepared was come, he was not happy. The question continually recurred. How well had he builded?

"That's Where the Doctor Wants to Build His Sanatorium."

With suddenly clarified vision he beheld the youth at his side, raw, unshaped, the reaches of his soul as yet unlighted by purpose, unwarmed by inspiration. After ten years he was almost as Richard Courtney had found him.

"I have scoured the windows. I cannot give the light," thought the preacher sadly.

He became aware that Mark had broken the silence. "I—I owe you a lot," he had said.

"Not very much." Courtney sighed. "I wish it were more—much more."

"Oh, yes, it is much. You've taught me to read and talk and—and think." Courtney repressed an unhappy smile. "You've made me—see big. You've got me ready to go away from here. I—I appreciate it."

"I'd rather you could see true. But must you go?" The plea was without spirit; he knew its uselessness. "There's a life to be lived here, even by a man who sees big. I wish you would stay, at least for a while."

"No, I must go now. I've a reason you don't know."

The preacher felt a jealous pang.

After a while he said, "Did you by any chance hear my sermon this morning?"

Mark looked away, uncomfortable. "Only part of it. I was thinking pretty hard."

"Of yellow braids and a pretty complexion," Courtney said to himself bitterly.

Mark was frowning in an effort to recall and piece together detached phrases that had floated to him during the service and then, finding no welcome, floated away. "It was about," he said hesitatingly, "it was about a man finding his big idea."

"I am flattered." The dry droll inflection was a concealment.

"The big idea," said Mark vaguely, "does it mean—God?"

"It's His way of lifting the world forward. It's—" Courtney stopped abruptly, with a hopeless smile. He looked away across the hills.

Suddenly, with an oddly appealing gesture, he turned again to Mark. All the intense longing of the man who has dreamed and failed and yet clung to some fragment of his hope, painting his vision, breathed in his words.

"Some day you may remember I told you. It's the big purpose that sometimes comes to the big, passionate man, to accomplish some work for its own sake; that grips him, drives him, makes him ruthless to his own desires, forgetful of his failures and blind to everything but his task; that transforms him into a narrow zealot, a fanatic, but a power—always a power, because he is his purpose incarnate. It is that without which the big man is wasted, because he is that dangerous, useless thing, a force uncontrolled. . . . It's what I wanted you to have."

Mark stared. "I—I'm afraid I don't understand."

"And I," Courtney cried, "I can't make you understand! But you will know, when it comes to you." The fire began to die from his eyes and voice. "If it comes," he added.

For a while Mark considered perplexedly this outburst. Then he dismissed it as one of the incomprehensible moments of a man whom, despite oddities, he liked very much. He returned to the thought that had led to the moment.

A little timidly he made the offer. "I'm going to leave the brown mare with you, if you'd like her."

"It's good of you to think of it. But you can sell her well. And you'll need the money."

"I know. But I want you to have her. I traded to get her for you."

Courtney would not spoil his pleasure. "Of course, I—" His acceptance halted. "No, give her to Dr. Hedges."

Mark shook his head. "I want you to have her."

"He needs a good horse. The one he has—"

"It was a fair trade," Mark asserted defensively.

A turn of the road brought them within sight of a great hill that stood across the valley. Over its level top swept breezes filtered pure through many leagues of forest. "Hedges hill" the village called it, finding humorous matter therein.

Courtney pointed. "That is where the doctor wants to build his sanatorium for consumptives."

"I know. He's cracked over that. He'll never do it."

"Perhaps not. It would be too bad. It," Courtney added quietly, "is his big idea."

Mark looked long at the hill, as though from the site of the sanatorium in Spain might be gleaned some hint of the meaning of the "big idea."

After a while he said slowly, "Would you really rather he'd have the mare?"

CHAPTER II.

The Path of Youth.

Had Richard Courtney thought to look back to his own adolescence, he might have understood his failure.

Mark, whose life, the preacher supposed, was to be made over by many books and sermons on purpose, unselfishness and clean living, was in fact seeing a miracle of quite another sort unfold within him.

Companionship, once sought, had suddenly become distasteful. He was happy only when wandering alone in the woods, idle gun on shoulder, or drifting lazily in his canoe.

After a period, during which his body shot up to its full height, wholesome toil and study busied his thoughts and Richard Courtney began to nurture vain hopes, occurred an event of no small importance to many young gentlemen of Bethel. Unity Martin, proud possessor of a diploma declaring to those who cared to peruse that she had mastered certain arts, came home to exhibit in all its perfection the product of education.

He was returning late from an afternoon's hunt in the woods behind the Martin farm, when he unexpectedly came upon her one autumn day. She was standing on a little knob, gazing absently into the fading sky. His ever-ready imagination was touched. In the dusk, the pale glow of the dying day upon her, her pensiveness and apparent frailty gave her a seeming of soulfulness that abashed him, moved him strangely. He thought he beheld one far finer and purer than any of the clayey creatures his life had touched. She saw him and smiled faintly. That smile put him in an agony of confusion and awkwardness. Because he did not know how to depart, he found himself walking home with her, and when she praised the pheasants slung over his shoulder, on a sudden glad impulse he gave to her and she quite naturally accepted the trophy of his hunt. This was a prophecy, but he was no seer.

It was long before he lost that impression of her, the frail spirit-like girl of the dusk, even though riper acquaintance might have taught him that she was indeed a dweller upon the earth. He whispered her name to himself, thinking it finest poetry. His desire to "do something" became a burning impatience to do large and splendid deeds that would prove his mettle. He was, in a word, a boy who thought himself in love.

Came a night, a still winter's night when moonlight gleamed on the snow and the chimes of sleighbells added to the enchantment, when he kissed her, with a sense of sacrilege—and she did not resist.

No wonder, then, Richard Courtney preached purpose in vain! His pupil's horizon was filled with a purpose not his own. Even the preacher's incomprehensible outburst was forgotten, as the boy went to his tryst that Sabbath afternoon.

For a mile he drove carefully and then, letting out the mare, with a flourish of speed drew up before the house of Squire Martin. It was the most pretentious in the valley.

Soon Unity appeared, fresh and dainty in her white dress and pink hat, followed by her sister Susan bearing a heavy pasteboard box. While Mark awkwardly helped his lady into the buggy, Susan slipped the box under the seat. Mark got in and the brown mare, needing no command, started away.

"I put up some lunch," Susan called after them. "Don't forget to eat it!"

"And so," breathed Unity, "you're really going away—at last! How did you happen to decide to go just now?"

"I don't know. It just came to me the other day that I couldn't stay here any longer. Somehow, ever since we began to talk of the city, this place has seemed so small and shut in—until this morning."

"Until this morning?" in some alarm.

"Then it seemed kind o' cozy and—and protected. I hate to leave it. I hate to leave you, Unity."

"And I'll hate to have you go. But, of course, you must. And then, before very long, you'll come back—and take me away with you."

For a while in silence they gave this prospect the consideration it deserved. Then:

"Oh, Unity, how can you love me so?"

She was able to answer him on this point in a way to satisfy him and yet leave him humbly grateful for his vast good fortune.

The shadows were quite long when they espied a great flat rock in a clearing a little way from the road. And there, in a delicious intimacy that they solemnly asserted was but a foretaste, they remembered to eat the lunch put up by the thoughtful Susan. Afterward they spent a rapturous hour watching the sun glide down to meet the hills.

She broke a long silence to say, dreamily, "You're going to be very rich, aren't you?"

He laughed. "Maybe. It isn't always so easy to get rich, you know."

"But everybody says you will."

"Everybody—in Bethel—may not know." Then he added firmly, "But I will—for you. And then—"

He got down from the rock and lifted his arms to her. She stood uncertain, looking down at him. The glow of the sunset was still upon her; in her eyes was another glow, from within, for him.

She measured the distance to the ground—it was almost her own height—then, with a gasp for her daring, she sprang into his arms. He caught her and held her, kissing her again and again, thirstily. She began to respond; her arms tightened around his neck; she clung very close.

She cried tremulously, "Oh, Mark, you won't forget me—out there. I—I couldn't bear—that."

"I will not forget."

A last bright shaft reflected from the crimson west flooded their little clearing, fell upon her. And that was the picture of her he carried "out there"—Unity in the sunset glow, eyes and cheeks aflame with love, desiring him only and not that he would win.

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"Little late, ain't ye?" Simon greeted Mark. But there was no reproof in the words, and no question; he assumed no right to pry into his son's affairs.

"I've been taking a drive," Mark answered.

Simon rose and went into the pantry. He returned, carrying a pitcher of milk and a plate piled high with buttered bread.

"I kept this ready fur ye. Thought ye might be hungry."

Mark was not hungry, but he ate with a show of great relish. Some instinct told him not to decline this little service.

"Guess ye're purty glad to git away from here?"

In the morning Mark would have answered with an unqualified "Yes." Now he said, "I am—and I'm not." He drew a long breath that was almost a sigh. "It's like going in swimming in April."

"Ye're right to go," Simon said. "I wouldn't want ye to stay. There ain't any prospect fur a young man round here."

He rose, and going to the cupboard, fumbled among the dishes. When he returned, he laid before Mark a worn pocketbook of leather. Mark opened it and glanced at its contents.

"If You Ever Get Rich—Come Back Here and Build a Steel Plant."

He looked up questioningly. "Why, there must be 'most a thousand dollars!"

"Jest that. I've been savin' it fur ye."

Impulsively Mark pushed it back toward Simon. "But I can't take it. It won't leave you anything, and I don't need it. I've got more'n five hundred of my own."

"I'd ruther ye'd take it," Simon insisted heavily. "It'll come in handy. If ye don't need it, ye can find a safe place fur it. An' ye can pay it back, if ye ever git rich. I," he repeated, "I've be'n savin' it fur ye. I knowed ye'd go away some day an' I wanted ye to take somethin'—frum me."

Mark's hand went slowly to the pocketbook. "All right, father." The words fell awkwardly. "I'll pay it back some day. And—thank you."

"Ye're quite welcome," answered Simon with quaint formality.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Fishes That Emit Sounds.

There is a fish in the Tagus that emits sounds resembling the vibrations of a deep-toned bell, gong or pedal pipe of an organ. Herrings, when the net has been drawn around them, have been observed to do the same, and similar accounts are given of the river bullhead. An amphibious siluroid fish on being taken into the hand, is said to shriek, and certain of the blennies emit similar sounds.—Field.