

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

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SYNOPSIS.

Mark Truitt, encouraged by his sweet-heart, Unity March, leaves his native town, to seek his fortune. Simon Truitt tells Mark that if long has been his dream to see a steel plant at Bethel and asks the son to return and build one if he ever gets rich. Mark applies to Thomas Henry, head of the Quincy Iron works, for a job and to meet the construction gang. His success in that work wins him a place as helper to Roman Andrusinski, open-hearth furnaceman. He becomes a boarder in Roman's home and assists Piotr, Roman's son, in his studies. Kazia, an adopted daughter, shows her gratitude in such a manner as to arouse Mark's interest in her.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"Yes, you would, Kazia. But I guess it's more than just the money. You see, in Bethel there's no chance, nothing to do; except grow old and nose into your neighbor's business and— and wait the things you can't have."

"You know? Do you want things, too?"

"Want things!" She drew a long wondering breath, as she measured desire. She did not wait for his question. "To be different."

They sat a little above the carriage road, along which rolled the Sunday afternoon procession of pleasure-takers. He pointed to an open landau in which two women sat, primly upright, hands folded in laps and faces set straight ahead, the very picture of



They Sat a Little Above the Carriage Road.

well-dressed, self-conscious respectability—as "different" from Kazia as anything he could conceive.

"Like that?"

"Yes, like that. Sometimes." She looked wistfully after the departing respectabilities. "But mostly, just to belong to somebody."

"But Roman and the Matka and Piotr—"

"They're ashamed of me and afraid other people'll find out about me. When I went to school the other boys and girls said things—and did things I didn't care." Her head went up and her voice told how passionately she had cared. "But Piotr told them at home and they wouldn't let me go any more. They'd be glad if I were gone. And some day—I will go."

"But where, Kazia?"

"I don't know," she said wearily. "If I knew, I'd go now. Some place where they won't know about me. Here nobody, when they find out, treats me like other people. Except," she added, "Jim Whiting."

"And me," he said gently. "And you." She turned to look searchingly into his eyes. "Don't it really make any difference to you?"

would come home; he did not like to think of her out in the languorous night with Whiting.

In time they did return. The murmur of their voices on the little front porch came to him through his open window. Whiting seemed in no haste to leave. Mark wondered impatiently what they found to talk so long about.

At length, sleep as far away as ever, he arose, dressed and went quietly down stairs—with what intent he hardly knew. On the bottom stair he stopped, facing the door. Whiting was on the point of leaving. Mark saw him coolly put an arm around Kazia; she suffered it. Hot anger—and something far sharper—boiled within the eavesdropper. Nor was it perceptibly cooled when he saw her deftly avoid the kiss Whiting would have taken; she laughed as she broke away. Whiting went down the steps, whistling gaily.

Mark was still standing on the stair when she went in. She started.

"Oh! Is that you?"

"That's a funny thing to say," she laughed. "Your voice sounds funny, too."

He had just been condemning Whiting for the indecent length of his stay. Now he said: "Let's go out on the porch a while."

They went out into the moonlight. He sat upon the railing and stared grimly in the direction of Whiting's departure. It was past midnight; the street slept. From the valley below them came the rumble of the mills that were teaching him fear and self-control. He was silent for a few minutes, while he tried to master the ugly thing within him.

"What is it?" she asked wonderingly.

"Kazia," he blurted out, "you shouldn't let him do that."

"Oh! You saw?"

"I didn't mean to."

"Why do you say I shouldn't?"

"He—he's not fit to touch you."

"He's very jolly and nice to me," she said quietly. "And—and he wants to take me away."

"But you're not going, are you?" he cried.

She sighed. "I don't know—yet."

"Kazia!" He did not know how his voice was shaking. "Promise me you won't go away with him."

"Why not?" She turned to him.

"Because," he began unsteadily, "because I want the best for you. Because—because this!" With a sudden rough reckless movement he caught her close to him. She suffered him as she had Jim Whiting. "Don't you know I want only the best for you?"

"I think I do." She put a hand to his cheek and turned his face out of the shadow, looking long and searchingly into his eyes.

Then she gave a little sigh. "I promise—now." Her lips waited for his kiss.

Gradually his senses cleared. He began to see the ugly treachery of what he had done. His strong clasp slackened.

She seemed to feel, with the sixth sense that was hers, the change in him.

"What is it?" She looked up in quick alarm.

"Nothing." To avoid her eyes he caught her close again, burying his face in her hair, and yielded to the intoxication of her. "Oh! Kazia, Kazia!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Fire.

July came, such a month as the city could not remember, humid and sickeningly hot. Children played languidly, always in the shade, and flocked around ice wagons, quarreling over the division of the fast melting, cool fragments.

In the mills the men toiled on, "speaking up" as always to feed a world hunger for steel. They drank vast quantities of water; they salted it that they might drink the more, believing that in much sweating alone lay safety. There were giants in those days. But sometimes they fell. A sudden drying up of sweat, a violent nausea, a sharp blinding pressure upon the brain—in a few minutes or fewer hours they were dead; their names did not always appear in the daily lists. Some that did not die found their strength forever broken.

The fierce heat blistered Mark's naked sweating skin. The water he drank carried out through his pores the food that should have nourished him. The heavy labor put upon him a weariness sleep could not dispel. The incessant roar, tearing at quivering nerves, impeding thought, became in his overwrought state exquisite torture. Hate, for the mills, for those above who drove so pitilessly, even for the men beside him, filled him; and fear. Once, when Henley, passing, gave his careless nod, he was answered only with a venomous glare that summoned the master's sardonic grin. Mark could have killed him then.

He envied Roman, often almost bitterly. The big Pole felt and showed the effects of the intense heat, but he was the same unfurled philosophical workman as ever, always with a

cheerful word; no fear of collapse disturbed him.

Through watching him Mark was beefed by a new temptation. When their turns were ended Roman and the men invariably flocked to the nearest saloon and there drank repeatedly—whisky and brandy mostly—until vigor returned to their worn-out bodies. It was a false vigor, Mark knew, and short-lived. But there were times when the thought of the hour of surcease, from fatigue, of spirited outlook, lured him almost irresistibly.

And one evening he followed Roman and his companions to the bar.

"Whisky," he ordered.

Roman put out a restraining hand. "You better not drink," he counseled gravely. "Or only beer."

Mark laughed recklessly and repeated his order. Thrice he drank. The weight dragging at his limbs lifted, the misery rankling in his heart dissolved. He was cheerful, talkative, soon maddened. Before he reached home the whisky had possessed his unaccustomed brain; he was staggering, drunk. Roman undressed him and put him to bed without supper. But he had had his period of forgetfulness.

The next day he paid—and the craving gnawed more sharply. That evening Roman, understanding, avoided the saloon and led Mark by a straight course homeward. Thereafter it was his custom, until Mark saw the care and forbade.

"You needn't be afraid. It costs too much. Everything," he added with a bitterness for which Roman had not the key, "costs too much."

"Zo? But you are tired. Unt you are not strong. Vy do you not leaf the work?"

"Give up now, after holding on this far! I guess you don't mean that. But some day I'll get where I want—I'll have life by the throat." It did not seem melodramatic to him. "Then I'll make it pay for this—on his knees."

Roman shook his head gravely, as at a blasphemy.

"You shouldn't not say so. Always life is the master. But you are tired!"

And in the midst of the ordeal by fire he fought his first battle. At times he was almost grateful for the physical weariness that distracted him from the inner struggle.

He learned then how insensibly Unity had receded into the background. She had become vague, of little substance; she was a story he had read a long time ago. But she was real, too, in that she was a habit.

There was a memory that accused—a girl, for once warm and yielding, in the last glory of the sunset, clinging to him with the tremulous cry: "You won't forget me out there?" He had made a vow. . . . Within a twelvemonth he had clasped another.

That other was both real, intensely real—and near. He tried to avoid her; it was not easy.

Kazia went about, quieter than ever, what she felt too deep for words, too solemn for laughter. She did not again break into song. But no one seeing her eyes could have doubted what had come into her heart. And she gave to her lover with both hands, knowing no thrift in love.

Her happiness awed, sometimes almost frightened her, but she would not question it. When her sixth sense stirred, she shamed it into silence. She saw in her lover's eyes a trouble that deepened as the days went by, heard it in his voice, felt it when he clasped her.

One evening—the last before the hot wave broke; but he did not know that—he dragged himself homeward, believing he had come to the end of his endurance.

"But I suppose I haven't," he sighed. "Probably I'll just go on and on—but some day I'll drop. I wonder why I do it! I wish the end would come soon—now." He thought he meant that.

Even the bath brought no relief. He sat down to a supper against the very

thought of which his stomach revolted. After a few mouthfuls he left the table and went to his room. He threw himself, still dressed, on the bed, tossing restlessly in the vain search for an easy position. His body was one dull ache. The overheated blood pounded through his veins, each throb a knife that hacked his brain. His skin was hot and dry, his mouth parched; fever rose.

The late darkness fell, dispelled a little by the faint glow from a nearby street lamp; it found him lying inert but awake. His mind was beginning to behave queerly, seeing strange shadowy objects that moved stealthily about. He caught himself muttering

to them. He wondered if he were growing delirious, but he could not summon energy to call out or arise.

It must have been 10 o'clock when he thought he heard a light tap on the door. He made an effort to speak.

"Come."

The door opened. Some one tiptoed softly to the bedside and leaned over him.

"Are you sick?" came the broken anxious whisper. "You looked so tired—and you came up without—speaking to me. They said, let you sleep. But I've been—so afraid."

He caught her hand and clung to it. "Would you mind staying a while?" he whispered back. "My head does funny tricks in the dark."

She put her free hand to his hot forehead. Then she gave a low plying cry. "You are sick!—Wait!"

She left the room quietly. Soon she returned with towels and a basin of water in which ice tinkled. She lighted the gas jet and turned it very low.

"Close your eyes now," she said softly, "and try to sleep. I didn't tell any one, because I wanted to help you myself."

He lay passive, while she placed cold wet towels over his eyes, bathed his hands and wrists in the icy water and stroked his throbbing temples. He wondered dully that hands which worked so hard could be so gentle. For many minutes they did not speak.

The stealthy shapes were laid. The sharp pounding in his brain began to subside. Drowsiness was stealing over him.

His hands groped until they found hers. "Kazia, Kazia!" he breathed.

"Hush!" she said.

"It's such a pretty name," he murmured sleepily.

He felt her lips on his forehead. After that he slept.

When he awoke the room was dark. A cool moist wind swept strongly in upon him. He heard the rumble of far away retreating thunder. And with the heat the headache and overpowering fatigue had gone. He drew a long sighing breath. Something stirred in his hand.

Then in the faint reflection of the street lamp he saw the figure crouching on the floor at the bedside, her cheek pillowed in his outstretched hand. It took him a moment to realize what had brought her there.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"And better?"

"All right now, thanks to you—Why, you're all wet!"

"Yes." She rose stiffly to her knees. "It's been storming and it rained in on me a little. But it's cooler now."

"And you—What time is it?"

"A clock just struck four."

"And you've been here all the time?"

"I was afraid you'd wake up and need some one. And—I wanted to."

"Kazia, why do you do these things for me?"

"It is my place."

Her place! What place, then, had he given her? "Kazia—" he began.

But more than cowardice sealed his lips. She might have been consciously fighting for her love. She bent over and kissed him.

"Hush! You need to sleep."

CHAPTER IX.

Liquid Iron.

The hot spell was over.

For fifty-seven years Roman had toiled as few men can toil—on the tiny farm that had been his father's, to satisfy the greedy tax gatherer; in Essen, learning another craft under the master Krupp; in the new land whose promise had lured him. Not once had his superb strength and endurance failed him; therefore he had never known fear, had not believed that the fate that overtook others must some day be his. He had been very prodigal of that strength.

But one day—such a one as in that season the steel-workers called cool—he staggered and fell. It was three days before he could go back to his job. During that time Mark Truitt was in charge of the furnace.

He who returned was not the careful, precise, unfurled workman. He knew fear. He tired easily and was uncertain of temper. The heat-fretted him and he worried over his work. He lost in efficiency; several times he tapped the furnace either too soon or too late and was sharply reprimanded. To keep up and to forget the new weakness he drank more whisky than ever. Within two weeks he collapsed again.

It was during Roman's third lay-off that Gracey, the foreman, said to Mark: "It looks like Roman's done for."

"It looks that way," Mark assented. "It's come pretty sudden with him. It does that sometimes."

"Yes." Mark stared sadly through the furnace mouth at the boiling flame-swept slag. The drama had become a tragedy. There was an element in steel of which chemists took no account—the lives and souls of men.

"He can't expect to keep his job," he heard the foreman continue, "away half the time like this. And last week he spoiled two heats. I'm afraid we'll have to let him go."

"Yes!" Mark's mouth twisted in an ugly sneer. "He's given you the best he had. And now he's breaking down. So—scrap him, of course!"

"That's funny talk," grunted the foreman. "Especially since the superintendent and I've been talking it over and we think of you for the job. That makes it look different, don't it?" he laughed.

"No, it doesn't. Do you suppose I haven't been thinking of that—counting on it—ever since he broke first?" Mark turned hot eyes on the foreman.

"Why, that's the worst of you. You drive us to the limit and when we break you kick us off like an old shoe. And that isn't enough. You've got to

make beasts of us, every man dogging the fellow ahead, glad when he drops and lets go his job. Damn you all, anyhow!"

"Then I'm to tell the superintendent you don't want the job?"

Mark looked again into the boiling furnace, felt its consuming breath, listened to the mills' strident voice. Through every sense he caught their menace; his spirit covered before it. But he who had come so near to falling could know the bitterness of him through whose fall advancement would come.

"No!" he snarled in savage contempt for himself and his hollow indignation. "You can tell him I'm a beast like all the rest."

He was on the night turn then. In the morning he went reluctantly to Roman's house. At breakfast he was alone with Kazia. But there was no love-making that morning. Nor did he explain that he was to supersede her uncle at the furnace.

"How's Roman?" he asked with an added inward twinge.

"He's not much better," she sighed. "We're worried about him. He frets because he thinks he might lose his job."

He said nothing.

"Do you think he will?"

"Yes." He made shift to raise his eyes to hers. "I think he will."

"Just because he's sick. Oh, surely not!"

"Because he's used up. And when you're used up, you've got to get out to make room for better—for those that can still be useful."

"Oh, that would break his heart. How I hate those mills!" she cried. "But don't tell him you think that."

"No." His eyes fell. "I won't tell him. He'll find out soon enough."

Roman did not go back to work until his shift was on day turn again. Some presentiment of the impending calamity must have come to him, for as he and Mark set out for the mills that morning the irritability that had marked him since his first collapse gave way to a deep dejection.

It was not until they were entering the mill shed that Mark said: "Roman, I think Gracey wants to see you."

He tried to make it very gentle.

"Zo?" Roman halted, looked intently at Mark. He drew a long whistling breath. "Zo!" He understood. But his presentiment had not told him how deep the hurt would be.

He tried to look the man he had been. But his tired lack-luster eyes belied the stiffly martial shoulders and firm step. He went straight to the foreman.

"Mine chop?" he asked steadily. "You will take it away?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to let you go, Roman."

"Unt vy?" There was no complaint. "You're laying off too much. And you're getting answered bluntly. And you're foreman answer in your work. You've lost your grip."

"I haf been zick. Meppy," Roman made an effort to speak the confidence he did not feel. "meppy I'll get better."

"I hope so. You've been a good man in your time. But I don't think so. You're getting too old for the work." Gracey was still young; he could speak carelessly of growing old.

"In my time! Oldt," Roman repeated slowly. "I haf not believedft zo."

He did not wince. But the shoulders he had been holding so bravely erect sagged.

"Oldt! It is zo."

He started to move away, but the foreman called him back.

"See here, Roman," he said with rough kindness. "You've always drawn good pay. And you've quite a bit laid by, I hear. Why don't you go back to your own country and take it easy the rest of your life?"

Roman eyed him listlessly. "Here is mine country. But I do not want to take it easy. Always haf I vorkedt—the vork of strong men."

There was no sense of triumph in his promotion, honestly earned though it was as his world measured such things.

He walked to Roman's house, with a firm tread that was the outward expression of his mood. He knew just what was coming. He dreaded it, the moment when he must again face the man by whose fall he profited, must again break the sweet ties this life formed only to sever. Yet he did not flinch. He might rail against the issues presented to him, but at least he had always the courage of his choice.

There was none of the trappings of tragedy in the moment he had dreaded. The family was gathered as usual in the dining room. Roman had himself in hand once more.

Mark stopped in the doorway. For the life of him he could not speak the commonplace salutation on his lips. He saw Kazia steal quietly from the room. But he knew that she stayed within hearing.

It was Roman who broke the silence. "You haf eaten?"

"At the saloon."

"Zo? You shouldt haf come. Ve valted."

Piotr snarled: "You've got a nerve to come back here at all."

"Piotr," Roman reproved him quietly, "it is not for you."

"Of course," Mark addressed Roman,

"You want me to go. I suppose you blame me. I blame myself somehow—I don't know why. It—it isn't fair! It isn't my fault you've been fired. You ought to see that. And I'd be a fool not to take your job, now that you can't have it any more."

"Huh!" sneered Piotr. "You're glad enough of the chance, too."

"Piotr!" The boy subsided. Roman went on: "It is not your fault I am oldt, no. But—it is better you go. You haf mine chop. It is not goot for me to see unt hear of the vork of strong men ven I am not strong."

"I will go tonight."

"I haf not zaldt tonight. Ven you haf another goot place to go."

"I will go tonight."

"Well—good-by, then," said Piotr promptly.

Mark waited a moment longer. But there was really nothing more to be said. He went upstairs.

His carpetbag packed—a brief task—he waited. And this was hard—



"Huh!" Sneered Piotr, "You're Glad Enough of the Chance."

hard! Now there was at least the semblance of a struggle.

It almost shook him because with that went—Kazia. Instinct, brushing aside the mist of false teachings, interpreted anew and aright the passion he had thought ignoble, warned him to take this whole love while yet there was time.

"Almost thou persuadest me. . . ."

But not altogether. His desire—to survive, to win his place among the masters—still held the whip, kept him facing doggedly his straight road ahead. And, as if jealous of any rival for supremacy over him, it claimed the pale lesser love. He could not see the unlettered Hunky girl sharing that conquest.

When she came, she stood for a moment at the door, a question and a great fear in her eyes.

"I—I was waiting for you," he said. "I knew. But I couldn't come any sooner."

Her glance fell to the bag, rose again. She walked slowly toward him. He rose. Scarcely an arm's length away, she halted. Suddenly tears stood in her eyes. She put out both hands in a quick pleading gesture.

"Don't go!"

"They don't want me to stay, Kazia." "That's because you've taken his job. Don't take it!"

He shook his head. "You don't understand. There's no reason why I shouldn't take it."

"He's your friend."

"You don't understand," he repeated wearily. "If I could give him back his job by not taking it, I'd not take it." He believed that then! He began again the old reasoning. "But I couldn't. Some one else would get it—that's all. Isn't it better for me to have it than a stranger? Roman," he concluded bitterly, "ought to see it that way."

"I know there isn't any good reason. But—I couldn't go with you, if you took it."

She couldn't go with him! His eyes fell miserably.

"Oh, no!" With one swift step she bridged the space between them, throwing her arms around his neck.

"Oh, no! I didn't mean that. I'd go with you, whatever you did. I'd have to. I couldn't stay here, when you're gone—go back to the way it was before you came. I couldn't stand that." A little shudder passed over her.

"You can't understand," he cried again. "I've tried—"

"I know. I've seen it troubling you, though I didn't know what it was. But—can't you see? I'm the reason. You'll never find any one that can love you like I can. It's all I know—to love—to love you. I don't ask much. But I can give—everything."

With a force that must have hurt her he freed himself from her clasp and sank shaking into the chair, covering his face with his hands. For a breath the scales quivered. Then:

"Kazia," he whispered, "I haven't been square with you. There's—there's another girl—"

"There is—And you—"

After what seemed like a long silence he dared to glance up to see how she had taken it. By then she had crept to the threshold and was looking back at him. About her lips a dazed, foolish little smile was playing. And her eyes were the eyes of one who had just seen a great horror.

When he looked up again, she was gone.

An hour later—how he could not have told—he