

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

By HENRY RUSSELL MILLER

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SYNOPSIS.

Mark Truitt, encouraged by his sweet-heart, Unity Martin, leaves Bethel, his native town, to seek his fortune. Simon Truitt tells Mark that it 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 Henley, head of the Quinby Iron works, for a job and is sent to the construction gang. His success in that work wins him a place as helper to Roman Andrejtski, open-hearth furnaceman. He becomes a bonder 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. Heavy work in the intense heat of the furnace causes Mark to collapse and Kazia cares for him. Later Roman also succumbs and Mark gets his job. Roman remonstrates and tells Mark to find another boarding place. Five years elapse during which Mark has advanced to the foremanship, while his labor-saving devices have made him invaluable to the company. In the meantime Kazia has married one Jim Whiting. Mark meets with an accident which dooms him to be a cripple for life. He returns to Bethel intending to stay there. He finds Unity about to marry another man and wins her back. Unity urges him to return to his work in the city. Mark rises rapidly to wealth and power in the steel business, but the social ambitions of his wife make their married life unhappy. The big steel interests are secretly anxious to get hold of stock in the Troquais Iron company, supposed to be worthless. Timothy Woodhouse seeks financial assistance from Mark and the latter buys Woodhouse's Troquais stock at a small figure. Henley forces Quinby to let Mark have stock in the Quinby company, through a threat that if he does not he will lose both of them.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

It was the less satisfying because he foresaw the end of a chapter. He had spent himself in body—he was no longer capable of long intense application, he had fallen back upon the invalid's last resort, drugs; in mind—the creative faculty seemed dead, that very morning a young man in the mills had announced an important invention that was to have been Truitt's magnum opus and upon which his sterile brain had labored in vain; in soul—he could no longer dream. And for reward he had—the dry fact of a triumph he could not sense and the prospect of an empty, useless, discontented future.

He was a critic, you see; but not of himself. The world was out of joint. Passers-by were diverted from their own cares by the sight of a well-dressed man stamping his cane on the pavement and muttering aloud: "An evil fate pursues me. Other men do as I do, desire as I desire and find content. Why can't I be contented—and happy?"

A thousand faces streamed past him, unrecognized and unrecognizing. Then, at a corner where two currents damned each other, appeared one that seemed oddly familiar. It was of an undistinguished homeliness, pasty pale, morose, matching well the general shabbiness of its owner. At first Mark, confused by the dirty brown beard, did not recognize him.

The man had no doubts. At sight of Mark an evil glitter sprang into the sullen eyes.

"You!"

By the hate that had lived through fifteen years Mark placed him.

"Piotr Andrejtski!"

"Peter Anderson," the man corrected him.

"That's a good American name. I'd forgotten you had a preference," Mark smiled and held out a friendly hand.

"How are you, Peter Anderson?"

The hand was ignored. When Peter Anderson sneered, his homeliness became almost grotesque.

"Since you're so interested, I manage to keep alive."

"How do you manage it?"

"I'm a compositor on the Outcry—when there's any money for an issue."

"The Outcry?"

"You'll hear of it yet. It's the paper of our Cause."

Mark knew of but one cause that employed the capital. "Socialism, I suppose." He smiled indulgently. "I hope it's in funds sufficiently often."

"I look it, don't I?"

The answer was so obvious that Mark avoided it. "How," he asked hastily, "is Roman?"

"He breathes and sleeps and eats. But he's dead."

"Is that a Socialist parable? I'm not a Socialist, so you'll have to explain."

"His mind's gone. It began to go soon after you stole his job. But probably you've forgotten that, too."

"I have no recollection," said Mark coldly, "of any such occurrence." With a curt nod, he passed on.

He had gone but a few steps when he halted and looked back. Peter, unmindful of elbowing pedestrians, was still at the corner, glaring at him.

Impulsively he turned and retraced his steps.

"See here, Piotr," he said. "Let us not use hard names. There are a good many things we'd never agree on. But we can agree on this—you're hard up. I've been luckier than you. What can I do to help you?"

Piotr's lips formed a sly, "Nothing." But the refusal did not fail. A look of transparent craft displaced malevolence.

"Do you mean that?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm not in the habit—"

"I don't care about your habits," Piotr interrupted ungraciously. "If

you want to do something, you can lend me a hundred dollars."

"Lend," evidently, was a euphemism.

"What will you do—still, that's your business. Of course, I will. I wish you'd asked me something harder. Come along to the bank."

The bank was a few blocks away. Mark improved the time by asking the details of Roman's circumstances. Piotr, sullenness not lifted by the prospect of money, answered shortly. It was a pitiable story of descent—of the gradual dissipation of the savings of Roman's active years and the swift failure, through idleness and too much alcohol, of his mental powers, leaving him and Hanka dependent upon Piotr's scanty and uncertain earnings.

"Where," Mark asked, as they entered the bank, "do you live now?"

"Rose Alley."

"Rose Alley!" Mark stopped short. "My God!"

"What does your sort know of it?"

"Quite enough. Come along."

A few minutes later they were in the street again, Piotr the richer by the sum he had asked.

They stood facing each other—two strong men who had conquered and the inefficient, one of life's guerrillas, who had just taken of the strong man's largess. But the inefficient was not grateful; a hundred dollars could not conquer his hatred.

"I s'pose," he sneered, "you want me to thank you?"

"No. If you need more, come to me. And, see here, Piotr, I want you to get Roman and your mother away from Rose Alley."

"You want—!" The money in his pocket, Piotr threw craft to the winds.

"What have you to do with us? Do you s'pose we'd let you help us?"

"But you took—"

Piotr chuckled—a chuckle of triumphant malice. "Did you think it was for us?" The chuckle grew into a laugh, as though he pondered some mammoth jest. "You—you—have just paid for the next issue of the Outcry!"

He wheeled and went haltingly away. Mark watched him until he turned a corner.

"Poor devil!" Mark shook his head pityingly. "He's mad."

It was not Mark's habit to waste precious hours wandering the crowded city streets in introspective meditation. He now went to the appointment with his lawyer to keep which he had left Henley.

It was a long and tedious consultation, having to do with a big real estate deal in which Truitt had shown his customary shrewdness. He displayed little interest. More than once Shirley, the lawyer, had to recall his straying attention. Shirley was astonished at this; his client was notable for his concentration on the matter in hand. He would have been even more deeply astonished, could he have looked upon the picture that lurked away Mark's thoughts. But then, for

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as a lawyer, however. Think of it," Mark smiled wryly, "as a gentleman—if the word means anything to you."

"It's your case," Shirley repeated.

"But my notion is, people will think you don't want the publicity—for social reasons. That sort of talk—"

Mark rose abruptly. "I can't help," he replied, with an impatient frown, "what people think, can I? Fix it up as soon as you can."

But the day's adventures were not ended. The ghost of Timothy Woodhouse could not oust Rose Alley from Mark's mind.

The blacks, ordered by telephone, waited him. Swiftly, Mark holding the reins, they were guided across a bridge, along rough-paved, tumble-down streets, into a quarter such as their aristocratic feet had never trod. Grime and decay were everywhere.

It was 15 years since he had seen Rose Alley, but he found the way as though he had taken it but yesterday.

He drew up at the mouth of a narrow shallow court, and giving the reins to his man, got down from the trap.

A few children—dirty, sallow, undersized—had been playing in the court. With difficulty, for they had not his tongue and were afraid of the stranger, he learned from them in which tenement Peter Anderson lived.

He groped and stumbled up two flights of stairs that groaned protestingly under his tread. He found a door and knocked. It opened.

For a full minute, speechless, he stared at the woman who stood on the threshold.

CHAPTER XVI.

Glowing Embers.

The figure silhouetted in the doorway was one to make men dream, full curved, strong with the strength of women whose forbears have always toiled, yet without heaviness; it was the strength that lies in quality, not in bulk.

She looked at him steadily, showing no surprise. And by that he read that she had learned to take life, its coincidences and its climaxes as they came, calmly, without loss of poise.

She spoke first, in a low even voice that hinted even less than her manner at inner excitement. "I thought it was Piotr. Your step sounds like his."

They might have been daily familiar.

"Yes," he flushed. "I am somewhat in his case."

He almost missed the swift glance she cast toward his cane. But he was grateful that she had no comment for his injury. In the presence of her splendid perfection his own physical shortcomings seemed almost cause for shame.

"How do you do, Kazia?" he said gravely. "I didn't expect to find you here."

He held out an uncertain hand. She took it, neither hastily nor reluctantly, for a brief meaningless clasp.

"I am here sometimes. Will you come in?"

She stood aside and he entered, trying to overcome his limp. It was the kitchen, which in Rose Alley—as he remembered—had to serve as living room as well. It was clean, but bare; pitifully bare.

By the stove stood a little faded woman, much stooped, her hair white and thin, her pale lack-luster eyes for the moment brightened by a startled question. He went over to her and took her hand. She shrank away from him.

"It is Mark Truitt, Matka," said Kazia in Polish. "Don't you remember?"

Hanka said something in the same tongue.

"She says," Kazia interpreted, "they have never forgotten."

Their eyes met again. . . . His turned away quickly and went to the other occupant of the room. He sat in the only armchair, a huge mass of inert flesh, head slouched forward and fingers playing aimlessly with the long unkempt beard that reached halfway to the bulging waist. Mark laid a hand on his shoulder. Roman looked up. But Roman saw as the new-born babe sees.

The grasp on his shoulder tightened. "Roman, don't you know me? I'm Mark—Mark Truitt, you remember."

The shoulder stirred a little under the tight grasp. Roman's head slouched forward again and he began once more his aimless twisting of the long beard.

"How long," Mark's voice had become sharp, "has he been this way?"

"Almost three years."

"And here?"

"A year longer."

Kazia's eyes said: "What is that to you?"

"Why," he demanded, "didn't you let me know about it?"

She smiled—contemptuously, as it seemed to him.

"We must get them out of here," he went on hastily.

"We can't. Piotr won't let us."

"He must," Mark declared curtly. "He will not," she repeated.

"I saw him today. He's crazy."

"He is. He's a good compositor and could make enough to keep them at least decently. But he prefers to work for the Outcry—for little or nothing. Generally it's nothing. He says it's for the cause."

"But that's no reason why he shouldn't let me help them."

She shrugged her shoulders. "To Piotr it is. I know, because I've tried."

"Then," he said, "we'll take them away and settle with Piotr afterward."

He said it crisply, with the assured air of fortune's darlings who, having made their resolve, take its consummation for granted. Her faint smile showed again.

"It isn't so simple as that. They won't go."

"They won't go!" He stared. "Why not?"

"For one thing," she returned quietly, "the Matka loves her son. I'll ask her."

She turned to Hanka and for several minutes the two women talked earnestly in their native tongue. Hanka shook her head continuously.

"She says," Kazia returned to Mark, "My Piotr wouldn't like it."

Hanka interrupted, laying a hand on Kazia's arm and looking anxiously toward the door. Kazia nodded.

"She says also," she interpreted again, "that we'd better go. It's most time for Piotr to come home. She's right."

"I think," Mark answered, "I'll stay, since I'm here, and have this out with Piotr."

"You'd better not." Her swift glance seemed to measure his physical frailty. "Piotr's temper is uncertain. He found me here once and drove me out. It—The gloom could not quite hide the color that surged into her cheeks. "It wasn't nice."

"I'm sorry for them, but just the same, since I've started, I'll see this through and wait for Piotr."

"No, you'd better not," she repeated with cold emphasis. "You can prove your inflexibility in some other way. Piotr is apt to have been drinking and if his temper is stirred up, he'll make them suffer." She nodded toward Hanka and Roman. "Really, you're quite helpless in the matter."

"I seem to be." He laughed shortly, to conceal a disappointment as undefined as the emotion set stirring by the sight of his old friends. "But, at least, I can leave some money."

But she shut him off from this, too. "No. What money they can use without Piotr's knowing of it, I can furnish."

He limped stiffly toward the door, more hurt than he was willing to admit to himself by the rebuff and the failure of his impulsive mission.

He went quickly out into the dark passage, that he might not have to look longer, and there awaited her. When she came, he led the way down the rickety stairs and out into the foul smelling court, lighted up now by a swaying arc lamp.

"One would think," he blurted out, "you wanted to stay there."

"Do you find that so wonderful?"

"I'm glad you can't. It's no place for such as you."

"Many people have lived here."

"But not from choice. I know. I lived here once myself, before—"

He hesitated a moment. "I left it to live with Roman."

She made no reply. He stopped, facing her and blocking her egress.

"You're thinking my going there was to the advantage of no one but myself?"

"Why else should you have gone there?"

"That's almost cynical, isn't it? I might have had several other reasons—but didn't. At least I did you no harm."

"Neither harm nor good."

"One doesn't like to think of one's self as reduced to even a harmless nonentity. Still, most of the virtues are negative, I believe. Though I'm vain enough to wish I could have been a positive influence in the making of the woman you've become. It's rather remarkable, Kazia."

"It isn't remarkable—or excuse for vanity."

She had not winced, nor had her steady gaze wandered. But for just an instant a fleeting somber shadow had rested in her eyes.

"I must go," she said.

They walked in silence to the mouth of the court. At their approach Mark's man got down from the trap, touching his hat.

"Can't I set you home?" Mark ventured, not at all sure that she would accept. But she affected no reluctance.

She glanced at a little watch she wore. "I go to the Todd hospital, and I've overstayed here a little."

He helped her up to the seat. The horses sprang forward, swung into the car tracks and quickly left the tenement neighborhood behind. For a time Mark gave his attention to guiding their swift course around overtaken cars and the slow lumbering teams that drew the heavy traffic of the street. They were on the bridge before either spoke.

"You said, to the hospital," he began suggestively. "Do you—"

"I'm on a case there."

"You're a nurse, then? I remember you had a knack for that sort of thing. Your husband—er—I hadn't heard—"

"I haven't seen him for 12 years."

"Kazia," he asked gravely, "will you tell me about yourself?"

"There is nothing to tell—any more than there is about you."

"That is, you're not interested in what has happened to me. You're frank."

"Because a chance has thrown us together for an hour is no reason for us to pretend an interest neither of us can feel."

"You may speak for yourself, please. At least, we can oil the wheels of circumstance by going through the polite forms. You could smile very graciously on my man Felix, but to me—"

He broke off with a short laugh. "History has a way of repeating itself. I remember saying something of the sort to you once before. Of course, you've forgotten."

"I forget—nothing."

"Ah! He turned quickly to her again. "Then I did do you harm."

"I can't see—"

"It follows," he interrupted. "If I had done you no harm, you would remember charitably, not coldly or worse, and you would be at least as cordial to me as to my groom."

"Now it is you," she answered after a thoughtful pause, "who will not let me oil the wheels. Probably what you say is right. I haven't thought much about influences—I haven't had time."

"I'm sorry. Which seems all I can do about it. You and Piotr and Hanka seem in a conspiracy to teach me that for regrettable things we can pay only with regret. But I promised to save you time."

Darkness had fallen when they drew up before the hospital. Mark descended painfully to help her down—a rather superfluous courtesy, since she was better able to alight alone than was he. "You're in good time, I hope?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you for the ride."