

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

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CHAPTER XXIX—Continued.

Piotr did not move from his corner. "Ah!" It was almost a sob. "They're still for you against everybody, against me. It was always so. Everybody was for you. You had everything. It came easy to you. It came hard to me, so hard I could never do anything or get anything. It—" "Yes, yes, Piotr, I know. But we're going to change that now. Come along—the rain's stopped and I must hurry." "To get back to her, I suppose?" Piotr sighed. "I must get back to her. Come on." "I don't think I—" Piotr's words came between gasps. Something seemed to be choking him. "In a minute. I—I must get—some things." Mark looked quickly back over his shoulder, caught by an odd change in the plaintive voice. Duak was gathering rapidly, deepening the shadows in the shed, and he could barely see the figure fumbling about in his corner. There was a pause—Piotr's search seemed to have been successful—then a metallic click. Mark whirled sharply on him.

"Piotr!" "Ah!" It was not a sob now, but a low guttural growl, throbbing with hate and triumph.

Piotr, too, whirled. From his corner a point of flame leaped out toward Mark, another—another—until six



From Piotr's Corner a Point of Flame Leaped Out Toward Mark.

shots had rung out. At the last Mark's head dropped forward, his body swayed slowly and fell in a crumpled heap across the doorway.

When he awoke he was being dragged by his wounded shoulder in such fashion that his head scraped along the floor. He did not realize so much, merely that his pain had increased a hundredfold. He tried to cry out, but could only lie limp and silent. Then he felt a hand passing over his face and a voice that seemed very far away muttering fretfully.

"I wonder if you're dying or shamming. It would be like you to sham. I didn't mean to shoot then. I didn't want you to die until you knew the mills were gone. But I had to—when you looked at me that way, I had to."

Mark heard, but the words meant nothing to him. The voice muttered on; detached sentences came to him.

"It isn't so easy as I thought. . . . I'd better go now, while I can. . . . I'm afraid. I never drove a horse. . . . Twice, coming here, I fell. I thought I was dead, but it didn't go off—I don't know why. . . . I'd like to tell you about Kazia's doctor. I saw them one night and followed them. You wouldn't believe it of her, would you? It nearly killed me. . . . It was your fault. You ran away from her. . . . It would be easy to drive off the road and fall in the dark. . . . I'm tired, and I tremble. Seeing you makes it worse. . . . I keep wondering what they'll do to me. . . . When the mills are gone, I'm coming back to you. I guess you'll stay. . . . Maybe I'd better finish you now—you're so lucky always."

Mark felt the hand again, now at his throat, pressing hard. He tried to protest: "That is quite superfluous," but the pressure would not let him. When blackness was closing in on him once more, the grip relaxed.

But he did not quite lose consciousness this time. He heard the other move about, still muttering, then pass out. The sound of wheels and the horse's tramping through the tall weeds died away in the distance.

At first Mark lay inert. A mortal weakness held him. He could realize only the pain. He wanted nothing but to lie prone and motionless. . . . A disturbing thought began to tug at his brain. He ought not to be there. There was a thing he must do, some one he must see. What was it?

"Kazia!" The name gave him a thrilling shock that sharpened the pain but cleared his mind a little.

And the mills! The mills! Kazia and the mills! The two thoughts were inextricably mingled.

With a rush came realization of his plight. Piotr, the puny whimpering

madman who cringed before a squall, had shot him and was on his way to blow up the mills. Piotr must be forestalled. With an effort he forced his eyes open and held them so until the first riddiness passed. He raised his head; it fell back with a thud.

"I can't do it," he groaned. But the mills—and Kazia! "I've got to do it. I must stop him. I must get to her."

Then began a fight to sit up, to stand, to beat off the invisible hands trying to drag him back into the blackness. How long the struggle lasted, by what degrees he progressed, he did not know; but when it was over he was leaning weakly against the door jamb. His brain was reeling, he breathed sobbingly, but by bracing himself desperately with the cane, recovered in the struggle to stand, he managed to hold what he had won.

His brain cleared again, a little steadiness came to the trembling limbs. Summoning all his will, he passed with uncertain dragging steps out of the shed. A cold damp wind breathed refreshingly upon him. He gripped his cane more tightly and started slowly down the weedy road.

He reached the foot of the hill and sank down in a little rain pool, rested pantingly and laved his hot face a few minutes, then staggered to his feet and limped on until weakness overcame him once more and he fell. . . . More than an hour later he was still lurking along the road. Kazia and the mills! They were in danger, they were being taken from him; he must save them.

So he beat his way slowly along moonlit stretches of rough road, through darkened ravines where only instinct found a path, until at last, rounding a curve, he saw the furnace looming huge before him.

As hours passed and Mark did not return, a sense of an approaching crisis, of a danger, came to Kazia. The squall died away, full darkness fell, the train she was to have taken with Piotr rolled to a stop at the station and out again, and still he had not returned. The sense grew heavier, passive waiting unbearable. To escape her foreboding she went out into the night and walked about again in the place she had once thought of as a haven. But she quickly left the rambling old village, seen for the first time, yet holding so many memories of which she must not think, and went over to the new Bethel with its wide paved streets and rows of pretty little cottages. Many of the cottages were dark and untenanted as yet, but she saw them as they would be when they were the homes of a happy folk who toiled without exhaustion or fear, with kindness in their hearts one for another.

She left the cluster of homes-to-be and retraced her steps over the street that led past the mills to the bridge, started to cross. But at the entrance she stopped. Everywhere it was the same, a redolence of him. After all, to her Bethel, the haven, was just Mark Truitt.

All her fine resolutions and philosophy had become insufficient. The sight of the river, the woods in their autumnal glory, the song of the rapids had revived the scenes of her one happiness.

She did not think that there might be some to see. She was weeping, head bowed on the bridge rail.

"Oh, I shouldn't have come. I want him—him. And I have no right to have him. It would be the cruelest thing I could do to him—even if he cared. I was wrong to come."

Thus she told hope—the immortal!—it must not live. . . . Old Simon had no skill for it and hence no part in the building of the mills. But he spent his days watching them grow. Often at night, when Bethel was sleeping, he would slip across the river to realize again that after so many years his dreams were coming magnificently true.

That night he left his seat on the stoop, where he had been wondering but patiently awaiting the absent Mark, and trudged down to the river and across the bridge. He saw the figure leaning on the rail at the farther end, but not until he was close did he see it was that of a weeping woman. He would have turned aside, but he perceived that she had heard him and lifted her head.

He stopped short, staring in astonishment at the woman, a sort that had never before come within his ken.

After a moment's hesitation he went to her. "Is anything wrong, ma'am?" She shook her head. "Is there anything I kin do fur ye?" Again the silent gesture.

"If there is," he persisted: "I'd like to do it fur ye." She found her voice. "It is nothing." She tried to smile. "Sometimes women cry for nothing, about little things."

"Some women do," Simon answered gravely. "I guess ye're a stranger here, ain't ye? I'm Simon Truitt." She started. "You're his father?" Simon noted the unconscious use of the pronoun. "Mark's, ye mean? Yes, ma'am. Did ye know him, back there in the city?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and turned her face from the moonlight. She seemed to be struggling again with a rising sob.

Simon found himself peering, closely and unintentionally, into her eyes. He stepped hastily back and heard himself speaking with a boldness he did not recognize.

"Mebby it was fur him ye were—But I hadn't oughter ask that, Mebby it's fur ye he's be'n grievin'?" "It couldn't be that."

"I've wondered. Often I've come on him when he thought he was alone, jest settin' and lookin' at nothin'—an' grievin', I know." Simon's face, too, sought the shadow. "I know."

"It might be because of me but not—not for me."

"Not because he wants ye, ye mean? But it could be that. Tain't likely he'd find two such women as ye, even in the city. An' tain't likely he'd trouble so much, if there wasn't a woman in it. I wish ye could give him what he needs."

"What he needs is to have his life made over from the beginning. He can't have that."

"If he's jest wantin' some one, there's a way he could have it."

"You don't understand," she said wearily. "No, I don't understand. That's the trouble. I'd like to help him, to give him what he needs. But I don't know how. There's nothin' I can give him."

He turned his face away from her, looking up at the furnace, big and menacing, outlined against the sky. There was silence among the mills. From the old village behind them came faint vague sounds of life—a distant tinkle of laughter, a crying child, a neighing horse. From the new town beyond the mills came no sound but a single voice in song, a wild eerie chant that had been brought from another land. The song was finished. Kazia and Simon stirred, as though they had been waiting for its close to bring their strange encounter to an end.

"What's that?" Both started. From somewhere near them had come a sudden muffled cackle of mirthless uncanny laughter. "Sounds 's if it come from the furnace. There hadn't oughter be anybody 'round here. But I guess it's just the watchman in the power house. The still night makes it sound like that."

But even as he spoke they saw the figure of a man crawling from behind the furnace. He scrambled to his feet and began to run, with an awkward hobbling gait, up the tracks toward the bridge. The moonlight fell full on his face.

As the cry, in a voice he knew, reached him, the man stopped suddenly, stared wildly about and saw the two figures advancing on him. He raised his hands in a frantic gesture.

"Kazia! Go back—go back!" She did not heed his warning. "Piotr! What are you doing?" "Go back!" he screamed. "You'll be killed. It's dynamite!"

Instantly the others guessed what impended. Kazia heard a low moan beside her, saw Simon run, as fast as his age-stiffened limbs allowed, toward the furnace, as if he thought to avert the imminent destruction.

"You mustn't!" she cried. "Come back!" If the old man heard, he did not obey. She fled after him, in instinctive purpose to drag him back out of danger.

They reached Piotr, passed him. He stood bewildered, glancing uncertainly toward the refuge of the woods. Then, with a low whimpering cry, he, too, joined in that moonlight race. He could not have overtaken her, had she not tripped and fallen over a switch. He flung himself upon her, moaning shudderingly.

"Kazia, I didn't want to hurt you." Simon sped on. That was what Mark Truitt, crouching where he had last fallen, saw just before the explosion came. There was a hoarse deafening roar. The great furnace seemed to reel, then toppled and fell.

They found him weakly trying to remove the debris from a place near the edge of the ruin. They drew him aside and a hundred strong hands took up his task. Soon they found the dead Piotr and under him Kazia, still breathing. It was not until daybreak that they came to Simon.

Kazia was carried to the village and laid in Doctor Hedges' own house. All through the night and in the morning, until the great surgeon from the city came, he fought off death. Then the surgeon took up the fight with a knowledge and skill the old doctor did not possess. For two days they did not sleep but watched and battled.

In the adjoining room a man, himself the object of the doctor's care, passed through his Gethsemane. The dead, his own pain and weakness, all else, were forgotten in his agony for the one who, it seemed, could not live. Sometimes he would rise from the couch where they had laid him and creep into the other room to join the watchers there until the sight of the still, bandaged form became more than he could bear. Then he would let them lead him back to his couch. His lips moved constantly, in what words he did not know. Their burden was the cry of all Gethsemanes.

"Let this cup pass from me." So the miracle was made perfect. Toward the last of that watch his weakness began to overcome him. The doctors supposed he slept and said: "It is best." He did not sleep. He had lost sense of his surroundings but his brain was alive. He was fighting, struggling supremely, to hold her back from the precipice over which she was slowly falling. Once she seemed to be slipping from his grasp. He heard her piteous cry to him.

"She called me," he whispered. Hedges thought it was delirium and would have led him back to his couch. But Mark resisted.

"I tell you, she called me. I must see her." "Let him," said the surgeon. "Probably it's his last chance."

Hedges released him and Mark went over to her. He dropped to his knees by the bedside and kissed, very gently, the arm outlined under the sheet.

"Kazia," he whispered. "My wife, my love, don't leave me! Can't you hear, dear?—the miracle has come!" He thought that she sighed, as does a tired child when it sinks to sleep, and that a little smile touched the pale lips.

The others did not see, but then they had not heard her call.

CHAPTER XXX. The Ultimate Purpose.

It was an Indian summer day, when the sun paused to smile genially back over his shoulder at the earth he was leaving to winter's cold mercy, and a warm wind blew softly. Toward noon Kazia, leaning on the doctor and his buxom wife, was helped to the front porch, where the Matka was waiting with cushions and shawls. In a big rocking chair the convalescent was made comfortable, with cushions at head and feet and the shawls tucked carefully around her.

"You're sure you're warm enough?" queried Mrs. Hedges, with needless anxiety. "Quite sure. You all spoil me with kindness."

Mrs. Hedges gave a last pat to the cushion behind Kazia's head. "You take a deal of spoiling, I think, dearie." Kazia sighed. "I'll hate to leave you." Tears, for some reason, were treacherously ready that morning.

"Then," drawled the doctor, "you're thinking of leaving us?" "I must—soon." But under the doctor's twinkling gaze a girlish flush sprang into view—perhaps to keep the tears company.

"Too much color," chuckled the doctor. "Let me feel your pulse." The crimson deepened and as instantly vanished.

"I've a cake in the oven." Mrs. Hedges suddenly remembered. "Doctor, I'll need you."

"Need me?" The doctor started. "Am I a—"

"At once, Doctor," came a stern command from the hall. "Eh? Oh—!" A light broke in upon him and he chuckled again. "Coming, my dear, coming!"

The Matka, too, would have left her, but Kazia stayed her. "Don't go," she said in the Matka's tongue.

The old woman halted, irresolute. "He, your lover, will be coming soon." Timidly she laid a thin knotted hand on the scarf enshrouding Kazia's hair.

Kazia ignored that. "You will hate to leave this place, won't you?" The Matka nodded. "There is peace here. Even the old smile and make fests, and they grow old easily, as a child grows into youth. And my Piotr is here." Her eyes sought a distant hillside, where white stones gleamed in the sunshine.

"But we must go. I don't belong here. What would these kind people think if they knew—the voice broke a little—"what you know."

"They would think as I do. And I—I know nothing, except that you love and are loved. Such love I have never seen. It is not the love your mother and her lover had. All here know and

are glad of it. I do not think you can go and leave him unhappy." And the Matka stole away.

"It came too late." Kazia's lips said that and the waiting tears overflowed, lingering gemlike on the fringe of closed lids. A thousand times she had repeated the words to herself since the first hour of consciousness when she had seen him bending over her. She thought she believed it. But her fast-beating heart, as she awaited her lover's coming, sounded another answer.

The heavy throbbing ceased, began again, keeping time with a tramping of hoofs from down the street. Her closed eyes did not open even when the tramping ceased and she heard his step, punctuated by the ring of cane on gravel, until his step, too, ceased and she felt him near her, his gaze upon her. She dreaded to meet that gaze.

bird that had seen the first light. And the light in his eyes, transfiguring him for her, thrilling her with its summons, was not to be mistaken for the fire that had flamed there at other times, or for the pity of one seeing his cruelities working out.

"It is not too late," her heart was crying, and she tried in vain to stifle its song.

But he did not press her then with impetuous wooing. "Do you realize," he said gravely, "this is the first time since the accident I've seen you alone?"

"Yes, I—" she began stammeringly. "The others have just gone in. If you call them, they will come."

"Then," he smiled reassuringly, "I will call them at once, for I have many things to show you today, and the doctor sets an absurd limit to our drive."

He rapped on the door and the doctor appeared, and behind him the Matka. Then, while the Matka piled the cushions in the seat, Mark and the doctor helped Kazia over the little walk and into the buggy.

"And mind you," the doctor adjured them, as Mark got in and the horse started, "two hours at the most—if you can track of the time!"

He gently led the Matka back into the house. For she, who had forgotten how to weep for sorrow, was weeping now for the joy awaiting Kazia.

First Mark drove, very slowly and carefully, through the old village—and across the bridge until he came to its middle point. There he stopped.

The mills were no longer lifeless and silent. A row of giant stacks spouted clouds of heavy black smoke that fluttered lazily away in the breeze in long wavering pennons. Through the power house windows the watchers caught a glimpse of great fly-wheels whirling and bright pistons plunging. From the rolling mills beyond came a low monotone rumble of engines stirring tentatively, testing their sinews as they waited to pounce upon and torture the coming steel.

And before them towered the rebuilt furnace, alive now and discordantly vocal with its first labor. Thither Mark pointed.

"Watch now! We're just in time. Our first tap!"

As he spoke, the shriek of the checked blast rose, drowning all other sounds, and the crew of men working at the furnace mouth sprang back. Out of a circle of darting fires forth leaped a molten deadly flood. A channel in the sloping sand-bed received it and bore it swiftly, in a dozen branches, to the waiting ladles. Little gaseous flames played impishly over the golden surface. As the cascading flood filled the ladles, drops splashed out upon the ground and burst in a thousand tiny points of light.

Almost before Kazia realized it, the flood had subsided and the full ladles were moving away.

He drove on and took the long winding road that led past Hedges' Hill—though he did not remind her of his meeting with Piotr—and after many miles circled back to the village. They talked little, and perhaps that little was hardly worthy of a record. Kazia lay back in her cushions, her eyes following his hand as he pointed out some new beauty to her.

"How could you leave it?" she murmured, as often she had exclaimed when she had heard of it from the adventuring youth.

"But if I hadn't left it, I shouldn't have found you. So—I'm glad I went." She made no answer to that.

Farther on they came to a branch road that once he had known. He followed it a while until there came to them a delicious spring-like fragrance. He stopped the horse again.

"I thought I could find it. See!" He pointed to an old tree that stood, a mass of fresh green leaves and snowy blossoms, a little away from the roadside.

"What is it?" "A pear tree." "But it's autumn and I thought—" She glanced up at him wonderingly.

"Every fall that tree puts out a new set of leaves and blossoms. You see, there is new life even after spring has gone."

She looked long and earnestly at the blossoming tree. "But winter will come and the blossoms will wither—fruitless."

ever away where the past belongs. One sin is much like another. And for every year you have I can show many. I ask you to forgive, you have forgiven much. Can't you trust me to forget a little? And, dear, all that—all the sins and shadow—were part of a man and woman we have left behind."

She seemed so weak and fragile, lying there, this wrath of the old Kazia, torn by love and fear! A sudden mist shut her from his sight. An unspeakable tenderness welled up within him, lending to his husky broken phrases a supreme eloquence she needed to hear.

"But this love—the Kazia that called it to life—are part of the new life. It began those days when we thought you couldn't live and I learned what love is and what it would mean to lose



"Ah! Take Me!"

you. It will never end. Is it I you doubt? Dear, I know—I know. And I need you. Can't you understand, I need you? You won't, you can't, fall me now?"

"You don't know what you ask," she whispered. "But I can't fight against it any longer—I want you so. Only promise me—when you remember—you won't let me know."

"I promise, Kazia!" "Ah! Take me." A sob shook her and she swayed toward him. He caught her and drew her very gently to him. . . . After a little she smiled through her tears.

It was evening and the others had gone, leaving them alone again. There was no light but the glow of embers on the hearth in the little cottage that was to be their home for a while. But it was enough for them, in whose hearts the unquenchable torch was glowing, revealing beauties and glories they never had known. They sat very close, watching—and listening.

For the silence of the hills was ended forever. Throughout that day, as the iron they had seen flowing advanced toward its destiny, the new creature that had come into the valley had been awakening to full life. Section after section had received the life-giving power, until now all the huge mechanism was in motion, driving, whirling, pounding at top speed. The earth quivered in answer to its pulsation. Crunching metal, raging blasts, fires such as served at the creation, lifted their voices in chorus—an ode of the elements to man the master, the song of steel. A terrible song whose beauty only the understanding might discern—singing madly of power and passion and purpose, of struggle and death, of birth and life, of triumph and steadfast strength.

To the lovers, rich in the knowledge that comes only after sin and payment and release, the song came not in vain.

"Ought you to be there?" she whispered. "Not tonight, dear." "Could we see it from here?" He helped her to a chair by the south window and stood at her side while she saw.

The night sketched the drama of steel for her. Again the great furnace was setting free its lambent flood. Under open sheds were gleaming the sun-bright mouths of other furnaces where the iron boiled and belled and became steel.

"Ah!" Wonderment and adoration were in her cry. "And it is yours—it is you!"

"Not I, not mine! I don't know how many generations of men gave themselves that we might have that. I know it was not for me, for any man. For all who suffer and toil!"

His face was set sternly toward the mills. For a long time he was silent. "What is it?" And she broke the silence with a whisper. "What do you see out there?"

Sternness melted into tenderness. "A parable," he smiled down on her, "of our lives—of life. Desire and disillusionment, battle and toil, conquest and failure, evil and shame—the fires and pressures that burn us and shape us." His hand rested on her hair. "And the purpose in which the real life begins."

"Ah! I wouldn't have you different. But to me—to me life isn't a parable—it is you. . . . This peace, this content—I can't believe yet that they are true, that they always will be true. Ah! Teach me, teach me!"

THE END.

Winthrop's Toast. Our Country—whether bounded by the St. John's and the Sabine, or however otherwise bounded or described, and be the measures more or less—still, Our Country, to be cherished in all our hearts, to be defended by all our hands.—Robert C. Winthrop, July 4, 1845.