

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

By
HENRY RUSSELL MILLER

Author of
"THE MAN HIGHER UP," "HIS RISE
TO POWER," Etc.

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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 Andrejzski, 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. 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 resents this and tells Mark to find another boarding place.

CHAPTER X.

Wounded on the Field.

The accident was one that happened often. Occasionally, after a tap, water would be turned into the cinder pit that the cooling slag might harden and be broken without delay. Not seldom the water would be conveyed under the crust, come into contact with the still molten slag and be converted suddenly into steam. Then there would be an explosion. Men might be seriously injured, or even killed, which was very sad—but one of the hazards of the employment. It happened when Mark had been following his straight road ahead for more than five years.

Five years during which he had won success, substantial if not brilliant! The lack of brilliancy might have been disputed by those few who knew that sundry labor-saving devices installed in the Quinby mills during this period were of his invention.

When Henley heard of the accident he frowned; Henley detested accidents, which spoke of inefficiency somewhere. But when the information was added that the foreman of the open-hearth battery was among the injured, he said: "Damn!" and in person at once called the hospital and his own physician by telephone and through these agencies commanded the best surgical skill and care for that valuable workman.

The doctors gathered in solemn conclave and did various things to Mark's shattered body. They dogged his steps into the very shadow of death and would not let him die. They did that, knowing they condemned him to a life of pain, and having the security of Thomas Henley's word that their bills should each and every one of them be paid.

While Mark still lingered in the vale of mystery that leads to full knowledge, two men began their daily—and nightly—watches. One was a thin faded man who wore the rusty black of the country preacher. The other was an awkward, gray little man who would sit motionless by the hour, never taking his eyes from the still form under the white sheet.

Mark did not die. His broken body began slowly to mend. He passed out of immediate danger; he was even allowed to talk and to be talked to a little. But in the manner of the nurses, of his visitors from Bethel, even of the callous doctors, were a grave gentleness, an absence of the exultation to be expected after triumph over death. He felt it.

He put his question to his father. "What are they keeping back from me?"

Simon's glance did not waver, nor did he try to evade with a soothing lie. "Ye'll never walk easy again. Ye'll have to use a crutch, leastways a cane, always."

"It's my hip?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"Ye were hurt innardly. Ye'll have to be careful always. No more work in the mills."

Mark closed his eyes, uttering no complaint. But within was a turmoil of protest and rebellion. A cripple, a partial invalid for life! Half a man! So had ended the dreamed campaign of conquest. Tears of futile rage seeped out through his closed eyelids.

His recovery was slow and very painful; six years of driving ahead at top speed had left him but little reserve vitality for the emergency. The mood of rebellion died down from sheer exhaustion. He accepted his misfortune; but sullenly, with no swelling heroic resolve to defy untoward circumstance.

There was no conscious desire to return to the mills from which he had been banished. They were too much the object of his smoldering resentment just then. He felt toward them as the betrayed toward the traitor.

"I think," he said once to Simon and Richard Courtney, who had not yet left the city, "I'll go back to Bethel."

"It will be a good place to recuperate," said the preacher.

"But I mean to stay."

"We shall be glad to have you back."

Thoughts of Bethel naturally revived the memory of Unity Martin. Mark found a certain grim humor in the recollection.

He had had his period of tragic remorse for Kazia. He had not, however, let conscience push to the extreme of disturbing the fixed destiny just mentioned. Nor was he long in attaining a comparative peace of mind

in which he could congratulate himself on having avoided a serious blunder. Not many months later he by chance met Piotr, who conveyed the news that Kazia had married Whiting. Piotr's manner of narration implied that, though Whiting was a poor refugee, Kazia had been fortunate to escape Mark. He seemed disappointed that his auditor showed no deep emotion.

Mark's letters to Unity had continued, at erratic intervals. Soon her replies, too, began to dwindle in number and in length; they had never had much to lose in the way of intensity. And then he sent a letter that she failed to answer at all, leaving their love affair suspended, so to speak, in the air. One of Simon's rare and misspelled missives informed Mark that she was, in the phrase Bethel used, keeping company with one Slocum, a prosperous young farmer of the vicinity. This may hardly be regarded as poetic retribution. It caused Mark a few days' surface indignation and a secret relief; one can not feel deeply the loss of a shadow, even though one has paid a price for her.

Kazia married; Unity, having jilted him, keeping company with plodding Bill Slocum! His tragedy had ended in sheer farce. We do well, he concluded, not to take our dramas too seriously.

An amazing thing happened one day. There was the sound of a quick unfamiliar tread in the corridor, the door was pushed briskly open and into the room stepped Thomas Henley.

"How are you, Truitt?" he inquired, shaking hands. "I was going by, had a few minutes and ran up to find out for myself."

"Well enough, I guess," Mark replied out of his amazement.

"Good!" said Henley. "Your father, I presume?" He nodded toward Simon.

Mark made the necessary introductions. Simon said: "Pleased to meet ye," and flushed for the son, who had had to own up to the relationship.

Toward the other visitor Henley glanced uncertainly a moment, then held out a hand.

"Ah! Doctor Courtney! Do you happen to remember me?" The question, obviously, was in playful irony.

"I happen to," answered Courtney, who did not share Simon's shyness.

"I remember now, it was you who sent this young man to me. I," said Henley graciously, "am in your debt."

The preacher's shadowy smile appeared. "Is he?"

Henley laughed pleasantly. "I fancy he is. And I have a notion the debt will grow. I am finishing your job, Doctor Courtney."

He turned to Mark. Simon and Courtney pushed their chairs back from the bedside, that the great man might hold the stage.

"When," Henley asked, "do you expect to come back to us?"

Mark winced and returned to the silliness that was becoming his habit. "I'm going back—home."

The pause and the slight emphasis on the last word were not lost on Henley; a suspicion as to their import stirred. But:

"Exactly right!" he exclaimed heartily. "Stay as long as necessary to get your strength together. You're too valuable a man to take chances. Your job will wait for you. By the way, about that new charging machine you spoke of before the accident; I suppose the plans aren't where we can lay our hands on them?"

"No," answered Mark, "you can't lay your hands on them. They're in my head."

"An excellent place to keep 'em," Henley agreed. "Suppose then, when you're feeling up to it, I send one of our engineers after you to go over the plans with you? If there's anything in the idea, we ought to install the machines before winter."

"You can send him, if you want to, but I won't go over the plans with him," Mark discouraged the suggestion.

"An excellent place to keep 'em," Henley agreed. "Suppose then, when you're feeling up to it, I send one of our engineers after you to go over the plans with you? If there's anything in the idea, we ought to install the machines before winter."

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"I'll see that you don't steal this," Mark responded ungraciously. "Because, when you pay for it, you've got to pay for this, too." He put a hand on the injured hip. "That is, if I ever put the idea in shape."

Henley waved a hand to intimate that allowance must be made for an invalid's humors. "Of course, we expect you to be business-like. Just what do you mean by that 'if'?"

"I mean I'm through with the mills," "Who," Henley's glance swept Simon and Richard Courtney sharply, "who has been putting fool ideas into your head?"

"You, for one, when you come here because I'm a valuable man, not because I'm a man. Would you come to see me if I hadn't a new invention in mind?"

"Nonsense! You're sick, that's all," Henley smiled kindly but confidently. "I've seen men in your case before. You think you won't come back. But you will. Why? Because you're a valuable man—I stick to that. You've a genius for mechanics, you know how to handle men and you've got a sense of organization. Most men would think themselves lucky if they had any one of those. What does it mean? That you fit in here, of course. And when a man fits into any kind of life, he can no more keep away than molten steel can avoid the shape of the mold. And you'll find it so—there's something about our business that gets into the bone and blood of a man." He looked at his watch and rose abruptly. "Glad you're getting along. Don't forget, your job is waiting for you."

"But you don't seem to understand," Mark cried. "I'm done for. I'll have to go on a cane, maybe a crutch, all my life. And the doctors say, no hard work at all."

Henley could be very human, when he chose. "Ah!" he said gently. "I had not heard that. I'm sorry. It makes a difference, of course."

It is possible that Henley was not thinking of Mark's commercial value, as he stood looking searchingly down at the querulous patient.

Unexpectedly he leaned forward a little. From his eyes a commanding flash leaped. He put out a hand and caught one of Mark's strongly.

"Your brains don't need a crutch, do they? It isn't brute strength that makes you valuable—we can buy that cheap. You said something about being a man. Now's your chance to be one. What's a little thing like a crutch or a doctor's prohibition? The measure of a man is what he overcomes. Go home and rest, get your nerve together. An' when you're ready, let me know. I'll find a place for you."

He was gone. And there was Mark, who had just been weakly if resentfully accepting defeat, a thrill like a war-horse that has heard the bugle call.

CHAPTER XI.

The Measure of a Man.

When he met Unity again, he had been in Bethel for more than two weeks.

He had started out for the morning turn on his crutches, to test his returning strength, and before he quite realized it the village lay behind him. He swung along for some two hundred yards farther; then let himself carefully down on the roadside.

He sat there for a long time, baring his head to the summer sunshine.

"This is very good indeed!" It would have been almost flawless but for one thing—he was rather lonely; he felt the need for some one to share the day with him.

He had his wish. Down the valley road appeared a buggy drawn by a lazy heavy-footed horse of the sort distinguished as "safe for women." From within the buggy Mark caught the gleam of a white shirtwaist and a sailor hat. Even before the vehicle drew near enough for recognition, he knew the passenger for Unity.

A slight tremor passed over him. To meet the embodiment of a shadow by whom one has jilted—is at least mildly exciting.

A slight tightening of the reins was sufficient to stop that horse.

"Hello, Unity!" Mark felt that this greeting fell short of the dramatic proprieties.

"Oh! How do you do?" she answered colorlessly.

There was a moment of silence during which, without seeming to do so, they inspected each other.

Mark had a twinge of disappointment. This was not the Unity he had loved so boyishly—and so briefly. She was as pretty as ever, in a way even prettier; but one could hardly have thought of her as spiritual. Her face was fuller, its color deeper, and there was a healthy roundness in the line of shoulder and breast, of the ankle that protruded from under the dust-robe. Not that she was fat! But her daintiness was gone. In the item of dress she would have suffered from comparison with the young ladies of his boarding house. Her hair was done carelessly. And vivacity had gone the way of daintiness. She had the air of having settled into the habit of Bethel, of having accepted its narrow outlook. A faint vertical line between her eyes hinted that she might not have accepted it with complacency.

Therefore he said: "You look the same as ever, Unity."

She brightened a little. "You think so?" There was something almost pitiful to him in the way she caught at the remark. She became spiritless again. "But, of course, that isn't true."

"But, of course, it is," she laughed unpleasantly. "You wouldn't think so, if you saw the way they treat me here now."

"The men? Surely not!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "No, the women. They're so friendly now

and they don't giggle behind my back. And when they haven't anything else to gossip about, they talk about how I'm settling into an old maid."

"Isn't that what the rhetorics used to call hyperbole? It should be sparingly used. Besides I hear you have a beau."

"Oh! him!" With another shrug. "He's afraid I'm not a good cook."

"That's a nice way to talk about a lover! Especially," he laughed self-consciously, "since you threw me over for him."

He almost missed the acid look she flashed at him. "It broke your heart, of course?"

"I've had pleasanter experiences," he said dryly. "Why didn't you answer my last letter, Unity?"

Her indifference might have been a little too well done. "For one thing, even I have a little pride. It was easy to see you'd got tired of me. Not that I cared! Those boy-and-girl af-

airs always die a natural death. There was another girl, wasn't there?"

"Why, I believe so. In fact, there was. I gave her up for you."

"And I gave you up. You must have thought," again her unpleasant laugh rang, "you'd made a poor bargain all round. Or had a lucky escape!"

"I did," he answered grimly, leaving her to construe the answer as she chose.

"That's an easy conundrum." She gathered up the reins. "Well, I must be going. We're harvesting now and I have to get back in time to help get dinner. Good-by."

She drove on, as casually as if they had been neighbors in the habit of meeting daily. . . . And this was their first meeting after six years.

He leaned back on his grassy bank, having found, if not a companion, at least food for reflection.

He was still resting on his grassy bank when, an hour later, the slow-going vehicle reappeared. With difficulty—for he had not yet become expert with his crutches—he rose and stood in the middle of the road. The horse, without urging, stopped with its nose against him. A more skilled observer than Mark might have noticed that some villager's mirror and comb had been utilized to the advantage of Unity's hair and that her hat had been readjusted to its most becoming angle; and would have drawn certain inferences.

Mark did not. He merely smiled at her over the horse's head.

She seemed rather impatient with his obstructiveness. "You've bought the pike, then? I hadn't heard."

He laughed and waved his hand airily. "This morning the world is mine. Do you know, we haven't shaken hands?"

"Oh, haven't we?" Her tone attached no importance to the omission. Nevertheless, when he stood aside, she drove the horse forward a length and laid a limp hand in Mark's.

"Also," he continued, "you haven't said you're sorry that I was hurt."

"Oh!" she repeated, with perfunctory unrelieved, "I'm sorry."

He laughed again. "You needn't mind now. You'll have plenty of chances before long."

"Meaning?"

"The road to your house is still open to the public, isn't it? I'm thinking of buying a new horse. Unity," he returned to gravity, "there isn't any reason why we shouldn't be good friends, is there?"

"People will talk."

He paraphrased a classic formula. "Unity," he said earnestly, "drat the people!"

"You can say that. You don't have to stay here."

"Not for good?"

"For good."

"Why?"

Mark laughed shortly. "When you're put out of the race, you don't want to stay where you have to watch the others still running."

She inspected him again, more closely. He thought he was sincere. But he did not know that despite the crutches and his drawn white face he had not the resigned despondent air of the man who has accepted a permanent seat on the shelf.

"Look as long as you want to," he suggested at last. "In the meantime—will you set the dogs on me when I drive down your way?"

"Oh, well!" She tried unsuccessfully to return to indifference. "If you really want to come—! It's been a dull season. I suppose it would be a mercy to the gossips to give their

tongues a chance to clack once more." She drew the reins taut.

"A real philanthropy," he assented, grinning, as the horse lumberingly resumed its journey.

Mark swung slowly along homeward. He smiled pityingly. He had read aright the new interest in Unity's face—that of the condemned prisoner who has heard rumor of reprieve. He was sorry for her. And pity—we have it from the poets—is love's poor relation.

Mark regained a measure of strength. He discarded one crutch and began each day to take a few steps experimentally with no support but a cane. He spent many beautiful idle hours, alone or with Richard Courtney, driving his new horse among the hills.

Sometimes—often—Unity was with him on these drives. Tongues clacked according to prophecy. But Mark did not care. And Unity did not care.

Mark fell placidly and easily in love with Unity again. At least, the while protesting, he decided that it must be love.

But the protest was half-hearted. He wanted to love.

"Are ye goin' to stay here in Bethel?" Simon broke a long silence to inquire, one rainy evening.

"I don't know," Mark answered out of a brown study, off his guard. But he added quickly: "Yes, I do know. I'm going to stay."

"Then, what are ye goin' to do?" "I don't need to do anything. I've got twenty thousand dollars. That'll last me—in Bethel."

Simon shook his head gravely. "Ye can't stand that. Ye've got to do somethin'. An' there's nothin' to do here—yet."

"And never will be."

"Mebby not. All the more reason why that Mister Henley's right."

"Would you have me go back to the city?"

"Yes."

"You don't know what you're saying," Mark began irritably. "I could never take a pen pusher's job. The mills are all I know. And that life—you don't know it. It costs too much. It takes it out of you, drives you like a slave. It—I'm not fit for it now. It—oh, let's not talk about it."

But Simon had more than one of Mark's problems on his mind.

"Are ye," he went on, "goin' to marry Unity Martin?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"If ye don't find out purty soon," remarked Simon most surprisingly, "she'll do your knowin' fur ye. I wouldn't."

Mark stopped at a window, looking frowningly out at the sheets of rain that dashed across the square of light.

Simon must have felt deeply on the subject, for he repeated, "I wouldn't."

"No," said Mark testily, "I suppose you wouldn't. I don't know. But if I do it, it will be with my eyes open." Which seems a most unlover-like saying.

There was an evening when he was alone with Unity on Squire Martin's front porch. It was one of the soft languorous nights that sometimes come to Bethel in early September. They talked little and that in low tones.

Once he leaned toward her. He had to peer closely to make out her look of content.

"Do you know," he remarked, "you ought to be glad I came back?"

"Indeed! And why?"

"Have you looked in the mirror lately? When I first came you looked—well, cranky and as though you didn't care whether school kept or not."

"Well, of all the conceit! I suppose you take all the credit." Thus she admitted certain improvements.

"And why not?" he laughed lazily. "When you come right down to it, Unity, you never really, definitely threw me over."

"It isn't too late."

"Yes, it is too late."

She said nothing. But when he reached up to take her hand he found it a tightly clenched little ball.

"Unity, do you remember the drive we took that Sunday, before I went to the city?"

"I think I do."

"She thinks she does!" he apostrophized the night. "I have a scheme. Tomorrow, right after dinner, I'm going to drive down here for you, Unity, let's have the Sunday over again—in every particular."

Again she was silent.

"You don't agree?"

"I—I'm not sure."

"That you love me?"

She shook her head. "That I want to marry you."

But when he drew her down and kissed her, she did not resist. "Wait," he whispered fatuously, "until tomorrow. Then you will be convinced." Although what virtue the morrow would hold he did not say. He probably did not guess.

Unity did not scruple to change the current of another's life; she saw no occasion for scruples. She thought she loved Mark. But she did not believe his expressed resolve to stay in Bethel was, could be, genuine; or, if genuine, that its execution would be good for him. And, principally—she knew exactly what she wanted.

Next day they drove over much the same road they had taken seven years before. They chatted in lighter vein, with intervals of eloquent silence. On a tiltop whence they could see only other hills and the sinking sun they ate the lunch put up by the thoughtful Susan. Then they waited to watch the sunset.

"Unity, what must I do to convince you?"

"Nothing," she murmured.

He considered his happiness.

And after a while she said: "Tell me about your life in the city. You've never said much about it."

Innocent demand! Not in vain is the trap set in the sight of a young

man in love. He began to describe the mills to her. And as he went on, into his words crept the unconscious eloquence of a real enthusiasm. His face became eager. Before he had ended, he was on his feet declaiming to her, who was a very attentive audience. He saw what he described.

"Ah!" she breathed, as he reached a period. "What a life! And you could leave it?"

"You forget," he reminded her, "I was put out of it."

She leaned forward suddenly, resting her hand on the one that held the cane. "Mark, why don't you go back to it?"

He jerked his hand free, as if he had felt a twinge of pain. "Don't suggest that, Unity!" he cried. "There's that other side. It's hard and cruel and narrowing. It eats up all the best of you. Sometimes it kills you. It makes you a machine, not your own man. I used to feel it here I was there, sometimes terribly. When I see it from a distance and I understand better. It's just one hellish scramble, that life—!" He stopped abruptly, with an impatient gesture.

"If I go back, Unity, you won't—"

But how could he phrase his fear or interpret the hot surging that drowned it?

She sighed happily.

He was soon to learn.

A man and a woman entered into the most trying of human relations. Both were young, but both had hardened in the pursuit of selfish desire. Neither had the love that finds its chief joy in yielding.

CHAPTER XII.

A Man and His Wife.

In the downtown offices of the Quinby company and in the particular room which may be called the headquarters of the Quinby army, two men were sitting late one winter afternoon.

The one was Henley himself, now chairman of the company, a bit stouter than when we first met him twelve years ago, his arrogance a little less evident in manner albeit time had not altered the fact. The other was a youngish man whose thin bony face and hands and streaks of premature gray hair spoke of physical frailty.