

# 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 Andarski, open-hearth furnaceman. He becomes a boarder in Roman's home and assists Plot, 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. 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.

## CHAPTER XII—Continued.

There had been a snow, hard packed by traffic, and the blacks caught the sleigh swiftly along through the dusk. When the crowded business section lay behind them, Henley remarked casually:

"I saw your little charity back there."

"He was a cripple."

"I see," Henley nodded. "That's your greatest asset."

"What is?"

"Your health."

"My lack of it, you mean," Mark answered grimly. "But I don't quite get your point of view."

"It keeps you from making a fool of yourself. There's Haro, for instance, a capable man, drinking himself into incompetency. And Harmon, with his women. For them prosperity means indulgence. You keep your appetites under control."

"I have to."

"Exactly my point." For a few blocks Henley apparently gave himself over wholly to the agreeable exercise of breathing in the keen frosty air. When he resumed, no one could have guessed from his tone that he was working toward a given point. "Higsbee's case is worse. One woman."

"Has he—"

"His wife. A smooth catty creature, with a craze for display. Married him after he made his stake, of course. Always nagging him for new jewels, new carriages, a new—house. Makes him dress for dinner. Drags him around to dances and receptions and box parties—when 30 minutes of that takes it out of him more than 12 hours at the rolls used to." Mark might have been sitting for his portrait. "Egging him on until he's scheming as unscrupulously as a toothless old dowager to get into society—or what with her passes for society. He spent six months beating about the bush to get me to send my wife around to call on her. Queer, how a big talented man will let a pretty useless woman pull him around by the ears!"

"Damned queer!" said Mark.

"I suppose we, who aren't in the same case, can't understand it."

Henley, Mark thought, seemed to understand it very well.

A few minutes more brought them dashing up to a stop under the portecochere of Henley's big house.

"Much obliged for the lift," said Henley as he sprang out of the sleigh. He added casually, "Er—by the way, I think I heard my wife say she was planning to call on Mrs. Truitt in the near future."

Despite a quick flush, Mark looked at him steadily. "Higsbee, then, was a parable?"

"By no means," Henley returned blandly. "It seems they have met at St. Swithin's and were—mutually interested." He paused, but as no reply came from Mark, continued in the impersonal tone of one who philosophizes generally. "After all, there's a Higsbee in all of us. We affect to jeer at this society thing. But we want our wives to have the best. It's more comfortable, too. And besides, when a man has a charming wife, he can't hide her light under a bushel. Good night."

"Good night. Especially," Mark muttered to himself, "when she proposes to let it shine." He gave the reins an angry jerk. The horses leaped and raced down the driveway and into the street. The music of the sleigh bells rang merrily on the keen air.

Once he laughed aloud, sneeringly. "Complaisant today!" He did not refer to Henley. He had, in fact, himself in mind. One can not well openly resent the insolent if friendly interest—even in one's domestic affairs—of the man whose eccentric favor spells prosperity. Still it stings, especially when it argues a shrewd guess as to the fact. And the fact was, Superintendent Truitt's domestic estate, like the neighborhood in which he lived, left something to be desired.

He stopped at a brick house that differed from its neighbors only in that the lot was wide enough to allow for a driveway to the little stable in the rear. A groom, who had come to the front in answer to the summons of the bells, took the team.

Mark, leaning hard on his cane, limped stiffly up the terrace steps to the porch. The parlor—Unity was beginning to refer to it, not easily, as the drawing room—was lighted, the shades were not drawn.

Unity was reclining in graceful attitude—she could be relied upon to present graceful poses at all times—in a big easy chair. Her gown, of some soft, pale green stuff, vastly became her and, as did every detail of her from the carefully achieved coiffure to the black velvet slippers that peeped out from beneath her skirt, avouched the fact that Unity had mastered more than the rudiments of the art of personal decoration.

He went into the house, doffed his heavy overcoat and limped into the drawing room. Unity did not by so much as a glance around disturb her graceful pose until he was at her side. Then she languidly held up a hand to him.

He brushed it with his lips. "You're looking scrumptious, Unity." He went so far as to give a brief admiring pat to her hair.

She moved petulantly. "Don't! You'll muss my hair."

He dropped her hand. "That would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

He sat down near her. She sighed. The sigh, one might have thought, was one of alarm and was because she had noted his pallor, which even after the spirited drive was so pronounced.

"Been a hard day?" But the question was not Unity's. She had not marked his air of exhaustion or, if she had, was so used to it that she was not concerned.

"So hard!" She sighed again very plaintively. "So very exciting! And you know how excitement always affects me."

"Yes, I know." Just the edges of his satirical smile showed again. "What has been the particular excitement today?"

"Mrs. Henley called!"

"Yes?" Mark's voice did not reveal the interest so epochal an event demanded.

"Yes?" mimicked Unity. "Is that all you can say? But I suppose, of course, you don't care, though you know what it means to me."

"Just what does it mean to you, Unity?"

"It means," somewhat dithyrambically, "that I have won the friend-



"No, Thanks! I Might Acquire the Taste."

ship I have tried so hard for three years to win."

"Then she came up to the plans and specifications?"

"She's a dear. So sweet and refined! So intelligent and ambitious! It's no wonder a man with such a wife has got as far as Mr. Henley has. Though I suppose he would never give her credit."

"I fancy Henley does her justice," Mark ventured.

"That is more," Unity's tone was one of patient dignified reproach, "than some people I know do for their wives."

Habit put a seal on his lips.

From lesser beginnings the Truitts had found, in the earlier years of their marriage, steel and tinder for quarrels—nasty quarrels in which tempers were lost and cutting words spoken and that invariably had the same issue—the husband, humiliated by the sordidness of it, suing for peace. But that stage had passed. Now, at the first sign of hostilities, he promptly hung out a white flag.

She eyed him covertly for a little. "I was so ashamed this afternoon," she murmured at last pathetically.

He opened his eyes with a start; he had almost slept. "Ashamed—? Oh, yes—Mrs. Henley. What did you do?"

"I did nothing. It was this house. I could see her looking around at all this and trying to hide her amusement

over it. Though she was careful not to take too much pains to hide it."

"But, for a friend, isn't that—"

"Oh, you can't understand. Or won't," she amended bitterly. "You've no conception of the pride a woman likes to have in her home. Of course, she looked down on this. Anybody would."

"We used to think it mighty fine. In Bethel we never dreamed of anything so good."

"You didn't. But I did," she retorted. "Besides, we aren't in Bethel now. We're here and growing rich. And we ought to live like the rest of our kind."

"Just what is our kind, Unity?"

"If you didn't have me to give you ambition, we'd still be homely dowdy nobodies."

"Then we are somebodies?"

"We can be. We're going to be."

She sat up suddenly, her thin lips tightening. "Mark, we must—we simply must—move. We can afford it, I know."

"Yes, we can do it." He made a gesture of resignation. "But it will clean me out of ready cash."

"You can make more," said Unity negligently. "You're so clever at that. And besides, what's the use of having money if it doesn't buy the things we want?"

"For one thing," he smiled grimly, "I can't get insurance, and men have been known to die and leave their widows penniless. However, he rose with an evident effort, "we've gone over all this a hundred times. I'll see."

Yielding was in his voice.

She fell back into her languid graceful pose. She gave him her very sweetest smile, which she meant to seem lovingly grateful. He saw in it only triumph.

"You can be such a dear!" she purred. "I'm so proud of you! And now you'd better hurry and dress. You know the Higsbees are coming for dinner."

He repressed an oath. "I'd forgotten." And he limped heavily from the room.

In his own room he dropped on the bed, yielding for a brief interval to the pain and weakness of which it was his pride never to give a sign before others.

He descended barely in time to join Unity in greeting their guests.

He did not see a deeper vanity in his feeling of superiority over his guests. Higsbee was a big beefy man, red of countenance and with a raucous voice that grated on Mark's nerves. He was rough, not to say boisterous, in manner, and his notion of wit was veiled smuttiness—essays to which Unity, incomparable hostess! paid the perfect compliment of a shocked laugh and a blush.

The dinner was well cooked and served, which was not always true when the Truitts dined alone. Mark ate sparingly, the while eying covetously the viands which he dared not indulge himself. He talked little, neither Higsbee's coarse darning nor the ladies' light gossip of plays, latest books and mutual acquaintances—especially of mutual acquaintances—being fields in which he felt at home. But he was secretly much amused when to Unity's casual mention of Mrs. Henley's call, Mrs. Higsbee replied with the invidious suggestion that Mrs. Henley was a good deal of a snob. And when Unity countered sweetly, "Do you think so? I haven't found her so," he chuckled aloud.

He explained the chuckle. "One mustn't look a gift horse in the mouth." At which crude remark Higsbee guffawed, Mrs. Higsbee tittered maliciously and Unity looked pained. All three had a suspicion of what he knew—that Mrs. Henley's call had been under orders, a gift from Henley.

Later he smoked, slowly and very appreciatively, a mild cigar, which lasted until Higsbee had consumed the second.

"How," Higsbee asked once, unctuously, "did you get Henley to send his wife around?"

Mark resented the question. "I didn't get him to."

"No?" Higsbee looked a bit incredulous. "Well, you certainly do stand well with him. Say, if you get a chance, I wish you'd drop him a hint that we'd be glad to have her call."

"I'm afraid," Mark said coldly, "Henley isn't a man to take that sort of a hint kindly."

"I wish you would," Higsbee urged. "Mrs. H. is crazy for it. And I reckon," he laughed lumberingly, "the best way is to get a woman what she wants. It's comfortable, anyhow."

"I haven't found it so," Mark lied, adopting Unity's tactics, and promptly changed the subject.

But at last the Higsbees left.

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Mark. "And to think that that man is one of the best labor handlers in the country!"

"Bourgeois!" Unity gave a shrug and a nod to include the departed guests.

"Spell it," Unity complied.

"Hm! I happen to know what it means." He gave her a look of mock admiration. "Unity, you're a wonder. You've got the nerve of a winner. You travel too fast a gait for me. Who could believe that less than six years ago you were back in Bethel, keeping company with tight-fisted Bill Slocum."

But Unity was too well pleased with herself just then to resent this cruel reminder. "Don't you see why I am so anxious to get up above such people?"

"I can see," he said, "I shall have to give in."

She went to him with a little cuddling movement, locking both hands over one of his shoulders and looking up at him. She made a pretty picture. A mirror over the mantle reflected it for him.

"Oh, Mark, you make me so happy! Tell me the truth. Aren't you glad I made you come back to the city, and that we've got so far—and that we're going so much farther?"

"You insist upon the truth?" He looked thoughtfully at the reflection. "Well, I suppose I must be. Otherwise you couldn't force me to buy the new house, even though you are a very capable bully."

"Bully!"

"Exactly. Only," he continued, "I still have a sense of proportion. We are rather absurd, you and I, Unity."

She laughed contentedly. "I know you. It's like you to growl when you're doing a specially nice thing." She held up her lips to him.

"And is this my reward? Magnificent!" But he did not kiss her. He looked curiously at her. Long ago he had been deceived. He knew that the shallow tenderness and admiration summoned by her sweetness of flesh and perfect grooming were not love. He gently disengaged himself.

"No, thanks! I might acquire the taste. And it's too expensive." He limped away from her and pretended to examine a book that lay on the piano.

She assumed an air of gentle reproach. "Oh, Mark, you don't mean that?"

She did not detect the warning note in his laugh.

"Oh, no! Of course not!"

He returned to her. They kissed.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### Trophies.

"Meteoritic" was the word most often used to describe Truitt's rise. It was a career possible only in his chosen industry and at that time when, no matter how fast plants were multiplied and new devices adopted, the output could not keep pace with the world's insistent demand for steel. It did not differ notably from the careers of several other young superintendents of the Quinby company, save in the one particular, that Henley's preference had deepened into something approximating friendship. On Mark's side the friendship was not open to question; his admiration and liking for Henley were unbounded and not dependent on favors received.

The Truitts had moved into their new house. It was a rambling, red-brick, ivy-grown structure containing eighteen rooms and surrounded by wide neglected grounds, and had been built half a generation before as a wedding present to Timothy Woodhouse III.

For several months Mark secretly congratulated himself on the purchase. Unity had the new house to wander over and admire. She had four servants to direct. Within the allotted time she had returned Mrs. Henley's call, and after an anxious period, Mrs. Henley called again; seeing which, certain other ladies of St. Swithin's who had attained the half-way station where they were very careful upon whom they left cards, called and invited her to share the activities of the guilds. All of which made for happiness, content. Unity found little to criticize, she was engrossed with the game of being a fine lady, which she felt sure was her vocation.

Thus peace abode in the Truitt household and Mark, freed from the irritation of constant bickering, was enabled to give himself wholly to work. He did not realize that during this truce he grew away from his wife more rapidly than when domestic inharmonies kept her constantly in his thoughts. During these months he completed his improved process for rolling steel cold, which made some noise in the industrial world.

But there is nothing to which our species so readily adapts itself as to luxury. Content dissolved. Unity began to complain of the heavy labor of ordering so big a house. She resumed her criticisms of Mark, finding fault with his fashion of dress, his manners, his habits and his neglect of her. She was seized with a devouring mania for amusement, filling the house almost every evening with guests and demanding that Mark perform his duties as host. Other evenings she dragged him to the theater, which he detested. When he, rendered peevish by late hours and boredom, suggested that there were matinees, she put on an injured air that was more irritating to him than outright distemper.

"Other men are glad to go out with their wives."

"Other men don't have to work so hard as I do."

"You think of nothing but money."

"Devilish lucky for you," he was indiscreet enough to retort, and she did not emerge from her sulks for several days.

But at last the gnawing canker was disclosed. One evening so stormy that no guests had come, Unity went up to his study where he was making the most of this respite. She talked ramblingly for a while.

"Well, Unity, out with it!" he exclaimed impatiently, after several minutes. "What do you want? As you see, I've got a great deal to do."

"I wonder what is the matter with Mrs. Henley?"

"You ought to know. You see her often enough, don't you?"

"Yes, I see her—at church! And we call. But she never invites us to the things she gives. I wonder why?"

"Probably because she doesn't want us."

Unity looked her protest at this blunt speech. But she did not abandon her project.

"I should think, if you're such good friends with Mr. Henley, you could manage it easily enough."

"Now you can stop right there," he answered emphatically. "I'm pretty soft, but there's one thing I draw the line at. And that's 'managing' to get

invited to other people's houses. That's flat!"

And on that he was firm, though he was made to pay in many ways for his refusal.

But in due time and without management a dinner invitation came; on whose initiative, being a secret neither Henley nor his wife has ever disclosed. Hence we may not speak surely as to the accuracy of certain inferences that Unity drew.

"You see!" she cried, showing the note to Mark. Her manner said plainly, "I alone did it, in spite of the indifference of my husband."

"I see," he responded dryly. "Are you going?"

She treated this question to the contemptuous silence it deserved.

And as Mark stood in the hall and watched her descending the stairs for the start, he was bound to confess that she made a fair—oh, a very fair—picture.

"Why," he wondered, "did the Almighty make so pretty a shell and put nothing in it?" This seems to prove that he had been pretty effectually disillusioned.

However careless he might affect to be, he was himself keenly elated over the event. Often he had asked himself why Henley, so friendly in all else, had never let down the bars before his home. And as he mounted the steps toward the opening door, he could not repress the thrill of exultation.

He had need of the stimulus of this exultation as he and Unity faced that routful of people who—well, were in longer practice at this sort of thing than was he. He limped, with something less than Unity's aplomb, across



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the room to meet his hostess, who murmured graciously something quite unintelligible, and Henley, who seemed rather bored. Then he was introduced to his dinner partner, Mrs. Belloc, who mistook his set expression for sternness, and was in the end by her without mishap to their places near Henley's end of the table.

He had no small talk and Mrs. Belloc, after one or two barren essays, allowed him a breathing spell.

Unity was at the very apex of her existence. She was the prettiest woman present, with the loveliness of physical full bloom just before it begins to fade. Her heart's desire had been granted—no longer must she be content with carelessly tossed crumbs and crusts of preference; she sat, both literally and figuratively, at the table of the city's elect.

The salad was being served when Mrs. Saunders turned to Mark. Mrs. Saunders was one of the insecure ladies who, following Mrs. Henley's example, had called upon Unity. She had just been listening, too long for patience, to her partner's praise of Mrs. Truitt.

"I should think you'd be jealous. Mr. Hars is more than enthusiastic over your wife tonight."

"How very tactless!"

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Saunders sweetly. "I quite agree with him. I think she's adorable. She reminds me so much of that portrait by—you know, the one that hangs in the Louvre."

"Oh! I thought everybody had been there."

"You see, Mrs. Saunders, I'm not anybody."

"You would say that, of course. One hears—"

"But it's quite true. To prove it, I've never been east of this city. In fact, the first time I came to this house—not so very long ago—I peeked through the window at the party. Henley caught me." He grinned wryly.

"The next day I got a job handling pick and shovel."

"How very romantic!"

"You wouldn't call it romantic, if you'd been in Houlahan's gang."

"And then, of course," Mrs. Saunders beamed, "you set out to win the princess?"

"The princess? Oh! my wife. Yes, I suppose so."

"She has always lived in the city, hasn't she?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Mark glanced critically at Unity. "But she hasn't. Eight years ago she was living in Bethel. And Bethel, Mrs. Saunders, you'll never find on the map."

"Oh!" Mrs. Saunders said innocently. "I had inferred—but that perfect manner! She must have acquired it at her finishing school!"

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Mark chuckled. "Finishing school! I wish you could see Miss Smith's seminary for young ladies. It isn't even a starter."

Mrs. Saunders laughed admiringly. "How very clever! I must tell your wife."

She leaned forward a little toward Unity. "Oh, Mrs. Truitt—"

Unity gave ear.

"I must tell you the clever thing your husband just said. We were talking about your school—Miss Smith's seminary, wasn't it? And I called it a finishing school. And Mr. Truitt said—Mrs. Saunders' voice carried well—it isn't even a starter. Awfully good, I think." A faint titter ran down the table. "Ah—where is Miss Smith's seminary, Mrs. Truitt?"

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