

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

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CHAPTER XXVI—Continued.

He became conscious of Simon's curious gaze and turned sharply on him. "Old man, you seem to know a surprising lot about making steel. Look down the valley—there, on those hills. Do you see anything that isn't there?" Simon looked and nodded. "I've be'n seein' it more'n forty years."

Henley stared. "Humph! An epidemic. There's magic in these hills." His thoughtful glance swept them once more. "But d—d alluring magic."

The gentle, sometimes plaintive voice of the preacher had no power to distract from thought. His wistful message could not reach the man for whom it had been prepared in the hope that it would come to him with healing in its wings.

The benediction had been said. Mark went quietly from his rear pew out of the church and limped slowly along the dusty, weed-flanked pike until he came to a minor crest. There he dropped on the roadside and turned his eyes to the valley.

The murmurous quiet of noonday was about him.

Up the rise, village bound, creaked a battered old top-buggy, bearing a passenger whose grizzled beard and lined face, too, showed the marks of time's battering.

The buggy drew up beside him. "Did he find you?" "Who?"

The doctor chuckled. "Guess he didn't, or you wouldn't have to ask. He's a vigorous party that doesn't understand the joy of talk. I took him from Number Four to your place."

"Short and stout—" "And not much for looks," Hedges concluded the portrait. "That's him. Has a way with him, though. And the habit of taking what he wants, I guess, without waiting."

"Sunday traffic," the doctor drawled, "is getting pretty heavy. Number Four brought a woman, too. Expecting any baggage of that kind?"

Mark shook his head absently. "No? That's too bad. She's a new kind for Bethel—a right pleasant kind, too, though I'm not sure how our women'd take her." The doctor

"I'll agree to the baths. If the men want to clean up after work—why, I regard bathing as a very proper habit."

Mark smiled. "The man will be grateful."

"I'm not joking," Henley reminded him sternly. "I'll go as far as to agree to their eight-hour shift—as an experiment. I'd like to see it tried out."

"Yes?" "Your company stores, company gardens and company homes are well enough. They can be made profitable—properly handled. But your profit-sharing plan is all wrong and—"

Henley leaned forward and rapped on the arm of his chair to emphasize each word—"and you can't have it. I wouldn't care if you gave them only a nominal share. It would be useful—at first—to get good men up here. Afterward you could cut it out. But why, in God's name, give them half?"

"Because I'll need the other half for some things I'm planning."

"I'm not joking," Henley repeated. "Why give them half?"

"Oh, that's an approximation. It seems to me a pretty fair division of the spoils. I don't insist on its accuracy. However, that's not the point."

Mark straightened up in his seat by the desk, facing Henley squarely. "Have you forgotten that my money and mine only is invested in this plant? I can quote good authority, yourself, that a man ought to be allowed to run his own business to suit himself."

"As long as he hurts no one else," Mark smiled again at that. "You said you weren't joking. I suppose you aren't. That's the joke of it. However, the point is, you forbid me to conduct my own business in my own way. And your authority?"

"The power," answered Henley quietly, "to smash you—and the will. We've got labor where we want it in this business and we propose to keep it there. What you propose would be a dangerous precedent. If we let you succeed, we'd have the men all over the country yammering for the same freak conditions. Therefore, we won't let you succeed."

"I see. And you?" "I? I made you—have you forgotten that?—and I'm responsible for you. I helped to put labor where it is, at some risk to myself, and I don't propose to have a man of my own making undo the biggest thing I've ever done. Therefore, I won't let you succeed."

CHAPTER XXVII.

Cities Unbuilt.

Henley was pleased to be facetious. "The great Utopian—in his modest cottage—living in democratic simplicity among his village neighbors. Very pretty! I suppose you do the chores, too."

"Sometimes—what we have." "Very pretty! The Sunday papers would like that. But it's a little too theoretical, don't you think?"

"Not conspicuously so. The place was here, and it served my purpose very well. I don't need much room, you know. I'm not a Wall street hero."

"Humph!" grunted Henley, still a skeptic. "What," Mark asked, "did you come here for?"

Henley grunted again. "Cordial, I must say! I came to restore your sanity." He rose, mopping his red face with a silk handkerchief. "Take me out of this sun and I'll begin. I hear you're pretty far gone."

Mark led him into a cool office-like room—pleasant enough—and made him comfortable with a cigar and a chair by a window from which a view of the valley was to be had.

"Not sybaritic," Henley grudgingly admitted, "but good enough for a man—who has no women. Now tell me what you're trying to do here."

And Mark began, simply, without enthusiasm or sentimentalizing, to set forth his idea.

The explanation came to an end. Mark awaited his auditor's comment. "Of course, you know," Henley said, with an easiness that was outward only, "you won't put it through."

"I do not know that," Mark answered quietly. "This valley is well situated with respect to the market. Its transportation facilities are good. Our fuel is here, and I can get ore here cheaper than Quincy or MacGregor. I can make steel cheaper than anybody in America, and there's no plant of its size that can equal mine in capacity. In ten years, with a fair field—"

"With a fair field. Exactly!" "You mean I won't have it?" "You won't have it."

"Why?" "For one thing—profits."

"I'll make money here." "It isn't a question of your profits nor of profits alone, but the size of profits. No," Henley shook his head vigorously, "you can't have it. I'm here to tell you that."

"Well?" "I have no objection to your safety appliances. They're practical. They'll save twice their cost in damages every year."

"That's obvious." "I'll agree to the baths. If the men want to clean up after work—why, I regard bathing as a very proper habit."

Mark smiled. "The man will be grateful."

"I'm not joking," Henley reminded him sternly. "I'll go as far as to agree to their eight-hour shift—as an experiment. I'd like to see it tried out."

"Yes?" "Your company stores, company gardens and company homes are well enough. They can be made profitable—properly handled. But your profit-sharing plan is all wrong and—"

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"You are quite sure you can do it—smash me?" "Truitt, every steel company in the country will make it its business to put you out."

"And you won't stand aside and let me fight it out with the rest of them?" "No," Henley seemed astonished at the question. "Certainly not. What did you expect?"

"I had hoped," Mark answered slowly, "that you'd stay out of it. I

realize I had no reason to hope that." Henley stirred restlessly, turned to look out upon the valley, upon the city that had not yet arisen. An uneasy qualm moved his heart, continued with a sharpness that was almost akin to pain. He found himself resisting an absurd, an incredible impulse—a tenderness such as he had used to know, stealthily and unadmittedly, for a young half invalid with the habit of triumphing where robust men fell, multiplied now for this man.

"Truitt, I—" Henley stopped, an embarrassment as unwonted as the impulse upon him, and turned again to the window.

"Truitt," he began again, very gruffly, eyes still fixed on the city the magic of the hills revealed to him. "I—well, I like you. I've always counted you my friend. I don't want to have to fight you. I don't think you want to fight me. There is—there may be another alternative." He turned to face Mark. "Take me in with you."

Mark looked his astonishment. "I say," Henley went on. "I might do it. I've seen something this morning—something you've been seeing. The city out there. It's big—big! And if the figures you've given me are correct, it's possible. This place was intended for a city. And with us working together, it could be ten times bigger—epic—stupendous!"

He got to his feet, and shooting up the shade, stood looking thoughtfully out of the window.

"We'd make it," Henley seemed almost to be thinking aloud, "a city from the beginning. We'd get the government to make the river navigable to the mouth and ship our coal by boat to the gulf. I can think of a dozen concerns I could get to move their plants here and contractors who'd undertake to house the people. In five years we'd have fifty thousand here, and coming so fast as we could put roofs over them. But we'd build on steel. We'd quadruple your plant at once—for a start. We'd make this the steel center and this overgrown trust with its graft and favoritism and slipshod methods would have us to reckon with. We'd leave Quincy and that Scotch baggage, grown fat on other men's brains, in the shade. By God! Henley's voice was ringing, as he wheeled on Mark again. "It would be the big thing of the century—making a city to order. And I guess for that you'd be willing to give up your little two-by-four paternalism."

"That would be stipulated?" "Certainly! We'll—"

Henley seemed unconscious of the change of mood and tense. "We'll leave fads to the cranks. We'll build this city on a rock—on a sound financial foundation—and use the profits for extensions."

"I think you don't understand what I—"

"Understand? Of course I understand. That's why the idea grips. You're a born battler; things were coming too easy for you. You need obstacles, to have to extend yourself. I need that. I've got a hold in Wall street. I can tighten my hold. But I'm out of place there. I'm a builder, not a money-grubber. I've got to see things growing under my hand. What I'm at now is just a game. This would be a work, the kind I need. Will you consider it?"

"Are you offering it?" "I'm offering it as a possible alternative to putting you out of business. There may be magic in these hills, but if the thing works out on study as I believe now it will, I'll do it. What do you say?"

"And you say," Mark insisted, "it's the only possible alternative to fighting you?"

"To being," Henley corrected grimly, "put out of business."

It was Mark's turn to go to the window. He stood there silent, for many minutes, looking not upon the city that might be but upon the little village that was.

"What do you say?" Henley demanded impatiently.

"It doesn't tempt," Mark faced him steadily. "You were mistaken. I don't want battle. I don't want obstacles. But I do want to put that through." He nodded toward the village and the mills.

"Humph! You'll find plenty of obstacles and battles over there."

"Yes. But there would be—compensations."

"I would give you compensations. Do you mean," Henley demanded, "you choose to hobble along with a little one-horse plant and philanthropy when you might go with me into something really big? Compensations! You'll end in losing all you have."

"All the money I have," Mark corrected. "That is possible. But I'm not worrying about the poor farm. I expect, when that happens, I can find a good job somewhere."

"Then," Henley fired his last gun, gruffly, "then you choose those people over there against me—who made you?"

"They helped to make me—to make you, too.—You," Mark answered quietly, "don't tempt."

"I'd like you to understand," he continued after a little pause, "since you've mentioned friendship, I don't like to think of you as an enemy. But this plan, this idea, is worth a good deal to me, even though the chance of success is small. It came to me before the strike. And at first it was only the shallow sentimentality you think it. Then it became a refuge. I came here because there was a thing—Henley saw the shadow that passed over his face—"a thing I wanted to forget, something I needed to earn. But now it's grown beyond that. It has a value of its own. It's my niche, the thing I must do. You've helped me to make that clear."

"You ought to understand it, for you had it. It's what saved you from being like the other money grubbers."

You came close to being one of them. Why, once when Quincy cracked his whip you—you—cringed like a whipped dog before the old blather-skite because you loved your money. You remember that, don't you? And then you ran afoul of him again, over the strike, when the same threat hung over you, and you didn't cringe. You beat him down. Why?"

"I couldn't let—"

"No, you couldn't. You believed opposing him would cost you much. The strike you forced did take hundreds of thousands from the value of your stock. But you didn't think of that then. And now—you've claimed my friendship. How much does it mean to you?"

"A good deal, Truitt," Henley answered slowly. "It's the only friendship I ever wanted. It was my reason for making you what you are."

"Friendship means obligation—you've just reminded me of that. Would it add to your obligation if I told you that you got away whole from Quincy because of me?"

"What! What's this? You never told me—"

"It wasn't I who did it but—a woman." Henley saw the shadow again.

"I'm offering it as a possible alternative to putting you out of business!"

"But she did it for me. I look for you an advantage I wouldn't take for myself. Does that square what you did for me?"

"Yes. I don't understand. But it does. It more than squares it."

"Then—my success here can't hurt you—will you stand aside and let me fight it out with the others?"

"You're asking me to let you undo the best thing I've ever done!"

There was a long silence in the little room. Henley sat stiffly, staring at the man who had passed out of reach of his influence. And the pain was unmistakable now.

"I see," he said at last, as if reluctantly. "I guess I'm the only one of the money grubbers who could understand. It seems to be your idea against mine. I'm sorry."

"It seems so. I'm sorry, too."

"My city—I guess it was just the magic of the hills, after all. I don't want to do it without you—I'm sorry."

There was a heavy pause. Then Henley drew a long breath that was almost a sigh, glanced at the clock and rose.

"I'll take another cigar," he said grimly facetious, "if you don't mind giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Then I'll go back to my money grubbing."

When they were standing on the station platform he asked abruptly, "Can you tell me about that woman business?"

"I'd rather not."

Henley scrutinized him keenly. From around a curve came the crescendo whistle of the approaching train.

"You'd better," he said as he stepped for his grip, "get her up here. You'll need her. And when you're down and out, come to me and I'll give you a job."

Mark watched the train, regretfully, until it was caught out of his sight. Then he let his gaze dwell lingeringly on the mills and village across the river. A wave of protectiveness swept over him, of tenderness as for a deeply loved one.

And quick upon that wave, ere it ebbed, surged another as though under the shock of the first contact with opposition a dam had fallen, loosing him high, filling his need. Consciousness, distinct, definite, thrilling, filled him—of a new power and mettle, of the vitality of his purpose, of an ultimate purpose into which his fitted. A weight fell like the pilgrim's pack from his shoulders. His spirit stood erect, steady. He lifted his eyes to the hills.

"I can put it through. I will. . . . I have faith."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

White Water.

The woman who alighted with Henley from the train had come with an errand. Sundry inquiries from the station and at the new hotel—so hideously garish amid the gray tones of its surroundings—convinced her that she would need Mark Truitt's help. But she had overheard her fellow passenger's questions to the doctor and guessed that Mark would be with him for most of that day.

She stayed in her little hotel room until dinner time. After that meal, eaten in a noisy dining-room filled with still homeless men who had come to build or work in the Bethel experiment, she went out and wandered about through the old village, of which years before, hearing of it from an unappreciative young adventurer, she had used to think as a sort of ante-

room to heaven. There had even been a period in that far-off, innocent girlhood when she had thought of it as a beautiful restful haven, to which, some day when he should have tired of the greedy city and its grind, her lover might bring her. Always, it seemed, she had needed and wanted a haven. If only he had brought her then, what might have been saved!

"What might have been saved! But I mustn't think of that."

From down a narrow lane she caught a glimpse of the river, smiling in the sunlight. It beckoned to her and she obeyed, turning her steps upstream. A thick grove of oaks and chestnuts shut her off from the village and she was alone with the river and forest. River and forest held many memories for her.

Hours passed. A few fleecy, tumbling clouds floated over her. Heavier and less silvery masses appeared over the western horizon. The wind freshened. She did not notice. . . . And suddenly she knew that she was not alone.

She turned and saw him standing near, staring, bewildered yet strangely eager, toward her. Her lips parted, her bosom lifted in a sharp intake of breath, as their eyes met. Then she got slowly to her feet, trying to look away that she might regain a lost-self-control.

He started toward her, with the peculiar halting step she never could see without a tender maternal impulse. Scarcely two yards away he stopped.

"Kazia—you!" "Yes."

"But I," he stammered, "I don't understand."

Self-control was coming back. "I came to get Piotr."

"To get Piotr," he repeated mechanically. But he did not comprehend.

He passed a hand over his eyes. The apparition did not fade. Gradually he realized—with a dazing jumble of gladness and pain and reluctance—that it was indeed she, in the flesh.

"I can hardly realize it," he said at last. "I was just thinking of you. Often I am thinking of you. A hundred times I've been on the point of going to see you, to find out—"

"To find out?" "How badly I hurt you."

"I told you I haven't blamed you."

"But that isn't true—it can't be true. It wouldn't be human not to resent me, what I've brought you. You do resent, don't you?"

"Why do you press me with what is ended? I don't want to think of it—or to be unjust. I—"

She turned sharply to face him. "Yes, if you must know it, I do resent."

"You have every right to resent," he answered sadly.

She started swiftly along the bank toward the village. He followed, trying to keep up with her, and with a real effort managed it. A quarter of a mile was thus traversed, neither speaking, she keeping always one pace ahead so that he could not see her face. Then she observed his heavy breathing and slackened her pace.

"I didn't realize I was walking so fast." Her voice was quiet again.

"I don't mind it." He assayed a laugh, a poor, mirthless attempt. "I need a counter-irritant just now."

"And I didn't mean what I said back there. I haven't felt that way—often, at least. I have no resentment against you—only against myself. It was in me to keep clean and I deliberately—it is all so clear now—chose the worst thing."

"That is true of all of us."

"I don't know. I only know it's true of me. And so you needn't go on torturing yourself with thoughts of your

responsibility. Oh, I don't want you to do that. It can help neither of us and it will cripple your work here."

"It isn't facing the truth that can hurt, but the truth itself. Kazia, why did you come here?"

"I told you—to get Piotr."

"Piotr? I had forgotten him. I heard this morning he was here."

"Then he is here? I asked at the station and hotel, but no one had seen or heard of him."

"But why is he here? And why have you come?"

"He came back to us a few weeks ago, the forlornest wail I've ever seen. I don't know how he had been living—we'd no trace of him since Uncle Roman died. He was starving and his mind was clearly gone. I suppose he wouldn't have come to me otherwise. I ought to have put him away somewhere, but he was harmless and it seemed so cruel. He just sat around poring over books as he

used to when he was a boy. He seemed to have forgotten all that's happened since then. And then three days ago he awoke. He asked me for some money—said something about a debt he had to pay. It was little enough—and he's had so little of everything, poor Piotr!"

"So very little."

"He went out and didn't come back. And yesterday—I'd seen she was worrying, but thought it was because he hadn't appeared again—the Matka told me she thought from something he'd said that he might have come up here to try to harm you in some way. Do you know where he is?"

"The doctor here, who told me about him, said he's camping out in an old shed over there in the hills."

"If you'll help me to him, or send some one—"

"I will go myself."

They had reached the lane that led to the main street and the hotel. She would have turned there, but he put out a hand and stayed her.

"Kazia, was it only on Piotr's account you came?"

Her glance wavered, sought wistfully and sadly the hills across the valley, came back to his. "You mean, did I think of meeting you again? I—why should I deny it? I wanted to see your work I had been hearing about—and you again. But it doesn't mean I wanted to change anything. Please believe that. And I didn't want to trouble you—"

"You haven't troubled me."

"Will you please leave me now and bring Piotr to the hotel? I must leave with him tonight."

When she had passed out of his sight, he started quickly villageward. At the cottage he harnessed his horse to a buggy, drove across the bridge and took the road that led to Hedges' Hill.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Miracle.

"I shall know it," he had thought, "when it comes."

And as he drove there came to him the knowledge of his miracle. It came, not with the lazy luxuriousness of youth drifting, ignorant and caring not for wisdom, toward a mate, nor yet with the ecstatic feverish excitement of the passionate man, but with a deep, solemn, all-pervading joy. Peace followed it—the peace of certitude, for he knew that in the woman who had sinned he had found the one who fitted into him as a member into its body, completed him, with him formed the perfect unity—of content, for he knew that from its infinite preciousness neither trial nor failure, disappointment nor misstep could subtract.

"She must know," he thought. "She must be made to know—that nothing else counts—that we are to begin over again together."

He remembered his mission.

There was a rumble of thunder. He glanced overhead and saw the blackened sky, heard the rushing wind. A few scattered drops fell. He urged the horse forward.

He was miles away from the village and near the foot of a hill that towered well above its neighbors. He smiled as he saw a trace of an old road, almost obliterated by weeds, that led zigzagging up the eminence. It was Hedges' Hill and near the crest, he remembered, was the outhouse that sheltered the unhappy Piotr.

The storm overtook him before he was half-way up the hill. When he reached the clearing on the edge of which stood the shed, he made his horse fast to a tree, and drenched to the skin by the pelting rain, entered the shelter.

At first, in the shadows of the windowless shed, he saw no signs of Piotr. He stood in the doorway, watching the storm.

He had been there several minutes when a queer choking sound came from behind him. He turned quickly, and as his eyes became used to the darkness, made out the figure crouching half hidden behind a bench in the far corner.

"Hello! Is that you, Piotr? What are you doing over there?"

The noise came again.

"Is something wrong with you?" Mark went closer to him. "I'm Mark Truitt. Don't you know me, Piotr?"

"Y-yes," quavered Piotr.