

# The Ambition of Mark Truitt

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

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## SYNOPSIS.

Mark Truitt decides to leave his native town of Bethel to seek his fortune. His sweetheart, Unity Martin, encourages him in his project. Simon Truitt tells his son that he has been his dirtiest son, seen a small plant at Bethel and asks him to return and build it if he ever gets rich. Mark arrives in the city and applies to Thomas Henley, head of the Quinby Iron Works, for a job and is sent to the construction gang. He makes a big success in that work and Henley promises him a better job.

## CHAPTER V.

### Crossroads.

It had been an unusually stubborn "hard-tap," requiring quick and heavy sledging to break out the hardened fire-clay and slag in the tap-hole. The slag that had floated on the metal was now dripping into the cinder pit, sending up shower of golden sparks.

Roman Andrijeski, melter in charge of the furnace, was watching the scorched, haggard face of his "second helper." That young man, leaning with an air of exhaustion and discouragement on his inverted sledge, was coughing violently. He had been just three months in the heat and toll the open-hearth furnacemen must endure and an unnerving fear was upon him: that his steadily waning strength would not hold out.

"Vat iss it? Zick?" Roman spoke in the slow, careful fashion that was his habit when he used English.

Mark shook his head. "Tucker'd out."

"Tucker'd out?" Roman looked at him gravely. "You drink too much?"

"I don't drink at all."

"That iss goot. Minefself," Roman explained naively, "I drink too much. Unt that iss not goot. But always I ha' been very strong. It iss the double turn," he added. "It iss veryhardt on the young. Later it gets not sohardt—sometimes. Vare do you lif?"

"With a Frenchman in Rose alley. Rose alley—it stinks! It's too near the mills. I can't sleep for the noise. I'm tired and my head aches all the time."

"For two, three days then you must not work but sleep."

Mark's red eyes darted angry suspicion at his chief. "I suppose you want my job for somebody else," he sneered.

"No. You are a goot worker. Unt I like you."

"All the same," Mark answered doggedly. "I quit when I have to—not before."

"You do not belief me." Roman shrugged his big shoulders. "Vat do you eat?"

"Oh, soup and brown bread and potatoes mostly. That's the trouble, I guess."

"Hundert t'ousand defis! Zo little unt you vork here! You are Amerikan, you must eat. Vou not lif another place?"

"The Frenchies sort o' think they're friends. They wouldn't understand."

"Zo? But here," Roman shrugged his shoulders again, "it iss a man must be for himself—Vork now." They returned to their task.

Even double turns have an end. The night shift came on at last. At the trough for cooling tools Mark washed away the grimy sweat that streamed down his face. Then he donned a dry shirt and a heavy overcoat. Despite this covering his overheated body shivered when the raw, early April wind struck him.

"Vat!" And Roman was beside him. "I ha' decidedt. You come lif by my house."

"I guess not," Mark answered wearily. "I guess you don't want me."

"I ha' decidedt," Roman repeated. "You ha' been goot friends to your friends—you will be to us also. I ha' a big house. It is still there; you shall sleep unt hear the mills. Unt my Matka, she iss goot cook. Unt meppy you make friends vit my Piotr. He has no American friends."

"You might get tired of me."

"Zo? Then vili tell you," said Roman simply. "Also, you will tell us, ven you get tiredt of us. Unt you will not be charged too much. You will come!"

Mark hesitated, then laughed grimly. "Will I come!"

"Goot!" Roman laid a kindly hand on Mark's shoulder. "Now vili you belief me unt not work till the coldt iss vell. You will come tomorrow!"

And, the matter arranged, they parted for the night.

Roman's house, big only by comparison with three-room tenements, was on a quiet street on one of the city's seven hills. Mark was tucked away in a third-story room. Not even his fancy, less lively than in months ago but still fertile, could conceive the cheap bed and rocker, rag carpet and unpainted table as the trappings of luxury. But it was clean and comfortable, through its windows swept the clean air for which his country-bred lungs were starving and the mills were heard only as a subdued, not unmusical rumble. Also, immeasurable boon! there was in that house a bathtub; his attendance upon it astonished even Kazia, who esteemed bathing more highly than did the rest of Roman's household. The Matka's cooking, supplemented by Kazia's arts, fell little short of Roman's prospects and the fare had substance.

For three days, hearkening to Roman's counsel, he did nothing but sleep and eat. His cold disappeared. His flagging strength revived. Then he gave himself anew to the endless, narrow grind—toll, eat, sleep and toll again.

Roman's house, it is true, contained more than comfortable beds and a bathtub, a fact to which Mark gave at first but scant attention. There was Roman himself, in the mills precise, patient, unfurled workman, outside a good-natured, impulsive giant, with a child's ungoverned appetite. There was Hanka, his wife, always called Matka—mother—a drab, shivering little woman who after twelve years in America had learned hardly a word of English. Piotr was a greedy, usually sullen boy of eighteen, still in high school, always bent over his trouble-some books. He had a club foot and the heavy labor of the mills was not for him.

"Piotr iss a good boy," Roman confided to Mark, "but he iss ashamed that he iss Hunk. I am not ashamed. He beliefs ven he iss smart with his books he vili be American. But," the father sighed, "Piotr iss not smart."

Also, there was Kazia.

At first Mark gave but passing notice to the girl who moved so quietly

"Pete!" The boy's homely face lit up. "Kazia, did you hear? He called me Pete."

"I like Piotr better," she said, with a shrug that imperiled her burden.

"Do you?" Piotr turned again to Mark. "do you know Latin, too?"

"Oh, a little!" Mark sought Kazia's face as this announcement of his erudition fell. But Kazia was looking away.

"And will you help me with that sometimes?"

"Sure. Sometimes," Mark assented recklessly.

But Piotr was insatiable. "Every night?"

"Well, no," said Mark, recovering caution. "Not every night. I can't—"

"Of course not, Piotr," Kazia cut in. "He can't waste time on a stupid little Hunky."

"I'm not a Hunky," Piotr resented passionately, addressing Kazia but for Mark's benefit, "any more'n you are. We are—we're Poles. But we're Americans now. Why, I've almost forgotten how to talk Polish—except to the Matka," he added conscientiously.

"Will you help me tonight?" he returned to Mark, with less assurance. "It's Caesar. And I am stupid," he sighed.

Mark, though repenting his rashness, could not well refuse. For an hour they listened while Caesar uncouthly told how he had taught the conquered Vercingetorix his place. But Kazia was not at any time present during the lesson. At last, yawning mightily, Mark arose. He went up to his room, bearing Piotr's awkward gratitude and followed by a look of humble admiration it is probably well he did not perceive.

But the incident had its sequel. He found a light burning dimly in the narrow hallway before his door, and coming out of his room—Kazia.

"I was fixing things," she explained, indifferent as ever.

"Thank you, Kazia." The room, as he remembered it, had been in perfect order. He stood aside to let her pass.

She took one step and then stopped abruptly, looking up at him with suddenly hostile eyes.

"What?" she demanded, "did you come here for?"

He smiled—the smile of age for a naughty but amusing child. "Because your father asked me, I guess."

"But you know Latin and algebra and things."

"Why, what's that got to do with it, Kazia?"

"We don't. We're just mill-workers—and Hunkies."

He was not schooled in the reading of voices, but he caught bitterness there. He looked at her more intently—and more kindly.

"What?" she repeated resentfully, "did you come here for? You don't like us. You won't have anything to do with us. You eat, then go up to your room and stay there. We thought you were coming to be friends with Piotr"—an almost imperceptible pause—and me."

"I come up to sleep, Kazia. You see, I was pretty near on my last legs when I came here and I need all the rest I can get. I'm not used to work in the mills and I guess I'm not so strong as I look. If I'm going to get ahead, I've got to do it while I can stand the work. Besides I didn't think you cared whether I liked you or not."

"I don't," she declared, with a little uplift of her chin; it was a beautifully molded feature. The movement caused his eyes to the slender yet strong and rounded throat. He wondered that these beauties had escaped his notice. "I don't. But Piotr and Uncle Roman do."

"Uncle Roman?" It was the first time he had heard the phrase. "I thought he was your father, Kazia."

"No. I—I have no father."

"Oh!" He assumed a bereavement. On a sudden pitying impulse he put out his hand and laid it on her bare forearm; the flesh was smooth and firm. "That's too bad, Kazia."

And then, most unexpectedly, the curtain was drawn aside for him.

"I won't be pitted!" With the cry fell away the Kazia he had known, as did Cinderella's tatters. In her place stood a girl who seemed taller, whose head was held in a fashion peculiar, in his books, to very proud and fine ladies. Her eyes blazed defiance. She snatched her arm away. "Here they're

all ashamed. But I ain't ashamed. I won't have you pity me."

This was mystery. But he did not press her for an explanation. He was more interested in another phenomenon.

"Do you know you're mighty good-looking, Kazia?"

The angry crimson deepened. "You're laughing at me. You're—"

"But I'm not laughing." He caught her arm again, gently. "I'm only surprised. I didn't think you were. But you are—when you're interested or mad. Only please don't be mad, because—" What was this unconsidered thing he was saying? The words ran on—"Because I want to be friends with you. Don't you want me to stay?"

For a silent moment she looked at him strangely.

"Yes." She turned abruptly and left him, descending the stairs without so much as a glance backward.

For a full minute he stood looking at the place where she had been. Then he drew a long sighing breath.

"She's a queer one," he muttered. When he awoke, the late morning sunshine filled his room. But the eager expectancy pervading him, as if some long planned holiday had dawned, was more than reflection of this outer radiance.

He bathed and dressed carefully. And for the first time he perceived that his clothes, relic of Bethel days, lacked something when judged by city standards. He frowned at the image in the cheap mirror.

"I must buy a new suit," he muttered.

When he went downstairs he found Kazia bending over a window box in the dining room, where three scarlet geraniums flamed. She heard his approach and turned slowly. . . . No deceptive half-light, but the full glory of spring sunshine, was upon her. She was indifferent as ever. But the transformation held.

"Oh! Hello!"

"Hello!" she said quietly, and moved away toward the kitchen.

"Kazia—"

She paused inquiringly.

"Er—" he floundered. "It's a fine morning."

"Yes," she said.

His remark, he felt, hardly justified her detention. He groped about for a more fertile topic. "Fine geraniums you've got there, Kazia."

"Yes."

"My goodness!" he laughed. "Is yes' all you can say? Don't you remember we agreed to be friends?"

"I said I wanted you to stay," she corrected without enthusiasm. "I'll get your breakfast." This time she accomplished her escape.

He sat at the table, loftily amused. Probably—thus he considered her unresponsive—the poor thing still doubted his sincerity. And she had reason, beyond question; on the whole had been selfish in his rigid seclusion. He must repair that.

Kazia, bearing his breakfast, interrupted his musings. He surveyed ap-

"Piotr!" muttered Piotr, in the Pole's deadly insult.

The homely face was pale, convulsed with hate and a real suffering.

Even Mark, self-absorbed, could see that. He patted the boy on the shoulder.

"Never mind, Pete. She can't think much of him."

"He's not fit for her," Piotr cried.

"Right!" Mark agreed firmly.

Piotr went further. "Nobody's fit for her."

"Kazia's a mighty nice girl," Mark declared, less sweepingly.

"Yes, she's nice. And she's smart, too, smarter'n me. She's smart as you."

Piotr looked up fiercely, as if expecting contradiction.

"Sure, she is! But I'm afraid," very casually, this, "she doesn't like me very well."

Piotr jumped at the bait. "She thinks you're stuck-up and selfish," he explained. "And she's always afraid everybody, 'cept Jim Whiting, 'll look down on her because her mother"—Piotr flushed—"wasn't married."

So that was the reason for her outburst of the night before. Poor Kazia! Mark had not needed to go out of virtuous Bethel to learn the lot of Hagars' children.

"Do you look down on her?" Piotr demanded aggressively.

"Of course not! And you needn't be ashamed of her, either—it isn't her fault, is it? I don't like," Mark said slowly, "to see her with that Whiting. I wish—I wish she liked me a little better."

He did not see the startled questioning look Piotr gave him.

"Kazia," asserted the boy, "never changes. I'm going home."

They strolled homeward, each moodily silent.

Despite the comfortable quarters and nourishing food, now his strength lagged painfully; his scorched face became haggard. And each morning he dragged himself wearily homeward, blind to the day's beauty.

But he did not forget Kazia.

Always a leech-like Piotr awaited his return, with problems to be solved and paragraphs to be construed. Nor did he wait in vain. Every morning Mark patiently sacrificed an hour of the needed sleep on the altar of the boy's rare stupidity. He did not look to Piotr's gratitude for his reward.

The direct charge into the mouth of the enemy's cannon is spectacular and heroic, but the great strategists have relied upon the movement in flank. On Friday Mark came within sight of the coveted position.

"There's three problems and a whole page of indirect discourse," the scholar

announced. He added the complaint, "You're late."

"All right," Mark sighed. "Bring 'em out."

Then Kazia spoke her protest.

"Piotr, can't you see he's tired?"

"But I can't do 'em." Piotr became silent at once. "And I haven't failed once this week."

"Piotr, you're a greedy Hunky pig."

"Don't you do it," she turned to Mark.

"Sunday's the double turn."