

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, encouraged by his sweetheart, Unity Martin, leaves Bethel, his native town, to seek his fortune. Silas Truitt tells Mark that he has been sent to him to run a steel plant at Bethel and asks his son to return and build one if he ever gets rich. Mark applies to Thomas Henly, head of the Quincy Iron Works, for a job and is sent to the construction gang. His work is to help in the building of a plant as helpers to Roman Andrejewski, open-hearth furnace man. He becomes a boarder in Roman's home and assists Piotr, Roman's son, in his studies. Kasia, an adopted daughter, shows her gratitude in such manner as a young girl's in her. Heavy work in the intense heat of the furnace causes Mark to collapse and Kasia cares for him. Later Roman also succumbs and Mark gets his job. Roman's wife visits and tells Mark of 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 Kasia has married John Whiting. Mark meets him in an accident which leaves 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. He rises rapidly to wealth and power in the steel business, but the social ambitions of his wife make their married life unhappy. The big steel interests are secretly anxious to get hold of stock in the Quincy Iron Works, and they seek financial assistance from Mark and the latter buys Woodhouse's Iroquois stock at a small figure. Henly forces Quinby to let Mark have stock in the Quincy company. Mark and Piotr make a socialistic speech on the street and the boy shows that he is still bitter against Mark. Mark finds Kasia, who is divorced and is now a hospital nurse, caring for Roman who is near death. Mark is advised by his physician to take a long rest. He gets six months' leave of absence. One day he takes Kasia out driving and they meet Mrs. Truitt. A bitter quarrel ensues and Mark demands a divorce. He absents himself from the city during the summer and makes no answer to the sensational charges brought by Mrs. Truitt. On his return he is treated coldly by many former friends.

CHAPTER XX.

The Red Glow.

Henley did not know what an impetus he had given with his "Pick out the thing you want most and fight until you get it."

Mark had not sought out Kasia. More than he would admit to himself, he had suffered during the weeks of injustice. Suffering had for the time dulled the longing for her. And behind that had been a proud reluctance to offer a love tainted by the tongues of scandal-mongers. But now the hunger for a great love—born on an autumn evening of his youth when he had come upon a frail slip of a girl rapidly gazing into the twilight, too much a part of him to be stilled even during the years of fierce blind struggle and disappointment—made itself felt again, downing pride...

He called up the Todd hospital, was told that Mrs. Whiting was not there, but could be reached at a certain number. He called up that number.

The response came in a low voice that even the telephone could not rob of its music for him. His heart leaped. Kasia!

There was a pause, then the low voice came again: "Who is that?" "This is Mark Truitt."

Another wait, so long that he thought the connection had been broken.

"Yes."

"Is there any place I could meet you—by accident?"

"Is there any reason for an accident?"

"If you think not, there is none. . . . Are you still there?"

"Yes. . . . You can come here." She gave an address.

"This evening?"

"If you wish. . . . Good-by."

He alighted from a car that evening before a big but unpretentious apartment house in one of the city's quieter neighborhoods. Three stories above the street he came to a door on which was her card. He knocked.

She opened the door. For many seconds they stood looking at each other, motionless, speechless. . . . He broke the silence, in a strange greeting that spoke of itself.

"How often I remember you so—on the threshold!"

"I thought it was your step." The rich color surged before the invitation, lent meaning by his greeting. "Will you come in?"

The quiet little sitting room was a cæsars. He thought he had never found, even in the wilderness, so restful a place.

"I suppose," he said aloud, when they were seated, "it's part of the mystery of personality."

"What is?"

"This room. It's the homiest I've ever been in."

"I'm glad you like it. I've had it for years. I suppose I oughtn't to keep it, because I don't get much good or it except in vacation. But I like to think of it as a place to come back to."

"You're on your vacation now?"

"Yes. I have a long one this year. I take only Doctor Wolf's cases now, and he is abroad for the summer."

He leaned back in the chair to which she had assigned him and watched her under cover of their inconsequential chat.

"Why did you ask me to come here?"

"Because I didn't want you to think." She paused uncertainly.

"That you believe all you may have heard of me lately. Thank you, Kasia."

But I'd have expected you to say that." Her eyes fell again to the sewing.

"Kasia," he asked directly, after a moment, "has any one ever connected you with my scandal?"

She looked up quickly again. "Why, no. How could they?"

"A mysterious woman has been mentioned. I've been afraid that every one I've had to do with might be smirched with me. I didn't want you—all women—to be touched."

"Do you care so much about it all?" "I wouldn't admit it to any one else. But I do care, Kasia."

She was silent, but the dark eyes were very gentle.

He leaned forward and drew her to him. He kissed her again and again. For a long minute he held her so, in silence. . . . Insidious moment, throwing open the gate that he might peer into a golden realm such as even this Joseph had never dreamed!

"You haven't said it," he broke the silence.

"That I love you? Do I need—"

"No." He kissed her again. "Only I can't quite believe it yet. It's worth going through all the trials and disappointments and ugliness—to have this hour."

Much later—it did not seem long—he asked: "Kasia, when will you marry me?"

She did not answer for a long while. Then she gently pushed him away and spoke, slowly, as though all her strength were needed to force out each word.

"I can not marry you."

"I can not—" He stared at her, stunned.

She shook her head, mute.

"But why? You are free."

"I am free—under the law. But I can not."

"You love me, and yet—"

"I can not."

"But why?" he persisted. "You must have some reason." Then he aroused himself. "Though you may just as well forget it. Do you think," he cried, "I've found a real enduring love only to let it go?"

"I have a reason. I—" She broke off, looking away. Her hands clasped tightly in her lap, unclasped, then went out in a little appealing gesture as her eyes came back to him. "It isn't that I don't want to. I—love you. But—oh, can't you understand? How could the love endure the little trials and frictions, the nearness, the commonplaceness of every-day life together?"

"Ah! I wish you hadn't said that." He was staggered for the moment; to him her reason was not an empty one. But he went on firmly: "That wouldn't be true with us. It's never true where there is a real love to smooth the way. And you and I—we mustn't judge by our past, because we've never found the real love—until now."

"Yes, it is real. I think it is real." From her wistful voice he thought he had shaken her. He pressed her hard. "Of course, it is. Then, don't you see—"

"No, if it is real, then I can't—I don't—risk losing it. I haven't had much, ever, except this love—I mustn't lose it. And you don't know—I'm not fine and clever and cultured, like—like the women you've known. You'd see the lacks—"

She was becoming incoherent. "Oh, don't try to persuade me. You only make it hard. I've been thinking of this—and of when you'd come—so long! And I know."

But he did try to persuade her. And longing lent him eloquence, as he pictured for her their love, triumphant over the starving years of separation, triumphing again over the vexatious problem of daily intimacy.

Slowly it came to him that she meant her refusal. He released her and drew back, so suddenly that she swayed and almost fell.

Then it only means that you don't love me. If you did, you wouldn't count the risk."

"If you must believe that," she answered sadly, "you must. But it isn't true. If I could forget the risk, I wouldn't love you as I do."

He laughed harshly, and reaching for his hat, turned toward the door. The dreamed love had gone the way of his beautiful philosophy.

But at the door he looked back. She was standing as he had left her, pale, in her eyes both fear and the glow of the flame he had lighted. The hand held out to him in involuntary gesture, was trembling visibly.

"Why—do you go?" "But you said—"

"I didn't say—I wouldn't love you."

He laughed again. "What is love—by itself?"

"We could," pitifully she put forth the suggestion, "we could be friends."

"Friends! I'm no bloodless poet. I want a whole love."

Her hungering look was calling him, drawing him across the room to her. It bade him take her. He took her, wonderingly, dazed by the seeming surrender. In her clasp she seemed to find a new courage.

"Then—then—I will give you a whole love—if you will take me as I am."

"No, no!" he muttered. "Not that, Kasia! I've hurt you enough. And

it wouldn't be a whole love. It couldn't be a lasting love. Love can't live except in the light of day."

"Love, if it is love, is its own light."

"But the risk you fear! It would be greater your way."

"This is my risk, not yours." Her arms encircled his neck, drawing his hot cheek down to hers. "And there is no one else. I am alone. No one would be hurt. It wouldn't—it couldn't—be a bigger love if given in the world's way. And this is all I can have, all I can give. Let me have it until—"

She ended in a gasp that was almost a sob.

CHAPTER XXI.

Arcady.

He went to sleep that night, fearing the awakening. But as he woke to the summons of the early summer sun, the dreading reaction did not come. He could think only with tenderness of the woman who had yielded to him, the love that did not haggle, with a sort of awe—and the query, Could he match it?

He arose, and going to the telephone, called her number.

"Is it you?" He heard the eager catch in the low voice.

"Who else could it be?" He laughed. "Kasia, if you should happen to invite me to breakfast—"

"Oh, will you? Come soon. I—I am always waiting for you."

But as he turned away from the telephone, something caught in his throat. "Poor Kasia!" he muttered. "We've cut out a big job for our selves."

He did not have to knock at her door. While he was still mounting the last flight of stairs, it was thrown open and she stood awaiting him in the little entrance hall. When he took her in his close clasp, she put her hand to his forehead and looked searching into his eyes. He was glad that what she saw there contented her.

"Oh, I'm glad," she murmured from his shoulder, "I'm glad you called me up."

"Of course I did. How long did you think I could wait to hear your voice again?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't. If you hadn't—"

"But I did." He kissed her.

Afterward, when the table had been cleared and the dishes washed—he helping with an awkwardness they found very comic—he broached his plan.

"Kasia, have you ever been in the woods?"

"No. But I remember you used to tell me of the hills you came from. I've always wanted to see them."

"Oh, yes, they're beautiful. But men live there, I meant clear out beyond the edge of things as you know them."

So he told her of the wilderness he had visited—of calm, placid rivers that became noble lakes and then rushed madly down narrow rocky chutes; of vast stretches of untouched forest, pathless to all but the wild things and the lonely, hardly less wild trapper; of its silences and ragings. She listened eagerly.

"Let's go there, Kasia."

The suggestion left her almost breathless for a moment. "Dare we?" "Why not?"

"Why not?" she repeated slowly. "There would be nothing to fear up there, nothing to conceal. We could stay until I have to go back to work."

"Longer, if you like it. You needn't think of work."

"But I must," she smiled. "I must live—and I'm not a very rich woman."

"Hush!" She laid a silencing hand over his lips.

It was easily arranged. He dropped a note to Henley which led the latter

to believe that his counsel had been taken and Mark had gone away to let gossip run its course and die. Kasia had no explanations to make.

They met in Toronto and there took a train together. They alighted far to the north at a rude little lumber town where the smell of fresh-sawn lumber mingled with the fragrance of balsam, swept down a long narrow lake. After one night in the home of a lumberjack to whose simple mind it never occurred to question the status of his Yankee guests, they started up the lake by canoe with a guide who was to leave them when they had made a permanent camp.

From beginning to end their stay in the woods was without cloud or flaw. The narrow lake narrowed still further

into a smooth clear river that wound in and out among ever wooded hills. They passed the region where the cruel ax had swung and scarred; the trees became bigger, the forest denser. Here and there they came to a rapids where the canoes had to be lifted and carried.

Her almost awed perception of each unfolding beauty touched him. On a jutting point they found a deserted little cabin, some trapper's winter abode. There the journey ended. When the hut had been cleaned out, they dismissed the guide with orders to return every three weeks with fresh supplies...

Mindful of his resolve, he planned their days carefully, thinking only that they might be perfect for her.

The man was swept out of himself, out of his groove of thought, as never before. His struggles and victories and disappointments receded; they seemed part of another existence. If he thought of them briefly at all, it was but as a price well paid for his freedom. He did not guess that the habit of thinking minutely for her happiness was slowly prying loose other and firmly fixed habits.

Two moons waxed and waned. The guide came with supplies, and again a second time. On his third appearance, the time set for their departure, Mark without consulting Kasia, sent him back. She did not seem to notice the change in plan.

On the day when the guide should have returned again, he did not come. That evening a storm arose, such as rarely visits even those northern woods. Mark and Kasia were out on the lake for a lazy after-supper paddle, watching the masses of black clouds gather over the hills at the head of the lake. There was a rumble of distant thunder.

Suddenly, overtaking the mountainous vapor, appeared a lower plane of clouds, flying before a wind that struck the water and sent a line of white churning down the lake. They were not far out, but though they paddled swiftly, their light craft was tossing like a cork before they reached shore. They made their landing, dragged the canoe to safety and tied the cabin just as a wall of green and darkness swept down upon them.

The fury was soon spent. The storm passed beyond the lake. Still they watched, in one of their long silences.

She sighed and stirred, looking up at him. "I wonder—" She paused.

"Yes?"

"Have I hurt you?"

"Hurt me?"

"By loving you. By coming here."

"No," he cried. "How could any one be harmed by a perfect love? And it has been perfect. I can never forget."

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