

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

By HENRY RUSSELL MILLER

Author of "THE MAN HIGHER UP," "THIS REISE TO POWER," Etc.

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CHAPTER XXIV—Continued.

Together he and Mark dragged Piotr to the cab and forced him within Piotr, dazed by Mark's appearance, resisted but feebly.

Before the grim majesty of approaching death even Piotr's madness was abashed. The supreme consciousness revolved back the atom that, when imprisoned in flesh, had been Roman. It was Kazia who saw.

"He is dead."

The Matka uttered a low moan, then became silent again, resumed her rigid gazing at the not less still body. Piotr's hand passed over his eyes in a bewildered gesture. The woman who kept the door made the sign of the cross and went quietly out.

Kazia bent over to kiss Roman's forehead. Then Piotr came out of his daze. He caught her roughly and drew her back.

"No!"

"Piotr!"

"You're not fit to touch him."

She turned and went slowly into the kitchen. Piotr followed.

He confronted her and Mark. "You can go now, both of you."

"Oh, Piotr, not now!" Kazia began pleading. "The Matka needs me and—"

"We need nothing from you. We weren't good enough for you once. You left us to be a fine lady. Now we don't want you."

"But I came back and you wouldn't let me stay."

"Yes, when you found that Jim Whiting couldn't give you what you wanted. You thought you could use us then—as he did." He nodded toward Mark. "How, his teeth bared in an ugly accusing leer, 'how did the Hunky girl get to be such a fine lady?'"

"Be still!" Mark stepped close to him, sternly. "Mind there any decency in that cracked mind of yours? Remember she came to them," he pointed toward the little bedroom, "when they needed some one. You were out filling the streets with your blackguardly rant. And whose money do you think had to keep them alive because you wouldn't do a man's work?"

"A man's work?" Piotr laughed, a horrible startling cackle. "To a cracked brain that isn't to betray and gouge and drive—? He broke off. "Do you mean it was her money?"

"Who else would have cared?"

Piotr went back into the death room, clutched his mother by the shoulder and shook her cruelly. "Tell me," he cried in her tongue, "have you taken money from her—that woman—when I told you what she was?"

The Matka shrank back from his vehemence. "I had to—buy things to keep him alive."

Piotr, releasing her, stared, his mouth working queerly. "Even you're against me."

He went again slowly into the kitchen, taking up his hat from the



"What Have You Found, Roman? Is It Simple, There?"

table. He did not stop until he reached the door. There he turned, facing Kazia.

"You can have her now. I'm going."

"He's crazy," Mark muttered. "Don't mind him."

With an effort she recalled herself to the situation. "You had better go now. I must take care of the Matka. Will you please telephone to the hospital that I can't be back tonight?"

"But I can't leave you alone here, while Piotr's at large. I'm going out to arrange for tomorrow. Then I'll come back here."

"Two hours later she returned and rapped lightly. Receiving no answer, he tried the door. It opened and he entered quietly.

Hanka lay on a narrow cot, in the sleep of exhaustion. In a chair by the table, head pillowed on one arm, Kazia, too, slept. She stirred uneasily as he entered, then became still. He tiptoed to another chair and began his lonely watch.

The night seemed endless. To sit motionless, looking at the relaxed form figure she made, became impos-

sible. He rose and crept silently into the room where Roman lay. A single "smile" was burning low in its socket. By its faint flickering glow the waxen face and golden hands seemed not dead, but only at peace. Mark looked long at him, as though Roman held the answer to his questions. Once he leaned over, whispering.

"What have you found, Roman? Is it simple there? Is there a new birth in which mistakes can be paid for? . . . I want to pay."

CHAPTER XXV.

Payment.

It was two days after the funeral. Mark had seen Kazia but for a few minutes, merely long enough to learn her new plans, and then Hanka had been present. Kazia proposed to take care of her, and that they might not have to be apart, to give up her fine position at the hospital; she thought she could obtain a new one that would take up only her days. She had, of course, to find a new apartment.

All day Hanka had been alone in the dismantled flat, thinking not of him who had gone but of the woman who had assumed her protection. Often her head shook in troubled gesture. Hanka had not lost the habit of seeing and understanding many things from her shadowy corner. Not out of grief for the dead, she knew, had the look that haunted her come into Kazia's eyes.

The dinner was over, the dishes washed and put away; this being part of Hanka's share in the new division of labor. She went into the little bedroom whither Kazia had gone to dress. But at the door she stopped, unnoticed, looking at the figure that lay motionless and face downward on the bed. She started to steal away, then turned again and went timidly to the bedside. She laid a gentle hand on Kazia's hair. "Little Kazia," she murmured, half frightened at her boldness, "what is troubling you?"

"Nothing, Matka," came the muffled answer.

"Is it because of me? I don't want to be a burden. I can go."

"No, no! You mustn't leave me. I'm just tired."

"Heart tired. Is it because of him—your lover?"

"I have no lover."

Kazia rose wearily, and going to the mirror, began to take down her hair. The thick soft tresses fell tumbling around her. Hanka, in troubled wonder, watched the round arm that wielded the comb, the smooth firm shoulders. At Kazia's age Hanka had already begun to wince into an uncomeliness that men passed by undesigning. She went over to the dressing woman and touched timidly the firm, still youthful flesh.

"You are like your mother."

"What was she like?"

"She was like you," Kazia did not smile. "Men saw her and wanted her."

"The comb became still. "Did she—did she love my father?"

"Such a love I have never seen."

It had been dark almost an hour when the bell rang. Hanka heard Kazia going to the door and a startled exclamation answered by a malicious voice Hanka did not know. The visitor was admitted and taken into the sitting room. To the kitchen came the murmur of Kazia's voice and his, chiefly his.

He had been there but a few minutes when his voice changed. It became eager, with an undertone that perturbed Hanka hurtly. Once Kazia uttered a low hurt cry. Hanka rose and crept along the little hall. She crouched in the darkness near the sitting room door, listening intently and wishing she had not been so stupid about English.

"Am I an ogre?" the mollified voice was saying.

"It is not a question of love. I am not old, but I have lived long enough to prick that illusion. We scientists know what love is."

"I don't care for you in any way," Kazia answered coldly. "Mr. Quinby, you oughtn't to be here. A man in your position—"

"My dear lady, let me remind you that the interest of a man in my position is not to be rejected lightly. With a word I gave you the best position your profession offers a woman. With a word I can take it away. I can relieve you of the necessity of working at all. I can make it impossible for you to find work in this city."

"Threats—"

"My dear lady!" the stranger's voice protested. "I would not do that. I would harm no one. I am a tender-hearted man. I, too, suffer, if by chance others suffer through me." The voice, vibrant with emotion, would have wrung tears of sympathy from a stone. But Hanka, as we have seen, could not weep. "I am only trying to show that those who enlist my interest do not lose by it."

"So you think I am for sale?"

that? You lay in the hollow of my hand. With a breath I could have destroyed your reputation. But I kept silence, I advanced your interests, I held you tenderly in my heart. Woman, you have bewitched me. I want you."

Hanka understood at least his last words and she understood his tone. She crept closer and through the crack of the sitting room door saw Kazia elude Quinby's outstretched arms.

At the same moment she heard a halting step on the stairway. She opened the outer door and went out to meet Mark Truitt, whispering excitedly to him in Polish. When he, astonished by her appearance and emotion, would have spoken, she clapped a hand over his mouth, and clutching him by a sleeve, drew him into the hall. She pointed through the crack.

Again Quinby reached toward Kazia and again she recoiled.

"Don't—don't touch me!"

"Why do you rebuff me? You're not an ignorant child. You must have known what my interest in the hospital and in you this year has meant. You wouldn't have taken my help unless you were willing to give me what I want."

"What is it—what is it you want?"

"I want you to be to me what you have been to Truitt."

"And if—I refuse?"

"I have never yet told that I caught Truitt and a sun-browned woman alone in an Ottawa hotel under circumstances—I have no reason to love him. I have refrained from telling only for your sake. I—Why do you force me to say this? I have no wish to be brutal to you. Seeing you has turned my head. But you will not—surely you can not refuse."

She dropped back into a chair, covering her face with her hands. When she looked up, she wore again the strange rapt expression.

"You said," she whispered chokingly, "you said—you would pay."

"Yes, yes!" he cried eagerly.

"You are trying to rob Mark Truitt—to force him out of the company. Will you—give that up?" Still in the same broken whisper.

"Even that. You are worth everything."

"And will you give me time—to send him away—and never let him know?"

"It is for you to make conditions. Ah! my dear—"

In triumph Quinby stepped toward her and bent over to take her hand.

"Don't do that!" said a voice behind him.

Quinby whirled. For a long silent minute the trio faced one another.

Then Mark, white of face, hands working convulsively, went slowly to the stupefied Quinby, who seemed turned to stone. He did not resist even when Mark's hand leaped up and caught him cruelly by the throat.

He was pressed back until his back met the wall. The grip tightened. Quinby's face grew purple. He squirmed and tried to cry out, but only a hoarse gurgle resulted.

Kazia came to herself. She sprang to her feet and caught Mark's arm, breaking his grip.

"Don't hurt him. He's not worth it."

Gently, without taking his eyes from Quinby, Mark freed his arm from her clasp. But he did not touch Quinby again. The first murderous impulse died. He turned contemptuously away from him.

Quinby, released from the cruel hand and eyes, started across the room. Mark whirled upon him once more.

"Stop!"

Quinby stopped. "This," he said weakly, "is a trap."

"Set by yourself." Mark turned to Kazia with a helpless, mirthless laugh. "What is my cue? Shall I kick him down stairs—or spring his dirty trap?"

"Let him go," she answered listlessly.

Mark shook his head. "Not without paying. He said," grimly, "he was willing to pay."

"I'm not afraid of you," Quinby muttered a feeble defiance. "What can you say of me that isn't true of you?"

"Ah!" Mark drew a sharp whistling breath. Quinby shrank back, his hands going protectively to his aching throat. "Now you shall pay. You—! He broke off with a gesture of disgust. "I find I've no stomach for blackmail just now. I'll telephone Henley to come over. He'll know how to handle this situation."

Then Quinby was indeed fear-struck. He clutched Mark's arm tightly. "Don't tell him!" he quavered. "We can settle this ourselves. I didn't really intend to force you out of the company, only to—to frighten you a little."

Mark jerked his arm free. "So you're a coward as well as a fraud! But I knew that before. This is too sickening. You'd better go."

anthropist, pierced to the heart. That is to say, Quinby retired from the realm of beneficence and his rival reigned absolute once more.

A heavy troubled silence was in the little room. Kazia stood passively by the table, waiting for Mark to speak. After a long while he raised his eyes to hers.

"Kazia, you poor romantic fool! Did you think any amount of money was worth that—even if he had kept his word? When I think what—oh, how could you think of it!"

"I wanted," she answered in a queer lifeless voice, as if benumbed by this crisis into which they had stumbled, "I wanted to do one thing for you—and your happy city."

"My happy city! What happiness could it have had, built on that? And I—hadn't you given me enough?"

"I gave you only love."

"Only—"

"It was all I had to give. It wasn't enough."

"I wish I could have given as much as you." The wistful words slipped out.

He stepped closer to her.

"Kazia, this has got to end."

"Yes."

"You must marry me tomorrow."

"Life, and with it pain, flickered once more."

"You are trying to give something now. But I'm glad you said that."

"I'm asking you to give something more. You will?"

"Why do you ask it?"

"Because I've hurt you enough. I did hurt you when I let you—led you to sin, even though we kept it a secret from the world. I want to make you happy—you said yourself we've broken a law. I want happiness—and I can't have it, knowing that for all I've taken from you I've given nothing."

She tried to smile; the sight of it cut to his heart. "Every reason but the one. But I'm glad you wouldn't lie to me now." The smile faded. "You see, I can't."

"Kazia, dear," he pleaded, "we started wrong—let's begin over again. Let's give love a new birth."

His voice rang with a longing she could not understand, but he could not touch her. She shook her head spiritlessly.

"There can be no new birth so long as there is memory. You could never forget that I—that I am not clean."

"Do you think me so small as to hold my own fault against you? It is my sin, too." He stepped closer, reaching out his arms to take her.

"Come, dear, your poor little reasons aren't enough."

She shrank away from his clasp, trembling. Into the tired white face came a look of fear and despair. She glanced this way and that, as though she sought an escape. Her hands went to her face. Then she forced them down and her eyes to his.

"I thought—I thought you understood. . . I wasn't clean—before we sinned. The doctor who helped me, I—! She could say no more."

Suspicion had not prepared him for this. He stared foolishly at her, showing how he recoiled from the fact her broken words had revealed. He did not then think it strange that the shame of a woman he did not love should stab so deeply.

"Kazia, how could you—how could you?"

After a while he forgot his own pain a little in pity for the silent stricken woman. Again his arms reached out for her and would not be denied.

"It must make no difference." His sternness was all for himself. "What am I to blame you? You sold your body to live. I gave my soul to feel others squirming under my feet. You hurt only yourself. I've hurt every one I touched. I hurt you. If I hadn't been a coward years ago when we first loved, you would never have been tempted. Your sin is only a part of mine. It is you who have most to forgive."

Slowly she raised her head to look at him. "And you," came a broken incredulous whisper, "and you would marry me—even now?"

"All the more now!"

For an instant a faint pitiable hope, defying knowledge, shone in her eyes.

"Have I been mistaken? Only love could ignore—ah! not lie to me now. It wouldn't be kindness. Is it just pay—or love?"

He tried to look away from her and could not. Her eyes held his, seeking through them to hunt out the last truth hidden in his soul. With a rough convulsive movement he drew her head down on his shoulder.

"How can I know what it is? It must be love, since I need you and want to make you happy. If it isn't now, surely love will come when we start right. Kazia, don't refuse me this chance to make up to you a little of the harm I've done you."

would be misery for me always. You wouldn't want that. . . And this—it seems I've always known it would come. It was a chance I took for a few months' happiness. I've had my happiness. . . You haven't harmed me—I beg you to believe you haven't harmed me."

But the hoarse cry died away. There was nothing to say. His humiliation was complete. Magdalen that she was, she looked up to her from depths of self-abasement she could never know.

The voice was growing unsteady again. "When I think how it might have ended—if you hadn't come tonight—I'm glad you came—to save me from—that. . . And now—I think you had better—go. . ."

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Pentecost.

It was a red sunrise, that Sabbath morning, and the ruddy glow lingered in the eastern sky long after the sun had swung clear above the hills. A slanting shaft found his window and fell upon him as he dreamed. He stirred restively.

He awoke slowly, reluctantly, drifting toward consciousness through a golden haze that vibrated with far-away dwindling harmonies.

"Where have I heard that before?"

After a little he remembered—a youth, full of dreams and credulous, joyously facing his great adventure.

"And tomorrow I set out on a new adventure. It was a long way from there to here. . . I wonder, would any man, given the choice, travel his road a second time?"

He rose and went to the window. Two years had passed, crowded with effort, crowned with achievement. From the window where he stood, still seeking to recover the lost harmonies, he could see the beginning of his happy city, all ready for the great experiment.

He bathed and dressed—in the new bathroom that was his one concession to the luxuriosities of the old life—and descended to the kitchen. The pleasant odor of frying ham met his nostrils; there was a hotel in Bethel now at which the Truitts generally had their meals, but sometimes, of a leisurely Sabbath morning, Simon still served as cook.

But the bent old man at the south window had forgotten breakfast. For a little Mark watched him without salutation.

"Good morning, father," he said at last.

"Good morning, Mark," Simon turned reluctantly from the window. "I was just thinkin' it'll be 20 years tomorrow ye went away—ah! now there's that."

"Yes. Your dream has come true. If you live until tomorrow night you'll have seen it all—steel made in Bethel."

Breakfast ready, they sat down and began the meal in silence. Mark ate lightly, absently.

Ever since Mark had returned, Simon had been vaguely sensible of a suffering to which some solacing word might be said. But the word would not come to his uneducated lips.

"I wish," Simon thought, "I could give him something."

It was a real suffering Simon sensed, no day without its hour of payment, no hour so heavy as on that Sabbath morning.

From across the town came a mellow clamor, the voice of the new church bell calling the faithful.

The clamor ceased and after an interval resumed for a few last taps before he rose and went into the house for his hat and cane. When he emerged again he found Simon sitting on the front stoop.

"Goin' to church?"

"I guess I'd better."

"Yes. Courtney likes ya to. Do ye," Simon asked suddenly, "still believe what he preaches?"

Mark hesitated a moment. "I suppose I never did. I'd like to, but I can't. It takes a certain quality of mind, I suppose—or early habit. I can't quite see—"

There was that in Mark's tone which made Simon look up quickly. "I can't see the logic of letting another's suffering pay for our sins."

"Ye'll be late," Simon suggested, Doctor Hedges, driving along the valley road, drew up at the station until the eleven o'clock train, having discharged its Bethel passengers, sped onward. The passengers were two, a man and a woman, strangers to the doctor and therefore alien to Bethel. The woman stood on the otherwise deserted platform, looking uncertainly

around her. The man made directly for the doctor.

"Do you," he demanded, "know where Mark Truitt lives?"

"Why, yes." The doctor bestowed a friendly smile on the stranger. "I guess I do."

"Can you show me how to find it?"

"Yes," Hedges glanced toward the woman; she was entering the station. "I can do better. I can take you there."

"If you will." And the stranger promptly entered the buggy.

The doctor clucked to his horse and turned hospitably, with conversation, intent, to his guest. But the latter forestalled him.

"Live here?"

"Between whites."

"Ha!" The stranger smiled, a brief wintry smile. "Doctor, I see. Do you know Truitt?"

"Well," Hedges spat ruminatively, "that's a pretty risky thing to say of any man, but I guess—"

"What do they think of him here?"

"They think he's a great man—and it's his own—"

"He's a great mechanic," said the guest shortly.

"I," drawled the doctor, "know more about men than mechanics, but—"

"What do you think of him?" the guest interrupted again.

The doctor, hoping to complete at least one sentence, quickened his drawl. "He's a man who's either losing himself or finding himself. I'm not sure—"

"Meaning?"

"You wouldn't," chuckled the doctor, "have time for the explanation." He drew up before the little cottage. "He lives here."

"Hardly!" the visitor retorted. "I take the three o'clock train. Much obliged." He sprang, more briskly than his rotundity promised, out of the buggy.

The doctor drove away still chuckling. The chuckle would not have died even had he known his passenger to be none other than that Henley whose star, flashing with comet-like swiftness and brilliancy above the horizon of speculation, had in two years achieved full planetary dignity and importance. But the doctor was not a student of Wall street astronomy.

"Humph!" The lunary surveyed the weather-beaten little cottage with its unkempt yard and near-by smithy. "So he lives here. Affectation, of course!"

He strode up the path and saluted the old man on the stoop.

"Mr. Truitt lives here, I believe?"

"I'm Simon Truitt. But I reckon ye want Mark, Mr. Henley."

"Ha! You know me. His father, I suppose?"

"Yes. I saw ye once, years ago, when he was in the hospital."

"I remember," said Henley, who had forgotten that incident completely. "Is Truitt about?"

"He's at church."

"Church! Surely not a habit?"

"He goes generally, since he comes back."

"Hm! Something new for Truitt?" Henley frowned. "And my time's short. I suppose I may as well save some of it by going over the plant now. There's no objection, I suppose?"

"No; I," Simon ventured uncertainly, "I was just about to go over myself."

"I'll be glad of your company," Henley graciously replied. "Shall we start?"

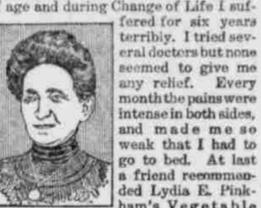
An hour later Henley emerged from the shadowy finishing mill, blinking hard in the midday's sunshine and trying to revise his estimate of the situation.

He followed Simon out on a tiny cape that jutted into the river, whence they could see other evidences of Truitt's lucidity—the hospital, the bank, the store, the cluster of homes gleaming white on the hillside.

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