

The Ambition of Mark Truitt

By HENRY RUSSEL MILLER

SYNOPSIS.

Mark Truitt, encouraged by his sweet-heart, Unity, 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. He succeeds in that work wins him a place as helper to Roman Andrejski, open-heart furnaceman. 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 a manner as to arouse Mark's interest 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 requests 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 Kasia 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. Mark rises rapidly to wealth and power in the steel business, but the social ambitions of his wife make his married life unhappy. The big steel interests are secretly anxious to get hold of stock in the Iroquois Iron company, supposed to be worthless. Timothy Woodhouse seeks financial assistance from Mark and the latter buys Woodhouse's Iroquois stock at a small figure. Henley forces Quinby to let Mark have stock in the Quinby company. Mark finds Piotr making 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 stop taking drugs and take a long rest.

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

"It did," he answered. "But you didn't invite it. You weren't the sort of girl that needed to be invited—you aren't that sort of woman now!" Eyes, no less than tongue, were eloquent of his admiration; but she was looking away. "But most women wouldn't be so ready to forgive. They would remember only hurt vanity. I'm at your feet for your charity. I've seen little of it in my life."

"Have you looked for it?"

"No. Nor had it. Nor valued it—until now."

"And now?"

"Why now I—need it."

Somehow the confession, an unconsidered remark that, however, had the ring of sincerity impulsive sayings are apt to have, seemed to establish even more firmly their intimacy. It nerved him to his next remark.

"Kasia, don't you think you could tell me what has happened to you during all these years?"

"You'll be disappointed," she began abruptly, "because there isn't much and it's commonplace enough. I married Jim and lived with him a year. Then I left him. Not because he wasn't kind—he was, in his rough way. But he was shiftless and he drank too much. He had no ambition and—I wasn't happy with him, so I left him, though I knew it hurt him."

"A woman can do that," he interrupted quickly.

"Some women do it, you mean. I've always been ashamed, though I never went back to him. Later, I got a divorce. I went to live with Uncle Roman, but Piotr, who had hated Jim, made it so unpleasant I had to leave. He hated me, too, I think."

"Or loved you, in Piotr's peculiar fashion. But go on."

"After a while I found work in a tobacco factory, rolling cigars. Not the kind you smoke, but cheap vile things. It—it wasn't nice."

"I've heard of those holes," he muttered. "You there—why—"

"I was one of many," she went on. "In two years I was sick and in the hospital, a heavenly place where there was ventilation and nothing to do and good things to eat. I used to pray I'd never get well."

"There isn't much more. I didn't have to leave the hospital. One of the internes took an interest. He had influence and helped me to register as a nurse. I've a knack for surgical work, and since I passed my examination I've always had cases. For the rest, I'm not educated. I've merely read a little, here and there, as I've had time."

"That's all and not what you seemed to expect. Just cruel selfishness in the beginning and a little luck afterward. Which is not the success you worship."

"But I see more than that. I read between the lines." Long afterward, recalling this scene, he remembered her quick questioning glance, but then he gave it no thought. "I see the courage to make a fight, the will to rise and being equal to the opportunity when it came. And I've heard that the really charitable are never so to themselves."

"Oh, if you will—" She broke off with a shrug. "Let us talk of something else."

When at length he broke the silence, his voice was a caress. "I wouldn't have you different. What you've lost is nothing compared with what you've gained."

She turned her head slowly toward him. For a long minute their eyes held. Then with one accord they looked away. Not the heart of a boy of twenty could have beaten more violently.

As they drove on, the silence became awkward, self-conscious. Neither seemed able to break it.

Rounding a curve in the tortuous driveway, they met a landau, a beautifully enameled affair drawn by high-stepping horses in elaborate silver-mounted harness. In it sat two women. They bowed to him, the younger with a pointed smile.

Kasia heard him mutter: "I had forgotten!"

"Who was she?"

"The older? That was Mrs. Thomas Henley, of whom you may have heard."

"Yes? But I meant the other."

"That," he answered in a dry constrained voice, "was Mrs. Mark Truitt."

After a while: "Ah!" she breathed. "She is lovely."

"That makes it unanimous," he said shortly.

It had ceased to be the pleasantest time he had had in years. A heavy cold cloud had settled upon their intimacy. Why dream of the possibility of a mighty primitive passion! It was not possible. . . . But it was a characteristic of the man to want most the things farthest away, the things forbidden.

"We've gone far enough," she said. True words, however she meant them! "And it is getting too cold for you. Let us turn back."

He made no protest. He swung the team around and drove toward the hospital; at a reckless pace, that he might not have to talk. He had no wish for commonplace speech with her. From other speech the habit of self-repression saved him.

But not wholly. For as they were nearing the hospital, he drew the horses down to a soberer gait.

"When," he asked, "will you drive with me again?"

"Not again."

He had known, even before she spoke, what her answer would be. And he knew—so had she given it—that it was irrevocable.

"I wonder why you came today."

"I'd been thinking of you. And I was—curious. To see what sort of man you had become."

They swung into the hospital grounds and up to the entrance. Over her protest he descended to help her in the pain the needless little service gave him.

He sought her eyes. "Was it only curiosity, Kasia?"

Her answer was not in words. Slowly she mounted the stairs to the doorway, and turning, looked steadily down upon him. Her face was white, but her eyes were lustrous—and unspeakably sad.

"Kasia—"

"Good-by."

He had had the answer he wanted. But he received it with a heart as heavy as lead. He wanted her as he had desired nothing since life began. And he could only stand and, helpless, see her leave him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Sundered Bonds.

Dinner, on the rare occasions when the Truitts dined together and alone, was marked by a careful formality that was but a thin disguise for their mutual dislike. At no other time, save by hastily cured accident, were they apt to confront each other. The quarrel of the night of their first invitation to Henley's house had never been healed. Each had gone a separate way, ignoring as far as possible the other's existence.

With Unity the dislike had been genuine. She believed that when her easy husband had so suddenly and definitely put an end to her supremacy, she had been robbed of a right that she, a woman and therefore a superior finer being, should enjoy. Fear, of him and of what the man she now perceived him to be might do if unduly provoked, kept dislike alive and hot.

With him it had been rather contempt for her airs and vanities, for the uselessness to which, even in a woman, he could not become reconciled.

Unity, too, rose and, following, overtook him in the freight drawing room. "You are rude. I wish to speak with you."

"I'm going up to my study."

"You're supposed to have given up work, I believe."

"I wish to be alone."

"Now, perhaps. You weren't alone this afternoon in the park."

"I didn't want to be then. What is that to you?"

"A wife has some right to consideration, I think."

"A wife—yes. You'll hardly claim the title."

"Do you deny it to me?"

"A wife has something to give her husband. But you—What is it you have to say? By your manner I judge you think it important."

"It is. You're too ill to work, but it seems not too ill to go driving in the park with striking looking women."

With an effort he kept his voice cold. "And you object, is that it?"

"I do."

"Very well. You've registered your protest. Is that all?"

"No, it is not." She leaned sharply forward, forgetting to pose and to smile, the delicate prettiness of face eclipsed by a cloud of vixenish temper. "It is not. I have some self-respect and regard for our position. If you haven't, do you suppose a husband means nothing to me but a name?"

He glanced hesitatingly toward the door, meditating retreat. Then, with a grim tightening of his lips, he returned his gaze to her.

"You really want an answer? Then, I had supposed a husband means to you a name—and a check book. With inexhaustible leaves."

"So you begrudge me the money I spend? You grow—"

"Your expense account, fully met, is the best answer to that, I think."

"But I want more than money. Do you think a little money—a little paltry money—can repay me for your neglect and selfishness?"

"So you scorn money? It's news to me. But I think you've nothing to complain of."

"Nothing!" she cried. "Is it nothing that I have to go everywhere alone, always having to listen to whispers behind my back of my husband's foolish attempts to play the man about town? You see, you couldn't keep your escapade of last year from me. Or that you've turned the old set against me by cheating poor Timothy Woodhouse out of his last property?"

He winced and flushed painfully at that. She saw and believed she had pierced his armor. She rose again, that she might deliver her final thrust most effectively.

"Do you call it nothing that you, who have no time or thought to spare your wife, brazenly flaunt your women in public, on the streets and in the parks, for all the city to see and gossip about?"

He was standing rigid, both hands gripping his cane, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on her. The tightened lips had become the merest line.

"If you refer to Mrs. Whiting," he began at last steadily, "you will please use more respectful terms."

"You reprove me on her account! This," she cried tragically, "this is too much. I suppose this Mrs. Whiting—if that's her name—is your mistress—perhaps I should say, your latest mistress."

"Why, you—"

The storm burst, choking back speech, but finding an outlet through his eyes. He reached out swiftly and caught her hand in a cruel clutch, crushing the soft useless member until her rings bit into the flesh and she cried out in pain.

"Let me go," she gasped. "You're hurting me."

He released her and sank back into a chair.

"I think we've come to the end of our chapter, Unity. But I'll give you—us—one more chance."

"You'd think I were a criminal!"

"We both are—but let that go. Heretofore you've made our life. And you've failed. Since our first month we've never been really happy, at least in each other. Now let me choose. Let's go away somewhere—"

"To New York or abroad?"

"Not to New York or abroad. To Bethel or some place where we can live a quiet, decent, natural life. Let us begin over again and try to recover what we've lost—or rather what we never had."

"You are absurd!"

"Is it absurd for a man to ask his wife—you've claimed the title—to share the life he wants and needs?"

"You forget to consider what I would have from such an arrangement."

"You would have me."

She answered with a contemptuous shrug. "I will do nothing so silly. You ask too much."

"Ah! You're franker than I thought you could be. I'm glad you're frank." He rose, looking curiously down at her. "If you look back, you'll find I've never asked you anything until now. I've been content to take—at least, I've taken—only what it suited your whims to give me. And you've given exactly nothing."

"And what," she flung back, "have you given me?"

"From another woman that might be a crushing retort. I've given you very little. But, as it happens, it's been all you wanted. You wouldn't take, you never wanted, the only worth while thing I had to give." He paused again, his manner hardening. "However, all that is ended. I go away tomorrow morning. I don't think I shall ever see you again."

Even then he might have relented, if she had given him excuse. But she gave him no excuse.

"You're asking for a divorce?"

"Yes."

"I suppose," she sneered, "you want to marry that woman, your mistress." He held himself under rigid self-control. "She isn't my mistress, though I love her. She was the girl I gave up years ago out of loyalty to you."

There was nothing lovely about Unity Truitt just then.

"And now you want to renew the broken romance. Very pretty! But," she laughed in vindictive pleasure in her fancied ability to thwart his desire, "you shan't have her. I don't choose to be a divorced woman. And I know you can't get a divorce without my consent."

"I think you will consent," he said quietly.

"I will not, I don't choose—"

"The choice is with you, of course. But you must understand it. You're through with me in any case. But if you consent to the divorce, I'll make a settlement that will satisfy you. If not, I will make only the allowance I think you've earned."

She went pale at that, the one threat which could reach her. "Why," she gasped, "you couldn't do that. Even you couldn't be so brutal—"

"Choose."

"But you couldn't. You—I must have time to think—"

"You must choose now." He was inflexible.

She sat transfixed, beginning to comprehend the reality of his purpose. Her confidence suddenly melted. Fear shone in her eyes. She rose, and with a piteous pleading gesture, too frightened to be conscious of her hypocrisy, she went to him.

"Why, Mark—Mark, dear! You can't mean that. You couldn't cast me off like this. Why, we're husband and wife—and I know I haven't been fair to you, but I can't let you go. Let me make up this last year to you. Let us go away, as you say, and begin over. We can be happy—"

The stammering incoherent cry halted, silenced by the unrelenting quality of his steady eyes. The out-

stretched hands fell limply to her sides. She shrank back a step from him.

"I believe—you do—mean it."

"I'm waiting for your choice."

"I have no choice. I—I must consent."

He turned away and without another word or glance for her, limped heavily out of the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

Bond Though Free.

The Truitt divorce sensation had reached and passed its height.

One day, when the decree was scarcely two weeks old, a man alighted from an incoming express train. He did not look like a roue or the villain of a famous scandal; he himself did not know that he had been heralded in such a role. His doctor would hardly have recognized him. He was still thin and the cane had not been discarded, but he was clear-eyed and healthily bronzed and the limp was far less noticeable than at any time since the accident.

Six months he had spent in the northern wilderness, living in the open, sleeping under the stars, with no company but his own thoughts and a taciturn half-breed Indian. But they had not been lonely months, nor did he think them wasted. For they had brought him to what he was pleased to call a new birth.

The first news of the Truitts' separation had evoked scant interest from the gossips. But as the time set for the trial approached it began to be whispered about that more than the usual stale story of domestic disagreement lay behind the affair. The whisper became an audible chorus. It was a dull season in a year when no important election impended, there was a dearth of spicy news; the newspapers avidly seized this chance to give flavor to their columns. From some source, which might have been identified as Unity's lawyer, reporters were furnished material for innumerable suggestive rumors. Vague but deftly worded innuendoes of Truitt's cruel treatment of his wife appeared, of his sly profligacy, of the one strikingly handsome woman who had captivated his fancy and whom it was supposed he would marry after the divorce. From Truitt, who had completely disappeared, came no denial. His flight and silence were taken as an admission of guilt.

At the trial, to be sure, the testimony was a distinct disappointment. It proved merely commonplace deser-

tion and touched but lightly on only one short-lived period of dissipation during which Truitt, at certain midnight suppers, had shared with other men the more or less interesting company of sundry nameless women. The public, deprived of the scandal for which its mouth had been watering, decided that Mrs. Truitt had been overly magnanimous in thus sparing her husband and let its heated imagination supply the lacking details. Truitt entered no defense and a decree was quickly handed down. Mrs. Truitt at once sailed for Europe.

He hailed a cab and gave the name of a club that to cabby brought visions of a liberal tip. In a few minutes the destination was reached and the passenger descended to the pavement. At that moment a woman, whom he recognized as one of Unity's familiar, approached. He lifted his hat and bowed. She looked squarely at him and passed on without greeting. Red surged into his cheeks.

"Cut!" he muttered. "I suppose Unity's given her version of our smash-up. Unity would."

He paid his fare and entered the portals from which no rich man had ever been excluded. At the desk a well dressed and usually very polite young clerk so far forgot himself as to look his amazement.

"Mr. Truitt! I supposed you were out of town. I thought—" He stopped in confusion, remembering that it was no part of his business to think.

Mark looked hard at him. "You thought?"

"I thought you were out of town, stammered the clerk.

"I was. And now I'm back." Mark answered dryly. "So I think I'll arrange for rooms here indefinitely."

Nor was this all of the city's greeting to the returned wanderer. The rooms arranged for, he turned away from the desk, to come face to face with a man whom he had used to like and who, he had reason to believe, had not been without interest in him.

"Why, hello, Baker!" Mark held out a friendly hand, with a genial smile that was part of his new resolve.

Baker took the hand, but released it quickly. "Ah! How are you, Truitt?"

"Bully. Just back from a long stay in the woods. Dine here with me tonight, won't you?"

"Thanks, no. I'm probably not dining here. Excuse me. Some men I must see—"

Baker broke hastily away, passed a few words with a nearby group and went out. The ruse was obvious.

Mark, feeling as though he had received a blow in the face, stared after the retreating figure. The genial smile faded. Then he went to the rooms he had engaged. Passing the group that had helped out Baker's ruse, he was conscious of their furtive curious glances.

Arrived in his rooms, his first act was to have back newspaper files sent up to him. For two hours he read how, while he was winning back health in the wilderness and planning a life of amity with his fellows, his name had been bandied about on the tongues of slander and gossip. As he read in the light of what had just happened the amazing accumulation of suggested filth, only here and there brushing the outer edges of fact, utter bewilderment filled him. Shirley's brief communication, making mention of "some talk," received at the edge of the wilderness, had not prepared him for this.

"It's all a pack of dirty lies," he cried. "How could these men, who've seen me go in and out every day, believe it? What rotters they must be themselves to be able to believe it! By God! I'll—" He stopped, with a sudden feeling of dismay. "Why—why, I can do nothing."

He was helpless.

"Then I am not free! She has put a mark on me that a lifetime can't rub out. Must we pay forever for our mistakes? . . ."

One evening, when his residence at the club had continued about three weeks, the affair came to a climax. He was entering the grill for dinner. At the sound of his name from a nearby group of diners, he halted involuntarily.

"That's all well enough," one of the diners was saying. "A club's a club and, of course, we have to allow a certain latitude. Still, when it becomes the refuge for a man so notorious we couldn't have him in our homes—" The speaker was checked by a warning kick.

Mark, sweeping the group with eyes from which the mask had momentarily fallen, met Baker's embarrassed gaze. With a contemptuous smile, he passed on to his own table and ordered a dinner which he made such show of eating as inward rage and pain allowed.

His coffee and cigar had just been brought when Baker crossed the room and stood by his table.

"Truitt—" he began uncertainly.

"Well?" Mark's upward glance was not welcoming.

"May I sit down for a minute?"

"Aren't you afraid of catching the plague?"

"I'm more afraid of being kicked for my impertinence."

"I understand," said Mark grimly. "I'm a pretty tough customer, but I don't commit assaults in public. Sit down."

Baker sat down, looking earnestly across the table at Mark. "Look here, Truitt. There are things on both sides of your fence I don't approve. But I particularly disapprove this Pharisee business. I felt like a cad when you caught us over there. I want to apologize for my part in it, though it wasn't a speaking part."

"All right," Mark lighted his cigar. "You've done your duty."

"But this is a little more than duty. I—" Baker hesitated. "Oh, hang it all! Some things become so painful

only plain speech serves. You don't need to be told of the stories going around. Lately it's occurred to me that you've been letting us take them at face, without trying to contradict them. That's the thing I'd do myself—if I were in the right. But it can be carried to extremes. Have I your permission to say that the stories are—let us say, overdrawn?"

"You have not. Life's too short to enter into a contest with rumor."

"But your silence—"

"Is my affair," Mark answered gruffly, rising. "You may say to your meticulous friend that I'm about to resign from this club."

"Baker, too, rose, looking at Mark keenly.

"Oh, come, Truitt," he began, "that's—"

But Mark cut him short. "At least it will save him and his sort the necessity of setting a precedent that would decimate the club. Good evening."

Henley, who had been out of the city when Mark returned, came back soon after the latter took up his residence in the hotel. Mark approached him with the inward shrinking that preceded every new meeting just then.

"You've picked up physically," Henley remarked after a cool handshake.

"Six months in the woods accounts for that."

"I'd think, if it was doing you so much good, you'd have stayed."

"In other words?"

"In other words," said Henley, "why did you come back now?"

Mark laughed hollowly. "I didn't know I'd become a notorious character."

"How, in heaven's name," Henley exclaimed, "did you let yourself get caught in a divorce court scandal? I'd have thought that you, of all men, if you had to play the fool, would at least have used finesse."

So even Henley believed the rumors! "At any rate, no one but myself is hurt."

"That's not true. Every one who had anything to do with you is more or less hurt. The company is reflected on. I," Henley concluded with an air that declared the indictment to be complete and unanswerable, "I am bemired, because we're known to be in so many things together."

"That," Mark returned coldly, "can be easily cured. We can wind up our affairs. And I'm ready to resign from the company."

"You can't cure the fact that we have been together. And you can't resign. Are you going to add to the scandal by marrying that woman?"

"What woman?" Mark's voice was cool and steady.

"The one that turned your head and your wife was smart enough to discover."

"You've heard names, then?"

"No," growled Henley. "She's as mysterious as the rest of your didoes."

"As mythical, you mean," Mark answered in a voice that did not betray his relief. "There was no woman."

"What! You mean these stories aren't true?"

"You'd seen me almost every day for years. You might have guessed that."