

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

BY **Bertrand W. Sinclair**

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(Continued from last issue.)

For another forty-eight hours Rod stirred uneasily about the town. He met his father by chance, talked with him briefly. He spent a little time each day in one or the other of two clubs in which he held membership. He and Mary went once to dinner at the home of a classmate, married now and frankly unsettled by the war cloud. He met other young men he knew. He missed a great many others, but he knew where they were. He heard the one thing discussed in clubs, in hotels, on the streets. People lived the war in public and private. Rod wondered if they dreamed about it in their sleep, as he sometimes did.

Between himself and Mary a singular constraint had arisen. It was as if some impalpable substance enfolded them, sealing their lips upon things they both felt and feared but could not embody in speech. Where the unspoken thought had scarcely needed words, so perfect an accord of mind had they attained, now each was locked in a separate chamber of his soul, brooding inscrutably, wordlessly even when they sat knee to knee by their room window or lay wide-eyed in the night, flesh touching flesh, mute in the face of an ache to speak and be understood. Rod came in one evening after dusk. Mary had begun to dress for dinner. She sat on the edge of their bed, hair down, a silver slipper hanging idly from one hand. She looked at Rod when he came in, in a silent question, almost an appeal, and then her eyes dropped to the floor.

"Dorothy is over from Victoria," she said tonelessly. "She telephoned half an hour ago. Charlie has been offered a commission. She's planning to go east with him and later across to London."

Rod sat down beside her, put his arms about her. His fingers stroked her thick, soft hair.

"I have to go," he said quietly. "I've hammered it out for myself. I can't keep out of it."

She laid her face against his breast. Her arms pressed tightly about him. A little shudder shook her.

"Oh, Rod, Rod," she whispered. "I can't bear it. I've seen it coming. We've just begun to live. And I'm going to have a baby."

He sat holding her close. She did not cry. She clung to him silently. The slow heave of her bosom, the occasional shiver, that desperate struggle for calmness, made him ache.

And he thought, with a slowly rising tide of bewilderment, of the wholly inadequate preparation that had been bestowed upon them for such a bitter sip of life's cup. For her a lonely childhood, an education frugally achieved, and marriage. For him, eighteen years of a sheltered, tutored existence, four years of college, twelve months in a logging camp, three months of inconceivable happiness—and the war.

The Great War—which in five years was to bestow upon his country, at the price of many lives and out-poured treasure, such priceless victories as a scramble for oil and a squabble over debts!

CHAPTER XVIII

When men walk often in the shadow of death they rise superior to its dread aspect, or they become indifferent to it, or they succumb to its ghastly presence and welcome it as a relief from unendurable suspense. Upon these emotional reagents all the heroism and endurance and cowardice of humanity in war is based. And when the shouting and the tumult dies the survivors sometimes find themselves incredibly of their survival in a world excitedly muttering the shibboleths of peace—peace where there is only truce. For the dumb clouds, led or driven, and the high-spirited adventurers did not alone comprise the armies which the nations lately sent forth. Wily-nilly, by outward compulsion or inner sense of duty, the sensitive, the lovers of beauty, the humanitarian, the altruist, those strange souls to whom disorder is an evil, justice a patriotically cherished dream, freedom the birthright of every man,—they too were khaki and were deafened by the guns.

Upon them, and they are no considerable portion of this our country's manhood, the war has left its mark. Not so much in the scars on their bodies—for those are things men forget as easily as women forget the pangs of childbirth—but in the more tenuous fabric of their souls, in the processes of their intellect. Many question the value of the ordeal,—judged by its results.

It was a questioning of this nature that troubled Rod Norquay on an evening in January, A.D. 1919. He sat among civilians in a Canadian Pacific smoking car while the Imperial Limited rolled westward through a rainy night. He was on familiar ground again, the soil where five generations of his blood had been nourished. The Coast Range was far behind the train. On his right the Fraser River made a pale shimmer in the darkness, with here and there the glowworm running lights, the yellow window squares of a river boat. It was good to be back, back to life that could be lived fully and freely, not simply endured.

But it was not good for him, in those last homeward miles, to listen to the talk that ran in the smoker. It was pitched to the same key as had fretted him in Paris, in London, all the way across North America,—boundaries, coal and iron, concessions, indemnities, reparations. Europe, Asia, and Africa, the islands of the Pacific, had been rearranged, parcelled out, in Rod's hearing in hotel lobbies, in ship saloons, in railway coaches, day after day, by sleek, middle-aged civilians, clever successful fellows who knew what was what. He was sick of it. Was that the reality behind the war to end war?

"Loot," he said to himself scornfully. "They can call it what they like, but that's what they mean." In the field even Fritz shot his looters when he caught them red-handed. But in civil life, behind the rampart of a victorious army, they had their eye on

the loot. They couldn't see much else that was worth consideration. This group in the smoker,—he had been in the enforced physical intimacy of railway travel with them for four days. They had been a trifle backward about approaching this moody young man in a London-tailored uniform of the C. E. F. with three thin gold stripes on his sleeve. They had respected his reserve silence. But they had talked for his benefit. Short of stuffing his ears with cotton he could not avoid hearing. And they talked voluminously, sagely, on the war, and the paces that was in the making. Rod grew to hate them. In his own mind he called them bus a ds. Which is a measure of his state of mind, for he was naturally courteous and tolerant toward his fellow men.

He welcomed the dim turreted and dooming outlines of Hasting Park. He recalled the mustering and drilling there, the housing of men by thousands in buildings designed for show cattle. By a curious association of ideas he reflected that many of those men had been butchered less mercifully than the stall-fed calves on shown in those barn-like structures, every time a battalion went up the line, wherever bombing squadrons could locate trench or billet, whenever enemy field guns could get the range.

Well, it was over. As the train slowed into the eastern portion of the yards, creeping between the docks and the city, he had a momentary, fantastic impression of having passed through a vivid nightmare of four years' duration. Because all this was the same. The Europe he knew had been torn to pieces, disfigured to strange aspects. Here the North Vancouver ferries, the self-same vessels he had ridden on, were scurrying back and forth across the Inlet, passing each other in midstream. Mast and funnels of deep-sea ships rose beside well-known docks. The rumble of downtown traffic; the chaste pyramidal roof of the Provincial Courthouse peeked out with ten thousand incandescent bulbs; the Moorish pile of the Vancouver Hotel; the white monolith of the Burns Block; the arching crown of the World Building, all these were adumbrated in the thin hovering haze of light reflected from a million windows, thousand of arc lights, batteries of electric signs. Here were things he knew, greeting his eyes as if he had been gone merely overnight. He took a final stare, before the coach slid under the long platform roof, at one familiar, flamboyant sign.

THE NORQUAY TRUST

Letters of fire, six foot high. He had never been able to look at that glowing emblem of Grove's career without a touch of scorn. It had been the mast of a departing troop train. That, like this, had been on a wet, windy night.

His lip curled now. But his physical inertia, his moroseness, that appalling critical turning of his mind, vanished with the final clutch of the brakes. Something flowed through him, warming him like strong brandy. He relinquished his bags to a porter, passed eagerly to the vestibule. He was no stray dog of war now, wistful and lonely. Through the car window he caught a glimpse of Mary's face, upturned in the glare of a light. Beside her stood his father, a tall, erect figure in a belted overcoat,—both smiling, expectant. This was something like! The things, the things that mattered.

It was worth something to come home like this—to this—he thought as his wife's arms closed about his neck, and he cut off her glad, little cry with his lips. His father threw dignity, reserve, to the winds and pounded him on the back, while a score of familiar faces pressed about him and hands reached for his.

Then the reaction,—the unmistakable warning from a body too greatly abused. "Let's get home," he said to Mary. "I'm getting wobbly. Good night, everybody. See you all again soon!"

"Come on, I have to move. I must," Mary slipped one arm through his, peering up anxiously. Rod's face was white, strained, in the station glare. "Never mind the bags. Well, we can tell a red-cap to send them out by an expressman," he muttered. "Give me your arm, pater."

"What is it, Rod?" Mary asked anxiously.

"Tell you later. Keep walking—slow. Can't talk. Walk."

His voice sounded dull and heavy. Three abreast they moved across the platform, stood a few seconds in the elevator, passed out over a tiled floor and between the high fluted columns of the main entrance, to a street where pools of water glistened, where the wet asphalt shone black, and the air was full of rain lines driving before a south-east gale. Norquay senior guided him through scurrying people bent under umbrellas.

"Here's the motor," he said.

"All right. Got my wind back now," Rod smiled.

"Been sick?" his father inquired solicitously.

"No. Just temporary let-down after being more or less keyed up. You'll see lots of fellows coming home like that, soon. Something lets go now and then."

He lay back on the upholstery between them, happy to feel Mary's hand pressed warmly close in his. In a few minutes the machine turned in a short, curved driveway, stopped under a portico.

Norquay senior kept his seat. "I'll see you tomorrow, Rod," he said. "Good night. Pleasant dreams to both of you."

The house was strange to Rod. He knew, of course, the street and number, but nothing more of the place where Mary had made her home for more than two years. He followed her into a living room where a fireplace glowed cheerfully, a simple, comfortable room. And they stood in the middle of it for a few seconds with their arms about each other, careless of their damp clothes, of Mary's hat tilted askew, of all but the fact that they were together after

being long apart.

"Did you miss me?"

"Are you glad to be home?"

Needless questions. Fond and foolish questions. They laughed and stood apart, threw off their heavy coats.

"Kid asleep, of course," Rod asked.

"Yes. Come, look."

She drew him through a short passage into a bedroom. A small touselled brown head rested on a pillow. One hand clutched a dilapidated woolly dog with luminous glass eyes, the other was thrown straight out on the white counterpane. Every body has grown.

Rod whispered. "He looks like you, Mary."

"Everybody says he's a perfect Norquay," she replied demurely. "So there you are."

"We've been very lucky," Rod said quietly. "If I'd known the situation was so critical at sea, I shouldn't have let you come home when you did. The place you had in Chelsea—I went out to see it before I left—for old times' sake. I hadn't been there since you came home. There's a new house—at least the upper story's all new. I made inquiries. Go-ha dropped high explosives on it about six weeks after you left."

Mary shuddered.

"Well, it's over," she murmured. "I cried all Armistice night—after the joy-whoppings. Silly thing for me to do. Everybody here went mad. Where were you?"

"Mopping up," he said grimly. "We didn't believe it at first. There was tea and down and smoked cigarettes and drank tea, and wondered how soon we could get home. God damn the war—and the war-makers!"

His voice choked with passion.

"So-sh, Rod," she warned, and drew him out of the room, back to a chair by the fire.

"I can't help it. That's the way I feel," he broke out again. And I feel that way like other men who've been through the big show, because of the selves. The beatitudes—the uselessness of it! And you don't realize the people think and talk about it all; what the papers print, and the preachers preach, and politicians cooking up their little messes, and a group of white-livered old men at Versailles politely quarrelling over the distribution of the plunder. Only there isn't going to be much plunder. They can't realize that. And they go on threatening and haranguing and wrangling over coal and iron and oil and indemnities, as if that was what we fought for; if it had been— I wonder if it was? When I feel that it was I have to curse."

"I'm home," he put his face in his hands, "but I know so many that won't come—good fellows—lots of 'em just Bill Fraser and Dan Hale—dozens of fellows I went to school with—scores of my own company. People prattle about the supreme sacrifice, as if that were a reward in itself. Damn them, they don't know what it means. I'm sick of all the saccharine tosh in the world about the war. It may have been done. But if the necessary jobs have to be done, and a dose of codlins, and left lying about here and there for a few hours with part of one leg blown off, they might change their minds about the soul-splitting part of it."

He lay back in his chair, eyes smoldering, fingers locked together for a minute. Then he smiled wanly.

"Listen to me rave," he said. "You mustn't mind. I get that way now and then. You do, in the army. You have to bottle up so much. I am glad the row's over, and I'm glad to be here. Place with you and the kid and camp out till I forget I ever was in a war. I expect in time it will get hazy. Only I have spells of thinking that Andy Hall was right. I wonder what became of Andy."

"Who was he?"

"A logger who worked for us. Clever chap. Thought his own thoughts about things, which isn't characteristic of loggers—or men in general, I'm beginning to believe. By the way, your father and mother are looking uncommonly well. But it struck me that the governor had aged a lot. Notice it? Did it knock him all of a heap when Phil went West?"

"No, he was rather quiet and sad for awhile, but with the casualties running so high we'd all schooled ourselves to expect bad news of you both any time."

Mary said quietly. "Something has worried him lately. He's here a good bit. Takes Roddy out for a walk or

drive nearly every day. He's well, I think, but lately he's been moody."

"See anything of Laska?"

"She shook her head."

"Very little. I don't see a great deal of people, Rod. Every one has been lovely to me. But—I don't fit into the giddy pace. You know, if you don't flutter pretty and with all your heart, you don't make a hit with the butterflies. Since I came back from London—I've just put in the time. You know—oh, we're a pair of softies—but it is good to be together. We have played the game."

A Chinese boy brought in tea and asked. Rod and Mary toasted their set at the windows that gave seaward view. English Bay shimmered in their casings under the gusty puffs of the storm wind. A chime struck ten.

"Two. But neither is completely furnished. There are two nice ones on the ground floor, which is plenty for as long as we have no guests. Why? I would much rather sleep upstairs."

"Why?" Mary repeated.

"Doctor's orders," he answered lightly. "High altitude advised. Oh, it's a notion of mine. You'll have to humor me."

"It's easily arranged," she said. "I'll have Yick make up a bed. You're whimsical, though, Rod. What's back of the notion?"

He laughed it off. An hour later, feeling himself sink into sleep with a delicious, pervasive sensation of contentment, his last conscious reflection was a hope that he would never have to explain what lay back of the notion. He felt Mary's arm resting across him. Surely body and soul could be at peace henceforth.

Well on in the night he awakened with a familiar apprehension tugging at his consciousness. His brain was quite clear. He knew what was happening. It had overtaken him before. The thinking, reasoning part of him, or perhaps the purely intuitive, urged that he rise and fight off a paralyzing numbness that seized his feet, his hands, that crept slowly upward and inward, chilling his flesh. Curious, he thought, to die like that, to stand by and watch himself run down like an unbound clock. He could hear the slow regular breathing of his wife beside him. He could feel the even beat of her heart where her breast pressed against his shoulder. His own heart had stopped. Would it begin again? He lay waiting, feeling that numbness seize his limbs, feeling his breathing grow more difficult. He remembered what he must do.

His will—that strange, detached segment of his being that was cognizant of and superior to his flesh, commanded him to rise at once. If he would ever rise again. And by some supreme effort of a body dying if not already dead he twisted himself sidewise, set his feet on the floor, hauled himself erect by a bedpost. Three steps to the door. Three steps from door to staircase. He moved in blind obedience to the will to live, moved with that clear, fantastic conviction of being already on the threshold of death. No pulse, scarcely a breath; speechless. He could not utter a sound. Only motor muscles moving, and that crystalline awareness of what was happening. He had a reluctant shrinking from that picture. To escape all that war could dart at him,—and to die of a cardiac failure on the night of his homecoming. No, by God! Not if he could reach those stairs!

He reached them, felt with a torpid foot for the top step, held to the balustrade with two unfeeling hands, went

down step, stamp, heavily, jarringly from step to step. His head swam. He suffocated. But he moved. His mind functioned. His body obeyed his will. All but his heart,—until he was within four steps of the bottom. Then it fluttered, feebly at first, tumultuously after a second, so that his breath came in quick gasps and long sobbing sighs.

(To be continued.)

EDISON IS UNABLE TO AID HIS OWN HEARING

It is one of the strange anomalies of science that the world's most famous inventor has not been able to assist his own failing hearing by mechanical means. A Canadian who called on Thomas A. Edison the other day states that he

had difficulty in carrying on a conversation with the aged inventor, even in a shout. Edison's hearing seems to be beyond cure, and beyond assistance through electrical sound amplification, in which field of study Edison has been a world leader.

The eyes seldom see temptation when the nose is pressed firmly against the grindstone.

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