

THE INVERTED PY AMID

BY
Bertrand W. Sinclair
Author of "North of Fifty-three"

(Continued from last issue.)

The test of anything is its workability. Rod's policy worked, with almost four hundred men on his payroll. And if he had not been compelled to pour his profits into that moribund Trust Company he could have built up a reserve strong enough to carry his working force over any possible non-productive period. At the worst now, he could square the Norquay account with the world at large. But a little thing might leave him with no resources whatever. And he regretted that. He knew what he could do, if he once had a free hand. That uncertainty bore on him hard. He was doing his best. His men were doing their best. Logs came down in tidewater in a marvelous flow, as if the trees were handled by intelligent automatons with legs and fingers of steel. He had no labor difficulty that was not solved on such occasions as it arose by a half-hour's dispassionate talk over a table with the spokesmen of his crews. The walking delegates of the Logger's Union approached him as confidently as if he had been a member of the union.

But there was always that cursed pit into which he was flinging his trees. It yawned bottomless. It loomed before him distressingly; an Augean stable that he must clean. He had his weak moments, his hours of utter discouragement. But he could neither stop nor turn aside. Sometimes in the streets of Vancouver, after a checking up with Charlie Hale in the Norquay Trust office, he would have the morbid fancy that the deep traffic road of the city was like the roar of the rapids by Little Dent, and that he was in a frail craft shooting that fierce economic tiferace to disaster in the financial whirlpools.

What a price to pay for one man's purblind ambition! He would look back at the chaste white square of the Norquay Trust Building, at the black iron skeleton or the great electric sign, and his lips would mutter a curse.

CHAPTER XXVII

Late summer of 1920 pricked to utter collapse the prosperity balloon which had been deflating ever since the Armistice. Europe still stewed in the choice juices of local punitive expeditions, reparation snarls, gyrating exchange, so that North American commerce lagged by the way with heavy feet. Here and there industry somehow kept going. It couldn't stop altogether, even lacking foreign markets. Crops were sowed and reaped; people were fed; life went on. But capital ventured timidly. Wages fell, even though commodities seemed reluctant to cheapen. The stress came particularly

hard on the Pacific Coast. The bottom dropped out of the lumber market. A thousand loggers walked the streets of Vancouver, hungry, bewildered, as soon as their savings gave out. Only here and there a few companies and individuals, fortunately situated, well-managed, or filled with bowels of compassion for their men, were enabled to continue. They could log cheaply. They were willing to risk a little loss rather than disband crews and let machinery rust; and they hoped for the upturn, the revival of "confidence" that salesman which coaxes itself to Boards of Trade and Chambers of Commerce.

Rod owned his timber. He neither leased, paid royalty, stumped, nor interest on borrowed capital. It was choice timber, picked long ago when his forefathers had the cream of coastal forests to choose from. If a tree could be cut and sold at a profit by cutting it he was the one. So long as he could operate without loss, he meant to keep on. He had to keep on, until the cost production overtook the market price.

And because he kept on along the lines he had laid down in the beginning, he found himself in disfavor with people who had once considered it a privilege to know a Norquay. He did not suffer from that. They could not hurt him. If he had not been deeply troubled because he saw the nearing end of his own rope, he would have been amused.

To know that there were men who jammed him heavily for paying labor so much a day when labor could be had for less. To be aware that a certain clique looked forward to the weight of the Norquay Trust crushing him, and that there might be pickings on the interest they took in his welfare, how eager they were to point out that he was hurting himself and demoralizing the labor market, making it hard for them to readjust their business to changed conditions, to deflate properly. Labor had to come down off its high horse and his tactics delayed the unsettling. And so forth. None of it troubled Rod. He did not want their friendship. He set no store by their opinions. He had been a solitary animal all his life, too self-contained for superficial friendships. He had dreamed in and out of books as a youngster; while some of these others were already up and doing. As a man he played a lone hand, acted with resolution, brooded over his own problems, disregarded the non-essential.

He had his wife and his son. He had a given task to accomplish. He had a friend or two to lean on if he needed to lean, Andy H-ll, Oliver Thorne, his brother-in-law who wrestled with the Norquay Trust as the angel of the Lord wrestled with Apollyon. In the city office he had two men he could rely on, two heroisms, two old, very wise, white-mustached men who had handled accounts, costs, sales, during his father's regime and Phil's. And there was Staggs, the butler, and his wife, who elected to remain at Hawk's Nest for the sake of a house room and a sentiment Rod understood, valued, was moved by. They were, Staggs said, too old to go into service elsewhere. They had a bit of money put by. Enough to live rent free, but not enough to cope with the cost of town living. They would like to stay at Hawk's Nest and keep it aired and dry, to care for such part of the grounds as Staggs could keep from going to rack, and Rod thanked them and let them have their wish. It gave himself and Mary a room always ready when they wanted to spend a day or two there, which they did at times. It was pleasant to sit on the wide porches in blazing August, to watch the juniper practice across the lawn astride a stick, Hawk's Nest home in a very dear and intimate sense, even if it could no longer be maintained in the old opulent state. Rod never passed down the channel in the Heida about his business without a lingering, regretful look at that red roof glowing against a background of green timber and great mountains.

There remained only one link—apart from his sister Dorothy who came to Hawk's Nest each summer for a month, and in whose Vancouver home the dim-misted Norquay clan gathered at the Christmas—between Rod and the numerous folk who had haunted their place in the old days, the girls he had danced with, the young fellows who had been his contemporaries. That link was Isobel Wall.

It seemed a strange friendship. He had always regarded Isobel with a feeling of patient tolerance. She had fallen in love with him once, in her doll-like fashion, to his great embarrassment. She appeared to have no recollection of that episode. She seemed firmly attached to Mary. Between them, diverse as they were, there did exist an intimacy, an understanding, an affection that Rod was slow to fathom, which he did not fathom at all until he began to take serious stock of Isobel and discovered that for all her unchanged pink-and-white prettiness, this diminutive person was really not at all the Isobel Wall of his original conception.

It seemed to him in the beginning to be incongruous that his wife's greatest, almost her only intimate, should be the frivolous daughter of a man who, next to Grove Norquay, was chiefly responsible for the evil days upon which the Norquay family had fallen. But because his faith in his wife's judgment was a vital thing, he let that pass. If at first glance it seemed incomprehensible it was an accomplished fact. Isobel lived in his house as much as she did her own. She seemed absolute mistress of her coming and goings. If she had once had no mark to shoot at save

dress and parties and men, she did not seem to care greatly now whether she danced and played and flirted. Yet she seldom uttered a serious thought. She remained a charming irresponsible, give, to stung and cigarettes. She descended upon them in town, at the Euclaw, when they were at Hawk's Nest or in the logging camp on Val ez, when the mood took her. She was always welcome. Isobel was a gloom-speller. Rod used to wonder at first if she did not come chiefly for the joy she got in devilling the lift out of Andy Hall. But presently he found himself with a sneaking fondness for Isobel and her quaint pertness. And when he reached that stage and admitted it, Mary laughed.

"Isobel's a jewel, Rod. She's sound and sweet and true as steel. She's been pampered and petted all her life. Yet it hasn't spoiled her in any of the various ways in which that sort of thing does spoil girls. She sticks to us because she's used to us, she's got to be real people she knows. That tiny blonde contains some very sound wisdom. She hasn't many illusions left, and still she hasn't got cynical or hard and calculating. Laska made a hash of her life and has reacted accordingly. Their mother's helplessly society-mad. That idea of heaven is to be presented at Court sometime. Bob drinks like a fish and goes on the loose just as Grove used to do. Her father knows only the money game and plays that to the exclusion of everything else. The poor kid's only chance in the world, she says herself, is to find and marry a man who can stand on his own feet."

Shortly after that conversation Rod went in search of a logging boss, thinking, as he walked beside a chute in which hummed a steel "main line" that quivered under the strain of a heavy load, of Isobel and her astonishing metamorphosis. Or was it merely a cropping out of something latent? Unhappily that did happen. By all the rules of the game, Isobel should continue as she had begun, a butterfly, a dainty practical creature who had never toiled, spun, or concerned herself with anything but each day's pleasure as it came her way. He hadn't credited Isobel with perception to fathom the futility of the pursuit of pleasure as a life work, without duties, responsibilities, or any creative passion. But he could understand her instinctive revolt. He wondered what John P. Wall thought of this daughter who found dissatisfaction in a life that was all pleasure and no purpose.

(Continued next issue.)

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