

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

BY **Bertrand W. Sinclair**

Author of "North of Fifty-three"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A day or two later Rod came back to that conversation.

"I keep thinking of Laska," he said to Isabel. "Is she really so soured on things as you declared? Is she deliberately hitting the high spots just for the kick there's in it?"

"I'll tell the listening world she is," Isabel replied. "I wonder why?" Rod mused. "She's free, young, and well-off. At least, she has all the advantages of wealth."

"Several whys," Isabel answered. "Her mind isn't healthy. It's twisted, or tainted or something. She started out several years ago with a lot of sentimental illusions. Matrimony, as she experienced it, was—well, unsatisfactory. Laska backed the wrong horse in the marriage race, and didn't discover it until too late. You don't mind my saying that Grove was a good deal of a mucker in his private life?"

Rod shook his head. "I'm not particularly sensitive about what you say of him."

"Well, it's true. Did you know that Laska was really in love, very much so, with Phil?"

"I suspected it."

"She was always rather a queer fish," Isabel continued. "Good, generous impulses mixed up with very uncertain ones. She liked them both at first, about fifty-fifty, I think. She may have married Grove simply because he asked her first. He did have a way of making women like him—all kinds of women—for awhile. Perhaps the fact that he was elected to be the biggest toad in the Norquay puddle influenced her. I don't know. I'm sure she thought it a fine thing to be mistress of Hawk's Nest and all it implied. Being chatelaine of a place with dignity, the permanence of age, all the indefinable things that Hawk's Nest makes you feel are part of it, must have appealed to her. But when she found what she was really up against as Grove's wife, how very different it turned out from the thing she dreamed it would be—well it was the most natural thing in the world for her to look back longingly at Phil and to be intensely sorry for herself."

"Self-pity is a very demoralizing sort of thing. Phil looked like pure gold alongside of what she'd chosen—a woman who lived with one man and knew the other could help seeing and feeling that. To know that she could have had Phil if she'd so chosen made it worse."

"Of course there was no turning back. It isn't done, you know—short of open scandal, or a perfectly insupportable outbreak of some sort. She had cooked her goose. In an extreme she might have divorced Grove. But she couldn't possibly marry his brother afterward. Nobody would have stood for that. So she just had to sweat. And that makes any woman sour, or hard or recidive."

"You know how Grove performed," Isabel pointed out. "He was a very untidy person—morally."

Rod nodded assent. "A man like that should never marry," Isabel continued sagely. "He was like a small, very headstrong boy with toys. Women were toys. When he got tired playing with one, he chucked her away and got another. He did that before he married Laska, I suppose. As soon as the novelty of her wore off he went right on—as usual. Everybody knew it. No one could do anything about it. He was fairly adept at keeping his affairs de coeur out of sight. There were a few explosions, to my personal knowledge. Then Laska finally settled back into a state of contemptuous resentful indifference, and let him go his own gait."

"But it made her suffer intensely, and it has given her a nasty taste in her mouth—and she has all the conventional reactions. If she had kids or work, anything real to take her mind off herself, she might come back to normal. As it is, I shouldn't be surprised at anything that sister of mine might do. She's an arsonist. She goes on hitting the high spots because she's got to do something. It's rotten, but so long as she can't get a kick out of anything else, why I expect she'll go on. I don't mean that she's dabbling in muck. Her instincts are fairly decent. But she's hovering on the ragged edge."

"Pity, isn't it?" Rod commented. "One can't take people by the scruff of the neck and set them right; even if one is sure of one's own standards and profound wisdom, which no one ever really is. When it comes to a showdown most of us have to dance accordingly to our bent, and pay the piper when he presents his bill."

"That's the devil of it; that inconvenient bill," Isabel said lightly. "That's why I've got fussy about how and with whom I dance. There's not much fun dancing alone, but there's nothing but grief in dancing with a death's head wisheo-on you for a permanent partner. That," she confessed naively, "is one of the reasons I like Andy Hall. You couldn't conceive of Andy being a bore, or a failure at whatever he undertook—or chattering. I hate cheats. Even the unconscious ones. And there's a lot of 'em about."

Rod forgot this under pressure of other things. It was all but, on his unpleasant, and he had more pertinent affairs in hand, keener problems that involved himself, people who were still entangled in the Norquay Trust, the men in his employ who labored faithfully because they had somehow acquired the assurance that he could keep the wheels turning when other camps shut down. They seemed to proceed on the assumption that being on the Norquay pay roll bestowed upon them immunity from the paralysis that crept over the body of industry.

To go on as he had begun was more than a material necessity. It had become a matter of pride as well as a necessity. He had fashioned a productive machine that worked now with automatic precision. But without continuous operation this machine would fall to pieces with his first task a little more than half-done, and his second task, which had been forming in his mind,

nebulously from the beginning—that of perpetuating this machine for the benefit of every unit therein, himself included—receded into nothingness. He had no philanthropic experiments in mind, but he did have an economic and industrial theory which he believed would work. Unless he could shake off the deadly weight of the Norquay Trust, it would crush him financially. To disband the organization now would destroy what he had been at great pains to create. His men wouldn't understand failure. They would classify him as another false alarm, another promise who failed to perform unless it was to his own advantage. He knew that once he got the white elephant off his hands, all he needed was his men and machinery to go on indefinitely, to build up slowly on a solid basis. But the price of continued and unquestioned leadership was victory in this first battle. And the chance of continuous progress to victory began to seem more remote.

The bottom had fallen out of everything. The brief post-war orgy of production had run its artificial course. The industrial war babies had died of inanition. Exchange that fattened like a wounded bird killed international trade. Europe was steeped in poverty. The waste of war could not be repaired until the wrangles of peace subsided. Instead of subsidizing, the quarrels over peace became more acute. While the politicians thrust and parried industry languished. In the domain of timber only first grades and pulp wood commanded a sale, and both on a falling market. The camps were shut down, the mills were silent. Neither camps nor mills would operate unless a profit seemed sure, a good safe margin.

But even Rod's narrow margin was vanishing. Second-grade stuff accumulated on his hands. He could only renew his pulp contracts at a loss. And he was fighting to make good a loss. Unless he could hang on for the turn in the market tide that must come—his dilemma was very real.

He could do two things. He could shut down. Six months' non-production and he could say good-by to every hope of a passable end to this adventure. Hawk's Nest and the ultimate sale of his standing timber might square the Norquay obligation. It would leave him picked to a skeleton. Or he could revise his established policy, cut wages to the bone, drive labor with a whip, fight them when they protested, go

through the ugly stages of strikes, sabotage, hatreds, clashes, diminished output, in a word precipitate the industrial warfare which had made the coast a Beldam for the single-track minds on both sides. And that also would ruin him.

September brought him to the stone wall. He came back from a business trip to town, depressed, uneasy. He knew that a good many people would consider his scruples unfounded. But he hated to cut wages. He had made such enormous profits on the labor of these men. He knew it. He knew that they knew it. It was not the way an employer should feel. It was not in line with the common conception of property rights. Nevertheless that was how he felt. However he came by it, his instinct was patriarchal. His men had become an aggregation of human beings for whose welfare he was to a certain degree responsible. He didn't know whether or not they shared such a feeling. He was too sensible to expect that sort of response. But certain loyalty of a definite sort had manifested itself during an unsettled period in complete absence of friction. They had never made an unreasonable demand.

To keep going necessitated drastic reductions. Would they stand it? Rod had very few illusions about men of any sort. They might not be able to envisage what he did—a permanent benefit to be derived by all who stood by the ship if the ship weathered the storm. He could not mislead them by promises. He was fundamentally incapable of making promises he could not guarantee to keep.

He called Andy Hall into conference, explained in further detail just what conditions they were faced with. In the midst of this he saw Andy's attention waver, his eyes turn. Rod's gaze followed the direction. Isabel Wall had been at the Euclataws two weeks. She was walking now slowly along the bench, bare-headed, her yellow hair glinting in the sun like spun gold, her skirt fluttering in the wind. A queer expression hovered on Andy's face.

Rod uttered another sentence softly; asked a question. Andy did not seem to hear.

"Damn it, never mind Isabel!" he broke out in exasperation. "Any time you want her you can have her, so for God's sake come out of that trance and listen to what I'm saying."

Andy glared at him, not so much in anger at the outburst as in sheer amazement, tinged with hopeful eagerness.

Rod began where he left off. "I heard that," Andy told him bluntly. "I know it anyway without telling. I asked what you said about her."

"Oh, he!" Rod threw up his hands. "Then he got hold of himself. Something in Andy's eyes—a curious illuminating reflection of himself sitting in the stern of his canoe long ago, staring back through a moonlit night at Oliver Thoro's house with a strange fever in his blood, a dull ache in his heart."

"Lord, Andy," he said with rough kindness. "Does that knock you all in a heap? You're not generally so slow." He paused an instant, then repeated Isabel's own words. "If you weren't stupid you'd see that all you have to do is to open your hands and she'll fall into 'em like a ripe plum."

Andy matched glances with him for ten silent seconds. Rod smiled wearily. His impatience had burst out. Then a flush dyed Andy's fair, freckled skin. "Shoot," he said presently "I'm listening."

Rod continued. "Simple. Leave it to the men," Andy counseled. "Don't make any arbitrary statements about either hours or wages. This bunch is wiser to conditions in general than you'd think. Show 'em your hand and give them the option of deciding what they want to do. Better let me handle them myself. Will you back up whatever I say or do?"

"Yes, your judgment is as good as mine where they're concerned," Andy wrinkled his brows for a minute. "I have a hunch they'll stand for pretty nearly anything you want to do, if they know your reasons," he said at last. "Be a pity to bust up a crack crew. I think they kinda feel that way themselves. It's a cut or a shutdown anyway."

Rod confirmed this. "Well, we'll see tonight."

Hall went away. Rod watched him follow alongshore after Isabel. They disappeared together over a mossy point. His glance came back along the booming ground, followed the shore. Rod junior played on the gravel with the small son of a hook-tender and the equally small daughter of a high-rigger. A dozen houses where married men lived with their families faced that strip of shore. Clothes flattered from taut lines. It neared five o'clock. Supper fires flung blue penitents from various chimneys. Over in the messhouse a flunky sang at his work and dishes clinked. From far up on the wooded slopes came shall whistle blasts, the throb of machinery, all muffled in the deep cool forest over which was spreading a blight of raw stumps, broken branches, a litter of destruction.

He went into the house. Mary sat with a few letters in her lap, the gleanings of that steamer's mail. She looked up at him expectantly. He shook his head.

"Can't tell yet where we'll come out," he said. "I'm getting to be a sort of a nightmare with you, isn't it, Rod?" she said wistfully. "The whole thing."

"Oh, well," he replied absently, "another year, maybe sooner, it'll be finished—win, lose, or draw."

He lit a cigarette, drew a whiff or two, sat with it forgotten—in his fingers till the stub burned him.

The long quiting blast went echoing up and down the channel. Men came pouring off the hill. The supper gong changed, a prolonged and resonant metallic vibration, like an anvil under quick strokes of a hammer. Rod and his wife and boy walked to the small dining room set apart for their use. And still Andy and Isabel remained somewhere beyond that mossy point jutting like a green tongue into the sea.

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