

# THE INVERTED PYRAMID

BY **Bertrand W. Sinclair**

Author of "North of Fifty-three"

(Continued from last issue.)

## CHAPTER XVI

From a folding chair on the after deck of the Haida Rod looked back at Hawk's Nest. The cruiser's screw churned up bubbles and foam astern. Dent Island and the gray stone house with its red roof, the pale green of grass and the dusky hue of the woods behind were receding fast. They vanished altogether as they rounded the Gildard light and stood away south.

"I was born here," Rod said simply. "I never went home but I was glad to be there. I never left it before without being sorry to go."

"Aren't you sorry now?" Mary asked.

"No. Are you?"

"No," she said frankly. "It was lovely—it is lovely. Everybody was good to me. I was quite happy there until—"

"Precisely. It's Grove's bailiwick when it comes to a show-down. That being so, it's no place for us. I'm glad to be on the water. I'd rather paddle my own canoe than be a guest on somebody's ship. It won't perhaps seem so pleasant for you, old thing."

"The only unpleasantness I dread," Mary rejoined, "is your beginning to wonder if it was worth while, after all. A lot of people aren't going to be able to see me with a microscope, Rod. You don't seem to get that, yet. I can't play the game the way they do. They're so chesty and cocksure. All their lives they've lived well, dressed well, gone where they chose with perfect assurance, accepted by their equals and deferred to by their inferiors. They have me at a disadvantage. I don't speak their favorite shibboleths, or see life from the same angle. I'm not sure," she hesitated wistfully, "that I will ever want to. But it would be dreadful if you found that you were being severely penalized for marrying out of your class, as they probably put it. That's the only thing I have any reason to dread. All the other possibilities," she made a quick inclusive gesture, "being poor; making the most of a little, longing for the unattainable, a great effort for a few simple pleasures—I know them all. They aren't so very terrible. They don't frighten me. But for you, because of me, to cut loose from everything and every one that has made up your life and then begin to chafe under it—that does."

Rod glanced over his shoulder. The deck was empty. He put one arm around her, shook her gently.

"I'll pull some saveman stuff on you," he threatened tenderly. "I never hear you talk like that again. In the first place, you mean more to me than anything or anybody. In the second place, nobody is going to penalize me. They won't try. There's no real reason for my being annoyed. While the governor is horribly annoyed about what he calls a disgraceful quarrel, he doesn't even dream of blaming you. He lays it to his sons' fiery tempers and shameful lack of self-control. He'll cool off. And having known you, he'd never dream of following Grove's lead. I know him. He's fair. If we should happen to live in Vancouver this winter, and we are to go out, you'll see that most of these high-flying friends of Grove's will conveniently forget, and be very nice to us—because we are what we are. There are enough people of some consequence to accept us as such and the rest will follow suit. Oh, I know them. They're just like sheep. That's a side issue. It can't make any difference to us."

Mary snuggled her hand in his.

"I hope not," she murmured.

"It can't," he declared. "It wouldn't make much difference if it worked out the other way. No," he grew reflective. "I'm like you. I don't see things from the same angle as most of the sleek, comfortably insulated people I know, nor do I want to. I want to know where I'm going, and why. It isn't just enough to eat, drink and be merry. I'm lucky in a material way, perhaps. I happened to be well-born, and I've had security wrapped about me like a blanket. Still, I doubt the value and permanence of a lot of things that many people—my own people included—take for granted. I'm true to form, just as Grove does. Only I think his form is rotten. That's why we don't hitch. I know we should have come to an open break sometime, if you had never been a factor. I despise him because he is what he is and does what he does. And he hates me because he's impressionable enough to feel that contempt. Anybody or anything that Grove can't dominate he dislikes. You know, I have a fancy that he sometimes feels he's shoddy, and tries to bolster himself up with the high-and-mighty pose. But after all that doesn't matter, either. I'm what I am and I shouldn't be cocky about it, I suppose."

Rod sat silent, recalling that scene in the library. All the hot anger had evaporated long ago. He was not sorry. No. But he was sobered. It had given him food for thought. His mind was so made that it fed upon, digested for good or evil, every crisis, each outstanding event, the significance of whatever stirred him deeply. Certain phases of a conversation with his father kept recurring to him. Certain things had been said—some calmly enough—some with a touch of passion. Rod thought again with impatience that his father had a blind spot where Grove was concerned. But it didn't matter much now. He had taken the only reasonable course open to him after that encounter with Grove, the simplest, most dignified solution. He could not remain at Hawk's Nest and preserve peace and dignity. He recognized that there lurked in him an eagerness to clash with Grove on almost any provocation. They were fundamentally antagonistic; they had always been. The gulf between them grew wider as they matured; the deep-rooted distrust and dislike of motive and action became more profound.

"It's as well the break came," he said aloud. "It was bound to come over something. I've simply been marking time. Now I can do—whatever I can do. Both of us. We don't have to

follow copy any more. We can make our own copy. I rather like the idea."

"It listens good to me," Mary said gayly. And they smiled in understanding.

"For the first time in my life I feel like a free man," Rod said abruptly. "Isn't that queer? Free in the sense that I am absolutely at liberty to work out my own destiny, in so far as any man can do that."

Phil came up from below. He sat on the low cabin roof, dangling his long legs.

"Well, children," he said cheerfully, "what's your program? Going to stay in town awhile?"

"Not long," Rod answered. "We're going to resume our interrupted honeymoon. For a month or so. After that—well, I'm not making any cast-iron plans."

"When you get ready to do something, let me know," Phil remarked. "This blow-up has sort of opened my eyes. It made me realize that our family solidarity is badly shot. Grove feels his oats more and more. If I weren't more or less passive, and if I didn't get a certain amount of satisfaction out of carrying on the show—and there's the governor to consider; he is a good sort—I'd quit. I may have to by and by. I won't stand interference. If I have to drop the reins, I'd like to take a whirl at something that might grow. We could make a go of it in timber, I think. We both know our ground there. I've got some money put aside. Think it over, Rod."

"I surely will. Only, as I said, I've no cast-iron plan. If you want to make money, why not try finance? A la Grove. That seems to be gorgeously productive."

"Finance. Huh!" Phil snorted. "I'd rather play poker. I don't want so much to get something as to do something."

"Andy Hall said to me once that the fundamental principle of modern business is to do everybody and do 'em first," Rod drawled. "That ought to give you scope enough."

They laughed. It was a quaint notion. As such it amused them.

Rod's expressed intention of resuming their honeymoon was based on an impulse with which, when he defined it, he found Mary in complete accord. She was no echo. So that with her interest assured he proceeded to act.

A week later they embarked from a coastwise steamer on a float landing before a logging camp halfway up Bute Inlet. They had doubled on their course and come back to a point within thirty miles of Hawk's Nest, to go on a voyage of exploration and discovery, as Rod whimsically defined their object. It was indeed a whim, based soundly on appreciation of natural beauty, of dusky still forests, of the sound of running water, the indefinable charm of wooded lowlands in which they could move untrammelled together, that had brought them here with a sturdy rowboat, a tent and bedding, fishing tackle and a supply of food. Camp fires and wood smoke at twilight amid these cathedral stillnesses that filled the untouched forest. This was what they desired, for the time.

A fisherman's motor boat carried them across the inlet for a sun, towing their loaded skiff astern.

"That's the place," Rod pointed.

"Let us off here."

The fisherman chugged away. They sat in the boat, oars in hand, gazing up at cliffy slopes where the forest opened about mossy knolls, where ledges of bare rock barred the hillside, rising up and up from a short reach of gravelly shore where tiny wavelets broke at spaced intervals. The inlet ran north-west, curved away among high mountains. Far above and on either side of this great arm of the sea low hills rose to cliffs, cliffs ran up to precipices, and a jumble of cliff, gorge, precipice and virgin forest lifted far above to high, aloof peaks, domed with snow and studded with glaciers. The afternoon wind was but a sigh. All that sweep of sea and mountain range brooded in the sun as voiceless and changeless as when the first Norquay sailed the Hermes to Dent Island more than a century before.

"This is something like, eh?" Rod murmured.

Mary nodded.

"It makes me feel," she said. "I can't quite express it. I might if I had wings."

"I have a feeling too," Rod confessed. "But it's mostly one of emptiness in my tummy. Let's get ashore and make a pot of tea. The Hiding Place is just around the corner. Give way, men! I'll show you a sight."

They turned a jutting point and met a slow outsetting current. Against it Rod made his way straight for a cliff which, as they drew near, opened like a great window chiselled in solid granite. Through this the stream flowed, sluggish, deep, a pale-green transience between high, damp walls. Somewhere within rose the monotony of a waterfall. The square framed broad-leaved maple tops. Higher up the pointed crests of cedar and the tufted plumes of fir stood sharp against the sky.

They rowed into the cleft, worked upstream between high, flood-scoured walls 'n that chasm the sun touched only for an hour at noon. It was dark and cool. Mosses and maidenhair fern lightened black crevices with streaks and clusters of green. There was a beauty about this gloomy cleft flooded with liquid emerald, but it was not a beauty one wished to embrace or linger with too long—too cavernous, a little grim. Mary drew closer to Rod in that hundred-yard passage. But she slipped her hands when the boat drew clear. They came out into sunlight. They had passed through the canyon as if it were a door which led to a tiny flat cupped in the hills, all clear of dense forest, almost free from thickets, clothed with bracken. The creek wimpled between low, gravelly banks. Between two maples on one side stood a small cabin of split cedar. Fireweed lifted blazing heads in a mass on one bank. A small grassy plot surrounded the cabin and the two trees. Rod sidled the boat in to the bank.

"Isn't this some little retreat?" he asked. "I came in here once long ago when we were cruising up the Inlet. Only had half an hour or so to spare. The crowd was in a hurry. I've always wanted to come back and camp awhile. This creek comes out of a lake in the woods about two miles inland. They say it's a gem. A trapper built the blazed line to the lake."

"Lovely, lovely," his wife murmured.

"And this country of ours has so many of these beauty spots. Sometimes I think we were so fortunate to be born here, Rod. If one could paint this. If one were a combination of Corot and Turner."

"Maybe one is," Rod commented genially. "How do we know what we can do? We've never had a chance to try. But you'd have to splash this on a seven-league canvas with brushes of comet's hair. There are some things man can't reduce to his own dimensions; can't reproduce in miniature. How could you get the effect of this? Lofty heights. Sweeping distances. Big forests of big trees. It's all too—too superlative. Nature was in the mood for a grand gesture when she fashioned this part of the world, Mary mine."

They made camp under the maples after a look at the moldy cabin interior. The stars came out to speckle a cloudless sky as they sat over their evening fires. They turned into blankets spread on a layer of fern and hemlock boughs, a moon sailed up from behind the Coast range. It touched all the hills with a silver glow, filled every hollow with ebony shade. They fell asleep to the lullaby of falling water and wakened with the sun on their faces.

They had no definite object beyond an impulse to be alone, to live awhile in those peaceful solitudes, to fish or loaf or climb as the spirit moved them. But that eagerness of spirit which has sent men alike to the Poles and into equatorial jungles to look on the face of new lands touched them both. They spent a day setting their camp to rights, after the fashion of the trapper's blazed line. It led them by dim marks through dense thickets, across lowlands where cedars stood like brown columns supporting the sky itself, their feet planted in thick mosses and sunless shade, over fir-clad ridges where a west wind made a faint sighing among branches a hundred feet above their heads, and brought them at last out on the shore of the lake.

The numerous lakes bordering close to the heavily wooded, mountainous coast of British Columbia have two characteristic features. They lie in granite pockets with steep-to, rocky shores. Or they spread in low basins shrouded in dense forest, and the margins of such lakes are a marshy jungle. In either case they are difficult of approach. One must clamber over jagged rocks or work up through crabbable, devil's club, and sedgy grass, and a hundred feet above their heads, and brought them at last out on the shore of the lake.

The Granite Pool on Valdez was one exception. This nameless lake proved another. Rod and Mary came to it through a heavy stand of cedar, massive old trees which had killed all the lesser growth in their centuries of possession. No sapling grew there, or bush or fern or vine. The level ground was carpeted with moss, which alone could thrive in that sunless place. Over this soft footing Rod and his wife walked by the little creek, flowing with faint murmurs in its bed of worn pebbles, till they stepped suddenly out of that semi-gloom into the brightness of open water rippling in the sun.

A low, gravelly beach at their feet; wooded point jutting into the lake; an island lifting a green mound of trees a little distance offshore; the lake itself bending away out of sight behind the base of a great mountain five miles distant,—this they saw.

"You never know what you're going to find back in these hills," Rod sat down on the gravel. "Let's sit and look. It's worth a look."

"If we just had a boat up here," Mary observed, after a little.

"We'll have one, Rod," answered promptly. "I have an ax. There are plenty of cedars. I can make a dugout of some sort in three or four days. Let's move camp up here. There'll be trout umpty-inches long in here, and I would like to see what's behind that mountain. We'll certainly explore this."

He made good his word, in sweat and strain. It was not a light task to shoulder-pack their food, bedding and tent over that pathless two miles. Nor was the shaping of a rude canoe from a cedar log so easy and simple as it seemed. But they accomplished these things. And having done so, they viewed their works with sinful pride, blessing the wilderness for what it bestowed upon them.

They meant to stay two or three weeks. Their food was reckoned on that basis. But they had been liberal in their estimate of supplies. There were trout in lake and stream. The blue grouse hooted on every hillside, and when they wanted meat they hunted these toothsome birds. Three weeks lengthened to four, to five—six. It became an amiable contest, a matter of achievement, to see how long they could live off the wilderness. They were completely happy there. It was as if some invisible barrier stood between them and the world of their fellows, where griefs and pains and irritations, hopes and fears and joys and ambitions ran their course. They did not know what went on beyond the rampart of their seclusion. And they did not care. They were too absorbed in what each day might bring forth as it passed. They experienced deep, ecstatic satisfactions in the simplest things. Rod began to work on his book again, in the intervals of hunting, fishing, exploring. He would lift his head, stirred out of concentration on imaginary things, at the sound of Mary singing as she moved about certain tasks. And he would smile. It was good; it was what he wanted. Peace to dream, to catch and transfix incident, character, a colorful background for heroic undertakings, as they mysteriously took form in his brain. To love and be loved to get something more out of life than just a leisurely existence; to create something of worth above the measure of money. He was aware that this was just an interlude. They would have to go back to the business of living along more conventional lines. They were both too much the normal product of society even to wish complete withdrawal from their kind. That would only be an evasion. But it was an experience they

found to their liking. They promised themselves to repeat it often.

"We're barbarians at heart," Mary said once. "Our so-called culture is only skin-deep. Otherwise we couldn't sit over a camp fire and be content. Nor lie in the sun on a mossy rock and feel that blissful sense of complete well-being. People with instincts like those should survive more or less comfortably, almost anything but loss of freedom. What do shops and streets, cities and frontiers mean to us here?" She waved a hand at the ring of mountains, the enclosing forest. "People handicap themselves when they grow too civilized."

"I wonder if they do?" Rod mused. "Perhaps. I know people who would be very uncomfortable here—where we have been quite at our ease. It seems to be instinctive with us. We get quite a kick out of it too. Maybe we're throw backs. Why shouldn't hereditary impressions crop out?"

"Maybe," Mary said reflectively. "By all accounts Roderick the first was a man who didn't mind long journeys or isolation. He must have felt at home here, or he wouldn't have made his home in a savage country. Certainly it wasn't compulsory with him. You don't have to throw back very far, Rod, to the self-sufficient type."

"And my people," she continued presently. "They were originally New York—upstate, not Manhattan—before the Boston Tea Party. Then they went across the Alleghenies. They went to Illinois. Both my grandfathers fought in the Civil War. When they came back from that Minnesota was too crowded for them. With half a dozen other families they trekked across the plains—in '67. They drove their stakes in southern Idaho on the banks of the Snake. Al-

ways restless. Always striking out into new territory. Wanting elbow room. Determined to have it. Never taking root or home in one generation. They went into virgin country with their cattle and horses, their tools and rifles, and made 'em s' where there had never been homes. They didn't get rich, but they were always independent, always competent to fend for themselves. Why shouldn't we have an instinct for this, Rod? It's in our blood."

"Well, we'll do it again," Rod phoned. "This is a good retreat. We'll come back."

To be continued.

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