

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

BY Bertrand W. Sinclair

Author of "North of Fifty-three"

CHAPTER VIII

Time bridges many a gap in the life of a man, periods that have no substance in them, no matter how occupied, how filled with minor incidents, stretches of days, months, years flow as unctuously as syrup from a tilted spout, as straight and open as a white road across a level plain. Then all at once comes a divergence, a break in the flow, new vista and compelling actions. Something leaps lancewise at the heart or brain out of the peaceful monotony. Something to be attained looms suddenly like a flame in the dark. Or he finds himself catapulted into some unforeseen clash, tingling to the snook of conflict.

Rod Norquay finished the formal education of a gentleman's son in the next two years. He acquitted himself according to the family traditions, escaping high honors without being plucked. He came home in 1913 with a B.A., a few letters and a miscellaneous assortment of classical and scientific and philosophical odds and ends imprinted on a fairly retentive memory, and a half-formed doubt of the utility or advantage of formal education. Having been officially labelled as the finished product of the educational machine he supposed that he would somehow be expected to justify the pains and expense of the cultural process. But where or how he had no idea. He was finished with school. He was home again. Everything was as before. If he were trained for any specific purpose, that purpose was as yet hidden from him. The desire to write an epic novel scarcely qualified as a purpose. In the outwardly simple but internally complicated affairs of the Norquay establishment he was a superfluous unit.

Apart from the family he was, as yet, of less consequence than any logger on the Norquay pay roll. "What's the use of being brought into the world, fed, clothed, and educated, if you're of no use or consequence to anybody?" he observed to Mary Thorn. "Nobody needs me to help solve their problems. I have none of my own—none that amount to much. That was all attended to before I was born."

"You don't know how lucky you are," Mary retorted. "You can do whatever you want to. You've got everything that most men have to struggle for all their lives—and then don't get it."

"But I don't seem to want to do anything that amounts to a hill of beans," Rod replied. "It's like a football game against a third-rate team. No fun in a walkaway. I have the instincts of a—what shall I say? Buccaneer?"

"Pioneer? Adventurer? I don't see much chance for anything but a penny-making adventure. I don't need to do that, even if it were to my taste. I couldn't get much kick out of making two dollars grow where only one flourished. Can't you show me a windmill or two, Mary?" he ended whimsically.

"I'll mount Rosinante and knock 'em over."

"Every avenue is open for you," Mary declared. "You can map out any sort of career you choose."

"What, for instance?" he inquired.

"There has to be a motive. Most of 'em are financial. There's the law, and science, and the arts. I don't warm up to a career as a matter of duty. I've talked to the governor, seeking light in my darkness. He blandly observes, 'Suit yourself, my boy. There's really no hurry', and goes on reading his book or paper, as the case may be. I'm inclined to believe the radicals at school were right. They claimed that economic urges lay at the root of all purposeful action in the world of affairs. Hence, I lack the strongest motive of all to force me to action."

"Haven't you any secret ambition of any sort whatever?" Mary inquired.

Rod reflected a second.

"Well, I won't commit myself," he replied. "Have you?"

"Yes," she answered demurely. "To be successful, beautiful and beloved."

"Successful—what do you define as success?"

"Act of succeeding; consequence, issue, outcome or result of an undertaking, whether good or bad," she laughed.

"Oh, hang Webster," he returned.

"What's your real, honest-to-goodness idea of success? What do you want most of all? What do you want to do? What do you live for? What's your heart set on as an objective?"

And Mary, sobered a little by the sudden earnestness of his tone, could only shake her head.

"I'm not quite sure," she confessed.

"There must be something over the hill—but I don't know what it is."

"Funny," he ruminated. "We're both in the same boat."

"How absurd," she protested instantly. "You give me a pain, Rod. Born to the purple and growling about it! In the same boat, indeed. The only point of similarity is that we're both dissatisfied with what—with what's in sight. You're sighing because no new worlds beckon you to conquer. Everything's at your hand. All you have to do is select your weapon and choose your field. All the prestige of wealth, good family, is at your back. You go somewhere, you want to do something, you mention your name; somebody says, 'Oh, one of the Norquays,' and the way is made easy."

"What's the use of an easy road if there's nothing at the end of it?" Rod asked impatiently.

"Oh, your breakfast must have disagreed with you," she flung back.

"I like a road that leads away to prospects bright and fair.

A road that is an ordered road, like a nun's evening prayer.

But best of all I love a road that leads to God knows where."

Rod quoted. "Perhaps that expresses it best. If there is any! I g in heredity the original Roderick's restlessness has cropped out in me—without either his capacity or his opportunity for doing things. Think of the resolution, the spirit of that old fan, the vision, he saw far beyond himself. He must

have had a dynamic energy. Whatever he wanted he went after, tooth and nail. And look at the result—in the fifth generation—of his pains and planning. The governor's idea of life is as rigid as granite: good food, efficient service, genteel restraint in all things, taboos and forms of all sorts. Grove's a glorified shopkeeper, with all a vulgar shopkeeper's love of display. Phil's the official watchdog of the family's material interests. And I'm a negligible quantity. Rum lot. And I'm the only one who isn't perfectly satisfied with everything. Even old Phil would just grin if I talked to him the way I'm talking to you."

"It's the right," the girl replied slowly. "You've got what everybody's after—ease, security, leisure. You aren't chafed by anything sordid. You ought to realize how fortunate you are and be satisfied. You find life pleasant, don't you?"

"That's good enough?"

"Only nobody who gets beyond purely superficial thinking is ever satisfied with mere pleasantness. I'm not a cow to lie down in a clover field and chew my cud forever."

"I give you up," Mary said. "You're a discontented pendulum."

"Education is a mixed blessing sometimes," Mary said in a tone that brought him to surprised attention. "It shouldn't be bestowed indiscriminately on those who can't live up to it, who can't gratify any of the cravings and dreams that education breeds. Education, if it's thorough, destroys too many illusions—illusions that one must hold as realities, if one is poor, a nobody, and without a chance to be anything else."

"Good Lord," he exclaimed, "you don't feel that way about it, surely?"

"Now and then—always," she murmured. "It's like loving a thing and hating it, too. There are times when Euripides, and Housman's lyrics, and Thomas Hardy don't fit in with cooking and cotton stockings—when poetic and artistic visions of what-might-be tantalize like glimpses of a cloud-hidden moon. Why should one sharpen one's perception of beauties that are beyond one's reach? I should have been trained in domestic science or nursing, or selling fripperies to rich women, instead of being put through the cultural horrid of a university that means well but unless a girl has a ready-made social background, or a decided talent, the so-called higher education is only a handicap."

"Oh, come now, Hardy," Rod protested.

"No. You don't know anything about people outside of your own comfortable spoon-fed class. Rod. That's the trouble. I do. I know my own kind of people first-hand. Three years in the U. B. C. has taught me something about your kind. I've been an outsider—looking in. Money, clothes, and manners. Manners are an asset; money is a necessity. If you've got both you can go anywhere, do anything. If you haven't, there's the dead line, and you can't cross. Pretty much everything that a university training fits one for, especially a girl, is across the deadline. It's rather depressing—sometimes."

Rod was dumb for the moment, because he was not stupid, and he knew what she said was true. He had seen what she said was true. He had seen the working out of those unpleasant truths during his own university career. He knew youngsters at McGill sweat and scraping through—boys with steel-bright-minds, struggling against the fearful handicap of poverty. Yet he had an inkling now what old Mark Sberburne meant when he ironically retorted to some one across a dinner table that he didn't need brains—he could buy 'em by the gross. Rod hated the idea of Mary Thorn being embraced in such a category. He received in one panoramic flash her situation and his own. He compared her with girls he knew. Isabel Wall, for instance. Less mind—oh, much less. Isabel was a dilike creature still. An impractical, useless young woman, even if highly ornamental. Clothes, dances, parties, sports, and men about comprised Isabel's desire of and knowledge of life. Yet she had everything money could buy. She had the entire everywhere.

Mary had neither money nor more than a glancing acquaintance with those who had. He recalled with a touch of shame that although they had played together from childhood, despite the fact that they had lived within sight of each other for ten years, Mary had never set foot within Hawk's Nest. And he had a swift, disconcerting vision of how difficult it would be for her to get a foothold in the Norquay circle—or its equivalent.

"The ruthless turn-down would come from another source—not from me," she answered soberly.

"You'd be marrying me," Rod retorted, "not my family or my acquaintances. They don't count so much as you think. We could have a whole of time together, Mary. You're the only girl I know that's real, honest-to-God girl. You always were. I wonder if you have the same queer sort of feeling about me that I have for you?"

"I expect I have," she owned. "I'm not a fool, or a liar, or inclined to be evasive. Rod. I don't care for you in a cool, quiet, calculating fashion. I'm flamed by you. That way, any more than you are. But, oh, Rod, I've had a lot of unpleasant wisdom forced on me since you went away four years ago. It won't do. It won't do!"

"Why not?" Rod demanded. "If we choose to say it will, who's to stop us? We're ourselves, and living our lives in our own affair."

"Living our lives isn't just a matter of doing whatever a passionate impulse may urge us to do," she answered slowly. "What do you suppose your family would do and say when you announced

your intention of playing King Cophetua to the beggar maid?"

"Whatever they jolly well pleased," Rod growled in defiance. "Besides I'm no king, neither are you a beggar. You exaggerate. Surely you haven't so humble an opinion of yourself?"

"It isn't humility. Far from it," the girl flashed back. "I may dislike the station in life in which it has pleased God to place me. But don't ever think I'm humble or diffident about it, or myself, or my people. Oh, no, Mr. Roderick Sylvester Norquay. But I don't wear blinkers. I see a lot of things I used to be unconscious of. One of them is that men like you are regarded as one class of beings, and girls like me quite another. Isn't it so?"

Rod sat silent. He was clear-sighted enough to see what she meant. His people—and by his "people" he embraced the whole category of his class—would say quite frankly and emphatically that Mary Thorn "wouldn't do." She wasn't anybody. She had never been anywhere or met any one. In a courteous, matter-of-fact manner they would make an issue of that. They would never countenance and accept Mary Thorn without a tussle. He saw all that, but it did not seem to him vital or final. And he merely sat silent while he sought cogent reasons to show her why these harsh facts she mentioned did not matter so far as they two were concerned. Why should they be governed by exterior restraints, taboos, penalties, if they had a burning need of each other?

He tried to put that into words. But the devil of perversity had entered into Mary. He could not drive them out. He sat there holding her hands, persuading, reasoning, pleading. He had a conviction that emotionally some flame in her leaped to the passionate fire within himself, and that she resisted only by some intellectual force that was stronger than his own. He could master her heart but not her will.

"What do you want out of life that you go after it single-handed?" he demanded savagely. "Am I not man enough for you? Why drag in class and money and all that sort of thing. You know that doesn't count between us. We've got something—there's something in us—that pulls us together. It was there long ago when we were kids paddling around together. It's grown stronger, through four years of almost complete separation. The peculiar magic of that—whatever it is—begins to work as soon as we come together. We don't have to tell each other. We know. Don't we? Isn't it true?"

She nodded, lips parted, eyes bright, looking out over the channel as if she saw more there than the running tide.

"Then," he continued, "if it seems good to us to plan a future in which we shall be partners as well as lovers, why shouldn't we?"

"Too soon, for one thing," she said. "You're twenty-two, Rod; I'm nineteen. I have another year in school. How do we know that what we seem to want badly today will satisfy us completely tomorrow? And even if we were sure, we can't dodge facts. You couldn't just by marrying me make me a Norquay, with all the rights, privileges, and standing of the clan. Neither your family nor your friends would accept me as one of themselves. Certainly not at first. Perhaps never. Look, she continued sadly. "I don't know any one you know. Your people don't know my people—don't want to know them. It would be a struggle. You'd have to pull me up to your level, or be dragged down to mine. They'd say you were marrying out of your class, and they'd punish you in so many subtle ways. You knew Marty Graham, didn't you? Have you seen him and his wife since you came back?"

Rod shook his head.

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"The ruthless turn-down would come from another source—not from me," she answered soberly.

"You'd be marrying me," Rod retorted, "not my family or my acquaintances. They don't count so much as you think. We could have a whole of time together, Mary. You're the only girl I know that's real, honest-to-God girl. You always were. I wonder if you have the same queer sort of feeling about me that I have for you?"

"I expect I have," she owned. "I'm not a fool, or a liar, or inclined to be evasive. Rod. I don't care for you in a cool, quiet, calculating fashion. I'm flamed by you. That way, any more than you are. But, oh, Rod, I've had a lot of unpleasant wisdom forced on me since you went away four years ago. It won't do. It won't do!"

"Why not?" Rod demanded. "If we choose to say it will, who's to stop us? We're ourselves, and living our lives in our own affair."

"Living our lives isn't just a matter of doing whatever a passionate impulse may urge us to do," she answered slowly. "What do you suppose your family would do and say when you announced

your intention of playing King Cophetua to the beggar maid?"

"Whatever they jolly well pleased," Rod growled in defiance. "Besides I'm no king, neither are you a beggar. You exaggerate. Surely you haven't so humble an opinion of yourself?"

"It isn't humility. Far from it," the girl flashed back. "I may dislike the station in life in which it has pleased God to place me. But don't ever think I'm humble or diffident about it, or myself, or my people. Oh, no, Mr. Roderick Sylvester Norquay. But I don't wear blinkers. I see a lot of things I used to be unconscious of. One of them is that men like you are regarded as one class of beings, and girls like me quite another. Isn't it so?"

Rod sat silent. He was clear-sighted enough to see what she meant. His people—and by his "people" he embraced the whole category of his class—would say quite frankly and emphatically that Mary Thorn "wouldn't do." She wasn't anybody. She had never been anywhere or met any one. In a courteous, matter-of-fact manner they would make an issue of that. They would never countenance and accept Mary Thorn without a tussle. He saw all that, but it did not seem to him vital or final. And he merely sat silent while he sought cogent reasons to show her why these harsh facts she mentioned did not matter so far as they two were concerned. Why should they be governed by exterior restraints, taboos, penalties, if they had a burning need of each other?

He tried to put that into words. But the devil of perversity had entered into Mary. He could not drive them out. He sat there holding her hands, persuading, reasoning, pleading. He had a conviction that emotionally some flame in her leaped to the passionate fire within himself, and that she resisted only by some intellectual force that was stronger than his own. He could master her heart but not her will.

"What do you want out of life that you go after it single-handed?" he demanded savagely. "Am I not man enough for you? Why drag in class and money and all that sort of thing. You know that doesn't count between us. We've got something—there's something in us—that pulls us together. It was there long ago when we were kids paddling around together. It's grown stronger, through four years of almost complete separation. The peculiar magic of that—whatever it is—begins to work as soon as we come together. We don't have to tell each other. We know. Don't we? Isn't it true?"

She nodded, lips parted, eyes bright, looking out over the channel as if she saw more there than the running tide.

"Then," he continued, "if it seems good to us to plan a future in which we shall be partners as well as lovers, why shouldn't we?"

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