

# THE SAGA OF AN

By Eiko Henmi

THIS is the saga of Powell Street. This is the story of an unrecorded, uninvited war. No headlines scream the encroachment of enemies into private territory. No sirens wail like banshees over the sea. No light flares suddenly in the darkness. But Powell Street is standing up under the strain.

The battlements of Powell Street have not changed very much during the cataclysmic events of the past two weeks. It goes on very much as it has done for the past forty years during this Christmas tide, preparing for Christmas, hanging holly, buying presents, eating and sleeping. The city itself is just the same. In the distance, the old wooden church with its new coat of brown paint is dimly outlined, obscured somewhat from view by trees which border the ball park, bare trees without singing birds. The little stores are gay for Christmas, gay with streamers and neon lights throwing vivid splashes of red upon the road. Children still walk the streets, oblivious to the world and its cares. The quaint old Chinaman still peddles his ancient sweetmeats, taking his stand on the corner with his little hand-wagon, his bundle of lighted torches, and his tinkling bell. And the tinkling of that bell is as enticing and as tempting as it was two weeks ago. Only the ball park in front of the church holds some aspect of mystery like some brooding thing, lighted here and there where last night's rain made pools glimmer with the flickers from the dancing street lights.

Overhead the sky is the same. The self-same evening stars glimmer faintly through a rent in the grey sky. To the north, across the stretch of placid sea, above the twinkling shore-line the still darker outlines of North Vancouver's hill sprawl like peaceful lions, casually on guard over Jap Town.

TODAY, there is no outward evidence of a battle on Powell Street. That is the irony of it all. Yet, last week, one of the boys came home. He did not believe that such a thing could happen to him. But it has happened. He was up in the interior, working as a section hand, a part of a gang who saw to it that the silver rails were ever in smooth working order for one of British Columbia's longest transportation systems. He had been on night shift, and too tired even to take his boots off, he had fallen asleep when he was rudely shaken out of his slumbers, given his bundle of clothing and told to go. Go? Why? Where? He had not yet heard the momentous news.

He will tell you that he has tried to find a job. He has appealed to the authorities. He was a Canadian-born. Surely the war had nothing to do with him. He was a Canadian! He said it proudly, almost confidently. But bluntly the answer came back. "There's no such thing as a Canadian." But aren't you a Canadian?" Came back the reply, "I'm a Britisher." The finality in his voice was more than an answer. Today, he is a part of Powell Street.

The boy next door is home to stay. The turbulent waters of the West Coast, the muddy, sand-filtered yellow Fraser, the calm inland waters, are now forbidden territory. His trim little boat, on which he had spent his savings is rounded up

# EMBATTLED STREET



with the rest, like so many cattle for the slaughter. Yester, was it only yesterday . . . his life was a secure one. It was a bumper year . . . and his enthusiasm had shown on his face. "Out there," he had said, pointing out beyond the gulf, "where the horizon loses itself, with the wind in one's face, the waves dashing the sides of the boat, the grey dawn breaking, and the engine throbbing beneath one's touch, it's man against the elements. Life's not so petty. It isn't small. It's not so bad at all." And this was the lad that had dreams of becoming a lawyer. No, the sea had not been petty. There was a bigness, a vastness, and a livelihood, out there.

They were going to have their new home for Christmas, with red candles and holly and mistletoe. "It wouldn't have been a very big house, but one where they could be alone. Now the holly has been put away . . . the new dress folded for another time. Yet, by habit, he needs must get up each morning with the first ring of the alarm. He must hurry. It is late. Then remembrance comes like an engulfing stream, and he turns back to sleep . . . a bell boy without a job.

SUCH is the saga of Powell Street today. Powell Street can take it. Its people are learning the story of life the hard way. There will be slip-ups; there will be failures; there will be betrayals . . . but there shall also be victories. Till two weeks ago, the story of these people was a matter of local prejudice. Today, the colour of their hair and their eyes bring with them the problem of their daily bread.

And yet, there are no barricades set up around Powell Street. They invite authority . . . they accept decrees. Their weapon is their faith in the land of their birth. "Canadianism" is their barricade against the hammering onslaughts upon their private worlds.

Yes, Powell Street is taking it in her stride. The Saga of Powell Street is a tragedy, but it is also a saga of courage, for here is no wailing, no wild rebellion. The first bewildering fear is no longer there. The moment of crisis has passed. It has been realized and accepted.

There is a new spirit on Powell Street. It is there, imprinted on the faces of weatherbeaten fisherfolk, dandling their third generation offsprings on their knee, their large gnarled hands idle and awkward, unused to idleness. It is there in the eyes of Powell Street youth, working at jobs which tomorrow may take away. It is there in the smile of maidens, whose world, never secure, even at best, now trembles. Tolerance? Courage? Wisdom? Fatalism? Whatever the spirit, it is that spirit which makes Powell Street people carry on as usual. It is the spirit which enters into the buying of Christmas presents. It is the spirit which fills in the void with everyday, ordinary things . . . things which must be done even if the heart is sorely tried.

This is the saga of Powell Street.

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