

POOR DOCUMENT

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The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from Saturday.)

"Did he see you?" was her first question.

"Yes. What about it? He never saw me but once, and that was at night and out of doors."

"Sometimes I think I can't stand it. Fred. The eternal suspense, the waiting for something to happen."

"If anything was going to happen, it would have done it months ago. Bassett has given it up, and Jud's dead. Even Wilkins knows that."

"She turned on him angrily."

"You haven't a heart, have you? You're glad he's dead."

"Not at all. As long as he kept under cover he was all right. But if he is, I don't see why you should fool yourself into thinking you're sorry. It's the best solution of a number of things."

"What do you suppose brought Jean Melis here?"

"What? To see the best play in New York. Besides, why not allow the man a healthy curiosity? He was pretty closely connected with a hectic part of your life, my dear. Now back up, and for the Lord's sake, forget the Frenchman. He's got nothing."

"He saw me that night, on the stairs. He never took his eyes off me at the request."

"She gave, however, an excellent performance that night, and nothing more was heard of the valet."

"There were other alarms, all of them without foundation. She went on her way, rejected an offer or two of marriage, spent her mornings in bed and her afternoons driving or in the hands of her hairdresser and manicure, cared for the flowers that came in long castle-like boxes, and began to feel a sense of security again. She did not intend to marry, or become interested in any one man."

"She had hardly given a thought to Leslie Ward. He had come and gone, one of that steady procession of men, mostly married, who battered their heads now and then like night beetles outside a window, against the hard glass of her ambition. Because her business was to charm, she had been charming to him. As could not always remember his name!"

As the months went by, she began to accept Fred's verdict, that nothing was going to happen. Bassett was back at work. Either dead or a fugitive somewhere was Judson Clark, but that thought she had to keep out of her mind. Sometimes, as the play went on, and she was able to make her solid investments out of it, she wondered if her ten years of retirement had been all the price she was to pay for his ruin, but she put that thought away too, although she never minimized her responsibility when she faced it.

But her price had been heavy, at that. She was childless and alone, lavishing her aborted maternity on a brother who was living his propitious



Every day is Mother's Day in a busy home, but I always feel that other people do a lot to help me.

Do you ever think of this when you sit down to rock and knit and read your daily newspaper? Do you keep track of new products of other brains to save us time and money?

Advertising is as interesting as a fairy tale with its teas and spices from Asia, its styles from an old grave in Egypt, its new foods and clothes from our own factories. I read it every day.

The family always remembers Mother's Day. Sometimes I wish they would read the advertisements and pick out something new that I covet a little for its novelty and attractiveness.

READ THE ADVERTISEMENTS They Take You to the World's Workhouse.

cheerful and not too moral life at her expense. Fred was, she knew, slightly drunk with success; he attended to his minimum of labor with the least possible effort, had an expensive apartment on the Drive, and neglected her except when he needed money. She began to see, as other women had seen

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before her, that her success had by taking away the necessity for initiative been extremely bad for him.

That was the situation when, one night late in October, the trap of Bassett's devious began to close in. It had been raining, but in spite of that they had sold standing room to the first limit. Having got the treasurer's report on the night's business and sent it to Beverly's dressing room, Gregory wandered into a small, low-ceilinged office under the balcony staircase, and, closing the door, sat down. It was the interval after the second act, and above the hum of voices the sound of the orchestra penetrated faintly.

He was very contented. He had a supper engagement after the show, he had a neat car waiting outside to take

him to it, and the night's business had been extraordinary. He consulted his watch and then picked up an evening paper. A few moments later he found himself reading over and over, a small notice inserted among the personals.

Personal: Jean Melis, who was in Noranda, Wyoming, during the early fall of 1919, please communicate with L22, this office.

The orchestra was still playing outside; the silly giggling crowds were moving back to their seats; and somewhere, Jean Melis, or the friends of Jean Melis, who would tell him of it, were reading that message.

He got his hat and went out, forgetting the neat car at the curb, of the supper engagement of the night's business, and wandered down the street through the rain. But his first uneasiness passed quickly. He saw Bassett in the affair, and probably Clark himself, still living and tardily determined to clear, for instance, would have to go in order to secure a letter addressed to him? Whether he had to present a card or whether he walked in, demanded his mail and went away? That thought brought another with it. Wasn't it probable that Bassett was in New York, and would call for his mail himself?

He determined finally to take the chance, claim to be L22, and if Melis had seen the advertisement and replied, get the letter. It would be easy to squeeze it with the valet, by saying that he had recognized him in the theatre and that Miss Canby wished to send him a box.

He had small hope of a letter at his first call, unless the Frenchman had himself seen the notice, but his anxiety drove him early to the office. There was nothing there, but he learned one thing.

He had to go through with no formalities. The clerk merely looked in a box, said "Nothing here," and went on about his business. At eleven o'clock he went back again, and after a careful scrutiny of the crowd, presented himself once more.

"L22? Here you are."

He had the letter in his hand. He had glanced at it, and had thrust it deep in his pocket, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He wheeled and faced Bassett.

"I thought I recognized that back," said the reporter, cheerfully. "Come over here, old man. I want to talk to you."

But he held to Gregory's shoulder. In a corner Bassett dropped the friendliness he had assumed for the clerk's benefit, and faced him with cold anger.

"I'll have that letter now, Gregory," he said. "And I've got a damned good

notion to lodge an information against you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Forget it. I was behind you when you asked for that letter. Give it here. I want to show you something."

Suddenly, with the letter in his hand, Bassett laughed, and then tore it open. There was only a sheet of blank paper inside.

"Well, I didn't," Gregory said sullenly.

"Just the same, I expect to see him the day's early yet, and that's not a common name. But I'll take damned good care you don't get any more letters from here."

"What do you think Melis can tell you, that you don't know?"

"I'll explain that to you some day," Bassett said cheerfully. "Some day when you are in a more receptive mood than you are now. The point at this moment seems to me to be, what does Melis know that you don't want me to know? I suppose you don't intend to tell me?"

"Not here. You may believe it or not, Bassett, but I was going to your town tonight to see you."

"Well," Bassett said sullenly, "I've got your word. And you can be nothing to do all day but to listen to you."

To his proposition that they go to his hotel Gregory assented sullenly, and they moved out to find a taxicab. In the pavement, however, he held back.

"I've got a right to know something," he said, considering what he's done to me and mine. Clark's alive, I suppose?"

"He's alive all right."

"Then I'll trade you, Bassett. I'll come over with what I know, if you'll tell me one thing. When did you begin to hiding for ten years, and makes him turn up now, yelling for help?"

Bassett reflected. The offer of a statement from Gregory was valuable, but on the other hand, he was anxious not to influence his narrative. And Gregory saw his uncertainty. He planted himself firmly on the pavement.

"How about it?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you this much, Gregory. He never meant to bring the thing up again. In a way it's me you're up against. Not Clark. And you can be pretty sure I know what I'm doing. I've got Clark, and I've got the report of the corner's inquest, and I'll get Melis. I'm going to get to the bottom of this if I have to dig a hole that buries me."

In a taxicab Gregory sat tense and erect, gnawing at his blonde mustache. After a time he said:

"What are you after, in all this? The story I suppose. And the money. I decay you're not doing it for love."

Bassett surveyed him appraisingly.

"You wouldn't understand my motives if I told you. As a matter of fact, he doesn't want the money."

Gregory sneered.

"Don't kid yourself," he said. "However, as a matter of fact, I don't think he'll take it. It might cost too much. Where is he? Shooting pills again?"

"You'll see him in about five minutes."

If the news was a surprise, Gregory gave no evidence of it, except to comment.

"You're a capable person, aren't you? I'll bet you could take a piano if you were put to it."

He carried the situation well, the reporter had to admit; the only evidence he gave of strain was that the hands with which he lighted a cigarette were unsteady. He surveyed the obscure hotel at which the cab stopped with a sneering smile, and settled his collar as he looked it over.

"Not advertising to the world that you're in town, I see."

"We'll do that just as soon as we're ready. Don't worry."

The laugh he gave at that struck unpleasantly on Bassett's ears. But inside the building he lost some of his jauntiness. "Queer place to find Judson Clark," he said once.

And again:

"You'd better watch him when I go. He may bite me."

To which Bassett grimly returned: "He's probably rather particular what he bites."

He was uneasily conscious that Gregory, while nervous and tense, was carrying the situation with a certain assurance; if he was acting it was very good acting. And that opinion was strengthened when he threw open the door and Gregory advanced into the room.

"Well, Clark," he said coolly, "I guess you didn't expect to see me, did you?"

He made no offer to shake hands, as Dick turned from the window, nor did Dick make any overtures. But there was no enmity at first, in either face; Gregory was easy and assured, Dick grave, and, Bassett thought, slightly impatient. From that night in his apartment the reporter had realized that he was constantly fighting a sort of passive resistance in Dick, a determination not at any cost to involve Beverly. Behind that, too, he

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felt that still another battle was going on, one at which he could only guess, but which made Dick sombre at times and gravely quiet always.

"I meant to look you up," was his reply to Gregory's nonchalant greeting.

"Well, your friend here did that for you," Gregory said, and smiled across at Bassett. "He has his own methods,

and I'll say they're effective."

He took off his overcoat and flung it on the bed, and threw a swift, appraising glance at Dick. It was on Dick that he was banking, not on Bassett. He hated and feared Bassett, but he was not afraid of him. He lighted a cigarette and faced Dick with a malicious smile.

"So here we are, again, Jud," he said. "But with this change—that now it's you who are the respectable member of the community, and I'm the—well, we'll call it the butterfly."

There was unmistakable insult in his tone, and Dick caught it.

"Then I take it you're still living off your sister?"

(To be Continued)

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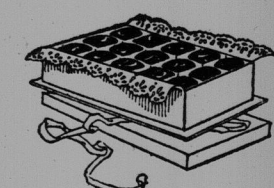
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