

The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday) "I have sworn—she muffled, and turning to the button inside the door, she switched on the light. Then she surveyed him again. "What's your name?" "Livingstone. Doctor, Livingstone. I called— "Is that for me, or for the police?" "Now see here," he said pleasantly. "I don't know who you are mistaking me for, and I'm not hiding from the police. Here's my card, and I have come from the family of a young man named Wheeler, who was killed recently in an automobile accident." She took the card and read it, and then resumed her intent scrutiny of him. "Well, you fooled me all right," she said at last. "I thought you were—well, never mind who. What about this Wheeler family? Are they going to settle with the undertaker?" "Be- cause I tell you flat, I can't and won't. She owed me a month's rent, and her clothes won't bring over seventy-five or a hundred dollars." As he left, he was aware that she stood in the doorway looking after him. He drove home slowly in the car, and on the way he made up a kindly story to tell the family. He could not let them know that Jim had been seeking love in the by-ways of life. And that night he mailed a check in payment of the undertaker's bill, carefully leaving the stub empty. On the third day after Jim's funeral he started for Noranda. An intern from a local hospital, having newly finished his service there, had agreed to take over his work for a time. But Dick was faintly jealous when he installed Doctor Reynolds in his office, and turned him over to the mystified Minnie to look after. "Is he going to sleep in your bed?" she demanded belligerently. "He was only partially mollified when she found Doctor Reynolds was to have the spare room for himself. She did not like the way things were going, she confided to Mike. Why wasn't she let on to Mrs. Crosby that Doctor Dick had gone away? Or to the old doctor? Both of them away, and that little upstart in the office ready to starve his patients and hang out his own sign the moment they got back? Unused to duplicity as he was, Dick found himself frowning along an extremely crooked path. He wrote half a dozen pleasant, non-committal letters to David and Lucy, spending an inordinate time upon them, and gave them to Walter Wheeler for delivery. But his chief difficulty was with Elizabeth. Perhaps he would have told her. There were times when he had to fight his desire to have her share his anxiety as well as know the truth about him. But she was already carrying the burden of Jim's tragedy, and her father too was insistent that she be kept in ignorance. "Until she can have the whole thing," he said, rather drearily. Beside his own troubles, other things could be set right; there was always a fighting chance. It was only death that was final. Elizabeth went to the station to see him off, a small film figure in a black neck, with eyes that persistently sought his face, and a determined smile. He pulled her arm through his, so he might hold her hand, and when he found that she was wearing her ring he drew her even closer, with a wave of passionate possession. "You are mine. My little girl." "I'm yours. For ever and ever." But they assumed a certain lightness after that, each to cheer the other. As when she asserted that the moment he stepped thinking about her, and she stopped, with any number of people about, and said:

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It seemed infinitely long ago, but very real. He even remembered dimly an open place at the other side of the building where the ranch men tied their horses. To test himself he walked around. Yes, it was there, but no more. He felt a queer, cold, shivering chill. Only a muddy automobile, without lights, and a dog on guard in the night, and he slept with it in the pocket of his pajama coat.

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ing that miserable ride back to Noranda, when he determined to see the man Basset and get the truth out of him if he had to choke it out. Basset was fairly stupefied when he saw Dick's signature on the hotel register. It destroyed, in one line, every hope he had of returning to Noranda after his flight was incredible. Ten years was only ten years after all. It was not a lifetime. There were men in the town who had known him well. Nevertheless, for a time he held to his earlier conviction, even fought for it. He went so far as to wonder if Clark had come back for a tardy re- venger. Men had done that before this.

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than decreased. Clearly Livingstone had not known him. How then had he known that he was in Noranda? And when he recognized him, as he would in a moment, what then? He put on his collar and tied his tie slowly. Gregory might be the key. Gregory might have found out that he had started for Noranda and warned him. Then, if that were true, this man was Clark after all. But if he were Clark, he wouldn't be there. It was like a kitten after its tail. It whirled in a circle and got nowhere. The waiter had laid his breakfast and gone when he emerged from the bathroom, and Dick was standing by the window looking out. He turned. "I'm here, Mr. Basset, on rather a precilliar—" He stopped and looked at Basset. "I see. You were in my office about a month ago, weren't you?" "For a headache, yes," Basset was wary and watchful, but there was even then no particular unfriendliness in his visitor's eyes. "It never occurred to me that you might be Basset," Dick said gravely. "Never mind about that. Eat your breakfast. Don't you mind if I talk while you do it?" (To be continued.)

