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The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday)

When, at five o'clock, up came Dick with a thermometer, he was asleep in his chair, his mouth slightly open, and snoring valiantly. Hearing Dick in the lower hall, she went to the head of the stairs, her finger to her lips. Dick nodded and went into the office. The afternoon mail was lying there, and he began mechanically to open it. His thoughts were elsewhere.

Now that he had taken the step he had so firmly determined not to take, certain things, such as Clara Roosevelt's story, David's unexcused absence, his own doubts, no longer involved himself alone, nor even Elizabeth and himself. They had become of vital importance to the family.

One thing was clear, then. Before he asked for her he would have to tell Walter Wheeler the situation in which he found himself, and having laid all his cards on the table, propose that, before any definite engagement, Mr. Wheeler go with him to Noranda.

That was the only fair thing to do, and it was wise too. He felt that he knew himself, and that he was not the sort to have committed any further act. Probably the thing David was hiding was only his illegitimacy. That was bad enough, but it was not through any fault of his. Of course, David might speak.

He pondered that, with an open and untried letter in his hand. Even if David talked, it would still be necessary for his own peace of mind to go back. He was certain.

"He began to read the letter. "Dear Doctor: I have tried to see you, but understand you are laid up. But this is as soon as you've read it. Louis Bassett has started for Noranda. I advise your getting the person you discussed out of town as soon as possible. Bassett is up to no good. I'm not signing this fully, for obvious reasons. G."

"The Sayre house stood on the hill behind the town, a long, rather low white house on Italian lines. In summer, under the family canopy, the Sayres extended over the terrace indicated, as Harrison Miller put it, that the family was "in residence." Originally designed as a summer house, Mrs. Sayre now used it the year round.

There was nothing there, as there was in the town house, to remind her of the bitter days before her wedding. She was a short heavy woman, of fine taste in her house and of no taste whatever in her clothing.

"I never know," said Harrison Miller, "when I look up at the Sayre place, whether I'm seeing Ann Sayre or an evening."

She was not a shrewd woman, nor a clever one, but she was kindly in the main, tolerant and maternal. She liked young people, gave gay little parties to which she wore her outlandish clothes of all colors and cuts, lavished gifts on the girls she liked, and was anxious to see Wallie married to a good, steady girl and settled down. Between her son and herself was a steady but unromantic affection.

She viewed him through eyes that had lost their illusion about all men years ago, and she had no delusions about him. She had no idea that she knew all that he did with his time, and no desire to penetrate the veil of his private life.

"He spends a great deal of money," she said one day to her lawyer. "I suppose in the usual way. But he's not quite like his father. He has real affections, which his father hadn't. If he marries the right girl she can make him do almost anything."

She had first inkling that he was interested in Elizabeth Wheeler one day when the head gardener reported that

Mr. Wallace had ordered certain roses cut and sent to the Wheeler house. She was angry at first, for the roses were being saved for a dinner party then considered.

"Very well, Phelps," she said. "Do it. And I'll select a plant also, to go to Mrs. Wheeler."

After all, why not the Wheeler girl? She had been carefully reared, if the Wheeler house was rather swift in spots, and she was a little thing; rather lovely too, especially in church. And certainly Wallie had been seeing a great deal of her.

She went to the greenhouse, and from there up-stairs, and into the rooms that she had planned for Wallie and his bride, when the time came. She was more content than she had been for a long time. She was a lonely woman, isolated by her very grandeur from the neighborhood she craved; when she wanted society she had to ask for it, by invitation. Standing inside the door of the boudoir, her thoughts already at work on draperies and furniture, she had a vague dream of new young life stirring in the big house, of no more lonely evenings, of the bustle and activity of a family again.

She wanted Wallie to settle down. She was tired of paying his bills at his clubs and at various hotels, tired and weary of the days he lay in bed all morning while his valet concocted various things to enable him to pull himself together. He had been four years sowing his wild oats, and now at twenty-five she felt he should be through with them.

The south room could be the nursery. On Decoration Day she did her dutiful best by the community, sent flowers to the cemetery and even strolled through a chilly hour there while services were read and taps sounded over the graves of those who had died in the great war. She felt very grateful that Wallie had come back safely, and if only now he would marry and settle down all would be well.

She made a resolution, there in the small church yard, to enlist Nina as an ally. She had placed Nina very wisely in her mind. Nina, with her ambitions, would be quick to see the advantage of such a marriage to herself. Otherwise, the middle-classness of Elizabeth's family did not matter. They were eminently respectable, and the Sayres had family enough for all.

Rather under pressure, Wallie lunched with her at the country club, but she found him evasive and not particularly happy.

"You're twenty-five, you know," she said, toward the end of a discussion. "By thirty you'll be too set in your habits, too hard to please."

"I'm not going to marry for the sake of settling married mothers," she said. "Of course not. But you have a good deal of money. You'll have much more when I'm gone, and money carries responsibility with it."

He glanced at her, looked away rapidly, a fork on the table cloth. "It takes two to make a marriage, mother."

He closed up after that, but she had learned what she wanted. At three o'clock that afternoon the Sayre limousine stopped in front of Nina's house, and Mrs. Sayre, in brilliant purple hat, got out. Letting her in a window, made the announcement.

"Here's the Queen of Sheba," he said. "I'll go up-stairs and have a headache. He kissed Nina and departed hastily. He was feeling extremely gentle toward Nina in those days, and rather too virtuous. He comforted that his conscience had brought him back and when the head gardener reported that

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fact, and he fairly glowed with righteousness. It was the great lady's first call, and Nina was considerably uplifted. It was for such moments as this that one trained servants and put Irish lace on their aprons, and had decorators who stood with their heads a little awry and devised backgrounds for one's personality.

"What a delightful room!" said Mrs. Sayre. "And how do you keep a maid as trim as that?"

"I must have service," Nina replied. "The butler's marching in a parade or something. How nice of you to come and see our little place. It's a band-box, of course."

Mrs. Sayre sat down, a gross disharmony in the room, but a solid and not unkindly woman for all that. "My dear," she said, "I am not paying a call. Or not only that. I came to talk to you about something. About Wallace and your sister."

"A few moments later, Leslie went down-stairs. Nina was sitting alone, thinking, with a not entirely pleasant look of calculation on her face. "Well," he said, "What are you two plotting?"

"Plotting? Nothing of course." "It's very plain at her. 'Now see here, old girl,' he said. 'You keep your hands off Elizabeth's affairs. If I know anything, she's making a damn good choice, and don't you forget it.'"

Dick stood with the telegram in his hand, staring at it. Who was Bassett? Who was "G"? What had the departure of whoever Bassett might be for

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Noranda to do with David? And who was the person who was to be got out of town?

He did not go up-stairs. Instead he took the letter into his office, closed the door, and sitting down at his desk turned his reading lamp on it, as though that physical act might bring some mental light.

It was distinctly a warning, and a warning that referred to himself. Had not David already attempted to get him out of town? And Bassett was "up to something," evidently something menacing to himself that was to culminate at Noranda? And Bassett was "up to something," evidently something menacing to himself that was to culminate at Noranda? And Bassett was "up to something," evidently something menacing to himself that was to culminate at Noranda?

Months later he wondered what would have happened had he taken that letter up to David, as was his first impulse? Suppose Bassett had been let alone at Noranda? And Bassett was "up to something," evidently something menacing to himself that was to culminate at Noranda? And Bassett was "up to something," evidently something menacing to himself that was to culminate at Noranda?

For a little while, then, the shuttle came up against David, and David would have fought him to a standstill. For a little while, then, the shuttle came up against David, and David would have fought him to a standstill. For a little while, then, the shuttle came up against David, and David would have fought him to a standstill.

The association between anxiety and David's illness had always been apparent in Dick's mind, but now he began to turn a concrete shock, a person, a telegram, a telephone call, and after dinner that night he went back to the doctor.

"Minnie," he inquired, "you remember the afternoon doctor David was taken sick? Did he receive a telegram that afternoon?"

"Not that I know of. He often answers the bell himself. He had a visitor, just before you heard him tell me."

"He had a patient, yes. A man." "Who was it?" "I don't know. He was a stranger to me."

"Do you remember what he looked like?" "Minnie reflected. "He was a smallish man, maybe thirty-five or so. He had a very light complexion, and he had a very light complexion, and he had a very light complexion."

"How soon after that did you hear doctor David fall?" Dick asked. "Right away. First, the door slammed, and then he dropped."

Poor old David! Dick had not the slightest doubt that David had received some unfortunate news, and that up there in his bedroom even since, alone and helpless, he had been struggling with some secret dread he could not share with any one. Not even with Lucy, he imagined. Nevertheless, he made a try with Lucy that evening.

"Aunt Lucy," he said, "do you know of anything that could have caused David's collapse?" "What sort of things?" she asked guardedly.

"A letter, we'll say, or a visit." "When he saw that she was only puzzled and thinking back, he had his own answer.

"Never mind," he said. "I was feeling about for some cause. That's all." He was satisfied that Lucy knew no more than he did of David's visitor, and that David had kept his own counsel ever since. But the sense of impending disaster that had come with the letter did not leave him. He went through his evening office hours almost mechanically, with a part of his mind busy on the puzzle. How did it affect the course of action he had mapped out? Wasn't it even more necessary than ever now to go to Walter Wheeler, and tell him how things stood?

He hated mystery. He liked to walk in the middle of the road in the sunlight. But even stronger than that was a growing feeling that he needed a sane and normal judgment on his situation; a fresh viewpoint, and some unprejudiced advice.

He saw David before he left, and he was very gentle with him. In view of this new development he saw David from a different angle, facing and dreading something imminent, and it came to him with a shock that he might have to clear things up to save David. The burden, whatever it was, was breaking him.

He had telephoned, and Walter Wheeler thought he knew what was coming, and he had well in mind what he was going to say. He had thought it over, pacing the floor alone, with the dog at his heels. He would say, "I like and respect you, Livingston. If you're worrying about what these damned gossips say, let's call it a day and forget it. I know a man when I see one, and if it's all right with Elizabeth it's all right with me."

Things, however, did not turn out just that way. Dick came in, grave and clearly preoccupied, and the first thing he said was: "I have a story to tell you, Mr. Wheeler. After you've heard it, and given me your opinion on it, I'll come to a matter that—well, that I can't talk about now."

"If it's the silly talk that I dare say

you've heard —"

"No that's a part of it. That alone I'd stand ready to face, but there is something else. Something I haven't told Elizabeth, and that I'll have to tell you."

Walter Wheeler drew himself up rather stiffly. Leslie's detection was still in his mind.

"Don't tell me you're tangled up with another woman?" "No. At least I think not. I don't know."

It was doubtful if Walter Wheeler grasped much of the technicalities that followed. Dick talked and he listened, nodding now and then, and endeavoring very hard to get the gist of the matter. There was at least a foundation of mutual liking and respect to go on, and there was no doubt of their earnestness. Now and then Wheeler stopped him with a question, and Dick would break in on his narrative to reply. Thus once:

"You've said nothing to Elizabeth at all? About the walling off, as you call it?" "No. At first I was simply ashamed of it. I didn't want to get the idea that I wasn't normal."

"I see. That was at first. I begin to think—I've told you that this walling off is an unconscious desire to forget something too painful to remember. It's practically always that. I can't go to her with just that, can I? I've got to know first what it is."

"I'd begun to think there was an understanding between you."

Dick faced him squarely. "There is. I didn't intend it. In fact, I'd told her I was going to Noranda. I didn't mean to speak to her until I'd cleared things up. But it happened anyhow, I suppose the way those two households happen."

The talk lasted well over an hour, and it left Walter Wheeler depressed and uneasy. He agreed to go back with Dick to Noranda as soon as Dick could leave David, but from the moment Dick gave him the letter to read he felt that a situation was developing which threatened the peace of at least two households.

"It looks queer, doesn't it?" "Yes. It does."

"You don't recognize the name Bassett?" "No. I've tried, of course."

The result of some indecision was finally that Elizabeth should not be told anything until they were ready to tell it all. And in the end a certain resentment that she had become involved in an unhappy situation died in Walter Wheeler before Dick's white face and sunken eyes.

At ten o'clock the house-door opened and closed, and Walter Wheeler got up and went out into the hall.

"Go on up-stairs, Margaret," he said to his wife. "I've got a visitor." He did not look at Elizabeth. "You settle down and be comfortable," he added, "and I'll be up before long. Where's Jim?"

"I don't know. He didn't go to bed."

"He started out with you, didn't he?" "Yes. But he left us at the corner."

They exchanged glances. Jim had been worrying them lately. Strange how a man could go along for years, his only worries those of housework, his track a single one through comfortable fields where one reaped only what he sowed. And then his family grew up, and involved him without warning in new perplexities and new troubles. Nina first, then Jim, and now this strange story, which so inevitably involved Elizabeth.

He put his arm around his wife and held her to him.

"Don't worry about Jim, mother," he said. "He'll all right fundamentally. He's going through the bad time between being a boy and being a man. He's a good boy."

He watched her moving up the stairs, his eyes tender and solicitous. To him she was just "mother." He had never thought of another woman in all their twenty-four years together.

Elizabeth waited near him, her eyes on his face.

"Is it Dick?" she asked in a low tone. "Yes."

"You don't mind, daddy, do you?" "I only want you to be happy." "You know that, don't you?"

She nodded, and turned up her face

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to be kissed. He knew that she had no doubts whatever, that this interview was to seal her to Dick Livingston for ever and ever. She fairly radiated happiness and confidence. He left her standing there and, going back to the living room, closed the door.

Louis Bassett, when he started to the old Livingston ranch, now the Watson place, was carefully turning over in his mind David's participation in the escape of Judson Clark. Certain places of it were quite clear, provided one accepted the fact that, following a heavy snowfall, an easterly

and a tenderfoot had gone into the mountains alone, under conditions which had caused the posse after Judson Clark to turn back and give him up for dead.

Had Donaldson sent him there, knowing he was a medical man? If he had, would Maggie Donaldson not have told it in her confession? She had said "a man outside that she had at first thought was a member of the searching party." Evidently, then, Donaldson had not prepared her to expect medical assistance.

(To be continued)

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