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The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday)

In the grip of a situation that was too much for him Basset rang the bell. It was answered by the elderly maid who took care of his own bedroom.

Months later, puzzling over the situation, Basset was to wonder, and not to know, whether chance or design brought the Thorwald woman to the door that night. At the time, and for weeks, he laid it to tragic chance, the same chance which had placed in Dick's hand the warning letter that had brought him West. But as time went on the part played in the tragedy by that faded woman, with her tired, dispirited voice and her ash-colored hair streaked with gray, assumed other proportions, loomed large and mysterious.

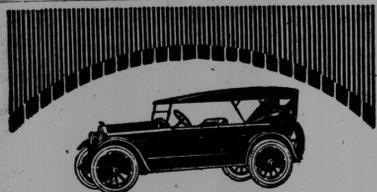
There were times when the wished that some presence of danger that made him throttle her then and there so she could not have raised her shrill, alarming voice. But he had no warning. All he saw was a woman in a washed-out blue calico dress and a fresh white apron, raising incursive eyes to his.

"I suppose it's all right if she sits in the hall?" Basset inquired, still fighting his losing fight. "She can go in if she sits."

"Right?" said the doctor, who had been to France and who brought home some British phrases.

Basset walked muck from the hospital alone. The game was up and he knew it. Sooner or later — in a way he tried to defend himself to himself. He had done his best. Two or three days ago he would have been exultant over the developments. After all, since things as one could, Clark was a murderer. Other men killed and paid the penalty. And the game was not up entirely, at that. The Providence which had watched over him for so long might continue to. The hospital was new. (It was ironically enough, the Clark Memorial Hospital.) There was still a chance. He was conscious of something strange as he entered the lobby. The constable was gone, and there was no clerk behind the desk. At the foot of the stairs stood a group of guests and loungers, looking up, while fresh white apron, raising incursive eyes to his.

Even then Basset's first thought was of fire. He elbowed his way to the foot of the stairs and demanded



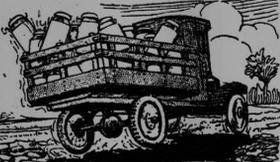
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to be allowed to go up, but he was refused.

"In a few minutes," said the boy. "No need of excitement."

"Is it a fire?"

"I don't know myself. I've got my orders. That's all."

Wilkins came hurrying in. The crowd, silent and respectful before the law, opened to let him through and closed behind him.

Basset stood at the foot of the stairs looking up.

To Elizabeth the first days of Dick's absence were unbelievable dreary. She seemed to live only from one visit of the postman to the next. She felt some times that only a part of her was at home in the Wheeler house, slept at night in her wide bed, donned its black frocks and took them off, and made those sad daily pilgrimages to the cemetery above the town, where her mother, tidied with tender hands the long, narrow mound, so fearfully reminding of Jim's tall, slim body.

And because of this division in herself, because she felt that her loyalty to her people wavered, because she knew that already she had forsaken her father and her mother and would follow her love through the rest of her life, she longingly anxious to comfort and to please them.

"She's taking Dick's absence very hard," Mrs. Wheeler said one night when she had kissed them and gone up-

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and little caressing touches on bowed heads and grief-stooped shoulders.

It put away Jim's clothing, and kept immaculate the room where now her mother spent most of her waking hours. It sent her on her knees at night, to pray for Jim's happiness in some young-man heaven which would please him. But the other part of her was not there at all. It was off with Dick in some mysterious place of mountains and vast distance, called Wyoming.

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