

## The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday)

Take the other angle. Say David Livingstone had not been sent for. He knew nothing of the cabin or its occupants until he stumbled on them. He had sold the ranch, distributed his brother's books, and apparently the townspeople at Dry River believed that he had gone back home. Then what had taken him clearly alone and having doubtless given the impression of a departure for the east, into the mountains? To hunt? To hunt what, that he went about it secretly and alone? Basset was inclined to the Donaldson theory, finally. John Donaldson would have been wanting a doctor, and not wasting one from Norada. He might have heard of this eastern medical man at Dry River, have gone to him with his story, even taken him part of the way. The situation was one that would have a certain appeal. It was possible, anyhow.

But instead of clarifying the situation, Basset's visit at the Wason place brought forward new elements which fitted neither of the hypotheses in his mind. To Wason himself, whom he met on horseback on the road into the place, he gave the same explanation he had given to the storekeeper's wife. Wason was a tall man in chaps and a shirt, and he was courteously interested.

"Bill and Jake are still here," he said. "They're probably in for dinner now, and I'll see you get a chance to talk to them. I took them over with the ranch. Property, you say? Well, hope it's better land than he had here."

He turned his horse and rode beside the car to the house.

"Come a little late to do Henry

Livingstone much good," he said. "He's been lying in the Dry River graveyard for about ten years. Not much mourned, either. He was about as close-mouthed and uncommunicable as they make them."

The description Wason had applied to Henry Livingstone the reporter himself applied to the two ranch hands later on, during their interview. It could hardly have been called an interview at all, indeed, and after a time Basset realized that behind their taciturnity was suspicion. They were watching him, undoubtedly; he rather thought, when he looked away that once or twice they exchanged glances. He was certain, too, that Wason himself was puzzled.

"Speak up, Jake," he said once irritably. "This gentleman has come a long way. It's a matter of some property."

"What sort of property?" Jake demanded. Jake was the spokesman of the two.

"That's not important," Basset observed easily. "What we want to know is if Henry Livingstone had any family."

"He had a brother."

"No one else?"

"Then it's up to me to tell the brother," Basset observed. "Either of you remember where he lived?"

"Somewhere in the east."

"That's a trifle vague," he commented good humoredly. "How about the mail? Didn't you boys ever mail any letters for him?"

He was certain again that they exchanged glances, but they continued to present an unbroken front of ignorance. Wason was divided between



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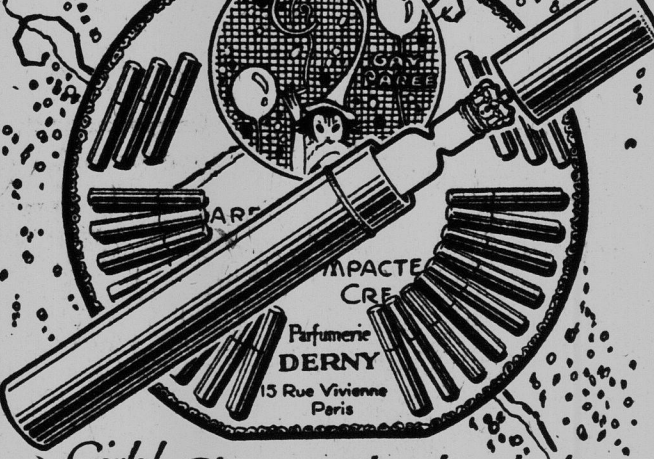
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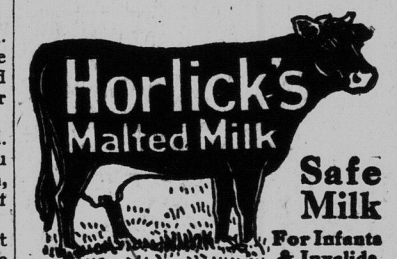
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entirely intending to drop the matter; but the reporter felt that now and then she was subjecting him to a sharp scrutiny and that, in some shrewd woman-fashion, she was trying to place him.

"You said it was a matter of some property?"

"Yes."

"But it's rather late, isn't it? Ten years."

"What's what makes it difficult?"

There was another silence, during which she evidently made her decision.

"I have never said this before, except to Mr. Wason. But I believe he was here when Henry Livingstone died."

"Great Scott!" Basset exclaimed, startled at her tone. "You don't think Livingstone was murdered?"

"No. He died of heart failure. There was an autopsy. But he had a bad cut on his head. Of course he may have fallen—Bill and Jake were away. They'd driven some cattle out on the range. It was two days before he was found. It would have been longer, if Mr. Wason hadn't ridden out to talk to him about buying. He found him dead in his bed, but there was blood on the floor in the next room. I washed it up myself."

"Of course," she added, when Basset made no comment. "I may be all wrong. He might have fallen in the next room and dragged himself to bed. But he was very neatly covered up."

"It's your idea then, that this boy put him into the bed?"

"I don't know. He wasn't seen since. But the posse found a horse

with the Livingstone brand, saddled and in Dry River Canyon, when it was looking for Judson Clark. Of course that was a month later. The men here, Bill and Jake, claimed it was a story there, probably, but not the story he was after. This unknown had been at the ranch when Henry Livingstone died, had perhaps been indirectly responsible for his death. He had, within the hour, fled after the thing had happened. Later on, then, David Livingstone had taken him into his family. That was all. Except for that identification of Gregory's, and for the photograph of Judson Clark. For a moment he wonder-

ed if the two, Jud Clark and the unnamed Dry River man, could be the same. But Dry River would have known Clark. But the two stories tied together somewhere. Must tie together. He wasn't through. Not by a blamed sight. He almost ditched the car on his way back to Norada, so deeply was he engaged in thought.

On the seventh of June David and Lucy went to the seashore, went by the order of various professional gentlemen who had differed violently during the course of David's illness, but who now suddenly agreed with an almost startling unanimity. Which unanimity was the result of careful coaching by Dick.

He saw in David's absence his only possible chance to go back to Norada without worry to the sick man, and he felt, too, that a change, getting away from the surcharged atmosphere of the

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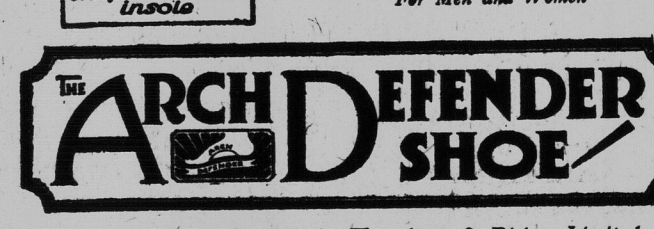
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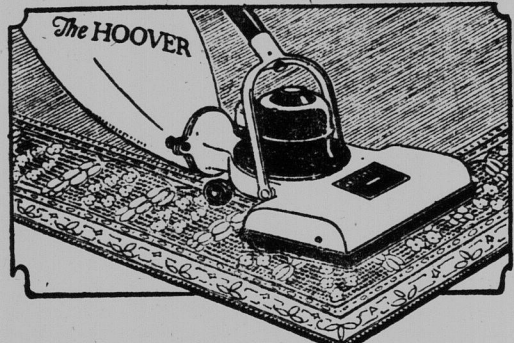
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old house, would be good for both David and Lucy. For days before they started Lucy went about in a frenzy of nervous energy, writing out for minutes menus for a month ahead, counting and recounting David's collar and handkerchiefs, cleaning and pressing his neckties. In the harness room in the stable Mike polished boots until his arms ached, and at bulging, came three gift trunks already bulging, for David, none of which he would leave behind. "I declare," Lucy protested to Dick, "I don't know what's come over him. Every present he's had since he was sick he's taking along. You'd think he was going to be shut up on a desert island."

But Dick thought he understood. In David's life his friends had had to take the place of wife and children; he clung to them now, in his age and weakness, and Dick knew that he had a sense of deserting them, of abandoning them after many faithful years. (To be continued)

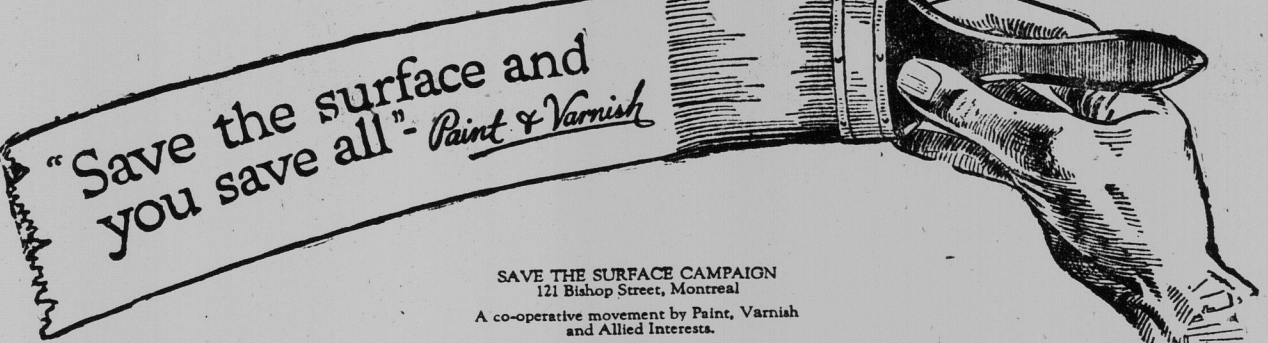


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