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The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from yesterday.)

Mixed up with his determination to surrender, the idea of atonement was strong in him. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. That had been his father's belief, and well he remembered it. But during the drifting period he thrust it back into that painful niche where he held Beverly, and the thing he would not face.

That phase of his re-adjustment, then when he reached it, was painful and confused. There was the necessity for atonement, which involved surrender, and there was the call of David, and the insistent desire to see Beverly again, which was the thing he would not face. Of the three, the last, mixed up as it was with the murder and its expiation, was the strongest, for by the very freshness of his released memories, it was the days before his flight from the ranch that seemed most recent, and his life with David that was long ago, and blurred in its details as by the passing of infinite time.

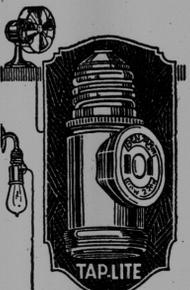
When Elizabeth finally came back to him, it was as something very gentle and remote, out of the long-forgotten past. Even his image of her was blurred and shadowy. He could not hear the tones of her voice, or remember anything she had said. He could never bring her at will, as he could David, for instance. When she did come it

was mostly at night, while he slept. Then the guard was down, and there crept into his dreams a small figure, infinitely loving and tender; but as he roused from sleep she changed gradually into Beverly. It was Beverly's arms he felt around his neck. Nevertheless, he held to Elizabeth more completely than he knew, for the one thing that emerged from his misty recollection of her was that she cared for him. In a world of hate and bitterness, she cared.

But she was never real to him, as the other woman was real. And he knew that she was lost to him, as David was lost. He could never go back to either of them.

As time went on he reached the point of making practical plans. He had lost his pocketbook somewhere, probably during his wanderings about, and he had no money. He knew that the obvious course was to go to the nearest settlement and surrender himself, and he played with the thought, but even as he did he knew that he would not do it. Surrender he would, eventually, but before he did that he would satisfy the craving that was in some ways like his desire for liquor that morning on the trail. The reckless, mad, and irresistible impulse, to see Beverly again.

In August he started for the rail-



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road, going on foot and without money, his immediate destination the harvest fields of some distant ranch, his object to earn his train fare east.

The summer passed slowly. To David and Elizabeth it was a long waiting, but with this difference, that David was kept alive by hope, and that Elizabeth felt sometimes that hope was killing her. To David each day was a new day, and might hold Dick. To Elizabeth, after a time, each day was but one more of separation.

Doctor Reynolds had become a fixture in the old house, but he was not like Dick. He was a heavy, silent young man, shy of intruding into the family life, and already crossed in a budding affair with the Rossiter girl. David tolerated him, but with a sort of smouldering jealousy increased by the fact that he had introduced innovations David resented; had for instance moved Dick's desk nearer the window, and instead of doing his own laboratory work had what David considered a damnable lay fashion of sending his little tubes, carefully closed with cotton, to a hospital in town.

David found the days very long and infinitely sad. He wakened each morning to renewed hope, watched for the postman from his upper window, and for Lucy's step on the stairs with the mail. His first glimpse of her always told him the story. At first he had insisted on talking about Dick, but he saw that it hurt her, and of late they had fallen into the habit of long silences.

The determination to live on until that return which he never ceased to expect only carried him so far, however. He felt no incentive to activity. There were times when he tried Lucy

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David depended on him with a sort of wistful confidence that set him to grinding his teeth occasionally in a fury at his own helplessness. And, as the extent of the disaster developed, as he saw David falling and Lucy ailing, and when in time he met Elizabeth, the feeling of his own guilt was intensified.

He spent hours studying the case, and he was chiefly instrumental in sending Harrison Miller back to Noranda in September. He had struck up a friendship with Miller over their common cause, and the night he was to depart that small inner group which was fighting David's battle for him formed a board of strategy in Harrison's tidy living room. Walter Wheeler and Bassett, Miller, and, tardily taken into their confidence Doctor Reynolds.

The same group met him on his return, set around with expectant faces while he got out his tobacco and laid a sheaf of papers on the table, and waited while their envoy, laying Bassett's map on the table, proceeded carefully to draw in a continuation of the trail beyond the pass, some sketchy mountains and a small square.

"I've got something," he said at last. "Not much, but enough to work on. Here's where you lost him, Bassett." He pointed with his pencil. "He went on for a while on a horse. Then someone must have lost the horse, for he turned up on foot, date unknown, in a state of exhaustion at a cabin that lies here. I got lost myself, or I'd never have found the place. He was sick there for weeks, and he seems to have stayed on quite a while after he recovered, as though he couldn't decide on what to do next."

Walter Wheeler altered and looked up.

"What sort of condition was he in when he left?"

"Very good, they said."

"You're sure it was Livingston?"

"The man there had a tree fall on him. He operated. I guess that's the answer."

"It's the answer to more than that," Reynolds said slowly. "It shows he had come back. If he hadn't he couldn't have done it."

"And after that?" same one asked.

"I lost him. He left to hike to the railroad, but I could find nothing of his plans. If I'd been able to make open inquiries I might have turned up something, but I couldn't. It's a hard proposition. I had trouble in finding Hattie Thorwald, too. She'd left the hotel, and in living with her son she swears she doesn't know where Hines is, and hasn't seen him for years."

Bassett had been listening intently, his head dropped forward.

"I suppose the son doesn't know where Hines is?"

"No, she warned me. He was surly and suspicious. The sheriff had sent for him and questioned him about how you got his horse, and I gathered that he thought I was a detective. When I told him I was a friend of yours, he sent you a message. You may be able to make something out of it. I can't. He said: 'You can tell him if you don't say anything about the other time.'"

"The other time?"

"He is under the impression that his mother got the horse for you once before, about ten years before Clark escaped. At night, also."

"Not for me," Bassett said decisively. "Ten years before that I was—"

He got out his notebook and consulted it. "It was on my way to the cabin in the mountains where the Donaldsons had hidden Jud Clark. I hired a horse at the livery stable."

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