

The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday)

Judson Clark had taken his yacht and gone to Europe, and was reported from there and there not too favorably. But when he came back, in early September, he had apparently recovered from his infatuation, was old, carefully dressed, and when interviewed, declared his intention of spending the winter on his Wyoming ranch.

Of course he must have heard of Lucas's breakdown, and equally of course he must have seen them both. What happened at that interview, by what attitude he allayed Lucas's probable jealousy and the girl's own nervousness, Bassett had no way of knowing. It was clear that he had convinced them both of his good faith, for the next note in the reporter's book was simply a date, September 12, 1911.

That was the day they had all started west together, traveling in Clark's private car, with Lucas, twelfth, slightly smiling and waving farewell from a window.

The big smash did not come until the middle of October. Bassett sat back and considered. He had a fairly clear idea of the conditions at the ranch. Daily riding, some light reading, and a great deal too much of each other. A sick man, too, unhappy in his exile, chafing against his restrictions, lonely and irritable. The girl, early seeing her mistake, and Clark's jealousy of her husband. The door into their apartment closing the thousand and one unconscious intimacies between man and wife, the breaking for two going up the stairs, and below that hot-eyed boy, agonized and passionately jealous, yet meeting them and looking after them, their host and a gentleman.

Lucas took to drinking, after a time, to allay his sheer boredom. And Jud Clark drank with him. At the end of three weeks they were both drinking heavily, and were politely quarrelsome. Bassett could fill that also. He could see the girl protesting, watching, increasingly anxious, as she saw that Clark's jealousy was matched by her husband's.

A queer picture, he reflected, the three of them shut away on the great ranch, and every day some new tension, some new strain.

Then, one night at dinner, they quarreled, and heavily left the table. She was going to pack her things and go back to New York. She had felt, probably, that something was bound to snap. And while she was upstairs Clark had shot and killed Howard Lucas, and himself disappeared.

He had run, testimony at the inquest revealed, to the corral, and saddled a horse. Although it was only October, it was snowing hard, but three horses, that he had turned his horse toward the mountains. By starting out, and after the Dry River Canyon, but the storm turned back, and they were obliged to turn back. A few inches more snow, and they could not have got their horses out. A week or so later, with a crust of ice over it, a few of them began again, with no expectation, however, of finding Clark alive. They came across his horse on the second day, but they did not find him, and there were some among them who felt that, after all, old Elihu Clark's boy had chosen the better way. It was better to lie somewhere in that white grave than to be tried and convicted.

Bassett closed his note-book and lit a cigar.

There was a big story to be had for the seeking, a whole of a story. He could go to the office, give them a hint, draw expense money and start for Noranda the next night. He knew well enough that he would have to begin there, and that it would not be easy. Witnesses of the affair at the ranch would be missing now, or when found the first accuracy of their statements would either be dulled by time or have been added to with the passing years. The ranch itself might have passed into other hands. To reconstruct the events of ten years ago might be impossible, or nearly so. But that was not his problem. He would have to connect Noranda with Haverly, Clark with Livingston. One thing only was simple. If he found Livingston's story was correct, that he had lived on a ranch near Noranda, before the crime, and as Livingston's story was correct, that two men could look precisely alike and come from the same place, and yet not be the same.

But, after he had turned out his light and got into bed, he began to think of the whole of a story. He could go to the office, give them a hint, draw expense money and start for Noranda the next night. He knew well enough that he would have to begin there, and that it would not be easy. Witnesses of the affair at the ranch would be missing now, or when found the first accuracy of their statements would either be dulled by time or have been added to with the passing years. The ranch itself might have passed into other hands. To reconstruct the events of ten years ago might be impossible, or nearly so. But that was not his problem. He would have to connect Noranda with Haverly, Clark with Livingston. One thing only was simple. If he found Livingston's story was correct, that he had lived on a ranch near Noranda, before the crime, and as Livingston's story was correct, that two men could look precisely alike and come from the same place, and yet not be the same.

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On his third reading the reporter began to visualize the human elements of the fight to save the boy; he saw morning before him the whole pitiful struggle; the indomitable range manager, his heart-breaking struggle with the blizzard; the shooting of his horse; the careful disarming of suspicion; and later the intrepid woman, daring that night ride through snow that had sent the posse back to its friends, to the boy, locked in the cabin and raving.

His mind was busy as he packed his suitcase. Already he had forgotten the compunctions of the early morning, he moved about methodically, calculating roughly what expense money he would need, and the line of attack, if any, needed at the office. Between Noranda and that old brick house at Haverly lay his story. Ten years of it. He was closing his bag when he remembered the little girl in the blue dress, at the theatre. He straightened and scowled. After a moment he snapped the bag shut. Damn it all, if Clark had chosen to tie up with a girl that was on Clark's conscience, not his.

But he was vaguely uncomfortable. "It's a queer world, Joe," he observed to the waiter, who had come in for the breakfast dishes. "Yes, sir, it is that," said Joe. During all the long night Dick sat by David's bedside. Earlier in the evening there had been a consultation; David had suffered a light stroke, but there was no paralysis, and the prognosis was good. For this time, at least, David had escaped, but there must be no other time. He was to be kept quiet and free from worry, his diet was to be carefully regulated, and with care he still had long years before him.

David slept, his breathing heavy and slow. In the morning there would be a nurse, but that night Dick, having sent Lucy to bed, himself kept watch. On the walnut bed lay Doctor David's partly aged, dimly outlined by the shaded lamp, and on a chair drawn close sat Dick.

He was wide-awake and very anxious, but as time went on and no untoward symptoms appeared, as David's sleep seemed to be more natural, Dick's thoughts wandered. They went to Elizabeth first, and then on from that starting-point, through the years of his life, to the day when Elizabeth, waiting in it for his return, saw both their lives, united and flowing on together, with children, with small cares, with the routine of daily living, and behind it all the two of them, hand in hand.

Then his mind turned on himself. How often in the past ten years it had done this. He had sat off, with a sort of professional detachment, and studied his own case. With the entrance into his world of the new science of psycho-analysis, he had now and then small, not very sincere attempts to penetrate the veil of his own unconscious. Not very sincere, for he was with the increase of his own knowledge of the mind, he had learned that behind such conditions as his lay generally, deeply hidden, the desire to forget. And that behind that there lay acknowledged or not, fear.

But forget what? he used to say to David, when the first text-books on the new science appeared, and he and David were learning the new terminology. Dick eagerly and David with contemptuous snorts of derision. "To forget what?"

"You had plenty to forget," David would say, stolidly. "I think this man's a fool, but at that—you'd had your father's death for one thing. And you'd gone pretty close to the edge of eternity yourself. You'd fought single-handed the worst storm of ten years, you came out of it with double pneumonia, and you lay alone in that cabin about fifty-six hours. Forget! You had plenty to forget!"

He had accepted that theory without question, finally. There seemed, indeed, nothing to question. He had gone shooting in the mountains, a month or so after his father's death, and had there been caught and almost died. David, searching for him, had found him, and he had been with the aid of a woman from the ranch, and had helped him to co-ordinate such memories as remained to him.

Curiously enough, they all referred to his childhood. There had been David's brother, his father, a rather elderly man, who had taught him to ride. He had been the enthusiastic young man who was afraid of a horse, and who used to take him on long walks. The ranch had seemed enormous, and he remembered being with the elderly man one day on a mountain top, and being told that a good bit of all the land in sight would be his one day. There were other things, too, not so clear. His mother, a shadowy memory of tall woman who was mostly in the ranch to prevent suspicion.

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"My vitality is back to normal and every morning I get up full of pep and ambition."—"Constipation has completely disappeared!"—"The boils disappeared after the first week, and now I never need laxatives!"—"I can truly say it has made me feel 100% better than I have felt since I left the farm some 15 years ago."

bed; horses and dogs; a corral with a high fence and sometimes cattle, sometimes horses, milling around inside it, while men on horseback would single out one and rope it. But he could not remember any names at all.

He had a general impression that there had been plenty of money in those days. He could hardly have told how he felt that. But the ranch had been sold on his father's death and had barely paid the mortgage.

He had had, at times since he came east, an occasional desire to go back and see that early home again. Later on, he knew that if he were ever to fill up the gap in his life it would be easier in the environment of one familiar thing. But in the first days he had been totally dependent on David, and money was now too plentiful. Later on, as the new life took hold, as he went to medical college and worked at odd clerical jobs in vacations to help pay his way, there had been no chance. Then the war came, and on his return there had been the practice, and his knowledge that David's health was not what it should have been.

But as time went on there was more and more aware that there was in him a peculiar shrinking from going back, almost an apprehension. He knew more of the mind than he had before, and he knew that not physical hardship, but mental stress, caused such lapses as his. But what mental stress, in a boy of twenty-two or so, could be great enough for such a setback?

He was obliged to face this also, and he did it with distaste. He had never found himself lacking in courage. Certainly he would have fought a man who called him a coward. But there was cowardice behind all such conditions as a part of the mind to face reality. It was weak. Weak. He hated it. But that night, sitting by David's bed, he faced reality with a vengeance. He was in love, and he wanted the things that love should bring to a normal man. He felt normal. He felt strengthened by love, that he could face whatever life had to bring, so long as it also brought Elizabeth.

He had taken his fears to David that Sunday night and David had scoffed at them. "Don't be a fool," he had said. "Go ahead and take her, if she'll have you. And don't be too long about it. I'm not as young as I used to be."

"What I feel," he had replied, "is this: I don't know, of course, if she cares." David had grunted. "I do know I'm going to try to make her care, if it's in the wood. But I'd like to go back to the ranch again, David, before things go any further."

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to go back to Noranda? But that would imply—

He bent over and felt the sick man's pulse. It was stronger, not so rapid.

Oddly enough, that was his first memory of David. He had been lying in a rough bunk in the mountain cabin, and David beside him on a wooden box had been bending forward and feeling his pulse. He had felt very weak and utterly inert, and he knew now that he had been very ill. The cabin had been a small and lonely one, with snow-peaks not far above it, and it had been very cold. During the day a woman kept up the fire. Her name was Maggie, and she moved about the cabin like a thin ghost. At night she slept in a lean-to shed, and David kept the fire going. A man who seemed to know him well—John Donaldson, he learned, was his name—was Maggie's husband, and every so often he came, about dawn and brought food and supplies.

After a long time, as he grew stronger, Maggie had gone away, and David had fried the bacon and heated the corned tomatoes or the beans. Before she left she had written out a recipe for biscuits, and David would study over it painstakingly, and then produce a panful of burned and blackened lumps, over which he would groan and agonize.

(To be continued)

Lieut. H. G. F. Hibbard of the Naval Service, Ottawa, who is in the city announced yesterday that recruiting for a local company of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve would be begun within a few days. From here Lieut. Hibbard will go to Charlottetown.

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The following are typical extracts from the letters we receive every day: "Nothing equal to it as a strength builder and corrector of constipation."

"My vitality is back to normal and every morning I get up full of pep and ambition."—"Constipation has completely disappeared!"—"The boils disappeared after the first week, and now I never need laxatives!"—"I can truly say it has made me feel 100% better than I have felt since I left the farm some 15 years ago."

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Nujol is a lubricant—not a medicine—non-laxative—non-greasy. When you are constipated, not enough of Nature's lubricating liquid is produced in the bowels to keep the food waste soft and moving. Doctors prescribe Nujol because it acts like this natural lubricant and thus secures regular bowel movements by Nature's own method—lubrication. Try it today.

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