

The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from Saturday)

"I'll write you all the town gossip," she said. "If you do—!" he threatened her. "You're to write me what you're doing, and all about yourself. Remember, I'll be counting on you."

"And, if their voices were light, there was in both of them the sense of a part made, of a bond that was to hold them, like clasped hands, against their coming separation. It was rather anticlimactic after that to have him acknowledge that he didn't know exactly when he could get away!

"She went with him to the door and stood there, her soft hair blowing, as he got into the car. When he looked back, as he turned the corner, she was still there. He felt very happy and available and he picked up an elderly village woman with her basket and went considerably out of his way to take her home.

"It had been five that afternoon David had let himself into the house with his latch-key, hung up his overcoat on the old walnut hat-rack, and gone into his office. The strain of the day before had told on him, and he felt weary and not entirely well. He had fallen asleep in his buggy, and had wakened to find old Nettle drawing him slowly down the main street of the town, pursuing an erratic but homeward course, while the people on the pavements watched and smiled.

"He went into his office, closed the door, and then, on the old leather couch with its sagging springs, he stretched himself out to finish his nap.

"Almost immediately, however, the door-bell rang, and a moment later Nettle opened the door.

"Gentleman to see you, Doctor David."

"He got up clumsily and settled his collar. Then he opened the door into his waiting-room.

"Come in," he said resignedly.

A small, dapper man, in precisely the type of clothes David most abominated, wearing light-colored spats, rose from his chair and looked at him with evident surprise.

"I'm afraid I've made a mistake. A Doctor Livingstone left his seat number for calls at the box office of the Annex Theatre last night—the 'Happy Valley Company'—but he was a younger man."

David stiffened, but he surveyed his visitor impassively from under his shaggy white eyebrows.

"I haven't been in a theatre for a dozen years, sir."

Gregory was convinced that he had made a mistake. Like Louis Bassett, the very unlikelihood of Jud Clark being connected with the domestic atmosphere and quiet respectability of the old house made him feel intrusive and absurd. He was about to apologize and turn away, when he thought of something.

"There are two names on your sign. The other one, was he by any chance at the theatre last night?"

"I think I shall have to have a re-

son for these inquiries," David said slowly.

He was trying to place Gregory, to fit him into the situation, straining back over ten years of security, racking his memory, without result.

"Just what have you come to find out?" he asked, as Gregory turned and looked around the room.

"The other Doctor Livingstone is your brother?"

"My nephew."

Gregory shot a sharp glance at him, but all he saw was an elderly man, with heavy white hair and fierce shaggy eyebrows, a portly and dignified elderly gentleman, rather resentfully courteous.

"Sorry to trouble you," he said. "I suppose I've made a mistake. Is your nephew at home?"

"No."

"May I see a picture of him, if you have one?"

David's wild impulse was to smash Gregory to the earth, to annihilate him. His collar felt tight, and he pulled it away from his throat.

"Not unless I know why you want to see it."

"He is tall, rather spare? And he took a young lady to the theatre last night?" Gregory persisted.

"He answers that description. What of it?"

"And he is your nephew?"

"My brother's son," David said steadily.

Somewhat it began to dawn on him that there was nothing inimical in this strange visitor, that he was anxious, and all at ease. There was, indeed, something almost beseeching in Gregory's eyes, as though he stood ready to give confidence for confidence. And, more than that, a sort of unfriendly stubbornness, as though he had come to do something he meant to do.

"Sit down," David said, relaxing somewhat. "Certainly my nephew is making no secret of the fact that he went to the theatre last night. If you'll tell me who you are, I can't afford to make a mistake."

David's ruddy color had faded. He opened a drawer of his desk and produced a copy of the photograph of Dick in his uniform. "Maybe this will help you."

Gregory studied it carefully, carrying it to the window to do so. When he confronted David again he was certain of himself and his errand for the first time, and his manner had changed.

"Yes," he said significantly. "It does."

He placed the photograph on the desk, and sitting down, drew his chair close to David's. "I'm not 'use any names Doctor. I think you know what I'm talking about. I was sure enough last night. I'm certain now."

David nodded.

"We'll start like this. God knows I don't want to make any trouble. But I'll put a hypothetical case. Suppose that a man when drunk commits a crime and then disappears; suppose he reforms and becomes a useful citizen, and everything is buried."

Doctor David listened stonily. Gregory lowered his voice.

"Suppose there's a woman mixed up in that situation. Not guiltily, but there's a lot of talk. And suppose she lives it down, for ten years, and then goes back to her profession, in a play that parents take their children to see, and makes good. It isn't hard to suppose that neither of those two people wants the thing revived is it?"

David cleared his throat.

"You mean, then, that there is danger of such a revival?"

"I think there is," Gregory said bitterly. "I recognized this man last night, and called a fellow who knew him in the old days, Saunders, our stage manager. And a newspaper man named Bassett wormed it out of Saunders. You know what that means."

David heard him clearly, but as though from a great distance.

"You can see how it appears to Bassett. If he's found it, it's the big story of a lifetime. I thought he'd better be warned."

When David said nothing, but sat holding tight to the arms of his old chair, Gregory reached for his hat and got up.

"The thing for him to do," he said "is to leave town for a while. This Bassett is a bound-dog on a scent. They all are. He is Bassett of the Times-Republican. And he took Jud—he took your nephew's automobile license number."

Still David sat silent, and Gregory moved to the door.

"Get him away tonight, if you can."

"Thank you," David said. His voice was thick. "I appreciate your coming."

He got up dizzily, as Gregory said "Good evening," and went out. The room seemed very dark, and unsteady, and not quite familiar. So this was what had happened after all the safe years! A man could work and build and pray, but if his house was built on the sand!

As the outer door closed with a slam David felt to the floor with a crash. Bassett lounged outside the nearest privet hedge which it was Harrison Miller's custom to clip with his own bachelor hands, and waited. And as he waited he tried to imagine what was going on inside, behind the neatly curtained windows of the old brick house.

He was tempted to ring the bell again, pretend to have forgotten something, and perhaps happen in on what might be drama of a rather high order; providing the man was Clark after all, it was fairly sure to be drama. He discarded the idea, however, and began his interested survey of the premises.

What a good doctor, or the whole trail ended there after all. He himself had felt, after his interview with Dick, that the scent was false. And there was this to be said: Gregory had been in the house scarcely ten minutes. Long enough to acknowledge a mistake, but hardly long enough for any dramatic identification. He was keenly disappointed, but he had longed for a little of disappointment, and after a moment he only said:

"Well, that's that. He certainly looked like Clark to me."

"I'll say he did."

"Rather surprised him, didn't you?"

"Oh, he was all right," Gregory said. "I didn't tell him anything, of course."

Bassett looked at his watch. "I was after you, all right," he said, cheerfully. "But if I was barking up the wrong tree, I'm done. I don't have to be hit on the head to make me stop. Come and have a soda-water on me," he finished amiably. "There's no train until seven."

But Gregory refused.

"No, thanks. I'll wander on down to the station and get a paper."

The reporter smiled. Gregory was holding a grudge against him, for a bad night and a bad day.

"All right," he said affably. "I'll see you at the train. I'll walk about a bit."

He turned and started back up the street again, walking idly. His chagrin was very real. He hated to be fooled and fooled he had been. Gregory was not the only one who had lost a night's sleep. Then, unexpectedly, he was hailed from the curbstone, and he saw with amazement that it was Dick Livingstone.

"Take you anywhere?" Dick asked. "How's the headache?"

"Better, thanks," Bassett stared at him. "No, I'm just walking around until train time. Are you starting out or going home, at this hour?"

"Going home. Well, glad the head's better."

He drove on, leaving the reporter gazing after him. So Gregory had been lying. He hadn't seen this chap at all. Then why—He walked on,

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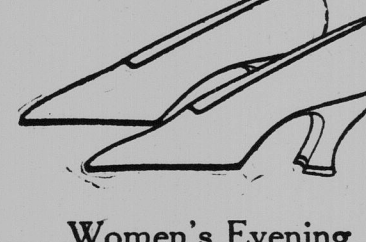
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more amiably. "That fellow isn't Jud Clark and never was. He's a doctor, and the nephew of the old doctor there. They're in practise together?"

"Yes?"

Bassett eyed him. Either Gregory was a good doctor, or the whole trail ended there after all. He himself had felt, after his interview with Dick, that the scent was false. And there was this to be said: Gregory had been in the house scarcely ten minutes. Long enough to acknowledge a mistake, but hardly long enough for any dramatic identification. He was keenly disappointed, but he had longed for a little of disappointment, and after a moment he only said:

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turning this new phase of the situation over in his mind. Why this elaborate fiction, if Gregory had merely gone in, waited for ten minutes, and come out again?

It wasn't reasonable. It wasn't logical. Something had happened inside the house to convince Gregory that he was right. He had seen somebody, or something. He hadn't needed to lie. He could have said frankly that he had seen no one. But no, he had built up a fabric carefully calculated to throw Bassett off the scent.

He saw Dick stop in front of the house, get out and enter. And coming to a decision, he followed him and rang the door-bell. For a long time no one answered. Then the maid opened the door, her eyes red with crying and looked at him with hostility.

"Doctor Richard Livingstone?"

"You can't see him."

"It's important."

"Well, you can't see him. Doctor David has just had a stroke. He's in the office now, on the floor."

She closed the door on him, and he turned and went away. It was all clear to him; Gregory had seen, not Clark, but the older man; had told him and gone away. And under the shock the older man had collapsed. That was sad. It was very sad. But it was also extremely convincing.

He sat up late that night again, running over the entries in his note-book. The old story, as he pieced it out, ran like this:

It had been eleven years ago, when, according to the old files, Clark had financed Beverly Carlyle's first starring venture. He had, apparently, started out in the beginning only to give her the publicity she needed. In devising it, however, he had shown a sort of boyish recklessness and ingenuity that had caught the interest of the press, and set newspaper men to chuckling wherever they met.

He had got together a dozen or so of young men like himself, wealthy, idle and reckless with youth, and headed by him, they had made the exploita-

tion of the young star an occupation. The newspapers referred to the star and her constellation as Beverly Carlyle and her Broadway Beauties. It was that the girl had thrown him over, money and all, for her leading man. One thing was clear, Clark not a drinker before, took to drinking hard, and after a time, after some unpleasant scenes probably, she refused to see him any more.

When the play closed in June, 1911, she married Howard Lucas, her leading man; his third wife. Lucas had been not a bad chap, a good-looking, rather negligible man, given to all-day Sunday poker, carefully varied, not very keen mentally, but amiable. They had bought a house on East Fifty-sixth street, and were looking for a new play with Lucas as co-star, when he unaccountably went to pieces nervously, stopped sleeping, developed a slight twitching of his handsome, rather vacuous face.

The story went, after a while, that Judson Clark had been refused and was

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