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The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from yesterday)

Bassett found his tin cup where he had left it, on a shelf, and poured out a small amount of whiskey from his flask.

"This is all we have," he explained. "We'll have to go slow with it."

To have an almost immediate effect. The twitching grew less, and a faint color came into Dick's face. He sat up and stretched himself. "That's better," he said. "I was all in. I must have been riding that infernal horse for years."

He wandered about while the report of a fire and set the coffee pot to boil. Bassett, glancing up once, saw his surveying the lean-to from the doorway, with an expression he could not understand. But he did not say anything, nor did he speak again until Bassett called him to get some food. Then then he was laconic, and he seemed to be listening and waiting.

"Once something started the horses outside, and he sat up and listened. "They're here!" he said.

"I don't think so," Bassett replied, and he went to the doorway. "No," he called back over his shoulder, "you get on and finish. I'll watch."

"Come back and eat," Dick said suddenly.

He ate very little, but drank most of the coffee. Bassett, too, ate almost nothing. He was pulling himself together for the struggle that was to come, marshalling his arguments for fight, and trying to fathom the extent of the change in the man across the small table.

Dick put down his tin cup, and got up. He was strong again, and the nightmare confusion of the night had passed away. Instead of it there was a desperate lucidity, and a courage born of desperation. He remembered it all distinctly; he had killed Howard Lucas the night before. Before long, he was up to the door, and took him back to the room. He was not afraid of him. They would always think he had run away because he was afraid of capture, but it was not that. He had run away from Dick's face. Only he had not got away from it. It had been with him all night, and it was with him now.

But he would have to go back. He couldn't be caught like a rat in a trap. The Clark didn't run away. They were fighters. Only the Clark didn't kill. They fought, but they didn't murder.

He picked up his hat and went to the door.

"Well, you've been mighty kind of night," he said. "But I've got to go back. I ran last night like a scared kid, but I'm through with that sort of foolishness."

"I'd give a good bit," Bassett said, watching him, "to know what made you run last night. You were safe where you were."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dick said drily. "I didn't run from them. I ran to get away from something. He turned away irritably. "You wouldn't understand. Say I was drunk. I was, for that matter. I'm not over it yet."

Bassett watched him. "I see," he said quietly. "It was last night, was it, that this thing happened?"

"You know it, don't you?"

"And after that happened, do you remember what followed?"

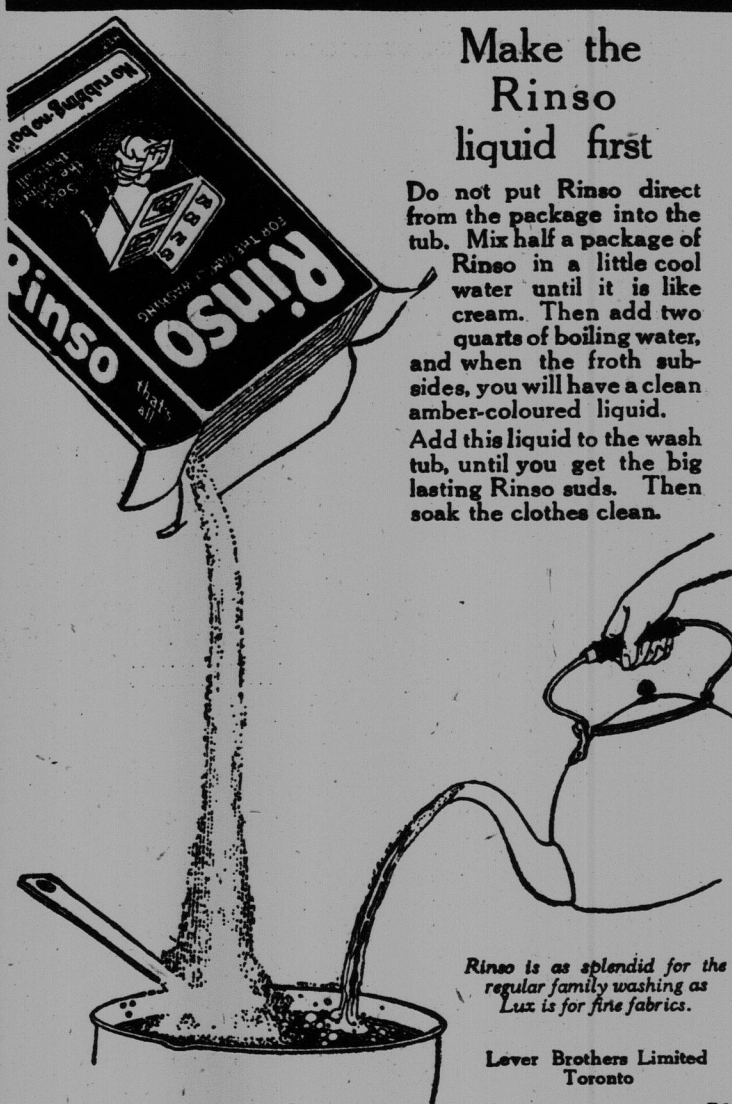
"I've been riding all night. I didn't care what happened. I knew I'd run into a whole of a blizzard, but I rode. He stopped and stared outside, to where the horses grazed in the upland meadow, knee deep in mountain flowers. Bassett, watching him, saw the incredulity in his eyes, and spoke very gently.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you are right. Try to understand what I am saying, and take it easy. You rode into a blizzard right enough, but that was not last night. It was ten years ago."

Had Bassett had some wider knowledge of Dick's condition he might have succeeded better during that bad hour that followed.

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you will stand trial and bring wretchedness to the people who stood by you before and who care for you now. By you can go over the mountains with me, and strike the railroad somewhere there, and then you can go on. They've waited ten years. They can wait longer. To his relief Dick acquiesced. He had become oddly passive; he seemed indeed not greatly interested. He did not notice the haste with which they were mounted, the care with which they avoided the trail. He gave, when asked, information as to the direction of the railroad at the foot of the western slope of the range, and at the same time found a trail for them some miles beyond their starting point. But mostly he merely followed. They made slow progress. Both horses were weary and hungry, and the going was often rough and even dangerous. But for Dick's knowledge of the country they would have been hopelessly lost. Bassett, however, although tortured by muscular soreness, felt his spirits rising as the mile were covered, and there was no sign of the pursuit. By mid-afternoon they were obliged to rest their horses and let them graze, and the necessity for food for themselves became insistent. Dick stretched out and was immediately asleep, but the reporter could not rest. The magnitude of his undertaking obsessed him. They had covered perhaps twenty miles since leaving the cabin, and the railroad was still sixty miles away. With fresh horses they could have made it by dawn of the next morning, but he did not believe their jaded animals could go on much longer. The country grew worse instead of better. A pass ahead, which they must cross, was full of snow. He was anxious, too, a to Dick's physical condition. The twitching was

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gone, but he was very pale, and he slept like a man exhausted and at his physical limit. But the necessity of crossing the pass before daylight or of waiting until dawn to do it, drove him back from an anxious reconnoitering of the trail at five o'clock, to rouse the sleeping man and start on again.

Near the pass, however, Dick roused himself and took the lead.

"Let me ahead, Bassett," he said, peremptorily, "and let your horses head alone. He'll take care of you if you'll give him a chance."

Bassett was glad to fall back. He was exhausted and nervous. The trail frightened him. It clung to the side of a rock wall, twisting and turning on itself. It ran under milky waterfalls of glacial water, and higher up it led over an ice field which was a glassy bridge over a rushing torrent. To add to their wretchedness, mosquitoes hung about them in voracious clouds, and tiny black knots, that got into their eyes and their nostrils, and set the horses frantic.

Once across the ice field, Dick's horse fell and for a time could not get up again. He lay, making ineffectual efforts to rise, his sides heaving, his legs rolling in distress. They gave up then and prepared to make such camp as they could.

With the setting of the sun it had grown bitterly cold, and Bassett was forced to light a fire. He did it with the protection of the mountain wall, and Dick, after unsaddling his fallen horse, built a rough shelter of branches and turned in. After a time the exhausted horse got up, and there was no forage, and the two animals were reduced to a state of hopeless excruciation, nose to the ground, among the moss and scrub pines. Before turning in, Bassett divided the remaining contents of the flask between them, and his last cigarettes were rolled in distress. He sat, back to the shelter, facing the fire, his mind busy with what Bassett knew was bitter and conflicting thoughts. Once, however, as the reporter was dozing off, Dick spoke.

"You said I told you there was a girl," he said. "Did I tell you her name?"

"No."

"All right. Go to sleep. I thought if I heard it, it might help."

Bassett lay back and watched him. "Better get some sleep, old man," he said.

He dozed, to waken again, cold and shivering. The fire had burned low, and Dick was sitting near it, unheeding, and in a deep study. He looked up, and Bassett was shocked at the quiet tragedy in his face.

"Where is Beverly Carlyle now?" he asked. "Or do you know?"

"Yes. I saw her not long ago."

"Is she married again?"

"No. She's revived The Valley and she's in New York with it."

Dick slept for only an hour or so that night, but as he slept he dreamed. In his dream he was at peace and happy, and there was a girl in a black frock who seemed to be a part of that peace. When he roused, however, still with the warmth of his dream on him, he could not summon her. She had slipped away among the shadows of the night.

He sat by the fire in the grip of a great despair. He had lost ten years out of his life, his best years. And he could not go back to where he had left off. There was nothing to go back to but shame and remorse. He looked at Bassett, lying by the fire, and tried to fit him into the situation. Who was he, and why was he here? Why had he ridden out at night alone, into unknown mountains, to find him?

As though his intent gaze had roused the sleeper, he opened his eyes, at first drowsily, then wide awake. He raised himself on his elbow and listened, as though for some far off sound, and his face was strained and anxious. But the night was silent, and he relaxed and slept again.

Something that had been forming in Dick's mind suddenly crystallized into conviction. He rose and walked to the ledge of the mountain wall and stood there listening. When he went back to the fire he felt in his pockets a small pad and pencil, and bending forward to catch the light, commenced to write.

At dawn Bassett awakened. He was stiff and wretched, and he grunted as he moved. He turned over and surveyed the small plateau. It was empty

ly, except for his horse, making his continuous hopeless search for grass. David was enjoying his holiday. He lay in bed most of the morning, making the most of his one after-breakfast cigar and surrounded by newspapers and magazines. He had made friends of the waiter who brought his breakfast, and of the little chambermaid who looked after his room, and such conversations as this would follow.

"Well, Nellie," he would say, "and did you go to the dance on the pier last night?"

"Oh, yes, doctor."

"Your gentleman friend showed up all right, then?"

"Oh, yes. He didn't telephone because he was on a job out of town."

Here perhaps David would lower his voice, for Lucy was never far away. "Did you wear the flowers?"

"Yes, violets. I put one away to remember you by. It was funny at first. I wouldn't tell him who gave them to me."

David would chuckle delightedly. "That's right," he would say. "Keep him guessing, the young rascal. We men are little cattle, Nellie, little cattle."

Even the valet unbent to him, and inquired if the doctor needed a man at home to look after him and his clothes, David was enormously tickled.

"Well," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "I'll tell you how I manage now, and then you'll see. When I want my trousers pressed I send them downstairs and then I wait in my bath robe until they come back. I'm a trifle better off for boots, but you'd have to knock Mike, my hired man, unconscious before he'd let you touch them."

"Of course there's my nephew," David went on, a little note of pride in his voice. "He's become engaged recently, and I notice he's bought some clothes. But still I don't think even he will want anybody to hold his breeches while he gets into them."

David chuckled over that for a long time after the valet had gone. He was quite happy and contented. He spent all afternoon in a roller chair, conversing affably with the man who pushed him, and now and then, when Lucy was out of sight, getting out and stretching his legs. He picked up old children and lonely dogs, and tried his eye in a shooting gallery, and had hard work keeping off the roller coasters and out of the sea.

Then, one day, when he had been entering his hotel, to find Harrison Miller sitting in the lobby. David beamed with surprise and pleasure. "You old humbug!" he said. "Or on a jaunt after all! And the contempt of you when I was shipped here!"

Harrison was constrained and uncomfortable. He had meant to see Lucy first. She was a sensible woman, and she would know just what David could stand, or could not. But David did not notice his constraint; took him to his room, made him admire the ocean view, gave him a cigar, and then set down across from him, benign and hospitable.

"Suffering Crismus, Harrison," he said. "I didn't know I was homesick until I saw you. Well, how's everything? Dick's letters haven't been much, and we haven't had any for several days."

Harrison cleared his throat. He knew that David had not been told of Jim Wheeler's death, but that Lucy knew. He knew, too, from Walter Wheeler, that he did not know that Dick had gone west. Did Lucy know that, or not? Probably yes. But he considered the entire benevolent conspiracy an absurdity and a mistake. It was making him uncomfortable, and most of his life had been devoted to being comfortable.

He decided to temporize. "Things are about the same," he said. "They're going to pave Chisholm street. And your Mike knocked down the night watchman like I got him off with a fine."

"I hope he hasn't been in my cellar. He's got a weakness, but then—How's Dick? Not overworking?"

"No. He's all right."

But David was no man's fool. He began to see something strange in Harrison's manner, and he leaned forward in his chair.

(To be continued.)

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