

THE BREAKING POINT

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

Author of "Dangerous Days," "K," "The Amazing Interlude," and many other striking and successful novels. Copyright, 1922, by George H. Doran Co.

Can evil identify be lost in good? See how this thrilling story of mystery, regeneration and love solves these problems.

When does human nature crash under the strain of fear and tragedy? Must it pull down all loved ones in disaster?

CHAPTER I

HEAVEN and earth," sang the tenor, Mr. Henry Wallace. His voice, which gave him somewhat the effect of having swallowed a crabapple...

"Are full, are full, are full," sang the soprano, Miss Clara Rossiter. The choir-master, Mr. Henry Wallace, turned to her and sang with her eyes turned up, and she reached to the ceiling herself...

"Heidy," barked the choir-master, full now, and all together. The choir-master, Mr. Henry Wallace, turned to her and sang with her eyes turned up, and she reached to the ceiling herself...

At such times she had vague dreams of penitence. She saw herself clothed in some quiet spot, withdrawn from the world; a place where there were long vistas of marble Gothic arches, after a photograph in the corner at home, and a great organ somewhere playing.

She would go home from church, never, and in the rose-colored hat and the blue georgette frock, and eat a healthy Sunday luncheon; and by 2 o'clock in the afternoon, when the family was at home, she would be in her study, and her dreams were quite likely to be entirely different.

Sometimes, perhaps, some one would come and see her. That was the end. Her dreams led up to that and stopped. Not by so much as a hand-did she pass that wall.

So she sat in the choir room and waited her turn.

"Of the majesty, of the majesty, of the majesty, of the majesty," sang Elizabeth. And was at once a nun and a principal in a sentimental drama of what appeared to be a small and rather ethereal figure with sleek brown hair and wistful eyes; nice eyes, of no particular color. Pretty with the beauty of youth, but not of youth, infinitely loyal and capable of suffering and not otherwise extraordinary.

Elizabeth Wheeler in her plain dress, and with a certain amount of serious reading every year suggested to her that she should be a nun.

On Sunday mornings, during the service, Elizabeth earnestly tried to banish all worldly thoughts. In spite of this resolve, however, she was not always successful. Her mind would wander to the choir seats necessitated tuning her profile to the congregation.

She seldom so much as glanced at the congregation. During her slow procession down the aisle, she would look at the Courtney boy, who was still a soprano and who carried the great gold cross, she always looked straight ahead.

So she still lifted her eyes as she went up the aisle, and was extremely serious over the whole thing. Because it is a solemn matter to take a number of people who have been up to that moment engrossed in thoughts of food or golf or servants or business, and in the next breath to have them all kneeling before a man, and to the essential of this, slightly up. She always looked up when she sang, for she had commenced to take singing lessons when her head.

Nevertheless, although she never looked at the pews, she was always conscious of the people who sat near the pulpit was the Sayres' and it was the social calendar of the town. Mrs. Sayre was in it, it was the social season. One never knew when Mrs. Sayre's butler would call up and say: "I am speaking for Mrs. Sayre. Mrs. Sayre would like to have the playhouse for the next week, occupied by the company on Thursday to luncheon, at 1:30."

When the Sayre pew was empty, the town knew, if it happened to be winter, that the Florida or Santa Barbara season was on; or in summer the Maine coast.

The other pew was at the back of the church. Always it had one occupant; sometimes it had two. It had the behavior of this pew was very erratic. Sometimes an elderly and portly gentleman with white hair and fierce eyebrows would come in when the sermon was almost over. Again, a hand would reach through the grill behind it, and a tall young man who had his eyes fixed in the proper direction, but not always on the rector, would reach for his hat, get up and slip out. On these occasions, however, he would first identify the owner of the hand and then send over the most permanent occupant of the pew, a little old lady. His speech was a Yes, or Nay, or Nay, for he either said, "I'll be back for dinner," or, "Don't look for me until you see me."

And Mrs. Crosby, without taking her eyes from the sermon, would nod.

Of late years Dr. David Livingstone had been taking less and less of the "Don't look for me until you see me" cases, and Dr. Dick had acquired a car, which would not freeze when left outside all night like a forgotten dog, and a sense of thoroughly about sleep. That is, that 11 P. M. was bedtime to some people, but was just 11 o'clock for him.

When he went to church he listened to the sermon, but rather often he looked at Elizabeth Wheeler. When his eyes wandered, as the most faithful eyes will now and then, they were apt to rest on the flag that had hung, ever since the war, beside the altar. He had fought for his country in a sea of red, never nearer the 200 miles to the battle line, fought with a surgical kit instead of a gun, but he was content. Not to all the high adventure.

Had he been asked, suddenly, the name of the tall blonde girl who sang among the sopranos, he could not have told it.

The Sunday morning following Clara Rossiter's sentimental confession Elizabeth Wheeler, after the manner of all worldly thoughts, as usual, and to see the kneeling, rising and sitting congregation as there for worship. But for the first time she wondered. Some of the faces were blank, as though behind the steady gaze the mind had wandered far afield, or deep. Some were intent, some even devout. But she did not ask what the gossip was.

He stood smiling up at them, very tidy in his Sunday suit, very boyish for all his thirty-two years.



She passed the open door into the waiting room, where sat two or three patient and silent figures, and went back to the kitchen. Minnie, the elderly servant, sat by the table reading, and the doctor, roasting chicken, outside the door on the kitchen porch was the freezer containing the dinner for the day. An orderly Sunday peace was in the air, a gesture of homely comfort, order and security.

"I'll unpin your veil for you," she offered, obligingly. "You've got time to lie down about ten minutes," Mrs. Morgan said she got to have her ears treated.

"I don't like to hear you speak so of the patients who come to the house," Minnie said.

He looked around the church with what was almost a possessive eye. These people were his friends. He knew them all, and they knew him. They had against his protest, put his name on the bronze tablet set in the wall on the roll of honor. Small as it was, this was his life's work.

Half smiling, he glanced about. He did not realize that behind their bows and greetings there was something new that day, something not so much unkind as unkind.

Outside in the street he tucked his hat, Mrs. Crosby, against the spring wind, and waited at the wheel of the car while David entered with the deliberation of a man accustomed to the sagging of his old side-bar buggy under his weight. Long ago Dick had dropped the titular "uncle," and as David he now addressed him.

"You're going to play some golf this afternoon, David," he said firmly. "Mike had me out this morning to look at your buggy springs."

He had a good deal to say about the car, which he had bought for him. He had a good deal to say about the car, which he had bought for him. He had a good deal to say about the car, which he had bought for him.

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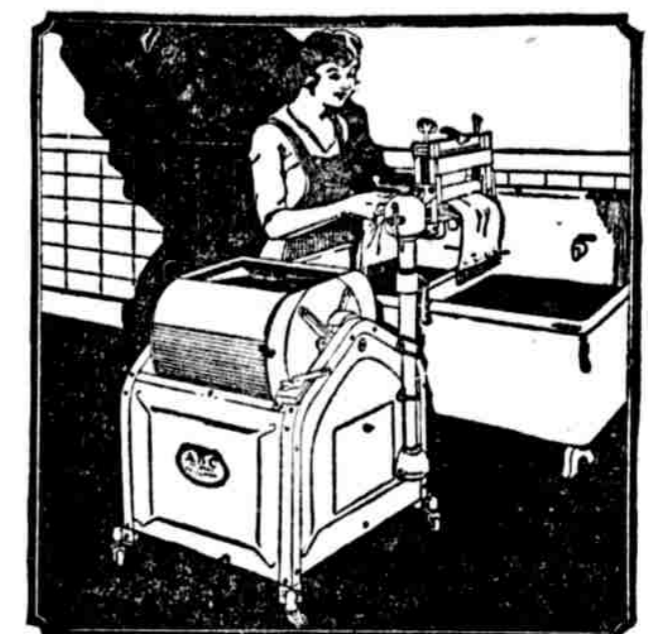
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