

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.

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

THIS BEGINS THE STORY
Dr. David Livingstone is the old family doctor of the quiet town of Beverly. Living with him and his daughter is a young girl, Elizabeth, who in spite of his thirty years, and a mystery which envelopes him, is a deeply interested in Elizabeth, his only daughter of a substantial descent of the town.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"Hanging Around" After Elizabeth the Wheeler house was good, modern and commonplace. Walter Wheeler and his wife were like the hours. They were here and there among the furniture there was a fine thing, an antique highboy, a Sheraton sideboard or some old glass, but his own outstanding mediocrity, they liked music, believed in the home as the unit of the nation, put happiness before undue ambition, and had devoted their lives to their children.

For many years their lives had centered about the children. For years they had held anxious conclaves about whooping cough, about small pox, influenza, later about Sunday tennis. They stood united to protect the children against disease, trouble and idleness.

Now that the children were no longer children, they were sometimes lonely and still apprehensive. They feared motorcar accidents, and Walter Wheeler had withstood the appeals of Jim for a half dozen years. They were not so much for them, and journeys, and unhappy marriages, and hid their tears from each other. Their nightly prayers were "to keep them safe and sound."

But they saw life reaching out and taking them, one by one. They saw their still as children, but as children Jim stayed out late sometimes, and considered his manhood in question if interrogated. Nina was married and out of the home but there were times when the possibility of maternity and its dangers for her. There remained only Elizabeth, and on her they lavished the care formerly divided among the three.

It was their intention and determination that she should never know trouble. She was tender, kind, the other, she was docile and gentle. They saw her, not as a healthy, normal girl, but as something fragile and very precious.

Nina was different. They had always worried a little about Nina, although she had never put their anxiety to such other. Nina had always over-ruled her disapproval, though she had never said so, but she had always placed an undue emphasis on things. Her bedroom before her marriage was cluttered with odds and ends, cotillions, and photographs, college pennants and small unwise purchases—trinkets of the gaudy and conquest—which were her life.

And Nina had "come out." It had cost a great deal, and it was not so much to introduce her to society as to put a family recognition on a fact already well known. She had brought herself out unofficially at sixteen. There had been the club ballroom, and a great many flowers which she had carried to the club, and the hospital and her clothing for all the faculty, and a caterer and orchestra. After that, for a cold and tumultuous winter Mrs. Wheeler had sat up with the doctor, and the next morning had let Nina sleep, while she went about her household duties. She had aged, rather, and her determined smile had grown a little fixed.

She was a good woman, and she wanted her children's happiness more than anything in the world, but she had had a dinner, and she had had a feeling of relief when Nina announced her engagement. Nina did it with characteristic sangfroid, at dinner one night.

"Don't ring for Annie for a minute, mother," she said. "I want to tell you all something. I'm going to marry Leslie Ward."

There had been a momentary pause. Then her father said: "Just a minute, is that Will Ward's boy?"

"Yes. He's not a boy."

"Well, he'll come around to see me before there's any engagement. Has that occurred to either of you?"

"Oh, he'll be around. He'd have come tonight, but how could he have having his bachelor dinner. I hope he doesn't look shot to pieces tomorrow. These bachelor things—! We'd better have a dinner or something, mother, and announce it."

There had been the dinner, with a silver loving cup bought for the occasion, and thereafter to sit out its usefulness in advance, coming to the table to his office a couple of months before the winter holidays and needing something badly.

"It's your going to give me a check for Christmas, anyhow, aren't you? And it would do me more good now. I simply can't go to another ball."

"Where's your trousseau?"

"It's worn out—danced to rags. And out of date, too."



"You'll have to marry sometime, and it isn't as though Wallie was disappointed on anything like that"

He had resumed his newspaper, to put it down almost at once. "What's that Sayre boy hanging around for?"

"Love? Any of the Sayre tribe? Jim Sayre drank himself to death, and this boy is like him. And Jim Sayre wasn't faithful to his wife. This boy is—well, he's a heir. That's why he was brought."

Margaret Wheeler stared at him. "Why, Walter!" she said. "He's a nice boy, and he's a gentleman."

"Margaret hesitated. She knew when you come into the room? Why in heaven's name don't you encourage real men to come here? There's Dick Livingstone. He's a man."

"Walter, have you ever thought there was anything queer about Dick Livingstone's coming here?"

"Darned good for the town that he did come."

"But—nobody ever dreamed that David and Lucy had a nephew. I mean he turns up, and they send him to medical college, and all that."

"I don't know. I haven't notified the town I possess," he said grimly.

"Well, there's something odd. I don't believe Henry Livingstone, the V. M. W. member, ever had a son."

"What possible foundation have you for a statement like that?"

"Mrs. Cook Morgan's sister-in-law has been visiting her lately. She says she saw Henry Livingstone well years ago in the West, and she never heard he was married. She says positively he was not married."

"And trust the Morgan woman to spread the good news," he said with ample sarcasm. "Well, suppose that's true? Suppose Dick is an illegitimate child? That's the worst that's implied, I dare say. That's nothing against Dick himself. I'll tell the world there's no blood on the Livingstone side, anyhow."

"You were very particular about Wallie Sayre's heredity, Walter."

"That's different," he retorted, and retired into gloomy silence behind his newspaper. Drat these women, anyhow. It was like some fool female to come there and rake up some old and defunct scandal. He'd stand up for Dick, if he ever came to the point. He liked Dick. What the devil did his mother matter, anyhow? If this town hadn't had enough evidence of Dick Livingstone's quality the last few years he'd better go elsewhere, anyhow. He got up and whistled, or the dog. "I'm going to take a walk," he said briefly, and went out. He always took a walk when things disturbed him.

On the Sunday afternoon after Dick had gone Elizabeth was alone in her room upstairs. On the bed lay the sort of gown Nina would have called a dinner dress, and to which Elizabeth referred as her dark blue. Seen thus, in the room which was her own expression, there was a certain nobility about her very simplicity, a staidness about her eyes that was almost disconcerting.

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think of you in that house! It's a wonderful house, Elizabeth. She's got a suite waiting for Wallie to be married before she furnishes it."

Elizabeth looked around her virgin little room, with its painted dressing table, its chintz, and its white bed with the blue dress on it.

"Who with?" Nina in her family was highly colloquial.

"With Dr. Livingstone," Elizabeth demanded. "Joking? Of course not."

Nina sat down again on the bed, her eyes on her sister, curious and not a little apprehensive.

"It's the first time it's ever happened, to my knowledge," she declared. "I know he's avoided me like poison. I thought he hated women. You know, Clara Rosseter is—"

Elizabeth turned suddenly. "Clara is ridiculous," she said. "She hasn't any reserve, or dignity, or anything else. And I don't see what my going to the theatre with Dick Livingstone has to do with her, anyhow."

Nina raised her carefully plucked eyebrows. "Really?" she said. "You needn't jump down my throat, you know. She considered, her eyes on her sister. 'Don't go to the theatre with Dick Livingstone, she's got you too good for you, and he hasn't a cent. A suburban practice, out all night, that tumble-down old house and two old people hanging around your necks, for Dr. David is letting go pretty fast. It just won't do. Besides, there's a story going the rounds about him, that—'

"I don't want to hear it, if you don't mind."

She went to the door and opened it. "I've hardly spoken a dozen words to him in my life. But just remember this. When I do find the man I want to marry, I shall make up my own mind. As you did," she added as a parting shot.

She was rather sorry as she went down the stairs. She had begun to suspect what the family had never guessed, that Nina was not very happy. More and more she saw in Nina's passion for clothes and gaiety, for small possessions, an attempt to substitute them for real things. She even suspected that sometimes Nina was a little lonely.

Wallie Sayre rose from a deep chair as she entered the living room.

"Hello," he said. "I was on the point of asking Central to give me this number so I could get you on the upstairs telephone."

"Nina and I were talking. I'm sorry."

Wallie, in spite of Walter Wheeler's opinion of him, was an engaging youth with a wide smile, an air of careless well-being, and an obstinate jaw. What he wanted he went after and generally secured, and Elizabeth, enlightened by Nina, began to have a small anxious feeling that afternoon that what he wanted just now happened to be herself.

"Nina coming down?" he asked. "I suppose so. Why?"

"You couldn't pass the word along that you are going to be engaged for the next half hour?"

"I might, but I certainly don't intend to."

"You are as hard to isolate as a— as a general," he complained. "I want on a perfectly good golf game to see you, and as your father generally calls the dog the moment I appear and goes for a walk, I thought I might see you alone. You're seeing me alone now, you know."

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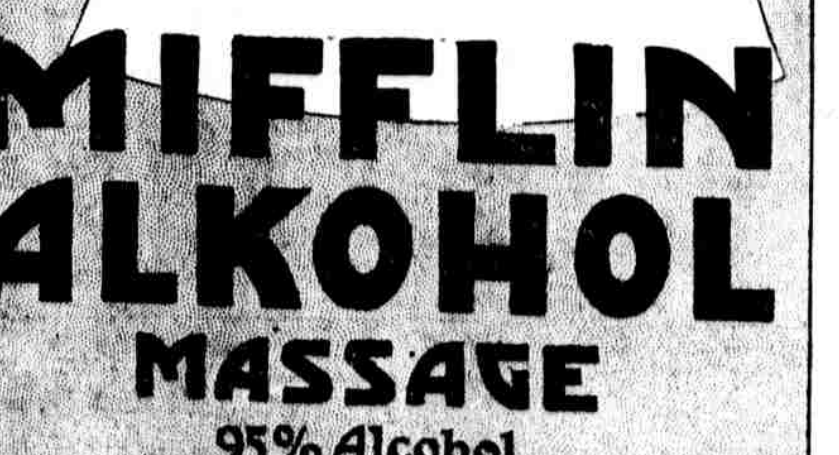
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For Nina's passion for things was inherent, persisting after her marriage. She discarded her birthday and Christmas in advance, coming to the table to his office a couple of months before the winter holidays and needing something badly.

It was a good woman, and she wanted her children's happiness more than anything in the world, but she had had a dinner, and she had had a feeling of relief when Nina announced her engagement. Nina did it with characteristic sangfroid, at dinner one night.

But just then Elizabeth looked totally unlike shipwreck. Nothing seemed more like a safe harbor than the Wheeler house that afternoon, or all the afternoon.

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