

# THE BREAKING POINT

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

Author of "Dangerous Days," "K," "The Amazing Interlude," and many other striking and successful novels.

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"The talk around here is that she's been off her head for the last year or two."

"He has heard it, honey."

He had expected her to look alarmed, but instead she showed relief.

"I'll tell you the truth, Les," she said. "I was worried sick about you. I think a rich man's man about town. And I'm afraid he's been a bit too good."

BEVERLY CALVERT, actress, 26, left, and Fred Gandy, 26, in a scene from "The Breaking Point." The two stars have been separated by a break in their marriage.

LOUIS PARSONS, 26, producer who wrote "The Livingstone Story" and "Paris Has Dances" to clear things up.

RINA, Elizabeth's sister, an actress.

ELIJAH WARD, Elizabeth's brother, 16.

MR. AND MRS. WHEDDER, English parents.

WALLIE RAYEL, 16, south of town, and his mother, who like him is in the service.

PEACE seemed definitely to have abandoned the Wheeler house. Then late in the evening a measure of it was restored when Nina and Leslie effected a reconciliation. It followed several bad hours when Nina had locked her door against them all, but at 10 o'clock she sent for Leslie and faced him with desperate calmness.

To Elizabeth, putting cold cloths on her mother's head as she lay on the bed, there came a growing conviction that the relation between men and women was a complicated and baffling thing, and that love and hate were sometimes close together.

Love, and habit perhaps, triumphed in Nina's case, however, for at 11 o'clock they heard Leslie going down the stairs and later on moving about the kitchen and pantry while washing softly. The servants had gone and the house was silent and coolly full.

Some time later Mrs. Wheeler, uniting intensely with the sun-baked hall behind her son-in-law coming up and carrying proudly a tray on which was a coast of an insatiable blackness and a pair which smelled feebly of tea.

"The next time you're out of a deck, just send me a telegram."

Mrs. Wheeler, full now overflowing with indignation and the piece of her mind she had meant to deliver, had vanished into her bedroom.

Later that night when Nina had finally forgotten him and had settled down for sleep, Leslie went downstairs for a smoke. And Elizabeth, sitting there alone, a book on her knee, fawned over her eyes wistfully and with a question in them.

"Sitting and thinking or just sleeping?" he inquired.

"I was thinking," she said.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" he asked.

"Good for you," she said heartily, and got up. "You'd better go to bed, young lady. It's almost midnight."

But although she she made no further move to go,

"What I am worrying about is this," Leslie. "He may hear it."

I don't believe it's true, and it wouldn't matter to him either."

"Good for you," he said heartily, and got up. "You'd better go to bed, young lady. It's almost midnight."

But although she she made no further move to go,

"What I am worrying about is this," Leslie. "He may hear it."

Leslie had gone to sleep, his arm over Nina's shoulders. From the window outside, looking out on the bare balcony outside her room, she could see the Livingstone house. Now it was invisible, but an upper window was outlined in the light. Very softly she kissed her finger tips to it.

"Good-night, dear," she whispered.

Louis Bassett had left for Norada, the day after Leslie's sudden illness, but had come back again, this time to Chicago, and left up in his hotel with a sprained knee. It was not until the day Nina went back to the little house in the Ridgely road, having left the first lesson of married life, that she might not only be captured but also held that he was able to resume his journey.

And again he wondered at the curious eyes of some men to secrete loyalty.

Theirs might go through life, fearing for themselves and destroying illusions to the last, but always there was some faithful soul to rebuild, some faithful soul to worship.

He was somewhat daunted at the size and bustling activity of Norada. Its streets were paved and well-lighted, there were park and a public library, and the place of the Commercial Hotel asked him if he had a place to stay.

But the development was almost in one way. In the old world a newcomer might have been subjected to friendly but inquisitive interest. In this grown-up and self-centered community a man might come and go unnoticed.

And he had other advantages. The pack, as he cynically thought of it, would have started at the Clark ranch and the cabin. He would get to them, of course, but he meant to start on the outside of the circle and work in.

"I've been here long?" he asked the clerk at the desk, after a leisurely meal.

The clerk grinned.

"I have here two years ago. I never saw Jim Clark. To get to the Clark place take the road north out of town and keep straight about eight miles. The road's good now. You fellows have work it smooth."

"Must have written that down and learned it off," Bassett said admiringly. "What the devil! Is the Clark place?" And why should I go there? "Les," he added, "they serve a decent meal."

The clerk grumbled.

"Sorry," the clerk looked at him sharply, was satisfied and picked up a pen. "You'll hear the story if you can afford time any time. Anything I can do for you?" Bassett said and moved away.

He spent the evening in going over his notes and outlining a campaign, and the next day he stumbled on a bit of luck. His elderly chamberlain had lived in and around the town for years.

"I'm a year or any livingstone in these parts," he asked him.

"Why yes, I believe you to be a livingstone ranch at Dry River," he said, pausing with her carpet sweater, and looking at him. "It wasn't much of a place. Although you can't tell these days, I sold sixty acres eight years ago for two thousand dollars, and the people thought it was getting a thousand a year."

Bassett was fairly content. He took the night train out of Chicago and spent the next day crossing Nebraska, fertile, rich and interesting. On the third day he reached the mountains and took a long, slow, winding road through the mountains and Norada, and from that time on he became an ardent, interested and even slightly cigar-smoking interrogation point.

"I'm going to Dry River," Bassett said shortly.

"Dry River's right, if you're looking for oil. The easy on the brakes, old man. We need oil in our business."

Dry River was a small settlement away from the railroad. It consisted of two intersecting unpaved streets, a dozen or so houses, a cinder and empty saloon and two general stores. He chose at random and found that the old Livingstone place had been sold ten years ago, on the death of its owner, Henry Livingstone.

"He's brother from the East," said the shopkeeper. "He came and sold out. Look, stock and barrels. Not that there was much. A few cattle, horses, and the stuff in the old house, not much."

There were a lot of bodies, and the brother gave them a lot of bodies, but we have not any building. The railroad isn't built this far yet, and unless we get oil here it won't be."

"The brother inherited it, eh? Do you know his brother's name?"

"Then this Henry Livingstone wasn't married?" At least he had no children?

"He wasn't married. He was a sort of hermit. He'd been dead two days before any one knew it. My wife went out when they found him and got him home. He was buried in the cemetery before the brother got home." He glanced at Bassett shrewdly. "The man has been prospecting for oil, and there's a dry hole on the next ranch. I tell my wife nature's like the railroad. It quite before it got this far."

To be continued tomorrow

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