

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

THE BREAKING POINT

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

Author of "Daughters Day," "K," "The Amazing Interlude," and many other successful novels. Copyright, 1922, Mary Roberts Rinehart, published by arrangement with McClure's.

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

DR. DAVID LIVINGSTON, chief physician to the hospital, a small, earnest, kind man, who has a secret concerning the identity of the nurse who was with the patient.

LUCY, his sister, beloved by everybody in town.

DR. DICK LIVINGSTON, to whose mind she clings, a man who is determined to find out who the nurse is, and to bring her to justice.

DR. LUCAS, an elderly, kindly man, who is full of vitality and has a great deal to say about the nurse's case.

BEATRICE WHEELER, a handsome girl who has been very successful.

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because both she and Dick were content just to get on with their lives and were holding their secret between them.

"Well, well," said David. "And you're not a doctor? And I'm the patient and you're the doctor? And good medicine you are, my dear."

He looked her over with approval, and with speculation, too.

She was a small and fragile vessel on which to embark all the hopes that were in his own cobwebbed and unfulfilled life. He had dreamed for Dick. She was even more than that. If Lucy was right, from now on she was a part of that mysterious, unexplained, unaccountable thing which he had begun with only a professional interest, but which had ended by becoming a vital part of his own life. She was a little shy with him, but she was rather blithe and nervous, yet radiantly happy. The combination of these mixed emotions, plus her best-room manner, made her a very attractive person. He was telling him the small news of the village, although David rather suspected her of listening for Dick's car all the while. When she got up to go and laid out her hand he kept it, and held it of his.



"Louis Bassett has started for Norada and I advise your getting the papers we discussed out of town as soon as possible."

disinterested people. He would have to put his situation clearly before them and let them judge. And he would have to clarify that situation for them and for himself.

He had had a weak moment or two. He knew that some men, many men, went to marriage with certain reservations, meaning to wipe the slate clean and begin again. He had a man's understanding of such concealments.

But he did not for a moment compare his situation with theirs. No mere misadventure, but something hidden and perhaps terrible lay behind David's strange new attitude; lay, too, behind the analytical and professional detachment. The mind in such cases set up its defensive machinery of forgetfulness, not against the trivial but against the unbearable.

For the last day or two he had faced the fact that not only must he use every endeavor to revive his past, but that such revival threatened with reality and finality to separate him from the present.

With an open and unread letter in his hand he stared at the office. This place was his; he had fought for it, worked for it. He had an almost ungodly sense of unseemly hands reaching out to drag him away from it; from David and Lucy, and from Elizabeth. And of himself holding desperately to them all, and to the beloved common-lace of his surroundings.

He shook himself and began to read the letter.

"Dear Doctor: I have tried to see you, but understand you are laid up. I'm sorry as soon as you're ready, I'll advise your getting the person who is in charge of the Norada case. I've discussed out of town as soon as possible. Bassett is up to mischief. I'm not signing this fully, for obvious reasons. G."

The Sayre house stood on the hill behind the town, a long, rather low white house on Italian lines. In summer, until the family exodus to the Maine coast, the brilliant canopy which extended over the terrace indicated, Harrison Miller put it, that the family was "in residence." Originally designed as a summer home, Mrs. Sayre now used it the year round. There was nothing there, as there was in the town house, to remind her of the bitter days before her widowhood.

She was a short, heavy woman, of fine taste in her house and of no taste whatever in her clothing.

"I never know," said Harrison Miller, "when I look up at the Sayre place, whether I'm seeing Ann Sayre or an awning."

She was not a shrewd woman, nor a clever one, but she was kindly in the main, tolerant and maternal. She liked young people, gave gay little parties, and was always her own mistress in the matter of colors and all cuts, having

twenty-five she felt he should be through with them.

"The south room could be the nursery."

On Decoration Day, as usual, she did her dutiful best by the community, sent flowers to the cemetery and even stood through a chilly hour there while services were read and taps sounded over the graves of those who had died in three wars. She felt very grateful that Wallie had come back safely, and that if only some happy marry and settle down all would be well.

The service left her emotionally untouched. She was one of those women who saw in war, politics, even religion, only their reaction on themselves and their affairs. She had taken the German deluge as a personal affliction. And she stood only stoically enduring while the village soprano sang "The Star Spangled Banner." By the end of the service she had decided that Elizabeth Wheeler was the answer to her problem.

By her under pressure, Wallie lunched with her at the country club, but she found him evasive and not particularly happy.

"You're twenty-five, you know," she said, toward the end of a discussion. "By thirty you'll be too set in your habits, too hard to please."

"I'm not going to marry for the sake of getting married, mother."

"Of course not. But you have a good bit of money. You'll have much more when I'm gone. And money carries responsibility with it."

He glanced at her, looked away, rapped a fork on the tablecloth.

"It takes two to make a marriage, mother."

He closed up after that, but she had learned what she wanted.

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He worked eagerly, and at last he came to the small core of the mass. It was a cigar.

It was somewhat later, when the peace of some tobacco had relaxed him into a sort of benignant drowsiness, and when Dick had started for his late afternoon calls, that Lucy came into the room.

"Elizabeth Wheeler's downstairs," she said. "I told her you wanted to see her. She's brought some chicken jelly, too."

She gathered up the tissue paper that surrounded him, and gave the room a critical survey. She often felt that the nurse was not so tidy as she might be. Then she went over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't want to worry you, David. Not now. But if he's going to marry her, why shouldn't he?" she demanded truculently. "A good woman would be one more anchor to windward."

She found that she could not go on. David was always incomprehensible to her when it came to Dick. Had been incomprehensible from the first. But she could not proceed without telling him that the village knew something, and what that something was; that already she felt a change in the local attitude toward Dick. He was, for one thing, not quite so busy as he had been. She went out of the room, and sent Elizabeth to David.

In her love for Dick, Elizabeth now included everything that pertained to him—his shabby coats, his rattling car, and his people. She had an impatient desire for their indorsement, to be liked by them and wanted by them. Not that there could be any words,

"I haven't been studying symptoms for all these years for nothing, my dear," he said. "It seems to me somebody is very busy."

"I am, Doctor David."

He patted her hand.

"Mind you," he said, "I don't know anything and I'm not asking any questions. But if the Board of Trade, or the Chief of Police, had come to me and said, 'Who is the best wife for—well, for a young man who is an important part of this community?' I'd have said in reply, 'Gentlemen, there is a Miss Elizabeth Wheeler who—'

Suddenly she bent down and kissed him.

"Oh, do you think so?" she asked, breathlessly. "I love him so much, Doctor David. And I feel so unworthy."

"So you are," he said. "So's he. So are all of us, when it comes to a great love, child. That is, we are never quite what the other fellow thinks we are. It's when we don't allow for what the scientist folk call a margin of error that we come our croppers. I scolded"—he watched her closely—"if you young people ever allow for a margin of error?"

"I only know this," she said steadily. "I can't imagine ever caring any less. I've never thought about myself very much, but I do know that, you see, I think I've cared for a long time."

When she had gone he sat in his chair staring ahead of him and thinking. Yes, she would stick. She had loyalty—loyalty and patience and a rare humility. It was up to Dick then. And again he faced the possibility of being loved in the past, of crowding memories of confusion and

despair and even actual danger. And out of that, what?

Habit. That was all he had to depend on. The brain was a thing of habits, like the body; right could be a habit, and so could evil. As a man thought, so he was. For all of his childhood, and for the last ten years, Dick's mental habits had been right; his environment had been right; his teaching responsible. Even if the door opened, then, there was only the evil thinking of two or three reckless years to combat, and the door might never open. Happiness, Louie had said, would keep it closed, and Dick was happy.

When at 3 o'clock the nurse came in with a thermometer he was asleep in his chair, his mouth slightly open, and snoring valiantly. Hearing Dick in the lower hall, she went to the head of the stairs, her finger to her lips.

Dick nodded and went into the office. This afternoon mail was lying there, and he began mechanically to open it. His thoughts were elsewhere.

Now that he had taken the step he had so firmly determined not to take, certain things, such as Clara Rossiter's story, David's unbusiness, his own doubts, no longer involved himself alone, nor even Elizabeth and himself. They had become of vital importance to her family.

There was no evading the issue. What had once been only his own misfortune, inasmuch as whatever it was, had now become of vital importance to an entire group of hitherto

disinterested people. He would have to put his situation clearly before them and let them judge. And he would have to clarify that situation for them and for himself.

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