# 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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WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

*DR. DAVID LIVINGSTONE, chief physician in Haverin, a small town, genial but blue. He shares a secret concerning identity of their beloved nephew with*

*LUCY, his sister, beloved by everybody in town.*

*DR. DICK LIVINGSTONE, in whose memory there is a gap, and who is determined some day to go back to Nevada, his childhood home, in order to bridge the gap. He is full of vitality and is boyish looking and acting in spite of his thirty years and professional career. He is in love with*

*ELIZABETH WHEELER, a wholesome girl, who loves him very sincerely.*

*BEVERLY CARLYSLE, actress, who, ten years before, was mixed up in a curious story. Her husband, Lucas, had been shot to death, as was generally believed, by a certain Jud Clark, a rich young man about town. Clark had disappeared immediately and it was believed he perished in a blizzard.*

*HARRISON MILLER, a neighbor, who knows something of the secret.*

*FRED GREGORY, Beverly's brother, and manager, whose researches line him up with*

*LOUIS BASSETT, a newspaperman, who suspects that Dick Livingstone is Jud Clark. His desire is to clear things up.*

*NINA, Elizabeth's sister, an extravagant young wife.*

*LESLIE WARD, Elizabeth's brother-in-law.*

*MR. AND MRS. WHEELER, typical American parents.*

*WALLIE SAYRE, a rich youth whose socially select mother wishes him to marry Elizabeth, with whom he is smitten.*

"It gives me a fighting chance, anyhow. That's all I want."

"It's the Answer"

WHEN he had finished the reading Dick sat for a moment with the papers in his hand, thinking.

"I see," he said finally. "Of course, it's possible. Good God, if I could only think it!"

"It's the answer," David said stubbornly. "He was prowling around and fired through the window. Donaldson made the state prisoner, of course, but that some one had been seen on the place and that he noticed you the night after dinner. He'd put guards around the place."

"It gives me a fighting chance, anyhow," Dick got up and threw back his shoulders. "That's all I want. A chance to fight. I know this. I hated Lucas—he was a poor thing and you know what he did to me. But I never thought of killing him. That wouldn't have helped matters. It was too late."

"What about—that?" David asked, not looking at him. When Dick did not immediately reply David glanced at him, to find his face set and pained.

"Perhaps we'd better not go into that now," David said hastily. "It's natural that the readjustments will take time."

"We'll have to go into it. It's the hardest thing I have to face."

"It's not dead, then?"

"No," Dick said quietly. "It's not dead, David. And I'd better bring it into the open. I've fought it to the limit by myself. It's the one thing that seems to have survived the shipwreck. I can't argue it down or think it down."

"Maybe, if you see Elizabeth—"

"I'd break her heart, that's all."

He tried to make David understand. He told in its sordid details his failure to kill it, his attempts to sink himself and conscience in Chicago and their failure, the continued presence of Elizabeth and what seemed to him the flesh and reality of the dream woman. That she was yesterday was Elizabeth was long ago.

"I can't argue it down," he finished. "I've tried to, desperately. It's a—I think it's a wicked thing, in a way. And God knows all she ever got out of it was suffering. She must bear the thought of me."

David was compelled to let it rest there. He found that Dick was doggedly determined to see Beverly Carlyle. After that he didn't know. No man wanted to surrender himself for trial unless he was sure himself of whether he was innocent or guilty. If there was a reasonable doubt—but what did it matter one way or the other? His place was gone, as he had made it gone if he was cleared, gone if he was convicted.

"I can't come back, David. They wouldn't have me."

After a silence he asked:

"How much is known here? What does Elizabeth know?"

"The town knows nothing. She knows a part of it. She guesses a great deal, Dick. It's a tragedy for her."

"Shall you tell her I have been here?"

"Not unless you intend to see her."

But Dick shook his head.

"Even if other things were the same I haven't a right to see her until I've got a clean slate."

"That's sheer sensitiveness," David said, almost with irritation.

"Yes," Dick acknowledged gravely. "It is sheer sensitiveness."

"What about the policeman?" he inquired after a silence. "I was photographed at Nevada. I suppose they have me?"

"Yes. The house was watched for a while, I understand they've given it up now."

In response to questions about his own condition Dick was almost irritable. He was all right. He would get well if they'd let him, and if people would let him. He would get to work, he would pay them. He was good for some money yet, before he died, and he intended to make it, in a court if necessary.

"They can't prove it, Dick," he said triumphantly. "I've been over it every day for months. There never was a shot fired in your quarter. There's a lot of things we'll show them, and we'll show them up. We'll show them up."

But no, and the excitement fatigue was telling on him, Lucy arrived at the door and came in.

"You've been long enough, anyhow. Before it spoils, she says. All that's needed is a rest. Dr. Richard is in the office. I haven't told him, of course."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Time for that later," Dick said. "I can't keep him out of my house, I suppose, I can get rid of my family's affairs for an hour or so."

So it happened that Dick followed Lucy down the back stairs and ate his meal standing in the kitchen.

"I don't like you to eat there," she protested.

"I've eaten in worse places," he said, smiling at her. "And sometimes not at all." He was immediately sorry for that, for the tears came to her eyes.

He broke as gently as he could the news that he could not stay, that it was a great blow to her. His smiling chin quivered piteously, and it took all his cheerfulness he could summon and all the promises of return he could make to soften the shock.

"You haven't even seen Elizabeth," she said at last.

"That will have to wait until things are cleared up, Aunt Lucy."

"Won't you write for something then, Richard? She looks like a ghost these days."

Her eyes were on him, puzzled and wistful. He met them gravely.

"I haven't the right to see her or to write to her."

And the finality in his tone closed the discussion, that and something, too, close to despair in his face.

For all his earlier hunger he ate very little, and soon after he tiptoed up the stairs again to David's room. When he came down to the kitchen later on he found her still there, at the table where he had left her, her arms across it and her face buried in them. On a chair was the suitcase she had hastily packed for him, and a roll of bills lay on the table.

"You must take it," she insisted. "It breaks my heart to think—Dick, I have the feeling that I am seeing you for the last time." Then for fear she had hurt him she forced a determined smile. "Don't pay any attention to me. David will tell you that I have said, over and over, that I'd never see you again. And here you are!"

He was going. He had said good-bye to David and was going at once. She accepted it with a stoicism born of many years of hail and farewell, kissed him tenderly, let her hand linger for a moment on the rough sleeve of his coat, and then let him out by the kitchen door into the yard. But long after he had gone she stood in the doorway staring out.

In the office Dr. Reynolds was finishing a long and carefully written letter.

"I am not good at putting myself on paper, as you know, dear boy. But this I do know. I do not believe that real love dies. We may bury it so deep that it seems to be entirely dead, but some day it sends up a shoot, and it takes lives or the business of living it has to be begun all over again. So when we quarrel, I always know——"

The evening had shaken Dick profoundly. David's appearance and Lucy's grief and premonition, most of all the face of Elizabeth, had bewildered and unnerved him. Even the assertion of his own innocence was silenced in an overwhelming yearning for the old house and the old life.

The ugly side window as he went toward the street he could see Reynolds at his desk in the office, and he was possessed by a fierce jealousy and resentment at his presence there. The living-room window was dark, and he stopped outside and looked at it. He would have given his hope of immortality that night to have been sitting there, to be working over his notes and his patients, his books and his pipe. Even the memory of certain dusky evenings spent in apparently perverse argument with him, and sent the blood to his head in a wave of unreasoning anger and bitterness.

He had no will desire to go in at the front door to find Reynolds in his easy chair, smoking and drive him out to demand his place in the world and take it. He could hardly tear himself away.

Under a street lamp he looked at his watch. It was 11 o'clock, and he had a half hour to spare before train time. Following an impulse he did not analyze he turned toward the Wheeler house. Once he had thought that he turned in that direction only with this difference, that then he went with a sort of furtive expectancy, as if that now he expected to see him. Yet that it somehow drew him he knew. Not with the yearning he had felt toward the old brick house, but with the poignancy of a lost past happiness. He did not love, but he remembered.

Yes, for a man who did not love, he was oddly angry at the sight of two young figures on the doorstep. Their clear voices came to him across the quiet street, vibrant and full of youth. It was the Sayre boy and Elizabeth.

He half stopped and looked across. They were quite oblivious of him, intent and self-absorbed. As he viewed Reynolds' unconscious figure with jealous dislike, so he viewed Wallace Sayre. Here, everywhere, his place was filled. He was angry with unreasoning, inexplicable anger, angry at Elizabeth, angry at the boy, and at himself.

He had but to cross the street and take his place there. He could drive that beardless youngster away with a word. The furious possessive jealousy of the male animal, which had nothing to do with love, made him stop and draw himself up as he started across.

Then he smiled wryly and went on. He could do it, but he did not want to. He would never do it. Let them live their lives, and let him live his. But he knew that there, across the street, so near that he might have raised his voice and summoned her, he was leaving the best thing that had come into his life; the one fine and good thing, outside of David and Lucy. That against its loss he had nothing but an infatuation that had ruined three lives already, and was not yet finished.

He stopped and, turning, looked back. He saw the girl bend down and put a hand on Wallie Sayre's shoulder, and the boy's face upturned and looking into hers. He shook himself and went on. After all, that was best. He felt no anger now. She deserved better than to be used to help a man work out his salvation. She deserved youth and joyousness, and the forgetfulness that comes with time. She was already forgetting.

He smiled again as he went on up the street, but his hands as he buttoned his overcoat were shaking.

It was shortly after that that he met the rector, Mr. Oglethorpe. He passed him quickly, but was conscious that the clergyman had stopped and was staring after him. Half an hour later, sitting in the empty smoker of the train, he wondered if he had not made something there. Perhaps the church could have helped him, a good man's simple belief in right and wrong. He was adrift in a gray no-man's land without faith or compass.

David had given him the location of Bassett's apartment house and he found it quickly. He was in a state of nervous irritability by that time, for the sense of being a fugitive was constantly stressed in the familiar streets by the danger of recognition. It was in vain that he argued with himself that only the police were interested in his movements, and the criminal rounded up not at all. He found himself slipping away from them like a nervous horse.

But if he expected any surprise from Bassett he was disappointed. He greeted him as if he had seen him yesterday, and explained his lack of amusement in his first words.

"Doctor Livingstone telephoned me. Sit down, man, and let me look at you. You've given me more trouble than any human being on earth."

"Sorry," Dick said awkwardly. "I seem to have a faculty of involving other people in my difficulties."

"Want a drink?"

"No, thanks. I'll smoke, if you have any tobacco. I've been afraid to risk a shop."

Bassett talked cheerfully as he found cigarettes and matches.

"The old boy had a different ring in his voice tonight. He was going down pretty fast, Livingstone; was giving up the fight. But I fancy you've given him a new grip on the earth."

When they were seated, however, a sort of awkwardness developed. To Dick Bassett had been a more or less shadowy memory, clouded over with the details and miseries of the fight. And Bassett found Dick greatly altered. He was older than he remembered him. The sort of boyishness which had come with the resurrection of his early identity had gone, and the man who sat before him was grave, weary, and much older. But his gaze was clear and direct.

"Well, a good bit of water has gone over the dam since we met," Bassett said. "I nearly broke a leg going down that infernal mountain again and I don't mind telling you that I came within an ace of landing in the Nevada jail. They knew I'd helped you get away. But they couldn't prove it.

"I got out, because I didn't see any need of dragging you down with me. I was a good bit of a mess just then, but I could reason that out anyhow. It wasn't entirely unselfish, either. I had a better chance without you. Or I thought I did."

To be continued tomorrow

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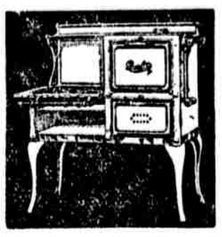

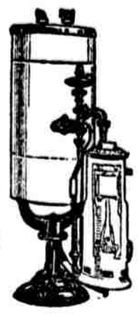

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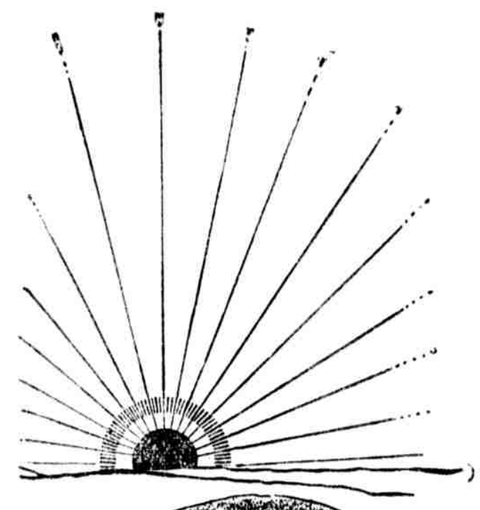

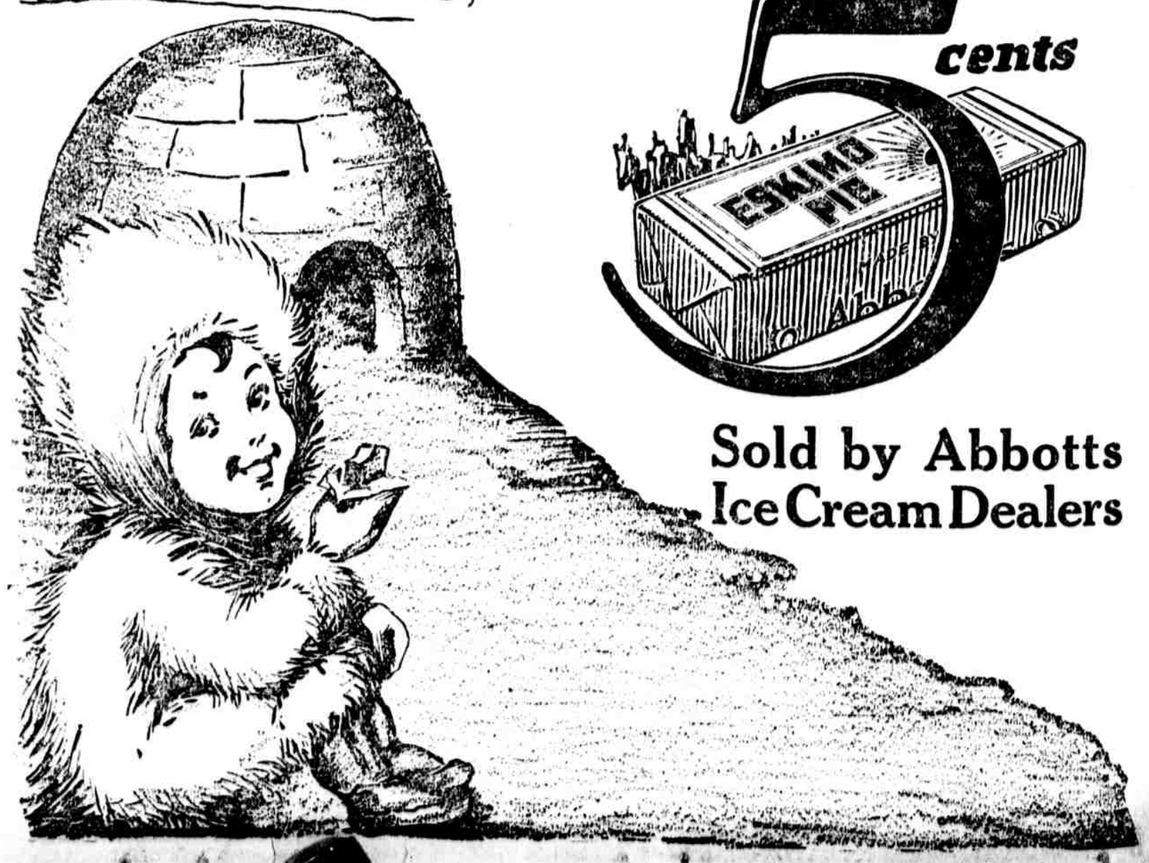


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