

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.

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

DR. DAVID LIVINGSTONE, chief physician at Beverly, a small town, great but kind. He is a great concern for the identity of his beloved nephew.

LUCAS, his sister, beloved by everybody in town.

DR. DICK LIVINGSTONE, in whose memory this story is told. He is a determined man, a man of honor, a man of courage. He is full of vitality and is looking for a new life in the city.

ELIZABETH WHEELER, a wholesome girl, who looks like a saint.

BEVERLY CARLYLE, actress, who has been in the city for some time. She is a beautiful girl, and is looking for a new life in the city.

MARION MILLER, a neighbor, who looks like a saint.

EDDIE GREGORY, Beverly's brother and neighbor, whose interests are in the city.

LUCAS BASSETT, a newspaperman, who is looking for a new life in the city.

WANDA, Elizabeth's sister, an extraordinary young girl.

ERLIE WARD, Elizabeth's brother-in-law.

MR. AND MRS. WHEELER, the American parents.

WILLIAM BASSETT, a young man who is looking for a new life in the city.



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"Well, Clark," he said coolly, "I guess you didn't expect to see me, did you?"

He made no offer to shake hands as Dick turned from the window, nor did Dick make any overture. But there was no animosity at first in either face; Gregory was easy and assured, Dick grave, and Bassett thought, slightly impatient. From that night in his apartment the reporter had realized that he was constantly fighting a sort of passive resistance in Dick, a determination not at any cost to involve Beverly. Behind that, too, he felt that still another battle was going on, one at which he could only guess, but which made Dick somber at times and grimly quiet always.

"I meant to look you up," was his reply to Gregory's nonchalant greeting.

"Well, your friend here did that for you," Gregory said, and smiled across at Bassett. "He has his own methods, and I'll say they're effective."

He took off his overcoat and hung it on the bed, and then a swift, appealing glance at Dick. It was on Dick that he was banking, not on Bassett. He hated and feared Bassett. He hated Dick, but he was not afraid of him. He lit a cigarette and faced Dick with a malicious smile.

"So here we are, again, Jud?" he

you remember, Jud, having a revolver and Lucas taking it from you?"

"No, Donaldson testified I'd had a revolver."

"Well, that's how we figure he'd got the gun. She thought at once that Lucas and you had quarreled, and that he was going to shoot. She tried to take it from him, but he was drunk and stubborn. It went off and killed him."

Bassett leaned forward.

"That's straight, is it?"

"I'm telling you."

"Then why in God's name didn't she say that at the inquest?"

"She was afraid it wouldn't be believed. Look at the facts. She'd quarreled with Lucas. There had been a notorious situation with regard to Clark. And remember this. She had done it. I know her well enough, however, to say that she would have confessed, eventually, but Clark had beaten her to it. It was reasonably sure that he was lost in the blizzard. You've got to allow for that."

Bassett said nothing. After a silence Dick spoke.

"What about the revolver?"

"She had it in her hand. She dropped it and stood still, too stunned to scream. Lucas, she says, took a step or two forward, and fell through the doorway. Donaldson came running in, and you know the rest."

Bassett was the first to break the silence.

"She will be willing to testify to that now, of course?"

"Not necessarily. Clark would be on trial. He's been indicted. He has to be tried."

"Why does he have to be tried? He's free now. He's been free for ten years. And I tell you as an honest opinion that the thing would kill her. Accident and all, she did it. And there would be some who'd never believe she hadn't killed of Lucas, and wanted the Clark money."

"That's a chance she'll have to take," Bassett said doggedly.

"The only living witness who could be called would be the rascal. And remember this: for ten years he has believed that she did it. He'll have built up a story by this time, perhaps unconsciously, that might damn her."

Dick moved.

"There's only one thing to do. You're right, Gregory. I'll never expose her to that."

"You're crazy," Bassett said angrily. "Not at all. I told you I wouldn't hide behind a woman. As a matter of fact, I've learned what I wanted. Lucas wasn't murdered. I didn't shoot him. That's what really matters. I'm no worse off than I was before, considerably better, in fact. And I don't see what's to be gained by going any further."

In spite of his protests, Bassett was compelled finally to agree. He was sulky and disgruntled. He saw the profound antipathy to all his effort of Dick wandering out again, legally dead and legally guilty, and he swore roundly under his breath.

"All right," he grunted at last. "I guess that's the last word, Gregory. But you tell her from me that if she doesn't reopen the matter of her own accord, she'll have a man's life on her conscience."

"I'll not tell her anything about it."

I'm not only her brother; I'm her manager now. And I'm not kicking any hole in the boat that floats me."

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"Well," he said, "here we are, all dressed up and nowhere to go!"

He wandered around the room, restless and disappointed. He knew, and Dick knew, that they had come to the end of the road, and that nothing lay beyond. In his own unpleasant way Fred Gregory had made a case for his sister that tied their hands, and the crux of the matter had lain in his final gibe: "As a man sows, Clark, so shall he reap." The moral issue was there.

"I suppose the Hines story goes by the board, eh?" he commented after a pause.

"Yes. Except that I wish I'd known about him when I could have done something. He's my half-brother, any way you look at it, and he had a rotten deal. Sometimes a man sows, he adds, with a very smile, "and the other fellow reaps."

Bassett went out after that, going to the office on the chance of a letter from Melis, but there was none. When he came back he found Dick standing over a partially packed suitcase, and knew that they had come to the end of the road indeed.

"What's the next step?" he asked bluntly.

"I'll have to leave here. It's too expensive."

"And after that, what?"

"I'll get a job. I suppose a man as well hidden here as anywhere. I can grow a beard—that's the usual thing, isn't it?"

Bassett made an impatient gesture, and fell to pacing the floor. "It's incredible," he said, "it's monstrous. It's a joke. Here you are, without a

thing against you, and hung like Mahomet's coffin between heaven and earth. It makes me sick."

He went home that night, leaving word to have any letters for 1.23 forwarded, but without much hope. His last clutch of Dick's hand had a sort of desperate finality in it, and he carried with him most of the way home the tall, worn and rather shabby figure that saw him off with a smile.

By the next afternoon's mail he received a note from New York, with a few words of comment pencilled on it in Dick's writing. "This came this evening. I sent back the money, D."

The note was from Gregory and had

eventually included a \$100 bill. It began without apperception: "I enclose and \$100, as I imagine funds may be short. If I were you I'd get out of here. There has been considerable excitement, and you know too many people in this burg."

Bassett sat back in his chair and studied the note.

"Now why the devil did he do that?" he reflected. He sat for some time, thinking deeply, and he came to one important conclusion. The story Gregory had told was the one which was absolutely calculated to shut off all further inquiry. They had had ten years; ten years to plan, eliminate and con-

struct; ten years to prepare the "case," in case Clark turned up. What was the story? But he had not been counting to let well enough alone; he had gone overreached himself.

Then what was the answer? Who had killed Lucas, but was it an accident? And there must have been a witness, or they would have had nothing to fear. He wrote out on a bit of paper three names, and sat looking at them: Hattie Thorwald, Jean Melis, Clifton Hines.

To be continued tomorrow

In a faint Gregory sat tense and erect, gnawing at his blood-mustache. After a time he said:

"What are you after, in all this?"

"The story, I suppose. And the money. I dare say you're not doing it for love."

Bassett surveyed him appraisingly.

"You wouldn't understand my motives if I told you. As a matter of fact, he doesn't want the money."

Gregory sneered.

"Don't kid yourself," he said. "However, as a matter of fact I don't think he'll take it. It might cost too much. Where is he? Shooting pills again?"

"You'll see him in about five minutes."

If the news was a surprise Gregory gave no evidence of it, except to comment:

"You're a capable person, aren't you? I'll bet you could find a place if you were put to it."

He carried the situation well, the reporter had to admit; the only evidence he gave of strain was that the hands with which he lighted a cigarette were unsteady. He surveyed the obscure hotel at which the cab stopped with a sneering smile, and settled his collar as he looked it over.

"Not advertising to the world that you're in town, I see."

"Well, don't worry. The laugh he got at that struck unpleasantly on Bassett's ears. But inside the building he lost some of his audacity. "Give place to find Jud and Clark," he said once.

And again:

"You'd better watch him when I go. He may bite me."

To which Bassett grimly returned: "He's probably rather particular what he bites."

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