

THE BREAKING POINT

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

Author of "Dangerous Days," "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 LIVINGSTONE, chief physician at the hospital, a man of great skill and a noble heart. He shows a secret concern for the fate of his patients.

DR. DICK LIVINGSTONE, in whose name there is a gun, and who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. CLARK, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. MELLS, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. HARRISON MILLER, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. FRED GIBSON, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. JOHN BASKETT, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. NINA, a woman of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do her duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. LESLIE WARD, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. ANDREW WHEELER, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.

DR. LESLIE WARD, a man of great skill and a noble heart, who is determined to do his duty in order to bridge the gulf between the two brothers.



"Has he gone back to her? To the actress he used to care for?"

Leslie's Confession

"I'M GOING to tell you something. I know it's safe with you, and I need some advice. I called on a woman this afternoon. You know who she is, Beverly? Careful?"

"That's not the point," Leslie declared, in a tranquil voice. "I'm not defending myself. She's a friend and I got a right to call on her."

"Sure you have," soothingly.

"Well, you know the situation at home, and who Livingston actually is. The point is that, while that poor kid at home is sitting around waiting for me with grief, Clark's gone back to her. To Beverly Ostie."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him this afternoon. At her house."

He sat still, moodily reviewing the situation. His thoughts were a chaotic and unpleasant mixture of jealousy, fear of Nina, anxiety over Elizabeth's sense of duty, and a vague, undefined sense of the future.

"She's a nice kid," he said. "I'm fond of her. And I don't know what to do."

Suddenly Joe grinned.

"I see," he said. "And you can't tell her, or the family, where you saw him?"

"Not without raising the dust of a row."

He began, automatically, to dress for dinner. Joe moved around the room, rang for a waiter, ordered orange juice and ice, and produced a bottle of gin from his bag. Leslie did not hear him. He was reflecting bitterly on the fact that a man who married built himself a wall against romance, or wall compounded of his own new sense of responsibility, of family ties, and fear.

Joe brought him a cocktail.

"Drink it, old dear," he said. "And when it's down I'll tell you a few little things about playing around with ladies who have a past. Here's to forgetting 'em."

Leslie took the glass.

"Right-o," he said.

He went home the following day, leaving Joe to finish the business in New York. His golf rather resembled a flight. Tossing sleepless the night before, he had found what many a man had discovered before him, that his love of clandestine adventures was not as strong as his caution. He had had a shock. True, his affair with Beverly had been a formless thing, a matter of imagination and a desire to assure himself that romance, for him, was not yet dead. True, too, that he had nothing to fear from Dick Livingstone. But the encounter had brought home to him the danger of this old-new game he was playing. He was running like a frightened child.

He thought of various plans. One of them was to tell Nina the truth, take his medicine of tears and coldness, and then go to Mr. Wheeler. Or was to go to Mr. Wheeler, without Nina, and make his humiliating admission. But Walter Wheeler had his own rigid ideas, was uncompromising in rectitude, and would understand as only a man could that, while so far he had been only mentally unfaithful, he had been actuated by at least subconscious desire.

His own awareness of that fact made him more cautious than he need have been, perhaps more self-conscious. And he genuinely cared for Elizabeth. It was, on the whole, a generous and kindly impulse that lay behind his ultimate resolution to tell her that her desertion was both selfish and cruel.

Yet, when the time came, he found it hard to tell her. He took her for a drive one evening soon after his return, forcibly drawing off Wallis Sarge to do so, and saying a few words to her when her job, rather set face. He found a quiet lane and stopped the car there, and then turned and faced her.

"How've you been, little sister, while I've been watering the gay white way?" he asked.

"I've been all right, Leslie."

"Not quite all right, I think. Have you ever thought, Elizabeth, that no man on earth is worth what you've been going through?"

"I'm all right, I tell you," she said impatiently. "I'm not grieving any more. That's the truth, Les. I know now that he doesn't intend to come back, and I don't care. I never even think about him, now."

"I see," he said. "Well, that's that. But he had no intention of leaving her in that position, and was started to hear her say:

"Well? Go on."

"What do you mean, go on?"

"You brought me out here to tell me something."

"Not at all. I simply—"

"Where is he? You've seen him?"

He tried to meet her eyes, failed, cursed himself for a fool, Elizabeth. "He's alive and well, Elizabeth. I saw him in New York."

It was a full minute before she spoke again, and then her lips were stiff and her voice strained.

"Has he gone back to her? To the actress he used to care for?"

He hesitated, but he knew he would have to go on.

"I'm going to tell you something, Elizabeth. It's not very creditable to me, but I'll have to trust you. I don't want to see you wasting your life. You've got plenty of courage and a lot of spirit. And you've got to forget him."

He told her, and then he took her home. He was a little frightened, for there was something not like her in the way she had taken it, a sort of immobility that might, he thought, cover heartbreak. But she smiled when she thanked him, and went very calmly into the house.

That night she accepted Wallis Sarge.

Bassett was having a visitor. He sat in his chair while that visitor ranged excitedly up and down the

room, a short, stout man, well dressed and with a mixture of severity and importance. The valet's first words, as he stood inside the door, had been significant.

"I should like to know, first, if I am talking to the police."

"No—and yes," Bassett said genially. "Come and sit down, man. What I mean is this. I am a friend of Judson Clark's, and this may or may not be a police matter. I don't know yet."

"You are a friend of Mr. Clark's?"

"Then the report was correct. He is still alive, is he?"

"Yes."

The valet got out a handkerchief and wiped his face. He was clearly moved. "I am glad of that. Very glad. I saw some months ago in a newspaper—"

"In New York," Now Melis, I've a suspicion that you know something about the crime Judson Clark was accused of. You intimated that at the inquest."

"Mrs. Lucas killed him."

"So she says," Bassett said easily. The valet jumped and stared.

"She admits it, as the result of an accident. She also admits hiding the revolver where you found it."

"Then you do not need me."

"I'm not so sure of that."

The valet was puzzled.

"I want you to think back, Melis. You saw her go down the stairs, some time before the shot. Later you were confident she had hidden the revolver, and you made a second search for it. Why? You didn't hear her testimony at the inquest then. Clark had run away. Why didn't you think Clark had done it?"

"Because I thought she was having an affair with another man. I have always thought she did it."

Bassett nodded.

"I thought so. What made you think that?"

"I'll tell you. She went West with a maid, and Mr. Clark got a Swedish woman from a ranch near to look after her, a woman named Thorwald. She lived at her own place and came over every day. One night, after Mrs. Thorwald had started home, I came across her down the road near the irrigator's house, and there was a man with her. They didn't hear me behind them, and he was giving her a note for some one in the house—the servant."

"Why not for one of the servants?"

"That's what I thought then, sir. It

want my business. But I saw the same man later on, hanging about the place at night, and once I saw her with him—Mrs. Lucas, I mean. That was in the early evening. The gentlemen were out riding, and I'd gone with one of the maids to a hill to watch the moon rise. They were on some rocks, below in the canyon."

"Did you see him?"

"I think it was the same man, if that's what you mean. I knew something queer was going on, after that, and I watched her. She went out at night more than once. Then I told Donaldson there was somebody hanging round the place and he set a watch."

"Fine. Now we'll go to the night Lucas was shot. Was the Thorwald woman there?"

"She had started home."

"Leaving Mrs. Lucas packing alone?"

"Yes. I hadn't thought of that. The Thorwald woman heard the shot and came back. I remember that, because she fainted upstairs and I had to carry her to a bed."

"I see. Now about the revolver."

"I located it the first time I looked for it. Donaldson and the others had searched the billiard room. So I tried the big room. It was under a chair. I left it there, and concealed myself in the room. Mrs. Lucas, came down late that night and hunted for it. Then she hid it where I got it later."

"I wish I knew, Melis, why you didn't bring those facts out at the inquest."

"You must remember this, sir. I had been with Mr. Clark for a long time. I knew the situation. And I thought that he had gone away that night and hunted for it. I would have told it all in court, but it never came to trial."

Bassett was satisfied and fairly content. After the Frenchman's departure he sat for some time, making careful notes and studying them. Supposing the man Melis had seen to be Clifton Hines, a good many things would be cleared up. Some new element he had to have, if Gregory's story were to be disproved, some new and different motive. Suppose, for instance—

He got up and paced the floor back and forward, forward and back. There was just one possibility, and just one way of verifying it. He sat down and wrote out a long telegram and then got his hat and carried it to the telegraph office himself. He had made his last throw.

He received a reply the following day, and in a state of exhilaration bordering on madness packed his bag, and as he packed it addressed it, after the fashion of lonely men the world over.

"Just one more," he said, "friend covered," he said, "and then you and I are going to settle down again to work. But it's some trip, old arm-breaker."

He put in his pajamas and handkerchiefs, his clean socks and collars, and then he got his revolver from a drawer and added it. Just twenty-four hours later he knocked at Dick's door in a boarding-house on West Sixth street, found it unlocked and went in. Dick was asleep, and Bassett stood looking down at him with an odd sort of water-

nal affection. Finally he bent down and touched his shoulder.

"Wake up, old top," he said. "Wake up. I have some news for you."

To be continued tomorrow

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