

The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

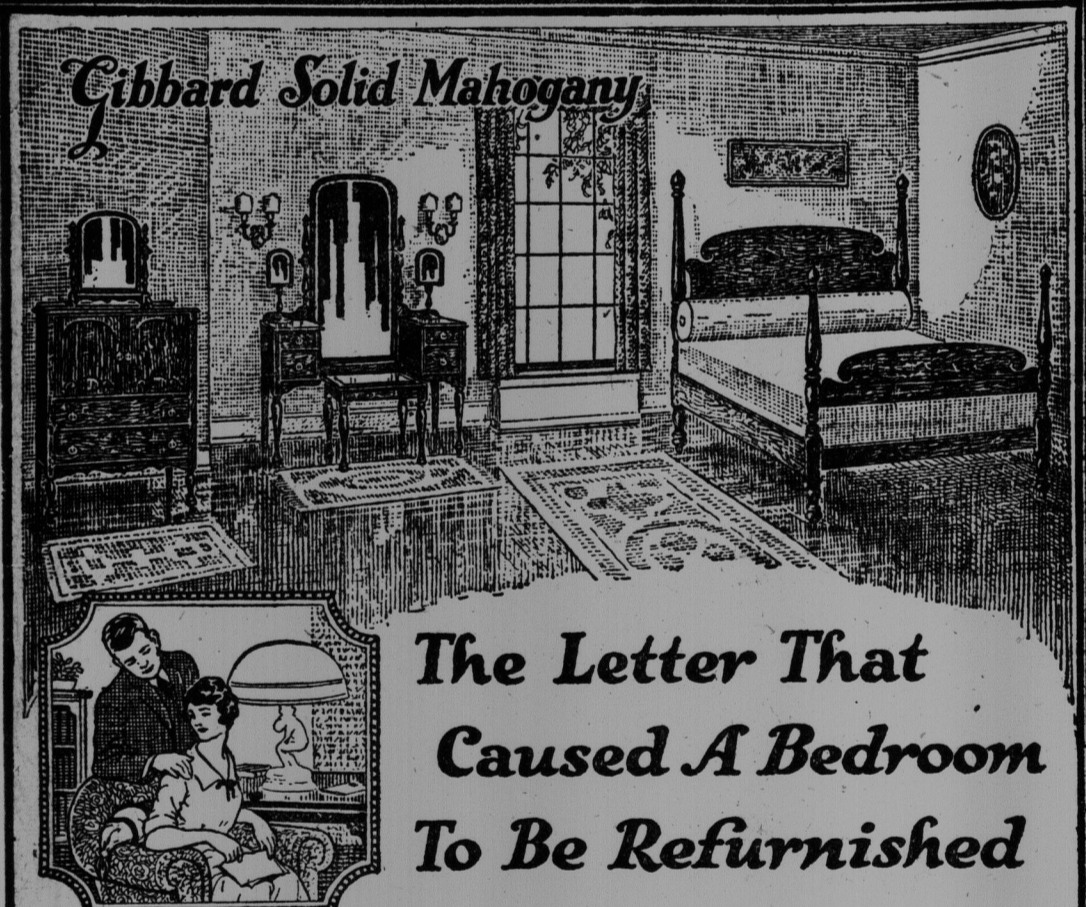
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(Continued From Saturday.)

He had thought Margaret was sleeping, but after a time she moved, and slipped her hand into his. It comforted him. That too was life. Very soon now they would be alone together again, as in the early days before the children came. All the years and the struggle, and then back where they started. But still, thank God, hand in hand. Ever since the night of Jim's death Mrs. Sayre had been a constant visitor to the house. She came in, solid, practical, and with an everyday manner, either forcedly cheerful or too decorously mournful, which made her very welcome. After the three first days, when she had practically lived at the house, there was no necessity for small retentions with her. She knew the house and the pantry and the kitchen. She had even penetrated to the second floor, and had slept a part of the first night there on the couch with golden springs which he kept because it fitted his body. She was a kindly woman, and she had shed with pity. And, because of her usual detachment from the town and sleep.

its affairs, the feeling that she was being of service gave her a little glow of content. She liked the family, too, and particularly she liked Elizabeth. But after she had seen Dick and Elizabeth together once or twice she felt that no plan she might make that would solve the problem for Wallace could possibly succeed. Lying on the old leather couch that first night, between her frequent excursions among the waking family, she had thought that out and abandoned it.

But, during the days that followed the funeral, she was increasingly anxious about Wallace. She knew that rumors of the engagement had reached him, for he was restless and irritable. He did not care to go out, but wandered about the house or until late at night sat smoking on the terrace, looking down at the town with sunken, unhappy eyes. Once or twice in the evening he had taken his car and started out, and lying awake in her French bed she would hear him coming in hours later. In the morning his eyes were suffused with his color had, and she knew that he was drinking in order to get to sleep.



The Letter That Caused A Bedroom To Be Refurnished

"WHAT'S the matter? Did letter, dear?"

"No-o-o, Fred. It's from the Campbell's. They're coming to visit us."

"The Campbell's! That's great news. But why are you looking so queer, Helen? You've always spoken so highly of the Campbell's."

"Oh! I do like the Campbell's and they gave us such a good time when we visited them last year. But I was thinking of our shabby old spare bedroom. And they had such a lovely guest room for us."

"H-m-m! It isn't very attractive," replied Fred, stroking his chin, thoughtfully.

"Honest, Fred, I'm ashamed of it. It gives visitors a bad impression. It makes people think we cannot afford anything better. Or else, that we don't care very much about the comfort of our guests."

"Nothing is too Good for Them"

"Well, I wouldn't want my old college chum, Jim Campbell, and his little wife to think that about us. Nothing is too good for them. We've been talking about re-furnishing that spare bedroom for a long time. I guess we'd better do it now."

"Fine! Fine! And let's do it right while we are about it, Fred. You know how people have admired our Gibbard Solid Walnut Dining Room Suite. Why not get a Gibbard Suite for our spare bedroom?"

"That's a Bright Idea, Helen"

"That Gibbard Dining Suite has class and it was very moderate in

price, too. We can afford to furnish the spare room in Solid Walnut or Solid Mahogany when we can get it in a Gibbard Suite at such a reasonable figure."

"That's settled then, eh, Fred? I'll meet you to-morrow at the furniture store and we'll select a Gibbard Suite. And won't one of those beautiful Gibbard Suites make our spare room a bedroom suit, a dining-room suite, a library table or writing desk from it. Hundreds of suites have been sold from the large catalogue photos of Gibbard Furniture, with satisfaction to everybody."

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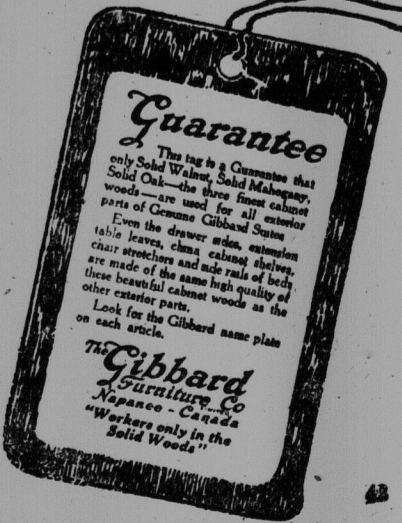
Ask to see the Gibbard Catalogue

If your dealer hasn't Gibbard Suites in stock, he can show you the Gibbard Catalogue of Queen Anne, Chippendale, Italian and Colonial Furniture. You can select a bedroom suit, a dining-room suite, a library table or writing desk from it. Hundreds of suites have been sold from the large catalogue photos of Gibbard Furniture, with satisfaction to everybody.

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On the third day after Dick's departure for the west she got up when she heard him coming in, and putting on her dressing gown and slippers, knocked at his door.

"Come in," he called ungraciously.

She found him with his coat off, standing half defiantly with a glass of whiskey and soda in his hand. She went up to him and took it from him. "We had enough of that in the family, Wallie," she said. "And it's a pretty poor resource in time of trouble. I'll have that back, if you don't mind."

"Nonsense," she said briskly, and flung it, glass and all, out of the window. She was rather impressive when she turned.

"I've been a fairly indulgent mother," she said. "I've let you alone, because it's a Sayre trait to run away when they feel a pull on the bit. But there's a limit to my patience, and it is reached when my son drinks to forget a girl."

He flushed and glowered at her in sombre silence, but she moved about the room calmly, giving it a housekeeper's critical inspection, and apparently unconscious of his anger.

"I don't believe you ever cared for any one, in all your life," he said roughly. "If you had, you would know."

She was straightening a picture over the mantel, and she completed her work before she turned.

"I care for you."

"That's different."

"Very well, then, I cared for your father. I cared terribly. And he killed my love."

She padded out of the room, her heavy square body in it blinding him a trifle rigid, but her face still and calm. He remained staring at the door when she had closed it, and for some time after. He knew what message for him had lain behind that emotionless speech of hers; not only understanding, but a warning. She had cared terribly, and his father had killed that love. He had drunk and played through his gay young life, and then he had died, and no one had greatly mourned him.

She had left the decenter on its stand, and he made a movement toward it. Then, with a half smile, he picked up and walked to the window with it. He was still smiling, half boyishly, he put out his light and got into bed. It had occurred to him that the milkman's driver, driving in at the break of dawn would encounter considerable glass.

By morning, after a bad night, he made a sort of double-headed resolution, that he was through, as he termed it, with booze, and that he would find out how he stood with Elizabeth. But for a day or two no opportunity presented itself. When he called, there was always present some grave-faced, sympathizing visitor, dark clad and low of voice, and over the drawing room would hang the indescribable crush of a house in mourning. It seemed to touch Elizabeth, too, making her remote and beyond earthly things. He would go in, burning with impatience, hungry for the mere sight of her, fairly overhauling his spirit, only to face the strange new spirituality that made him ashamed of the fleshly human urge in him.

Once he found Clare Rossiter there, and felt at once something electric in the air. After a time he identified it. Behind the Rossiter girl's soft voice and sympathetic words, there was a veiled hostility. She was always, Elizabeth, was over-conscious of her. And she was, for some reason, playing up to him. He thought he saw a faint look of relief on Elizabeth's face when Clare at last rose to go.

"I'm on my way to see the man Dick Livingston," he said to himself. "I suppose I'm a cad to put a responsibility like that on a girl."

She yearned over him, rather. She made a little tentative overture of friendship and affection. But she scarcely seemed to hear them, wrapped as he was in the selfish absorption of his disappointment. When he heard the postman outside and went to the door for the mail, she thought he had not noticed her going. But when she returned he was watching her with jealous, rather tragic eyes.

"I suppose you hear from him by mail?"

"There has been nothing today."

Something in her voice, or her face, made him look at her closely.

"Has he written at all?"

"The first day he got there. Not since."

He went away soon, and not after all with the feeling of going for good.

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He straightened, and looked past her, unseeing, at the wall. "I guess I've known it for quite a while," he said at last. "I didn't want to believe it, so I wouldn't. Are you engaged to him?"

"Yes. It's not to be known for a while, Wallie."

"He's a good fellow," he said, after rather a long silence. "Not that that makes it easier," he added with a twisted smile. Then boyishly and unexpectedly he said, "Oh, my God!"

He sat down and when the dog came and placed his head on his knee, he patted it absently. He wanted to go, but he had a queer feeling that when he went he went for good.

"I've cared for you years," he said. "I've been a poor lot, but I'd have been worse, except for you."

"And again."

"Only last night I made up my mind

that if you'd have me, I'd make something out for myself. I suppose I'm a cad to put a responsibility like that on a girl."

She gave him no chance to reply but sauntered out with her sex-conscious, half nervous walk. Outside the door she smiled faded, and her face was hard and bitter. She might forget Dick Livingston, but never would she forgive herself for her confession to Elizabeth, nor Elizabeth for having heard it.

Wallie turned to Elizabeth when she had gone, slightly bewildered.

"What's got into her?" he inquired. And then, seeing Elizabeth's white face, rather shrewdly: "That was one for him and two for you, was it?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"I wonder if you would look like that if anyone attacked me?"

"No one attacks you, Wallie."

"That's not an answer. You wouldn't, would you? It's different, isn't it?"

"Yes. A little."

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