

The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday.)
It was not until he had completed his course and come home that he had realized that David was growing old. Even then he might have felt that, by the time David was compelled to relinquish his hold on his practice, he himself would be sufficiently established to take over the support of the household. But here there was intersected a new element, one he had not counted on. David was fiercely jealous of his practice; the thought that it might pass into new and alien hands was bitter to him. To hand it down to his adopted son was one thing; to pass it over to some "young whipper-snapper" was another.

Nor were David's motives selfish or unworthy. His patients were his friends. He had a sense of responsibility to them, and very little faith in the new modern methods. He thought there was a great deal of tomfoolery about them, and he viewed the gradual loss of faith in them with alarm. When Dick wore rubber gloves during their first obstetric case together, he snorted.

"I've delivered about half the population of this town," he said, "and slipped 'em to make 'em breathe with my own bare hands. And I'm still here and so are they."

For by that time Dick had made his decision. He could not abandon David. For him then and thereafter the routine of a general practise in a suburban town, the long hours, the varied responsibilities, the feeling he had sometimes that he was doing none of them well. But for compensation he had old David's content and greater leisure, and Lucy Crosby's unspoken gratitude and love.

Now and then he chafed a little, when he read some article in a medical journal by one of his fellow enthusiasts, or when, in France, he saw men younger than himself obtaining an experience in their several specialties that would enable them to reach wide fields at home. But mostly he was content, or at least resigned. He was building up the Livingston practice, and his one anxiety was lest the time should come when more patients asked for Doctor Dick than for Doctor David.

After ten years the strangeness of his situation had ceased to be strange. Always he meant some time to go back to Norada, and there to clear up certain things, but it was a long journey, and he had very little time. And, as the years went on, the past seemed unimportant compared with the present. He gave little thought to the future. Then, suddenly, his entire attention became focused on the future.

Just when he had fallen in love with Elizabeth Wheeler he did not know. He had gone away to the war, leaving her a little girl, apparently, and he had come back to find her a woman. He did not even know he was in love, her first. It was when, one day, he found himself driving past the Wheeler house without noticing that he began to grow uneasy.

The future at once became extraordinarily important and so also, but somewhat less vitally, the past. Had he the right to marry, if he could make her care for him?
He sat in his chair by the window the night after the Homer baby's arrival, and faced his situation. Marriage meant many things. It meant love and companionship, but it also meant, should mean, children. Had he the right to go ahead and live his life fully and happily? Was there any chance that, out of the years behind him, there would come some forgotten thing, some faint or incident, to spoil the carefully woven fabrics of his life?

Not his life. His.
On the Monday night after he had asked Elizabeth to go to the theatre, he went into David's office and closed the door. Lucy, alive to every movement in the old house, heard him go in and, rocking in her chair overhead, her hands idle in her lap, waited in tense anxiety for the interview to end.

She thought she knew what Dick would ask, and David would answer. And, in a way, David would be right. Dick, fine, lovable, up-to-date, had a right to the things other men had, and a love and a home of his own, to children, to his own full life.
But suppose Dick insisted on clearing everything up before he married? For to Lucy it was unthinkable that any girl in her senses would refuse him. Suppose he went back to Norada? He had not changed greatly in ten years, a conspicuous figure.
Her mind began to turn on the possibility of keeping him away from Norada.

Some time later she heard the office door open and then close with Dick's characteristic slam. He came up the stairs, two at a time as was his custom, and knocked at her door. When he came in she saw what David's answer had been, and she closed her eyes for an instant.

"Put on your things," he said gaily, "and we'll take a ride on the 'N-tops.' I've arranged for a moon."
And when she hesitated:
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"Yes," Doctor David's voice was reluctant.
"The mind is a strange thing," went on the little man, musingly. "It has its own life, its own logic, its own sense, its own way of going off duty during sleep. Our sternest and often unconscious repressions pass then, and then, emerge in the form of dreams. But of course you know all that. Dream symbolism. Does the person in this case dream? That would be interesting, perhaps important."
"I don't know," David said unhappily.
"The walling off, you say, followed a shock?"
"Shock and serious illness."
"Was there fear with the shock?"

David hesitated. "Yes," he said finally. "Very great fear, I believe." Doctor Lauler glanced quickly at David and then looked away.
"I see," he nodded. "Of course the walling off of a part of the past—you break you or me. Was there—was there such a history in this case?"
"Yes," Doctor David's voice was reluctant.
"The mind is a strange thing," went on the little man, musingly. "It has its own life, its own logic, its own sense, its own way of going off duty during sleep. Our sternest and often unconscious repressions pass then, and then, emerge in the form of dreams. But of course you know all that. Dream symbolism. Does the person in this case dream? That would be interesting, perhaps important."
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desirable that he should not identify himself with his past. The loss of memory of the period immediately preceding was complete, but, of course, gradually, the cloud began to lift over the earlier periods. It was there that suggestion was used, so that such memories as came back, were, well, he adapted them to fit what he was told.
Again Doctor Lauler shot a swift glance at David, and looked away.
"An interesting experiment," he commented. "It must have taken courage."
"A justifiable experiment," David affirmed stoutly. "And it took courage. Yes."

David got up and reached for his hat. Then he braced himself for the real purpose of his visit.
"What I have been wondering about," he said, very carefully, "is this: the mechanism of fear, this wall—how strong is it?"
"It's like a dam, I take it. It holds back certain memories, like a flood gate. Is anything likely to break it down?"

"Possibly something intimately connected with the forgotten period might do it. I don't know, Livingston. We've only commenced to dig into the mind, and we have many theories, and a few established facts. For instance, the primal instincts—"
He talked on, with David nodding now and then in apparent understanding; but with his thoughts far away. He knew the theories; a good many of them he considered poppycock. Dreams might come from the subconscious mind but a good many of them came from the stomach. They might be safety valves for the mind, but also they might be a mere escape. He didn't want to be a doctor, he wanted to be a fact.

The office attendant came in. She was as tidy as the desk, as obsessed by order, as wooden. She placed a pad before the small man and withdrew. David rose.
"Let me know if I can be of any further assistance," he said.
"And I'll be glad to see your patient at any time. I'd like the record for my files."

Nevertheless, he felt vaguely comforted, and as though it had helped to bring the situation out into the open and discuss it. He had carried his burden alone for ten years, or with only the additional weight of Lucy's apprehensions. He wandered out into the city streets, and found himself some time later at the railway station, without remembering how he got there.

Across from the station was a large billboard and on it the name of Beverly Carlyle and her play, "The Valley." He stood for some time and looked at it, before he went in to buy his ticket. Not until he was in the train did he realize that he had forgotten to get his lunch.

He attended to his work that evening as usual, but he felt very tired, and Lucy going in at nine o'clock, found him dozing in his chair, his collar half choking him and his face deeply suffused. She awakened him and then, sitting down across from him, joined him in the vigil that was to last until they heard the car outside.

She had brought in her sewing, and David pretended to read.
At midnight they heard the car go in, and the slamming of the stable door, followed by Dick's footsteps on the walk outside. Lucy was very pale, and the hands that held her sewing, twitched nervously. Suddenly she stood up to get her lunch.

At age 30 he secured a \$5,000 Twenty Pay Life Policy.

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"Thank you," David said. He stood lingering in his hat.
"I suppose there's nothing to do? The dam will either break, or it won't." "That's about it. Of course since the conditions that produced the setting up a large part in the situation; that happens and a normal occupation will do a great deal to maintain the status quo. Of course I would advise no return to the unhappy environment, and no shocks. Nothing, in other words, to break down the wall."
Outside, in the corridor, David remembered to put on his hat. Happiness and a normal occupation, yes, but no shock.

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