

The Breaking Point

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from yesterday.)
"I'd walk," she advised him. "He may come back with them, and in that case David will know soon enough. Or he may refuse to, and that would kill him. He'd rather think him dead than that."
She slept quietly that night, and spent rather more time than usual in dressing that morning. Then she took the way to the Wheeler house. She saw in what she was doing no great particularly culpable thing. She had no great revenge in mind; all that she intended was an evening of the score between them. "He preferred you to me, when you knew I cared. But he has deserted you." And perhaps, too, a small present jealousy, for she was to live in the old brick Livingstone

house, or in one like it, while all the village expected ultimately to see Elizabeth in the house on the hill. She kept her message to the end of her visit, and delivered her blow standing.
"I have something I ought to tell you, Elizabeth. But I don't know how you'll take it."
"Maybe it's something I won't want to hear."
"I'll tell you, if you won't say where you heard it."

But Elizabeth made a small, impatient gesture. "I don't like secrets, Clare. I can't keep them, for one thing. You'd better not tell me."
Clare was nearly balked of her revenge, but not entirely.
"All right," she said, and prepared to depart. "I won't. But you might just find out from your friend, Mrs. Sayre, who it was she saw in Chicago." It was in this manner, not by bit and each bit trivial, that the case against Dick was built up for Elizabeth. Mrs. Sayre, helpless before her quiet questioning, had to acknowledge one damning thing after another. He had known her; he had not asked for Elizabeth, but only for David; he looked tired and thin, but well. She stood at a window watching Elizabeth go down the hill, with a feeling that she had just seen something die before her.

On the night Bassett and Harrison Miller were to return from Chicago, Lucy sat downstairs in her sitting room waiting for news.

At ten o'clock, according to her custom, she went up to see that David was comfortable for the night, and to read him that prayer for the absent with which he always closed his day of waiting. But before she went she stopped before the old mirror in the hall, to see if there was any visible sign of tension.

The door into Dick's office was open and on his once neat desk there lay a litter of papers and letters. She sighed, and went up the stairs.
David lay propped up in his walnut bed. An incredibly wasted and old David; the hands on the log-cabin quilt which their mother had made were old hands, and tired. Sometimes Lucy, with a frightened gasp, would fear that David's waiting now was not all for Dick. That he was waiting for peace. But there had been something new in David lately. She thought it was fear. Always he had been so sure of himself; he had made his experiment in a man's soul, and whatever the result, he had been ready to face his Creator with it and take the responsibility.

But with his weakness his self-confidence had gone. He had tampered with the things that were to be, and not to be, but Dick, was paying for that awful audacity.

Once, picking up his prayer-book to read evening prayer, as was his custom now, it had opened at a verse, marked with an uneven line:

I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto Him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son.
That had frightened her. David's eyes followed her into the room.

"I've got the fire going," she said. "I've got an idea you're keeping something from me, Lucy."

"Why should I do that?"
"Then where's Harrison?" he demanded querulously.

She told him one of the few white lies of her life, when she said: "He hasn't been well. He'll be over tomorrow."
She sat down and picked up the prayer-book, only to find him lifting himself in the bed and listening.

"Somebody closed the hall door, Lucy. If it's Reynolds, I want to see him."

She got up and went to the head of the stairs. The light was low in the hall beneath, and she saw a man standing there. But she still wore her reading glasses, and she saw at first hardly more than a figure.

"Is that you, Doctor Reynolds?" she asked, in her high old voice.

Then she put her hand to her throat, and stood rigid, poised, dramatic. For the man had whipped off his cap and stood with his arms wide, looking up.

Holding the stair rail, her knees trembling under her, Lucy went down, and not until Dick's arms were around her was she sure that it was Dick, and not his shabby, weary ghost. She clung to him, tears streaming down her face, still in that cautious silence which governed them both; she held him off and looked at him, and then strained herself to him again, as though the sense of unreality was too strong, and only the contact of his rough clothing made him real to her.

It was not until they were in her sitting room with the door closed that either of them dared to speak. Or perhaps, could speak. Even then she kept hold of him.

"Richard?" she said. "Richard?"
And that, over and over.
"How is he?" he was able to ask, finally.

"He has been very ill. I began to think—Dick, I'm afraid to tell him. I'm afraid he'll die of joy."

He winced at that. There could not be much joy in the farewell that was coming. Winced, and almost staggered. He had walked all the way from the city, and he had had no food that day.

"We'll have to break it to him very gently," he said. "And he mustn't see me like this. If you can find some of my clothes and Reynolds' razor, I'll—"

He caught suddenly to the back of a chair and held on to it. "I haven't taken time to eat much today," he said smiling at her. "I guess I need food, Aunt Lucy."

For the first time then she saw his clothes, his shabbiness, and his pallor, and perhaps she guessed the truth. She got up, her face twitching, and pushed him into a chair.

"You sit here," she said, "and leave the door closed. The nurse is out for a walk, and she'll be in soon. I'll bring some milk and cookies now, and start the fire. I've got some chops in the house."

When she came back almost immediately, with the familiar tray and the familiar food, he was sitting where she had left him. He had spent the entire time, had she known it, in impressing on his mind the familiar details of the room, to carry away with him.

She stood beside him, a hand on his shoulder, to see that he drank the milk slowly.

"I've got the fire going," she said. "And I'll run up now and get your clothes. I—had put them away." Her voice broke a little. "You see, we—You can change in your laboratory, Richard, can't you? If you go upstairs he'll hear you."

He reached up and caught her hand. That touch too, of the nearest to a mother's hand that he had known, he meant to carry away with him. He could not speak.

She hustled away, into her bright kitchen first, and then with happy stealth to the store room. Her very heart was singing within her. She neither thought nor reasoned. Dick was back, and all would be well. I she had any subconscious anxieties, they were quieted, also subconsciously, by confidence in the men who were fighting his battle for him, by Walter Wheeler and Bassett and Harrison Miller. That Dick himself would present any difficulty lay beyond her worst fears.

She had been out of the room only twenty minutes when she returned to David, and prepared to break his great news. At first she thought he was asleep. He was lying back with his eyes closed, and she crossed on the prayer-book. But he looked up at her and was instantly roused to full attention by her face.

"You've had some news," he said. "Yes, David. There's a little news. Don't count too much on it. Don't sit up, David. I have heard something that makes me think he is alive. Alive and well."

He made a desperate effort and controlled himself.

"Where is he?"
She sat down beside him and took his hand between hers.

"David," she said slowly. "God has been very good to us. I want to tell you something, and I want you to prepare yourself. We have heard from Dick. He is all right. He loves us, and he always did. And—he is downstairs, David."

He lay very still, and without speaking. She was frightened at first, afraid to go on with her further news. But suddenly David sat up in bed, and in a full, firm voice began the Te Deum Laudamus. "We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord, All the earth doth worship Thee, the Father everlasting."

He repeated it in its entirety. At the end, however, his voice broke. "O Lord, in Thee have I trusted—I doubted Him, Lucy," he said.

Dick, waiting at the foot of the stairs, heard that triumphant psalm of thanksgiving and praise, and closed his eyes.

It was a few minutes later that Lucy came down the stairs again.

"You heard him?" she asked. "Oh, Richard, he had frightened me. It was more than a question of himself and you. He was making it one of himself and God."

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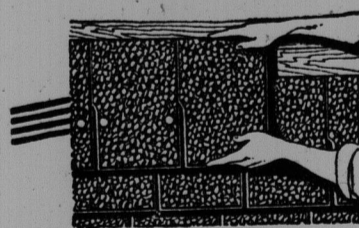
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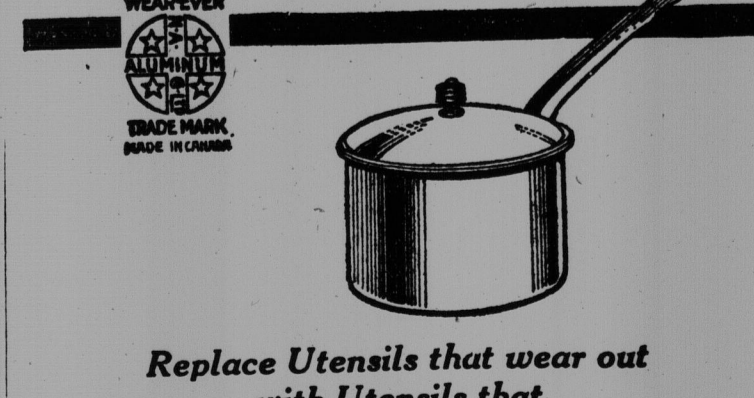
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