



BY
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART



THE BREAKING POINT



Author of
"K", THE AMAZING INTERLUDE, etc.



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Author of
Affinities and Other Stories" "The After House," "Bab,
a Sub-Deb," "Long Live the King," "More Tish,"
"A Poor Wise Man," "Tish," "Sight Unseen and
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"Window at the White Cat," etc.

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THEY WERE VERY GAY IN THE OLD BRICK HOUSE
THAT NIGHT.

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I

“Heaven and earth,” sang the tenor, Mr. Henry Wallace, owner of the Wallace garage. His larynx, which gave him somewhat the effect of having swallowed a crab-apple and got it only part way down, protruded above his low collar.

“Heaven and earth,” sang the bass, Mr. Edwin Goodno, of the meat market and the Boy Scouts. “Heaven and earth, are full—” His chin, large and fleshy, buried itself deep; his eyes were glued on the music sheet in his hand.

“Are full, are full, are full,” sang the soprano, Clare Rossiter, of the yellow colonial house on the Ridgely Road. She sang with her eyes turned up, and as she reached G flat she lifted herself on her toes. “Of the majesty, of Thy glory.”

“Ready,” barked the choir master. “Full now, and all together.”

The choir room in the parish house resounded to the twenty voices of the choir. The choir master at the piano kept time with his head. Earnest and intent, they filled the building with the Festival Te Deum of Dudley Buck, Opus 63, No. 1.

Elizabeth Wheeler liked choir practice. She liked the way in which, after the different parts had been run through, the voices finally blended into harmony and beauty. She liked the small sense of achievement it gave her, and of being a part, on Sundays, of the service. She liked the feeling, when she put on the black cassock and white surplice and the small round velvet cap of having placed in her locker the things of this world, such as a rose-colored hat and a blue georgette frock, and of being stripped, as it were, for aspirations.

At such times she had vague dreams of renunciation. She saw herself

cloistered in some quiet spot, withdrawn from the world; a place where there were long vistas of pillars and Gothic arches, after a photograph in the living room at home, and a great organ somewhere, playing.

She would go home from church, however, clad in the rose-colored hat and the blue georgette frock, and eat a healthy Sunday luncheon; and by two o'clock in the afternoon, when the family slept and Jim had gone to the country club, her dreams were quite likely to be entirely different. Generally speaking, they had to do with love. Romantic, unclouded young love dramatic only because it was love, and very happy.

Sometime, perhaps, some one would come and say he loved her. That was all. That was at once the beginning and the end. Her dreams led up to that and stopped. Not by so much as a hand clasp did they pass that wall.

So she sat in the choir room and awaited her turn.

“Altos a little stronger, please.”

“Of the majesty, of the majesty, of the majesty, of Thy gl-o-o-ry,” sang Elizabeth. And was at once a nun and a principal in a sentimental dream of two.

What appeared to the eye was a small and rather ethereal figure with sleek brown hair and wistful eyes; nice eyes, of no particular color. Pretty with the beauty of youth, sensitive and thoughtful, infinitely loyal and capable of suffering and not otherwise extraordinary was Elizabeth Wheeler in her plain wooden chair. A figure suggestive of no drama and certainly of no tragedy, its attitude expectant and waiting, with that alternate hope and fear which is youth at twenty, when all of life lies ahead and every to-morrow may hold some great adventure.

Clare Rossiter walked home that night with Elizabeth. She was a tall blonde girl, lithe and graceful, and with a calculated coquetry in her clothes.

“Do you mind going around the block?” she asked. “By Station Street?” There was something furtive and yet candid in her voice, and Elizabeth glanced at her.

“All right. But it's out of your way, isn't it?”

“Yes. I—You're so funny, Elizabeth. It's hard to talk to you. But I've got to

talk to somebody. I go around by Station Street every chance I get.”

“By Station Street? Why?”

“I should think you could guess why.”

She saw that Clare desired to be questioned, and at the same time she felt a great distaste for the threatened confidence. She loathed arm-in-arm confidences, the indecency of dragging up and exposing, in whispers, things that should have been buried deep in reticence. She hesitated, and Clare slipped an arm through hers.

“You don't know, then, do you? Sometimes I think every one must know. And I don't care. I've reached that point.”

Her confession, naive and shameless, and yet somehow not without a certain dignity, flowed on. She was mad about Doctor Dick Livingstone. Goodness knew why, for he never looked at her. She might be the dirt under his feet for all he knew. She trembled when she met him in the street, and sometimes he looked past her and never saw her. She didn't sleep well any more.

Elizabeth listened in great discomfort. She did not see in Clare's hopeless passion the joy of the flagellant, or the self-dramatization of a neurotic girl. She saw herself unwillingly forced to peer into the sentimental windows of Clare's soul, and there to see Doctor Dick Livingstone, an unconscious occupant. But she had a certain fugitive sense of guilt, also. Formless as her dreams had been, vague and shy, they had nevertheless centered about some one who should be tall, like Dick Livingstone, and alternately grave, which was his professional manner, and gay, which was his manner when it turned out to be only a cold, and he could take a few minutes to be himself. Generally speaking, they centered about some one who resembled Dick Livingstone, but who did not, as did Doctor Livingstone, assume at times an air of frightful maturity and pretend that in years gone by he had dandled her on his knee.

“Sometimes I think he positively avoids me,” Clare wailed. “There's the house, Elizabeth. Do you mind stopping a moment? He must be in his office now. The light's burning.”

“I wish you wouldn't, Clare. He'd hate it if he knew.”

She moved on and Clare slowly followed her. The Rossiter girl's flow of talk

had suddenly stopped. She was thoughtful and impulsively suspicious.

“Look here, Elizabeth, I believe you care for him yourself.”

“I? What is the matter with you to-night, Clare?”

“I'm just thinking. Your voice was so queer.”

They walked on in silence. The flow of Clare's confidences had ceased, and her eyes were calculating and a trifle hard.

“There's a good bit of talk about him,” she jerked out finally. “I suppose you've heard it.”

“What sort of talk?”

“Oh, gossip. You'll hear it. Everybody's talking about it. It's doing him a lot of harm.”

“I don't believe it,” Elizabeth flared. “This town hasn't anything else to do, and so it talks. It makes me sick.”

She did not attempt to analyze the twisted motives that made Clare belittle what she professed to love. And she did not ask what the gossip was. Half way up Palmer Lane she turned in at the cement path between borders of early perennials which led to the white Wheeler house. She was flushed and angry, hating Clare for her unsolicited confidence and her malice, hating even Haverly, that smiling, tree-shaded suburb which “talked.”

She opened the door quietly and went in. Micky, the Irish terrier, lay asleep at the foot of the stairs, and her father's voice, reading aloud, came pleasantly from the living room. Suddenly her sense of resentment died. With the closing of the front door the peace of the house enveloped her. What did it matter if, beyond that door, there were unrequited love and petty gossip, and even tragedy? Not that she put all that into conscious thought; she had merely a sensation of sanctuary and peace. Here, within these four walls, were all that one should need, love and security and quiet happiness. Walter Wheeler, pausing to turn a page, heard her singing as she went up the stairs. In the moment of the turning he too had a flash of content. Twenty-five years of married life and all well; Nina married, Jim out of college, Elizabeth singing her way up the stairs, and here by the lamp his wife quietly knitting while he read to her. He was reading Paradise Lost: “The mind is its own place, and in

itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”

He did a certain amount of serious reading every year.

On Sunday mornings, during the service, Elizabeth earnestly tried to banish all worldly thoughts. In spite of this resolve, however, she was always conscious of a certain regret that the choir seats necessitated turning her profile to the congregation. At the age of twelve she had decided that her nose was too short, and nothing had happened since to change her conviction. She seldom so much as glanced at the congregation. During her slow progress up and down the main aisle behind the Courtney boy, who was still a soprano and who carried the great gold cross, she always looked straight ahead. Or rather, although she was unconscious of this, slightly up. She always looked up when she sang, for she had commenced to take singing lessons when the piano music rack was high above her head.

So she still lifted her eyes as she went up the aisle, and was extremely serious over the whole thing. Because it is a solemn matter to take a number of people who have been up to that moment engrossed in thoughts of food or golf or servants or business, and in the twinkling of an eye, as the prayer book said about death, turn their minds to worship.

Nevertheless, although she never looked at the pews, she was always conscious of two of them. The one near the pulpit was the Sayres' and it was the social calendar of the town. When Mrs. Sayre was in it, it was the social season. One never knew when Mrs. Sayre's butler would call up and say:

“I am speaking for Mrs. Sayre. Mrs. Sayre would like to have the pleasure of Miss Wheeler's company on Thursday to luncheon, at one-thirty.”

When the Sayre pew was empty, the town knew, if it happened to be winter, that the Florida or Santa Barbara season was on; or in summer the Maine coast.

The other pew was at the back of the church. Always it had one occupant; sometimes it had three. But the behavior of this pew was very erratic. Sometimes an elderly and portly gentleman with white hair and fierce eyebrows would come in when the sermon was almost over. Again, a hand would reach through the grill behind it, and a tall young man who had had his eyes fixed in the proper direction, but not always on the rector, would reach

for his hat, get up and slip out. On these occasions, however, he would first identify the owner of the hand and then bend over the one permanent occupant of the pew, a little old lady. His speech was as Yea, yea, or Nay, nay, for he either said, "I'll be back for dinner," or "Don't look for me until you see me."

And Mrs. Crosby, without taking her eyes from the sermon, would nod.

Of late years, Doctor David Livingstone had been taking less and less of the "Don't-look-for-me-until-you-see-me" cases, and Doctor Dick had acquired a car, which would not freeze when left outside all night like a forgotten dog, and a sense of philosophy about sleep. That is, that eleven o'clock P.M. was bed-time to some people, but was just eleven o'clock for him.

When he went to church he listened to the sermon, but rather often he looked at Elizabeth Wheeler. When his eyes wandered, as the most faithful eyes will now and then, they were apt to rest on the flag that had hung, ever since the war, beside the altar. He had fought for his country in a sea of mud, never nearer than two hundred miles to the battle line, fought with a surgical kit instead of a gun, but he was content. Not to all the high adventure.

Had he been asked, suddenly, the name of the tall blonde girl who sang among the sopranos, he could not have told it.

The Sunday morning following Clare Rossiter's sentimental confession, Elizabeth tried very hard to banish all worldly thoughts, as usual, and to see the kneeling, rising and sitting congregation as there for worship. But for the first time she wondered. Some of the faces were blank, as though behind the steady gaze the mind had wandered far afield, or slept. Some were intent, some even devout. But for the first time she began to feel that people in the mass might be cruel, too. How many of them, for instance, would sometime during the day pass on, behind their hands, the gossip Clare had mentioned?

She changed her position, and glanced quickly over the church. The Livingstone pew was fully occupied, and well up toward the front, Wallie Sayre was steadfastly regarding her. She looked away quickly.

Came the end of the service. Came down the aisle the Courtney boy, clean and shining and carrying high his glowing symbol. Came the choir, two by two, the women first, sopranos, altos and Elizabeth. Came the men, bass and

tenor, neatly shaved for Sunday morning. Came the rector, Mr. Oglethorpe, a trifle wistful, because always he fell so far below the mark he had set. Came the benediction. Came the slow rising from its knees of the congregation and its cheerful bustle of dispersal.

Doctor Dick Livingstone stood up and helped Doctor David into his new spring overcoat. He was very content. It was May, and the sun was shining. It was Sunday, and he would have an hour or two of leisure. And he had made a resolution about a matter that had been in his mind for some time. He was very content.

He looked around the church with what was almost a possessive eye. These people were his friends. He knew them all, and they knew him. They had, against his protest, put his name on the bronze tablet set in the wall on the roll of honor. Small as it was, this was his world.

Half smiling, he glanced about. He did not realize that behind their bows and greetings there was something new that day, something not so much unkind as questioning.

Outside in the street he tucked his aunt, Mrs. Crosby, against the spring wind, and waited at the wheel of the car while David entered with the deliberation of a man accustomed to the sagging of his old side-bar buggy under his weight. Long ago Dick had dropped the titular “uncle,” and as David he now addressed him.

“You're going to play some golf this afternoon, David,” he said firmly. “Mike had me out this morning to look at your buggy springs.”

David chuckled. He still stuck to his old horse, and to the ancient vehicle which had been the signal of distress before so many doors for forty years. “I can trust old Nettie,” he would say. “She doesn't freeze her radiator on cold nights, she doesn't skid, and if I drop asleep she'll take me home and into my own barn, which is more than any automobile would do.”

“I'm going to sleep,” he said comfortably. “Get Wallie Sayre—I see he's back from some place again—or ask a nice girl. Ask Elizabeth Wheeler. I don't think Lucy here expects to be the only woman in your life.”

Dick stared into the windshield.

“I've been wondering about that, David,” he said, “just how much right—”

“Balderdash!” David snorted. “Don't get any fool notion in your head.”

Followed a short silence with Dick driving automatically and thinking. Finally he drew a long breath.

“All right,” he said, “how about that golf—you need exercise. You're putting on weight, and you know it. And you smoke too much. It's either less tobacco or more walking, and you ought to know it.”

David grunted, but he turned to Lucy Crosby, in the rear seat:

“Lucy, d'you know where my clubs are?”

“You loaned them to Jim Wheeler last fall. If you get three of them back you're lucky.” Mrs. Crosby's voice was faintly tart. Long ago she had learned that her brother's belongings were his only by right of purchase, and were by way of being community property. When, early in her widowhood and her return to his home, she had found that her protests resulted only in a sort of clandestine giving or lending, she had exacted a promise from him. “I ask only one thing, David,” she had said. “Tell me where the things go. There wasn't a blanket for the guest-room bed at the time of the Diocesan Convention.”

“I'll run around to the Wheelers' and get them,” Dick observed, in a carefully casual voice. “I'll see the Carter baby, too, David, and that clears the afternoon. Any message?”

Lucy glanced at him, but David moved toward the house.

“Give Elizabeth a kiss for me,” he called over his shoulder, and went chuckling up the path.

II

Mrs. Crosby stood on the pavement, gazing after the car as it moved off. She had not her brother's simplicity nor his optimism. Her married years had taken her away from the environment which had enabled him to live his busy, uncomplicated life; where, the only medical man in a growing community, he had learned to form his own sturdy decisions and then to abide by them.

Black and white, right and wrong, the proper course and the improper course—he lived in a sort of two-dimensional ethical world. But to Lucy Crosby, between black and white there was a gray no-man's land of doubt and indecision; a half-way house of compromise, and sometimes David frightened her. He was so sure.

She passed the open door into the waiting-room, where sat two or three patient and silent figures, and went back to the kitchen. Minnie, the elderly servant, sat by the table reading, amid the odor of roasting chicken; outside the door on the kitchen porch was the freezer containing the dinner ice-cream. An orderly Sunday peace was in the air, a gesture of homely comfort, order and security.

Minnie got up.

“I'll unpin your veil for you,” she offered, obligingly. “You've got time to lie down about ten minutes. Mrs. Morgan said she's got to have her ears treated.”

“I hope she doesn't sit and talk for an hour.”

“She'll talk, all right,” Minnie observed, her mouth full of pins. “She'd be talking to me yet if I'd stood there. She's got her nerve, too, that woman.”

“I don't like to hear you speak so of the patients who come to the house, Minnie.”

“Well, I don't like their asking me questions about the family either,” said Minnie, truculently. “She wanted to know who was Doctor Dick's mother. Said she had had a woman here from Wyoming, and she thought she'd known

his people.”

Mrs. Crosby stood very still.

“I think she should bring her questions to the family,” she said, after a silence. “Thank you, Minnie.”

Bonnet in hand, she moved toward the stairs, climbed them and went into her room. Recently life had been growing increasingly calm and less beset with doubts. For the first time, with Dick's coming to live with them ten years before, a boy of twenty-two, she had found a vicarious maternity and gloried in it. Recently she had been very happy. The war was over and he was safely back; again she could sew on his buttons and darn his socks, and turn down his bed at night. He filled the old house with cheer and with vitality. And, as David gave up more and more of the work, he took it on his broad shoulders, efficient, tireless, and increasingly popular.

She put her bonnet away in its box, and suddenly there rose in her frail old body a fierce and unexpected resentment against David. He had chosen a course and abided by it. He had even now no doubt or falterings. Just as in the first anxious days there had been no doubt in him as to the essential rightness of what he was doing. And now—This was what came of taking a life and moulding it in accordance with a predetermined plan. That was for God to do, not man.

She sat down near her window and rocked slowly, to calm herself. Outside the Sunday movement of the little suburban town went by: the older Wheeler girl, Nina, who had recently married Leslie Ward, in her smart little car; Harrison Miller, the cynical bachelor who lived next door, on his way to the station news stand for the New York papers; young couples taking small babies for the air in a perambulator; younger couples, their eyes on each other and on the future.

That, too, she reflected bitterly! Dick was in love. She had not watched him for that very thing for so long without being fairly sure now. She had caught, as simple David with his celibate heart could never have caught, the tone in Dick's voice when he mentioned the Wheelers. She had watched him for the past few months in church on Sunday mornings, and she knew that as she watched him, so he looked at Elizabeth.

And David was so sure! So sure.

The office door closed and Mrs. Morgan went out, a knitted scarf wrapping her ears against the wind, and following her exit came the slow ascent of David as he climbed the stairs to wash for dinner.

She stopped rocking.

“David!” she called sharply.

He opened the door and came in, a bulky figure, still faintly aromatic of drugs, cheerful and serene.

“D'you call me?” he inquired.

“Yes. Shut the door and come in. I want to talk to you.” He closed the door and went to the hearth-rug. There was a photograph of Dick on the mantel, taken in his uniform, and he looked at it for a moment. Then he turned. “All right, my dear. Let's have it.”

“Did Mrs. Morgan have anything to say?” He stared at her.

“She usually has,” he said. “I never knew you considered it worth repeating. No. Nothing in particular.”

The very fact that Mrs. Morgan had limited her inquiry to Minnie confirmed her suspicions. But somehow, face to face with David, she could not see his contentment turned to anxiety.

“I want to talk to you about Dick.”

“Yes?”

“I think he's in love, David.”

David's heavy body straightened, but his face remained serene.

“We had to expect that, Lucy. Is it Elizabeth Wheeler, do you think?”

“Yes.”

For a moment there was silence. The canary in its cage hopped about, a beady inquisitive eye now on one, now on the other of them.

“She's a good girl, Lucy.”

“That's not the point, is it?”

“Do you think she cares for him?”

“I don't know. There's some talk of Wallie Sayre. He's there a good bit.”

“Wallie Sayre!” snorted David. “He's never done a day's work in his life and never will.” He reflected on that with growing indignation. “He doesn't hold a candle to Dick. Of course, if the girl's a fool—”

Hands thrust deep into his pockets David took a turn about the room. Lucy watched him. At last:

“You're evading the real issue, David, aren't you?”

“Perhaps I am,” he admitted. “I'd better talk to him. I think he's got an idea he shouldn't marry. That's nonsense.”

“I don't mean that, exactly,” Lucy persisted. “I mean, won't he want a good many things cleared up before he marries? Isn't he likely to want to go back to Norada?”

Some of the ruddy color left David's face. He stood still, staring at her and silent.

“You know he meant to go three years ago, but the war came, and—”

Her voice trailed off. She could not even now easily recall those days when Dick was drilling on the golf links, and that later period of separation.

“If he does go back—”

“Donaldson is dead,” David broke in, almost roughly.

“Maggie Donaldson is still living.”

“What if she is? She's loyal to the core, in the first place. In the second, she's criminally liable. As liable as I am.”

“There is one thing, David, I ought to know. What has become of the Carlisle girl?”

“She left the stage. There was a sort of general conviction she was implicated and—I don't know, Lucy. Sometimes I think she was.” He sighed. “I read something about her coming back, some months ago, in 'The Valley.' That was the thing she was playing the spring before it happened.” He turned on her. “Don't get that in your head with the rest.”

“I wonder, sometimes.”

“I know it.”

Outside the slamming of an automobile door announced Dick's return, and almost immediately Minnie rang the old fashioned gong which hung in the lower hall. Mrs. Crosby got up and placed a leaf of lettuce between the bars of the bird cage.

“Dinner time, Caruso,” she said absently. Caruso was the name Dick had given the bird. And to David: “She must be in her thirties now.”

“Probably.” Then his anger and anxiety burst out. “What difference can it make about her? About Donaldson's wife? About any hang-over from that rotten time? They're gone, all of them. He's here. He's safe and happy. He's strong and fine. That's gone.”

In the lower hall Dick was taking off his overcoat.

“Smell's like chicken, Minnie,” he said, into the dining room.

“Chicken and biscuits, Mr. Dick.”

“Hi, up there!” he called lustily. “Come and feed a starving man. I'm going to muffle the door-bell!”

He stood smiling up at them, very tidy in his Sunday suit, very boyish, for all his thirty-two years. His face, smilingly tender as he watched them, was strong rather than handsome, quietly dependable and faintly humorous.

“In the language of our great ally,” he said, “Madame et Monsieur, le diner est servi.”

In his eyes there was not only tenderness but a somewhat emphasized affection, as though he meant to demonstrate, not only to them but to himself, that this new thing that had come to him did not touch their old relationship. For the new thing had come. He was still slightly dazed with the knowledge of it, and considerably anxious. Because he had just taken a glance at himself in the mirror of the walnut hat-rack, and had seen nothing there particularly to inspire—well, to inspire what he wanted to inspire.

At the foot of the stairs he drew Lucy's arm through his, and held her hand. She seemed very small and frail beside him.

“Some day,” he said, “a strong wind will come along and carry off Mrs. Lucy Crosby, and the Doctors Livingstone will be obliged hurriedly to rent aeroplanes, and to search for her at various elevations!”

David sat down and picked up the old fashioned carving knife.

“Get the clubs?” he inquired.

Dick looked almost stricken.

“I forgot them, David,” he said guiltily. “Jim Wheeler went out to look them up, and I—I'll go back after dinner.”

It was sometime later in the meal that Dick looked up from his plate and said:

“I'd like to cut office hours on Wednesday night, David. I've asked Elizabeth Wheeler to go into town to the theater.”

“What about the baby at the Homer place?”

“Not due until Sunday. I'll leave my seat number at the box office, anyhow.”

“What are you going to see, Dick?” Mrs. Crosby asked. “Will you have some dumplings?”

“I will, but David shouldn't. Too much starch. Why, it's 'The Valley,' I think. An actress named Carlyle, Beverly Carlyle, is starring in it.”

He ate on, his mind not on his food, but back in the white house on Palmer Lane, and a girl. Lucy Crosby, fork in air, stared at him, and then glanced at David.

But David did not look up from his plate.