

# BROKEN QUARANTINE



Mary Roberts Rinehart

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# THE BROKEN QUARANTINE

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES M. RELYEA

IT was a very melancholy day. The rain had left little gravelly puddles along the driveway, and Bertram's most promising firecrackers expired in a damp and dejected hiss. Here and there an unwary angle-worm had come up to drink and stayed to drown. Bertram had gone out with an umbrella and succeeded in rescuing some of them, when *mademoiselle*, hiding in the library from the aggressive patriotism of the neighborhood, had come out and foiled his humane designs.

Bertram was sulky. It didn't rain like this at Beach Head, he thought savagely, sticking the blistered fingers of one hand into the pocket of his small white bloomers. Moreover, when it rained there one could have his bathing-suit on, and play in the puddles on the beach. It was exactly like the Curtises and the Stillwagons and the Mabons to have the measles. Personally, he would have preferred measles to this precaution of banishment to the city with *mademoiselle*. Nothing in the way of being shut in a dark room, with a trained nurse and a glass thermometer, seemed half as unbearable as the Fourth of July without mother to tie up his burned fingers, or father to send up balloons which Bertram himself had helped to inflate.

In the dismantled library *mademoiselle* was asleep, her head jerking forward in an alarming manner. Everywhere there was an amazing smell of soap and hot water and brass polish, and in the late afternoon light the drawing-room, with its chairs reaching out their white-covered arms, and the very pictures on the walls hidden mysteriously behind blue and white checked gingham, was terrifying, to say the least.

Finally, Bertram went to the kitchen for companionship, and watched Norah preparing his bread-and-milk supper. She fixed the tray with practised hands.

"That's about the last clean napkin," she said, half to herself. "Goodness help us if they don't bring some clean napkins from the shore. Where's *madamzelle*?"

“She’s asleep,” said Bertram, eyeing the comfort of the kitchen and Norah’s good-humored face wistfully. “I wish you’d let me eat my supper here, Norah. Mother is coming in the morning, but just now I’m a little lonely.”

“Then ye shall,” said Norah heartily, drawing a chair to the kitchen table. And there Bertram ate, looking over the edge of his blue bread-and-milk bowl, which was almost on a level with his chin, to watch the preparations for *mademoiselle*’s dinner.

When he had finished, the sun had come out, sending watery yellow gleams slanting through the kitchen window, turning the dingy nickel plate of the alarm clock to dazzling silver, throwing into prominence the black letters on the blue-and-white jars marked “Tea,” “Ginger,” and “Allspice.” Outside, the desultory shooting had become a steady fusillade; the snapping varied now and then by the booming of a dynamite cracker. When the noise became more than usually appalling, Norah frowned and shut the window.

“Who’s doin’ it I don’t know,” she said, “with every family in three squares out of town, and the orphans shut up with scarlet fever. I wish the Fourth of July came in the middle of Christmas week, when we could shut up the doors and windows!”

Bertram slipped out of his chair and tugged at the knot of his bib.

“Thank you, Norah,” he said soberly. “I’m not so lonely now.”

*Mademoiselle* had wakened from her nap, and with one foot asleep had limped up-stairs to dress. She was in a very bad humor. Beach Head, with its hours of leisure and French novels, while Bertram dug in the warm sand, had been much to her taste. Beach Head being temporarily impossible, *mademoiselle* did not object to the city house, with its cool rooms and its daily drive in the park. But across the street was the orphan asylum, the only blot on the scutcheon of that aristocratic neighborhood, and on its door, flaming red in the rays of the sun, was a rectangular piece of scarlet cardboard, at once a warning and a menace—a bit of color that seemed to follow *mademoiselle* into every corner of her room, bringing two vertical lines between her well-cared-for eyebrows. For scarlet fever at the orphan asylum, mild as chickenpox though it be, meant the farm!—the farm, Bertram’s delight, a charming place for producing eggs and butter and fresh vegetables, but as a summer residence for *mademoiselle*! She hooked her collar with a jerk, and looked out of the window.

“Bare-tram!” she called. “I wish no holes burned in ze blouse!”

*Mademoiselle* was occasionally called upon to darn the damaged white suits; as to burned fingers she was less solicitous; they repaired themselves, in time.

Bertram nodded. He was looking just then at the asylum yard. For years the Ridgeview orphans had been a bone over which the different factions of the neighborhood had quarreled furiously. They were divided into two sections—the charitable and generally elderly board of lady managers, whose children were well past the measles and scarlatina period, and who found the asylum's present location central and easily accessible; and the parents of the vicinity, whose children were still at the susceptible age, and who saw in every outbreak of whooping-cough and chickenpox a menace to their peace of mind. Nursery governesses were instructed to choose the opposite side of the street, and babies in perambulators were taken along the other square. Fortunately, the most serious outbreaks at the asylum had occurred during the summer, when the neighborhood was almost deserted—fortunately, that is, for every one but the orphans.

Mrs. Theodore Van Court had been the leader of the anti-asylum party. Bertram could not remember a time when he had not been told to shun the orphans. Indignant conferences over the telephone had given him the impression that beyond the iron fence were germs, countless thousands of them, much like caterpillars in size and shape, waiting an opportunity to drop from trees or to crawl through the fence, and to lodge on unsuspecting small boys who happened to be passing with their governesses. Thus the asylum possessed for him the awful attraction of danger. When *mademoiselle* called, he was gazing, with much the fascination exerted on a youthful mind by the possibilities of a hornets' nest, at a procession of the germ-producers coming down the back steps.

The orphans came, two by two, down the big stone steps; first the girls, their hair in tight braids, their blue dresses identical, seam for seam; then the boys, in little gray trousers and blouses cut from the same web as the girls' dresses. They were very solemn and self-conscious. Not every orphan asylum could boast of scarlet fever and measles at the same time, and a policeman on the front steps to keep people out. Also, having been shut in all day, they had been told to breathe deep and hold their heads up, so the procession was of unwonted dignity, each small pair of shoulders held rigidly erect, every pair of lungs obediently inflated to bursting before they were explosively emptied.

Bertram was fascinated. Orphans playing in their brick-paved back yard were nothing new; but these were quarantined orphans, and he recognized

the importance they had assumed. The small boy with red hair, who sometimes called "Hello!" to him through the fence, now gazed stonily ahead, his chest thrown out, his face flushed with importance and the exertion of the one-two-three breathing exercise.

The children marched around the quadrangle three times; then, led by the teacher, they went up the steps, past the triumphant red sign, and into the dimness of the big building beyond. Bertram, from the sidewalk, gazed after them regretfully. Then he saw that the boy with the red hair had not gone in. He had stopped near the fence, in flagrant violation of the rules, and was now occupied in hanging by his feet from the iron railing.

"We're quarantined!" he called, his voice somewhat throaty from his position.

"What's that?" Bertram asked, crossing the street slowly.

The red-haired boy got cautiously down, wiping his hands on the lining of his pockets.

"It's fun," he said. "There's a policeman on the front steps, and the groceries and meat and ice is all left at the gate. Then we carry them in. Ten of us has scarlet fever, and two measles."

A boy rode by on a bicycle, throwing torpedoes right and left. One flew into the asylum yard and lay there uninjured; the red-haired boy pounced on it, and exploded it with his heel.

"We're not having any firecrackers," he said, "not this year."

"Here," said Bertram, turning out his pockets, "you can have these. I'm tired of them, anyhow."

The red-haired boy looked apprehensively toward the windows.

"They're having prayers, I guess," he said finally. "All right!"

For the next fifteen minutes the truant exulted in his birthright. No one seemed to have noticed his defection, so he made whizzers and squibs; he held crackers in his fingers until they exploded, or tossed them, at the critical moment, to explode in the air. He made up the day's arrears of enjoyment in that brief quarter of an hour. Then, with his face powder-streaked and perspiring, he grinned at Bertram through the fence.

"Come on in," he said hospitably. "If you can get your head through, the rest's easy. Come on!"

Bertram looked around. There were no germs to be seen, probably the rain had drowned them, like the angle-worms. He worked his head through cautiously; with a little assistance from the red-haired boy, his body followed, little horizontal streaks of black being left along his white blouse. From this vantage-point he looked back at the house across the street. In the fast-approaching twilight its curtainless windows were gloomy and cheerless. Bertram turned his back to it and looked toward the asylum. From some open windows on the lower floor came the shrill voices of the orphans as they marched up-stairs.

“Onward, Christian soldiers,” they sang lustily.

The truant outside began to look uncomfortable.

“They’re going up to bed,” he said dubiously, looking at his guest. “I guess I’d better go too.”

“Oh, look!” cried Bertram, as a small girl down the street, unable to wait for darkness, stepped to the curb and began to wave a Roman candle in quick, jerky little circles.

The result was not brilliant, but as a promise of glories to come it was satisfying. Bertram drew a long breath.

“That’s nothing,” said the red-haired boy. “Just wait till dark. Why, from our windows last Fourth there was more rockets than you could count, goin’ up at the same time, and red fire and green fire, and Roman candles and balloons, and over across the river they had the Fall of Pompeii and George Washington.”

“We always have fireworks at Beach Head,” said Bertram modestly, “but we never have the fall of anything, or George Washington.”

“I’ll tell you what.” The red-haired boy leaned over confidentially. “You come on in with me. We can get up easy, and then you can look out the window too. Oh, there’s another!”

A tall rocket rose hissing from somewhere beyond the asylum, bent its head gracefully, and with a little report sent down a shower of red and blue stars, their colors still pale against the evening sky. Bertram watched with his mouth open; then he looked at the rows of heads beginning to show at the upper windows of the building.

“I guess I’ll go up and look out,” he said, and with his hands in his pockets he followed his guide across the yard, past the scarlet sign and into the building.



BERTRAM'S BREAKFAST WAS CARRIED OVER BY NORAH AND SERVED THROUGH THE FENCE BY A VERY MEEK AND TEARFUL MADEMOISELLE

For the sake of coolness the lights in the long halls were turned low; from the nurseries came bursts of suppressed chatter and occasionally a less suppressed wail. One corridor was shut off from the main hall with a



temporary partition, and the red-haired boy walked as far as possible from it. But they met no one, and their entrance into the dormitory up-stairs, which under ordinary circumstances would have thrown two dozen small boys into the greatest excitement, to-night faded into insignificance beside the counting of paper balloons, now fish, now flesh—in the shape of a portly, swaying elephant—and now fowl, which rose unsteadily above the housetops, circled dizzily, threatening every moment to go up in a flash of flame, and then, caught by a fortunate breeze, sailed off majestically, growing smaller and fainter, until even the children's keen eyes failed to distinguish them.

The red-haired boy led the way between the rows of white beds to the far end of the dormitory.

“Here's a good place,” he said, “right by my bed. There's a man on that street down there that owns a fireworks store, and he sends off the things he don't want to keep for next year. Last Fourth a fellow got his thumb 'most blown off there. It's a fine place to see, isn't it?”

Bertram leaned his elbows on the sill and looked out. It was almost dark now. The city lights came on, long parallel lines of bluish dots, stretching from the hill which the asylum crowned to the river, and beyond the river, where the dots were smaller and the lines seemed to converge in the misty, luminous distance. It was very beautiful. When a particularly large rocket went up across the river, and sent a shower of wriggling golden fish down into the black water, the children were in raptures.

“Look!” they said. “The little fish knew where to go, didn't they?”

By leaning over, Bertram could look down and see the policeman on the front steps. A crowd of boys came down the street, carrying a huge, red-covered cylinder, with a fuse at the end. They looked up at the rows of faces in the windows, put down the cylinder near the policeman, lit the fuse, and ran away noisily. Bertram held his breath and put his fingers in his ears; but the resulting explosion was a tiny, feeble crack, and the boys, running back with derisive shouts, shouldered the piece of stove-pipe, and started for new fields to conquer.

In every direction, now, rockets blazed; the heated night air was aquiver with sound and color, while up to the little watchers in the upper windows floated the indescribable noises of a city at play. A launch beat up the river, its engine throbbing against the current, its wake a blaze of red and green fire. Somewhere, far away, a fire-bell tolled quickly. The children had an

inspiring glimpse of dashing horses, and of a brass cylinder that vomited black smoke and sparks as it whirled along.

After a time the red and green and gold glories began to pall. Bertram sat down on the red-haired boy's little white bed and yawned. The crowds at the windows had thinned perceptibly, and here and there small boys were drowsily unlacing shoes, or tugging at the fastenings of suspenders. It was evident that discipline had been relaxed for this one night.

"My legs are tired," Bertram explained with another yawn, "and I've been looking so long my eyes ache. I have to shut them a minute."

He rubbed them vigorously, and looked at his red-haired friend. Gradually the orphan's flamboyant crown became a red light on a very tall stick; he seemed, curiously enough, to have four eyes and no nose to speak of. Then, with a little sigh, Bertram dropped his head on the pillow, and was immediately asleep.

An hour or so later, the man who owned a fireworks establishment having disposed of his superfluous stock, the neighborhood settled to something like quiet. The red-haired boy undressed quietly, put his clothes, with the precision of asylum training, on the chair beside his bed, and crept in beside Bertram. And there they slept, a bit moist from their close quarters, perhaps, but comfortably, dreamlessly. The night watchman, who tiptoed into the dormitory toward early morning and put out the light, did not notice that there were twenty-five small, sleep-flushed faces instead of twenty-four; so all through that long night *mademoiselle* sat, white and tense, in the library across the street, with its ghostly covered furniture, waiting for the message the police did not bring, while in the kitchen Norah sobbed out her Irish heart over a blue and white bread-and-milk bowl.

## II

MRS. VAN COURT was a very indignant and perplexed young mother as she stepped out of the coast express that morning and gave her trunk-check to a station porter. A twenty-four-hour-old paper from home had told her of the epidemic at the asylum.

"Very mild!" she stormed. "No serious cases! That means fewer precautions than ever. One thing I can do—that gate will be locked, and kept locked. And if I see any one going into that place, they will stay there.

Between the managers and the board of health, they have never had a decently enforced quarantine!”

It was very early when the cab slowed down before the Van Court home. Mrs. Van Court got out and paid the man; then she deliberately walked across the street and shook the orphan asylum gate. It was locked, thank goodness—double-locked, with two massive padlocks. Then she stopped and gazed with horrified eyes at the asylum steps. A small boy was standing there, a boy in a crumpled linen suit, with small cotton socks slipping down around his ankles; a sleepy, confused little boy, with yellow hair and the crimson of the scarlet fever card forming a halo around his head.

“Bertram!” she called, shrilly, when she could find speech. “Come here instantly! What on earth are you doing there? How did you get in? What does *mademoiselle* mean by allowing such a thing? The gates are locked, too!” She shook them violently, but the padlocks merely rattled derisively. “Go back at once and bring some one to unlock this gate, or—no, don’t do that. I don’t want you to go into the asylum for anything. What am I going to do?” she groaned helplessly. “If they find you there they’ll keep you, perhaps for weeks. How did you get in?”

Bertram shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, and put his hands in his pockets. It was the germs again, he knew that.

“I guess I slept there all night, mother,” he said truthfully. “The red-haired boy——”

Mrs. Van Court grasped a rod of the fence with one spotlessly gloved hand, to steady herself.

“Wait until I see *mademoiselle*!” she choked. “How did you get in?”

“Through the fence,” said Bertram, essaying a similar manner of exit.

Although the getting in had been simple enough, the getting out was entirely different. Somewhere along the line of fence there were probably two bars sufficiently apart to admit the passage of a plump little body; but Bertram could not find them. Half desperate, Mrs. Van Court went around to the front of the building and appealed to the night policeman, drowsing on the step.

“You’ll have to see the board of health, ma’am,” he said civilly. “The people around here is always complainin’ that there’s a leak in the quarantine, and it would cost me my place to let the little boy out.”

Mrs. Van Court hurried back again, passed her handkerchief through the fence to Bertram, who was crying from hunger and a sense of exile, and ran over home. After a brief but somewhat heated interview with *mademoiselle* she called up the president of the board of lady managers.

“It’s outrageous!” she protested. “The policeman refuses to let the child out, and he has had no breakfast. Please telephone at once to the asylum to have the gate opened.”

The president of the board of lady managers had been roused from her morning sleep, and was not especially gracious.

“I’m afraid it’s impossible, Mrs. Van Court,” she said, with some asperity. “It is largely due to your efforts that the asylum is quarantined to this extent, and you remember, of course, the grocer’s boy whom you reported during the diphtheria epidemic last winter for delivering groceries at the door instead of the gate. He was kept there four weeks, I think.”

Mrs. Van Court groaned.

“The cases are entirely different,” she said icily. “I shall appeal to the board of health.”

It was seven o’clock when she hung up the receiver and picked up the telephone book. But central told her that the board of health offices did not open until nine. The two hours until that time passed endlessly. Bertram’s breakfast was carried over by Norah and served through the fence by a very meek and tearful *mademoiselle*. At nine thirty an inspector from the health office came down, and, influenced by the Van Court name, allowed the prisoner to be released, and temporarily quarantined in his home across the street. But through all that day’s stress of fumigating and disinfecting, of temperature-taking, doctors’ visits, and strained relations with *mademoiselle*, Bertram talked of the orphans, of the red-haired boy, of the twenty-four white beds, into which their owners tucked themselves without assistance, until insensibly Mrs. Van Court began to realize that some of the orphans across the way were boys just as little and helpless as her own.

During the weeks that followed, when Bertram suffered no ill effect from his experience, thankfulness took the place of bare tolerance. In the autumn, the board of lady managers was electrified to receive from their former enemy a deed of her farm, “to be a summer home for children who have too little liberty in the city during hot weather.”

The board of lady managers smiled, and elected Mrs. Van Court to fill the next vacancy. And Mrs. Van Court’s first motion, carried unanimously,

was that the present iron fence be taken down and replaced by one in which the bars were just two inches apart. Yet even this, as Bertram pointed out to *mademoiselle*, would still allow the smaller germs to get through.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Broken Quarantine* by Mary Roberts Rinehart]