

"K"

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from last week.)

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—At her home in the Street Sidney Page agrees to marry Joe Drummond "after years and years" and talks to K. Le Moyné, the new roomer.

CHAPTER II—Sidney's aunt Harriet who has been dressmaking with Sidney's mother, launches an independent modiste's parlor. Sidney gets Dr. Ed Wilson's influence with his brother, Doctor Max, the successful young surgeon, to place her in the hospital as a probationer nurse.

CHAPTER III—K. becomes acquainted in the Street. Sidney asks him to stay on as a roomer and explains her plans for financing her home while she is in the school.

CHAPTER IV—Doctor Max gets Sidney into the hospital school.

CHAPTER V—Sidney and K. spend an afternoon in the country. Sidney falls into the river.

CHAPTER VI—Max asks Carlotta Harrison, a probationer, to take a motor ride with him. Joe finds Sidney and K. at the country hotel, where Sidney is drying her clothes, and is insanely jealous.

CHAPTER VI.

Operations were over for the afternoon. The last case had been wheeled out of the elevator. The pit of the operating room was in disorder—towels everywhere, tables of instruments, steaming sterilizers. Orderlies were going about, carrying out linens, emptying pans. At a table two nurses were cleaning instruments and putting them away in their glass cases. Irrigators were being emptied, sponges recounted and checked off on written lists.

In the midst of the confusion, Wilson stood giving last orders to the interne at his elbow. As he talked he scoured his hands and arms with a small brush; bits of lather flew off on to the tiled floor. His speech was incisive, vigorous. At the hospital they said his nerves were iron; there was no let-down after the day's work. The internes worshipped and feared him. He was just, but without mercy. To be able to work like that, so certainly with so sure a touch, and to look like a Greek god! Wilson's only rival, a gynecologist named O'Hara, got results, too; but he sweated and swore through his operations, was not too careful as to aseptis, and looked like a gorilla.

The day had been a hard one. The operating-room nurses were fagged. Two or three probationers had been sent to help clean up, and a senior nurse, Wilson's eyes caught the nurse's eyes as she passed him.

"Here, too, Miss Harrison!" he said slyly. "Have they set you on my trail?" With the eyes of the room on her, she answered primly:

"I'm to be in your office in the mornings, Doctor Wilson, and anywhere I am needed in the afternoons."

"And your vacation?"

"I shall take it when Miss Simpson comes back."

Although he went on at once with his conversation with the interne, he still heard the click of her heels about the room. He had not lost the fact that she had flushed when he spoke to her. The mischief that was latent in him came to the surface. When he had rinsed his hands, he followed her, carrying the towel to where she stood talking to the superintendent of the training school.

"Thanks very much, Miss Gregg," he said. "Everything went off nicely."

He was in a magnanimous mood. He smiled at Miss Gregg, who was elderly and gray, but visibly his creature.

"The sponge list, doctor."

He glanced over it, noting accurately sponges prepared, used, turned in. But he missed no gesture of the girl who stood beside Miss Gregg.

"All right." He returned the list. "That was a mighty pretty probationer I brought you yesterday."

Two small frowning lines appeared between Miss Harrison's dark brows. He caught them, caught her somber eyes too, and was amused and rather stimulated.

"She is very young."

"Prefer 'em young," said Doctor Max. "Willing to learn at that age. You'll have to watch her, though. You'll have all the internes buzzing around, neglecting business."

Miss Gregg rather fluttered. She was divided between her disapproval of internes at all times and of young probationers generally, and her allegiance to the brilliant surgeon whose word was rapidly becoming law in the hospital. When an emergency of the cleaning-up called her away, doubt still in her eyes, Wilson was left alone with Miss Harrison.

"Tired?" He adopted the gentle, almost tender tone that made most women his slaves.

"A little. It is warm."

"What are you going to do this evening? Any lectures?"

"Lectures are over for the summer. I shall go to prayers, and after that to the roof for air."

"Can't you take a little ride tonight and cool off? I'll have the car wherever you say. A ride and some supper—how does it sound? You could get away at seven—"

"Miss Gregg is coming!"

With an impassive face, the girl turned away. The workers of the operating room surged between them. But he was clever with the guile of



"Can't You Take a Little Ride Tonight?"

the pursuing male. Eyes of all on him, he turned at the door of the wardrobe room and spoke to her over the heads of a dozen nurses.

"That patient's address that I had forgotten, Miss Harrison, is the corner of the Park and Ellington avenue."

"Thank you."

She played the game well, was quite calm. He admired her coolness. Certainly she was pretty, and certainly, too, she was interested in him. He went whistling into the wardrobe room. As he turned he caught the interne's eye, and there passed between them a glance of complete comprehension. The interne grinned.

The room was not empty. His brother was there, listening to the comments of O'Hara, his friendly rival.

"Good work, boy!" said O'Hara, and clapped a hairy hand on his shoulder.

"That last case was a wonder. I'm proud of you, and your brother here is indecently exalted. It was the Edwardes method, wasn't it? I saw it done at his clinic in New York."

"Glad you liked it. Yes, Edwardes was a pal of mine in Berlin. A great surgeon, too, poor old chap!"

"There aren't three men in the country with the nerve and the hand for it."

O'Hara went out, glowing with his own magnanimity. Doctor Ed stood by and waited while his brother got into his clothes. He was rather silent. There were many times when he wished that his mother could have lived to see how he had carried out his promise to "make a man of Max."

Sometimes he wondered what she would think of his own untidy methods compared with Max's extravagant order—of the bag, for instance, with the dog's collar in it, and other things. On these occasions he always determined to clear out the bag.

"I guess I'll be home for dinner," he said. "Will you be going for dinner?"

"I think not. I'll—I'm going to run out of town, and eat where it's cool."

The Street was notoriously hot in summer.

"There's a roast of beef. It's a pity to cook a roast for one."

Wasteful, too, this cooking of food for two and only one to eat it. A roast of beef meant a visit, in Doctor Ed's modest-paying clientele. He still paid the expenses of the house on the Street.

"Sorry, old man; I've made another arrangement."

They left the hospital together. Everywhere the younger man received the homage of success. The elevator man bowed and fung the doors open, with a smile; the pharmacy clerk, the doorkeeper, even the convalescent patient who was polishing the great brass floorplate, tendered their tribute. Doctor Ed looked neither to right nor left.

Sidney, after her involuntary bath in the river, had gone into temporary eclipse at the White Springs hotel. In the oven of the kitchen stove sat her two small white shoes, stuffed with paper so that they might dry in shape. Back in a detached laundry, a sympathetic maid was ironing various soft white garments, and singing as she worked.

Sidney sat in a rocking chair in a not bedroom. She was carefully swathed in a sheet from neck to toes, except for her arms, and she was being as philosophic as possible.

Someone tapped lightly at the door.

"It's Le Moyné. Are you all right?"

"Perfectly. How stupid it must be for you!"

"I'm doing very well. The maid will soon be ready. What shall I order for supper?"

"Anything. I'm starving."

"I think your shoes have shrunk."

"Flatterer!" She laughed. "Go away and order supper. And I can see fresh etiquette. Shall we have a salad?"

K. Le Moyné stood for a moment in front of the closed door, for the merriment of her moving, beyond it. Thing had gone very far with the Pages roomer that day in the country; no so far as they were to go, but far enough to let him see on the brink of what misery he stood.

He could not go away. He had promised her to stay; he was needed. He thought he could have endured seeing her marry Joe, had she cared for the boy. That way, at least, lay safety for her. The boy had fidelity and devotion written large over him. But this new complication—her romantic interest in Wilson, the surgeon's reciprocal interest in her, with what he knew of the man—made him quail.

From the top of the narrow staircase to the foot, and he had lived a year's torment! At the foot, however he was startled out of his reverie, Joe Drummond stood there waiting for him, his blue eyes recklessly alight.

"You—you dog!" said Joe.

There were people in the hotel parlor. Le Moyné took the frenzied boy by the elbow and led him past the door to the empty porch.

"Now," he said, "if you will keep your voice down, I'll listen to what you have to say."

"You know what I've got to say."

This failing to draw from K. Le Moyné anything but his steady glance Joe jerked his arm free and clenched his fist.

"What did you bring her out here for?"

"I do not know that I owe you any explanation, but I am willing to give you one. I brought her out here for a trolley ride and a picnic luncheon."

He was sorry for the boy. Life no having been all beer and skittles to him, he knew that Joe was suffering and was marvelously patient with him.

"Where is she now?"

"She had the misfortune to fall in the river. She is upstairs." And, seeing the light of unbelief in Joe's eyes "If you care to make a tour of investigation, you will find that I am entirely truthful. In the laundry a maid—"

"She is engaged to me"—doggedly "Everybody in the neighborhood knows it, and yet you bring her out here for a picnic! It's—it's damned rotten treatment."

His fist had unclenched. Before K. Le Moyné's eyes his own fell. He felt suddenly young and futile; his just rage turned to blustering in his ears.

"I don't know where you came from," he said, "but around here decent men cut out when a girl's engaged."

"I see!"

"What's more, what do we know about you? You may be all right, but how do I know it? You get her into trouble and I'll kill you!"

It took courage, that speech, with K. Le Moyné towering five inches above him and growing a little white about the lips.

"Are you going to say all these things to Sidney?"

"I am. And I am going to find out why you were upstairs just now."

Perhaps never in his twenty-two years had young Drummond been so near a thrashing. Fury that he was ashamed of shook Le Moyné. For very fear of himself, he thrust his hands in the pockets of his Norfolk coat.

"Very well," he said. "You go to her with just one of these ugly insinuations, and I'll take mighty good care that you are sorry for it. If you are going to behave like a bad child, you deserve a licking, and I'll give it to you."

An overflow from the parlor poured out on the porch. Le Moyné had got himself in hand somewhat. He was still angry, but the look in Joe's eyes startled him. He put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You're wrong, old man," he said. "You're insulting the girl you care for by the things you are thinking. And, if it's any comfort to you, I have no intention of interfering in any way. You can count me out. It's between you and her."

Joe picked his straw hat from a chair and stood turning it in his hands.

"Even if you don't care for her, how do I know she isn't crazy about you?"

"My word of honor, she isn't."

"She sends you notes to McKees?"

"Just to clear the air, I'll show it to you. It's no breach of confidence. It's about the hospital."

Into the breast pocket of his coat he dived and brought up a wallet. The wallet had had a name on it in gilt letters that had been carefully scraped off. But Joe did not wait to see the note.

"Oh, damn the hospital!" he said—and went swiftly down the steps and into the gathering twilight of the June night.

CHAPTER VII.

Sidney and K. Le Moyné were dining together at the White Springs hotel. The novelty of the experience had made her eyes shine like stars. She saw only the magnolia tree shaped like a heart, the terrace edged with low shrubbery, and beyond the faint gleam that was the river. The unshaded glare of the lights behind her in the house was eclipsed by the crescent edge of the rising moon. Dinner was over. Sidney was experiencing the rare treat of after-dinner coffee.

Le Moyné, grave and contained, sat across from her. To give so much pleasure, and so easily! How young she was, and so radiant! No wonder the boy was mad about her. She fairly held out her arms to life.

Ah, that was too bad! Another table was being brought; they were not to be alone. But what assailed in him violent resentment only appealed to Sidney's curiosity.

Carlotta Harrison came out alone. Although the tapping of her heels was dulled by the grass, although she had exchanged her cap for the black hat, Sidney knew her at once. It was the pretty nurse from Doctor Wilson's office. Was it possible—but of course not! The book of rules stated explicitly that such things were forbidden.

"Don't turn around," she said swiftly. "It is the Miss Harrison I told you about. She is looking at us."

Carlotta's eyes were blinded for a moment by the glare of the house lights. Then she sat up, her eyes on Le Moyné's grave profile turned toward the valley. Lucky for her that Wilson had stopped in the bar, that Sidney's instinctive good manners forbade her staring, that only the edge of the summer moon shone through the trees. She went white and clutched

the edge of the table, with her eyes closed. That gave her quick brain a chance. It was madness, June madness. She was always seeing him, even in her dreams. This man was older, much older. She looked again.

She had not been mistaken. Here, and after all these months! K. Le Moyné, quite unconscious of her presence, looked down into the valley.

Wilson appeared on the wooden porch above the terrace, and stood, his eyes searching the half-light for her. If he came down to her, the man at the next table might turn, would see her—

She rose and went swiftly back toward the hotel. All the gayety was gone out of the evening for her, but she forced a lightness she did not feel: "It is so dark and depressing out there—it makes me sad."

"Surely you do not want to dine in the house?"

"Do you mind?"

"Your wish is my law—tonight," he said softly.

(Continued next week.)

Curiosities of the Dead Letter Office.

In connection with the work of the Postoffice Department one of the most interesting of its bureaus is that of the division of dead letters, to which all unclaimed mail is eventually sent, says the Washington "Star."

According to the very latest figures the receipts of letters and parcels in this division for the last fiscal year were 10,839,890, which is a small net increase over the preceding year, according to officials of that division.

Included in this number were 395,161 undeliverable parcels received at the post offices throughout the country and at the headquarters of fifteen divisions of the railway mail service.

This is one of the divisions which is helping to make Uncle Sam rich. The net revenues of this office, derived from the sale of undeliverable articles of merchandise in the division and by post-masters at headquarters of the railway mail service, together with currency found loose in the mails and removed from letters found to be undeliverable after careful examination, as well as postage payments and unclaimed stamps, aggregated last year \$53,665.69. This is an increase over the former year of \$5,524.96.

The regulation requiring the collection of one cent each on advertised letters returned from the division of dead letters has been in force only six months, but it has already resulted in the collection of \$11,000, making the total net revenue for the year for this office \$64,665.69. It is estimated that the revenue under present conditions for 12 months would be approximately \$75,000, which, it is said by the officials of the office, would make the division self-sustaining.

The department figures show that checks, drafts, money orders and other valuable papers of the face value of \$2,303,119.56 were found during the year in undeliverable letters, practically all of which were reported to the owners. In connection with this bureau, Congress has recently passed legislation reducing the limit of time that letters containing valuable inclosures shall be held awaiting reclamation from four years to one year. This, officials of the division say, will prevent the unnecessary accumulation of this matter, as under the old law—Pittsburgh Dispatch.

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