

"K"

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

(Copyright, by McClure Publications, Inc.) (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 Moine, the new roomer.

CHAPTER II—Sidney's aunt Harriet who has been dresmaking 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 VII—While Sidney and K. are dining on the terrace, Max and Carlotta appear. K. does not see them, but for some reason seeing him disturbs Carlotta strangely.

CHAPTER VIII—Joe reproaches Sidney she confides to K. that Joe knows now she will not marry him.

CHAPTER IX—Sidney goes to training school and at home relies more and more on K. Max meets K. and recognizes him as Edward, a brilliant young surgeon who has been thought lost on the Titanic. K.'s losing cases lost him faith in himself and he quit and hid from the world.

CHAPTER X—Carlotta fears Sidney Christine Lorenz and Palmer Howe are married. The hard facts of her new life puzzle Sidney.

CHAPTER XI—Max continued his flirtation with Carlotta, who becomes jealous of Sidney. K. coaches Max in his work, but remains a clerk in the gas office.

CHAPTER XII—Palmer and Christine move into rooms in Sidney's home. Sidney's mother dies. Palmer neglects Christine.

CHAPTER XIII—On a joy ride with Grace, a young girl, Palmer is hurt and Johnny, the chauffeur, seriously injured.

CHAPTER XIV—Sidney nurses Johnny. Carlotta changes the medicine that Sidney is to give him.

CHAPTER XV—Johnny nearly dies. K. who has brought Johnny's mother to him saves the boy and comforts Sidney.

Her world was in pieces about her, and she felt alone in a wide and empty place. And, because her nerves were drawn taut until they were ready to snap, Sidney turned on him shrewdly.

"I think you are all afraid I will come back to stay. Nobody really wants me anywhere—in all the world! Not at the hospital, not here, not any place. I am no use."

"When you say that nobody wants you," said K., not very steadily, "I—I think you are making a mistake."

She scanned his face closely, and, reading there something she did not understand, she colored suddenly.

"I believe you mean Joe Drummond."

"No, I do not mean Joe Drummond." If he had found any encouragement in her face, he would have gone on recklessly; but her black eyes warned him.

"If you mean Max Wilson," said Sidney, "you are entirely wrong. He's not in love with me. Anyhow, after this disgrace—"

"There is no disgrace, child."

"He'll think me careless, at the least. And his ideals are so high, K."

"You say he likes to be with you. What about you?"

Sidney had been sitting in a low chair by the fire. She rose with a sudden passionate movement. In the informality of the household, she had visited K. in her dressing gown and slippers; and now she stood before him, a tragic young figure, clutching the folds of her gown across her breast.

"I worship him, K.," she said tragically. "When I see him coming, I want to get down and let him walk on me. When I see him in the operating room, cool and calm while everyone else is flustered and excited, he looks like a god."

Then, half ashamed of her outburst, she turned her back to him and stood gazing at the small coal fire. It was as well for K. that she did not see his face.

"It's real, all this?" he asked after a pause. "You're sure it's not just—glamour, Sidney?"

"It's real—terribly real." Her voice was muffled, and he knew then that she was crying.

She was mightily ashamed of it. Fears, of course, except in the privacy of one's closet, were not ethical on the street.

"Perhaps he cares very much, too."

"Give me a handkerchief," said Sidney in a muffled tone, and the little scene was broken into while K. searched through a bureau drawer. Then K. questioned her, alternately soothing and probing.

"Who else had access to the medicine closet?"

"Carlotta Harrison carried the keys, of course. I was off duty from four to six. When Carlotta left the ward,

the probationer would have them." "Have you reason to think that either one of these girls would wish you harm?"

"None whatever," began Sidney vehemently; and then, checking herself "unless—but that's rather ridiculous."

"What is ridiculous?"

"I've sometimes thought that Carlotta—but I am sure she is perfectly fair with me. Why, K., she wouldn't. It would be murder."

"Murder, of course," said K., "in intention, anyhow. Of course she didn't do it, I'm only trying to find out whose mistake it was."

Soon after that she said good-night and went out. She turned in the door way and smiled tremulously back at him.

"You have done me a lot of good. You almost make me believe in myself."

"That's because I believe in you."

With a quick movement that was one of her charms, Sidney suddenly closed the door and slipped back into the room. K., hearing the door close, thought she had gone, and dropped heavily into a chair.

"My best friend in all the world!" said Sidney suddenly from behind him, and, bending over, she kissed him on the cheek.

The next instant the door had closed behind her, and K. was left alone to such wretchedness and bliss as the evening brought him.

Joe Drummond came to see Sidney the next day. She would have avoided him if she could, but Mimi had ushered him up to the sewing-room boudoir before she had time to escape. She had not seen the boy for two months, and the change in him startled her. He was thinner, rather hectic, scrupulously well dressed.

"Why, Joe?" she said, and then: "Won't you sit down?"

He was still rather theatrical. He dramatized himself, as he had that night the June before when he had asked Sidney to marry him. He stood just inside the doorway. He offered no conventional greeting whatever; but, after surveying her briefly, her black gown, the lines around her eyes:

"You're not going back to that place, of course?"

"I—I haven't decided."

She sat at her incredulously. "You don't mean that you are going to stand for this sort of thing? Every time some fool makes a mistake, are they going to blame it on you?"

"Please don't be theatrical. Come in and sit down. I can't talk to you if you explode like a rocket all the time."

Her matter-of-fact tone had its effect. He advanced into the room, but he still scorned a chair.

"I guess you've been wondering why you haven't heard from me," he said. "I've seen you more than you've seen me."

Sidney looked uneasy. The idea of espionage is always repugnant, and to have a rejected lover always in the offing, as it were, was disconcerting.

"I wish you would be just a little bit sensible, Joe. It's so silly of you, really. It's not because you care for me; it's really because you care for yourself."

"You can't look at me and say that, Sid."

He ran his finger around his collar—an old gesture; but the collar was very loose. He was thin; his neck showed it.

"I'm just eating my heart out for you, and that's the truth. And it isn't only that. Everywhere I go, people say, 'There's the fellow Sidney Page turned down when she went into the hospital! I've got so I keep off the Street as much as I can.'"

Sidney was half alarmed, half irritated. This wild, excited boy was not the doggedly faithful youth she had always known. It seemed to her that underneath his quiet manner and care-

fully-repressed voice there lurked something irrational, something she could not cope with. She looked up at him helplessly.

"But what do you want me to do? You—you almost frighten me."

"You're going back?"

"Absolutely."

"Because you love the hospital, or because you love somebody connected with the hospital?"

Sidney was thoroughly angry by this time, angry and reckless. She had

come through so much that every nerve was crying in passionate protest.

"If it will make you understand things any better," she cried, "I am going back for both reasons!"

"She was sorry the next moment. But her words seemed, surprisingly enough, to steady him. For the first time, he sat down."

"Then, as far as I am concerned it's all over, is it?"

"Yes, Joe. I told you that long ago."

He seemed hardly to be listening. His thoughts had ranged far ahead suddenly.

"You think Christine has her hands full with Palmer, don't you? Well, if you take Max Wilson, you're going to have more trouble than Christine ever dreamed of. I can tell you some things about him now that will make you think twice."

But Sidney had reached her limit. She went over and flung open the door.

"Every word that you say shows me how right I am in not marrying you, Joe," she said. "Real men do not say those things about each other under any circumstances. You're behaving like a bad boy. I don't want you to come back until you have grown up."

He was very white, but he picked up his hat and went to the door.

"I guess I am crazy," he said. "I've been wanting to go away, but mother raises such a fuss—I'll not annoy you any more."

He left her standing there and ran down the stairs and out into the street. At the foot of the steps he almost collided with Doctor Ed.

"Back to see Sidney?" said Doctor Ed genially. "That's fine, Joe. I'm glad you've made it up."

The boy went blindly down the street.

CHAPTER XVII.

Winter relaxed its clutch slowly that year. March was bitterly cold; even April found the roads still frozen and the hedgerows clustered with ice. But at midday there was spring in the air in the courtyard of the hospital, convalescents sat on the benches and watched for robins. The fountain, which had frozen out, was being repaired. Here and there on ward window sills tulips opened their gaudy petals to the sun.

Harriet had gone abroad for a flying trip in March, and came back laden with new ideas, model gowns, and fresh enthusiasm. Grace Irving, having made good during the white sales, had been sent to the spring cottages. She began to walk with her head higher. The day she sold Sidney material for a simple white gown, she was very happy. On Sidney, on K., and on Christine the winter had left its mark heavily. Christine, readjusting her life to new conditions, was graver, more thoughtful. She was alone most of the time now. Under K.'s guidance, she had given up the "Duchess" and was reading real books. She was thinking real thoughts, too, for the first time in her life.

Sidney, as tender as ever, had lost a little of the radiance from her eyes; her voice had deepened. Where she had been a pretty girl, she was now lovely. She was back in the hospital again, this time in the children's ward. K., going in one day to take Johnny Rosenfeld a basket of fruit, saw her there with a child in her arms, and a light in her eyes that he had never seen before. It hurt him, rather—things being as they were with him. When he came out he looked straight ahead.

K. had fallen into the habit, after his long walks, of dropping into Christine's little parlor for a chat before he went upstairs. Those early spring days found Harriet Kennedy busy late in the evenings, and, save for Christine and K., the house was practically deserted.

The breach between Palmer and

Christine was steadily widening. She was too proud to ask him to spend more of his evenings with her. On those occasions when he voluntarily stayed at home with her, he was so discontented that he drove her almost to distraction. Although she was convinced that he was seeing nothing of the girl who had been with him the night of the accident, she did not trust him. Not that girl, perhaps, but there were others. There would always be others.

Into Christine's little parlor, then, K. turned, one spring evening. She was reading by the lamp, and the door into the hall stood open. The little room always cheered K. Its warmth and light appealed to his esthetic sense; after the barrenness of his bedroom, it spelled luxury. And perhaps, to be entirely frank, her evident pleasure in his society gratified him. Christine's small coquetries were not lost on him. The evenings with her did something to reinstate him in his own self-esteem. It was subtle, psychological, but also it was very human.

"Come and sit down," said Christine. "Here's a chair, and here are cigarettes and there are matches. Now!"

Behind him, Christine stood watching his head in the light of the desk lamp. "What a strong, quiet face it is," she thought. Why did she get the impression of such a tremendous reserve power in this man who was a clerk, and a clerk only? Behind him she made a quick, unconscious gesture of appeal, both hands out for an instant. She dropped them guiltily as K. turned to her.

"I wonder if you know, K.," she said, "what a lucky woman the woman will be who marries you?"

He laughed good-humoredly. "I wonder how long I could hypnotize her into thinking that."

"I've had time to do a little thinking lately," she said, without bitterness. "Palmer is away so much now, I've been looking back, wondering if I ever thought that about him. I don't believe I ever did. I wonder—"

She checked herself abruptly and sat down. After a moment: "Has it ever occurred to you how terribly mixed up things are? Take this Street, for instance. Can you think of anybody on it that—that things have gone entirely right with?"

"It's a little world of its own, of course," said K., "and it has plenty of contact points with life. But whenever one finds people, many or few, one finds all the elements that make up life—joy and sorrow, birth and death, and even tragedy. That's rather trite, isn't it?"

Christine was still pursuing her thoughts.

"Men are different," she said. "To a certain extent they make their own fates. But when you think of the women on the Street—Harriet Kennedy, Sidney Page, myself, even Mrs. Rosenfeld back in the alley—somebody else molds things for us, and all we can do is to sit back and suffer. I am beginning to think the world is a terrible place, K. Why do people so often marry the wrong people? Why can't a man care for one woman and only one all his life? Why—why is it all so complicated?"

"There are men who care for only one woman all their lives."

"You're that sort, aren't you?"

"I don't want to put myself on any pinnacle. If I cared enough for a woman to marry her, I'd hope to— But we are being very tragic, Christine."

"I feel tragic. There's going to be another mistake, K., unless you stop it."

He tried to leave the conversation with a little fun.

"If you're going to ask me to interfere between Mrs. McKee and the deaf-and-dumb book and insurance agent, I shall do nothing of the sort. She can both speak and hear enough for both of them."

"I mean Sidney and Max Wilson. He's mad about her, K.; and, because she's the sort she is, he'll probably be mad about her all his life, even if he

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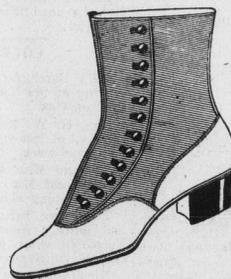
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"I'm Just Eating My Heart Out for You."

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