

Bellefonte, Pa., May 4, 1917.

"K"

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

(Continued from last week.)

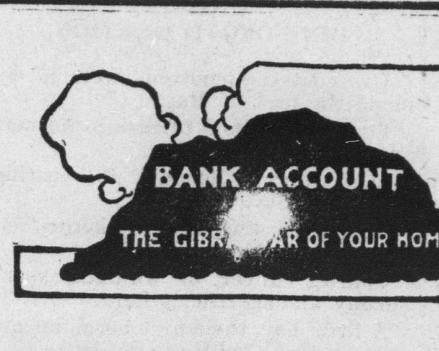
CHAPTER XX.

The announcement of Sidney's engagement was not to be made for a year. Wilson, chafing under the delay, was obliged to admit to himself that it was best. He was genuinely in love, even unselfishly—as far as he could be unselfish. The secret was to be carefully kept also for Sidney's sake. The hospital did not approve of engagements between nurses and the staff. It was disorganizing, bad for discipline. Sidney was very happy all that summer. She glowed with pride when her lover put through a difficult piece of work; flushed and palpitated when she heard his praises sung; grew to know, by a sort of intuition, when he was in the house. She wore his ring on a fine chain around her neck, and grew prouder every day. K had postponed his leaving until fall. Sidney had been insistent, and Harriet had topped the argument in her businesslike way. "If you insist on being an idiot and adopting the Rosenfeld family," she said, "wait until September. The season for boarders doesn't begin until fall." So K waited for "the season," and ate his heart out for Sidney in the interval. Johnny Rosenfeld still lay in his ward, inert from the waist down. K was his most frequent visitor. As a matter of fact, he was watching the boy closely, at Max Wilson's request. "Tell me when I'm to do it," said Wilson, "and when the time comes, for God's sake, stand by me. Come to the operation. He's got so much confidence that I'll help him that I don't dare to fail." Luckily for Sidney, her three months' service in the operating room kept her and Carlotta apart. For Carlotta was now not merely jealous. She found herself neglected, ignored. It ate her like a fever. But she did not yet suspect an engagement. It had been her theory that Wilson would not marry easily—that, in a sense, he would have to be coerced into marriage. She thought merely that Sidney was playing a game like her own, with different weapons. So she planned her battle, ignorant that she had lost already. Her method was simple enough. A new intern had come into the house, and was going through the process of learning that from a senior at the medical school to a half-baked junior interne is a long step back. He had to endure the good-natured contempt of the older men, the patronizing instructions of nurses as to rules. Carlotta alone treated him with deference. His uneasy rounds in Carlotta's precinct took on the state and form of staff visitations. She flattered, cajoled, looked up to him. After a time it dawned on Wilson that this junior cub was getting more attention than himself; that, wherever he happened to be, somewhere in the office would be Carlotta and the Lamb, the latter eying her with worship. Her indifference had only piqued him. The enthroning of a successor galled him. Between them, the Lamb suffered mightily—was subject to frequent "hawling out," as he termed it, in the operating room as he assisted the aesthetist. He took his troubles to Carlotta, who soothed him in the corridor—in plain sight of her quarry, of course—by putting a sympathetic hand on his sleeve. Then, one day, Wilson was goaded to speech. "For the love of heaven, Carlotta," he said impatiently, "stop making love to that wretched boy. He wriggles like a worm if you look at him." "I like him. He is thoroughly genuine. I respect him, and he respects me." "It's rather a silly game, you know. Do you think I don't understand?" "Perhaps you do. I—I don't really care a lot about him, Max. But I've been downhearted. He cheers me up." Her attraction for him was almost gone—not quite. He felt rather sorry for her. "I'm sorry. Then you are not angry with me?" "Angry? No." She lifted her eyes to his and for once she was not acting. "I knew it would end, of course. I have lost a—lover. I expected that. But I wanted to keep a friend." It was the right note. Why, after all, should he not be her friend? He had treated her cruelly, hideously. If she still desired his friendship, there was no dissuality to Sidney in giving it. And Carlotta was very careful. Not once again did she allow him to see what lay in her eyes. She told him of her worries. The Lamb was hovering near, hot eyes on them both. It was no place to talk. Sidney would be at a lecture that

night. The evening loomed temptingly free. "Suppose you meet me at the old corner," he said carelessly, eyes on the Lamb, who was forgetting that he was only a junior interne and was glaring ferociously. "We'll run out into the country and talk things over." She demurred, with her heart beating triumphantly. "What's the use of going back to that? It's over, isn't it?" Her objection made her determined. When at last she had yielded, and he made his way down to the smoking room, it was with the feeling that he had won a victory. K had been uneasy all that day; his ledgers irritated him. He had been sleeping badly since Sidney's announcement of her engagement. At five o'clock, when he left the office, he found Joe Drummond waiting outside on the pavement. "Mother said you'd been up to see me a couple of times. I thought I'd come around." K looked at his watch. "What do you say to a walk?" "Not out in the country. I'm not as muscular as you are. I'll go about town for a half-hour or so." Thus forestalled, K found his subject hard to lead up to. But here again Joe met him more than half-way. "Well, go on," he said, when they found themselves in the park; "I guess I know what you are going to say."

"I'm not going to preach, if you're expecting that. Ordinarily, if a man insists on making a fool of himself, I let him alone." "Why make an exception of me?" "One reason is that I happen to like you. The other reason is that, whether you admit it or not, you are acting like a young idiot, and are putting the responsibility on the shoulders of someone else." "She is responsible, isn't she?" "Not in the least. How old are you, Joe?" "Twenty-three, almost." "Exactly. You are a man, and you are acting like a bad boy. It's a disappointment to me. It's more than that to Sidney." "Much she cares! She's going to marry Wilson, isn't she?" "There is no announcement of any engagement." "She is, and you know it. Well, she'll be happy—not! If I'd go to her tonight and tell her what I know, she'd never see him again." The idea, thus born in his overwrought brain, obsessed him. He turned to it again and again. Le Moyne was uneasy. He was not certain that the boy's statement had any basis in fact. His single determination was to save Sidney from any pain. When Joe suddenly announced his inclination to go out into the country after all, he suspected a ruse to get rid of him, and insisted on going along. Joe consented grudgingly.

"Car's at Bailey's garage," he said sullenly. "I don't know when I'll get back." "That won't matter. K's tone was cheerful. "I'm not sleeping, anyhow." That passed unnoticed until they were on the highway, with the car running smoothly between yellowing fields of wheat. Then: "So you've got it too?" he said. "We're a fine pair of fools. We'd both be better off if I sent the car over a bank." He gave the wheel a reckless twist, and Le Moyne called him to time sternly. They had supper at the White Springs hotel—not on the terrace, but in the little room where Carlotta and Wilson had taken their first meal together. Joe submitted with bad grace, but the meal cheered and steadied him. K found him more amenable to reason, and, gaining his confidence, learned of his desire to leave the city. "I'm stuck here," he said. "I'm the only one, and mother yells blue murder when I talk about it. I want to go to Cuba. My uncle owns a farm down there." "Perhaps I can talk your mother over. I've been there."



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