

"K"

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER XXIV.

K. spent all of the evening of that day with Wilson. He was not to go for Joe until eleven o'clock. The injured man's vitality was standing him in good stead. He had asked for Sidney and she was at his bedside. Doctor Ed had gone.

K. found Sidney in the room, not sitting, but standing by the window. The sick man was dozing. One shaded light burned in a far corner. She turned slowly and met his eyes. It seemed to K. that she looked at him as if she had never really seen him before, and he was right. Readjustments are always difficult.

Sidney was trying to reconcile the K. she had known so well with this new K., no longer obscure, although still shabby, whose height had suddenly become presence, whose quiet was the quiet of infinite power.

She was suddenly shy of him, as he stood looking down at her. He saw the gleam of her engagement ring on her finger. It seemed almost defiant. As though she had meant by wearing it to emphasize her belief in her lover.

They did not speak beyond their greeting, until he had gone over the record. Then: "We can't talk here. I want to talk to you, K."

He led the way into the corridor. It was very dim. Far away was the night nurse's desk, with its lamp, its annunciator, its pile of records. The passage floor reflected the light on glistening boards.

"I have been thinking until I am almost crazy, K. And now I know how it happened. It was Joe."

"The principal thing is, not how it happened, but that he is going to get well, Sidney."

She stood looking down, twisting her ring around her finger.

"Is Joe in any danger?"

"We are going to get him away to-night. He wants to go to Cuba. He'll get off safely, I think."

"We are going to get him away! You are, you mean. You shoulder all our troubles, K., as if they were your own."

"I?" He was genuinely surprised. "Oh, I see. You mean—but my part in getting Joe off is practically nothing. As a matter of fact, Schwitzer has put up the money. My total capital in the world, after paying for the machine today, is seven dollars."

"You, of course," said she. "You find Max and save him—don't look like that! You did, didn't you? And you get Joe away, borrowing money to send him."

He looked uncomfortable, almost guilty.

"When I look back and remember how all these months I've been talking about service, and you said nothing at all, and all the time you were living what I preached—I'm so ashamed, K."

He would not allow that. It distressed him. She saw that, and tried to smile.

"When does Joe go?"

"Tonight. I'm to take him across the country to the railroad. I was wondering—"

"Yes?"

"I'd better explain first. Then if you are willing to send him a line, I think it would help. He saw a girl in white in the car and thought it was you, of course. Carlotta was taken ill. And Schwitzer and—Wilson took her upstairs to a room."

"Do you believe that, K.?"

"I do. He saw Max coming out and misunderstood. He fired at him then."

"He did it for me. I feel very guilty, K., as if it all comes back to me. I'll write to him, of course. Poor Joe!"

He watched her go down the hall toward the night nurse's desk. Then he went back into the quiet room.

He stood by the bedside, looking down. Wilson was breathing quietly; his color was coming up, as he rallied from the shock. In K.'s mind now was just one thought—to bring him through for Sidney, and then to go away. He might follow Joe to Cuba. There were chances there. He could do sanitation work, or he might try the canal.

The Street would go on working out its own salvation. He would have to think of something for the Rosenfelds. And he was worried about Christine. But there again, perhaps, it would be better if he went away. Christine's story would have to work itself out. His hands were tied. "I'd better get away from here," he told himself savagely.

Someone entered the room. He thought it was Sidney and turned with the light in his eyes that was only for her. It was Carlotta.

She was not in uniform. She wore a dark skirt and white waist and her high heels tapped as she crossed the

room. She came directly to him. "He is better, isn't he?" "He is rallying. Of course it will be a day or two before we are quite sure." She stood looking down at Wilson's quiet figure.

"I guess you know I've been crazy about him," she said quietly. "Well, that's all over. He never really cared for me. I played his game and I—lost. I've been expelled from the school."

Quite suddenly she dropped on her knees beside the bed, and put her cheek close to the sleeping man's hand. When after a moment she rose, she was controlled again, calm, very white.

She turned toward the door. But K. could not let her go like that. Her face frightened him. It was too calm, too controlled. He followed her across the room.

"What are your plans?" "I haven't any. I'm about through with my training, but I've lost my diploma."

"I don't like to see you going away like this."

She avoided his eyes, but his kindly tone did what neither the Head nor the executive committee had done that day. It shook her control.

"What does it matter to you? You don't owe me anything."

"Perhaps not. One way and another I've known you a long time." "You never knew anything very good."

"I'll tell you where I live, and—"

"I know where you live." "Will you come to see me there? We may be able to think of something."

"What is there to think of? This story will follow me wherever I go! I've tried twice for a diploma and failed. What's the use?"

But in the end he prevailed on her to promise not to leave the city until she had seen him again. It was not until she had gone, a straight figure with haunted eyes, that he reflected whimsically that once again he had defeated his own plans for flight.

Sidney brought her letter to Joe back to K. She was flushed with the effort and with a new excitement.

"The most remarkable thing has happened. What a day this has been! Somebody has sent Johnny Rosenfeld a lot of money. The ward nurse wants you to come back."

The ward had settled for the night. The well-ordered beds of the daytime were chaotic now, torn apart by tossing figures. The night was hot and an electric fan hummed in a far corner. Under its sporadic breezes, as it turned, the ward was trying to sleep.

Johnny Rosenfeld was not asleep. An incredible thing had happened to him. A fortune lay under his pillow. He was sure it was there, for ever since it came his hot hand had clutched it.

He was quite sure that somehow or other K. had had a hand in it. When he disclaimed it, the boy was bewildered.

"I'll buy the old lady what she wants for the house, anyhow," he said. "But I hope nobody's took up a collection for me. I don't want no charity."

"Maybe Mr. Howe sent it."

"You can bet your last match he didn't."

In some unknown way the news had reached the ward that Johnny's friend, Mr. Le Moyné, was a great surgeon. Johnny had rejected it scornfully.

But the story had seized on his imagination.

"Say, Mr. Le Moyné."

"Yes, Jack."

He called him "Jack." The boy liked it. It savored of man to man. After all, he was a man, or almost. Hadn't he driven a car? Didn't he have a state license?

"They say that you're a surgeon; that you operated on Doctor Wilson and saved his life. They say that you're the king pin where you came from." He eyed K. wistfully. "I know it's a lie, but if it's true—Don't you think you could do something for me, sir?"

When K. did not reply at once, he launched into an explanation.

"I've been lying here a good while. I didn't say much because I knew I'd have to take a chance. Either I'd pull through or I wouldn't, and the odds were—well, I didn't say much. The old lady's had a lot of trouble. But now, with this under my pillow for her, I've got a right to ask. I'll take a chance, if you will."

"It's only a chance, Jack."

"I know that. But lie here and watch these soaks of the street. Old, a lot of them, and gettin' well to go out and starve, and—Mr. Le Moyné, they can walk, and I can't."

K. drew a long breath. He had started, and now he must go on. Faith in himself or no faith, he must go on. Life, that had loosed its hold on him for a time, had found him again.

"I'll go over you carefully tomorrow, Jack. I'll tell you your chances honestly."

"I have a thousand dollars. Whatever you charge—"

"I'll take it out of my board bill in the new house!"

At four o'clock that morning K. got back from seeing Joe off. The trip had been without accident.

Over Sidney's letter Joe had shed a shamefaced tear or two. And during the night ride, with K. pushing the car to the utmost, he had felt that the boy, in keeping his hand in his pocket, had kept it on the letter. When the road was smooth and stretched ahead, a gray-white line into the night, he tried to talk a little courage into the boy's sick heart.

"You'll see new people, new life," he said. "In a month from now you'll wonder why you ever hung around the Street. I have a feeling that you're going to make good down there."

And once, when the time for parting was very near—

"No matter what happens, keep on

believing in yourself. I lost my faith in myself once. It was pretty close to hell."

Joe's response showed his entire self-engrossment. "If he dies, I'm a murderer." "He's not going to die," said K. stoutly.

At four o'clock in the morning he left the car at the garage and walked around to the little house. He had had no sleep for forty-five hours; his eyes were sunken in his head; the skin over his temples looked drawn and white. His clothes were wrinkled; the soft hat he habitually wore was white with the dust of the road.

As he opened the hall door, Christine stirred in the room beyond. She came out fully dressed.

"K., are you sick?" "Rather tired. Why in the world aren't you in bed?"

"Palmer has just come home in a terrible rage. He says he's been robbed of a thousand dollars."

"Where?" Christine shrugged her shoulders.

"He doesn't know, or says he doesn't. I'm glad of it. He seems thoroughly frightened. It may be a lesson."

In the dim hall light he realized that her face was strained and set. She looked on the verge of hysteria.

"Poor little woman," he said. "I'm sorry, Christine."

The tender words broke down the last barrier of her self-control.

"Oh, K.! Take me away. Take me away! I can't stand it any longer."

She held her arms out to him, and because he was very tired and lonely,



"Poor Girl!" He Said "Poor Christine!"

and because more than anything else in the world just then he needed a woman's arms, he drew her to him and held her close, his cheek to her hair.

"Poor girl!" he said. "Poor Christine! Surely there must be some happiness for us somewhere."

But the next moment he let her go and stepped back.

"I'm sorry." Characteristically he took the blame. "I shouldn't have done that— You know how it is with me."

"Will it always be Sidney?" "I'm afraid it will always be Sidney."

CHAPTER XXV.

Johnny Rosenfeld was dead. All of K.'s skill had not sufficed to save him. The operation had been a marvel, but the boy's long-sapped strength failed at the last. K., set of face, stayed with him to the end. The boy did not know he was going. He roused from the coma and smiled up at Le Moyné.

"I've got a hunch that I can move my right foot," he said. "Look and see."

K. lifted the light covering. "You're right, old man. It's moving."

"Brake foot, clutch foot," said Johnny and closed his eyes again. K. had forbidden the white screens, that outward symbol of death. Time enough for them later. So the ward had no suspicion, nor had the boy. The ward passed in review. It was Sunday, and from the chapel far below came the faint singing of a hymn. When Johnny spoke again he did not open his eyes.

"You're some operator, Mr. Le Moyné. I'll put in a word for you whenever I get a chance."

"Yes, put in a word for me," said K. huskily.

He felt that Johnny would be a good mediator—that whatever he, K., had done of omission or commission, Johnny's voice before the Tribunal would count.

Johnny was close on the edge of his long sleep by that time, and very comfortable. It was K. who, seeing he would no longer notice, ordered the screens to be set around the bed, K. who drew the coverings smooth and folded the boy's hands over his breast.

The nurse stood by uncertainly. "How very young he is! Was it an accident?"

"It was the result of a man's damnable folly," said K. grimly. "Somebody always pays."

And so Johnny Rosenfeld paid.

The immediate result of his death was that K., who had gained some of his faith in himself on seeing Wilson on the way to recovery, was beset by his old doubts. And now came a question that demanded immediate answer. Wilson would be out of commission for several months, probably. He was gaining, but slowly. And he wanted K. to take over his work.

"Why not?" he demanded, half irritably. "The secret is out. Everybody knows who you are. And now, because a boy who wouldn't have lived anyhow—"

"That's not it," K. put in hastily. "I know all that. I guess I could do it and get away with it as well as the average. All that deters me—I've never told you, have I, why I gave up before?"

Wilson was propped up in his bed. K. was walking restlessly about the room, as was his habit when troubled.

"I've heard the gossip; that's all."

"You know what I always felt about the profession, Max. We went into that more than once in Berlin. Either one's best or nothing. I had done pretty well. When I left Lorch and built my own hospital, I hadn't a doubt of myself. And because I was getting results I got a lot of advertising. Men began coming to the clinics. I found I was making enough out of the patients who could pay to add a few free wards. I want to tell you now, Wilson, that the opening of those free wards was the greatest self-indulgence I ever permitted myself. I'd seen so much careless attention given the poor—well, never mind that. It was almost three years ago that things began to go wrong. I lost a big case."

"I know. All this doesn't influence

(Continued on page 7, column 1.)

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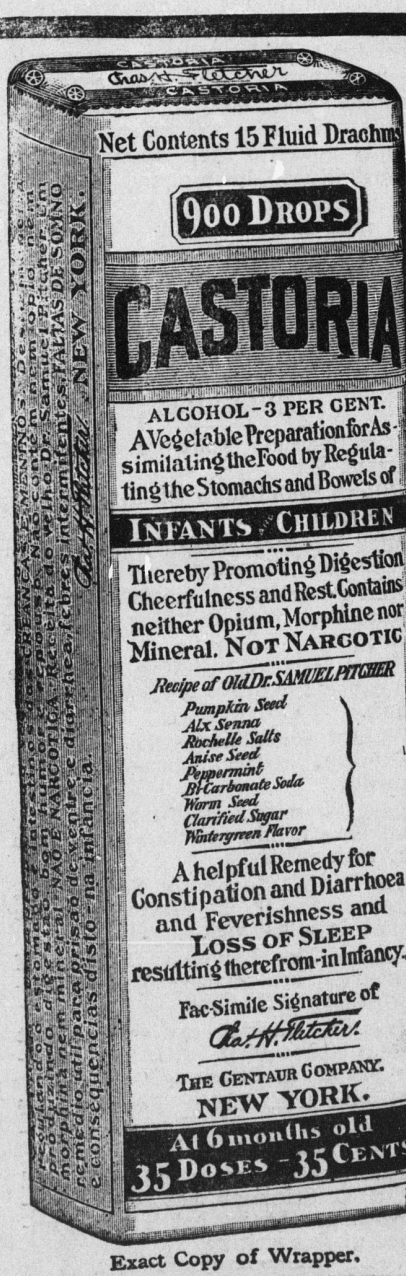


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