

"K"

By **Mary Roberts Rinehart**

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(Concluded from last week.)

CHAPTER XXVI.

Late September had come. The Street had been furiously busy for a month. The cobblestones had gone, and from curb to curb stretched smooth asphalt. To this general excitement the strange case of Mr. Le Moyne had added its quota. One day he was in the gas office, making out statements that were absolutely ridiculous. And the next there was the news that Mr. Le Moyne had been only taking a holiday in the gas office and that he was really a very great surgeon and had saved Dr. Max Wilson.

The Street, which was busy at the time deciding whether to leave the old sidewalks or to put down cement ones, had one evening of mad excitement over the matter—of K., not the sidewalk—and then had accepted the new situation.

But over the news of K.'s approaching departure it mourned. The Street made a resolve to keep K., if possible. If he had shown any "high and mightiness," as they called it, since the change in his estate, it would have let him go without protest. But when a man is the real thing—so that the



"I'm Sorry, Dear Max."

newspapers give a column to his having been in the city almost two years—and still goes about in the same shabby clothes, with the same friendly greeting for everyone, it demonstrates clearly, as the baritone put it, that "he's got no swollen head on him; that's sure."

A little later, K., coming up the Street as he had that first day, heard the baritone singing:

"Home is the hunter, home from the hill,
And the sailor, home from the sea."
Home! Why, this was home. The Street seemed to stretch out its arms to him. The alanthus tree waved in the sunlight before the little house. Tree and house were old; September had touched them. Christine sat sewing on the balcony. A boy with a piece of chalk was writing something on the new cement under the tree. He stood back, head on one side, when he had finished, and inspected his work. K. read in chalk on the smooth street:

Max Wilson.

Christine was still singing; but now it was "I'm twenty-one, and she's eighteen." The light was gone from K.'s face again. After all, the Street meant for him not so much home as it meant Sidney. And now, before very long, that book of his life, like others, would have to be closed.

He turned and went heavily into the little house.

Christine called to him from her little balcony:

"I thought I heard your step outside. Have you time to come in?"

K. went through the parlor and stood in the long window. His steady eyes looked down at her.

"I see very little of you now," she complained. And, when he did not reply immediately: "Have you made any definite plans, K.?"

"I shall do Max's work until he is able to take hold again. After that—"

"You will go away?"

"I think so. I am getting a good many letters, one way and another. I suppose, now I'm back in harness, I'll stay. My old place is closed. I'd go back there—they want me. But it seems so futile, Christine, to leave as I did, because I felt that I had no right

to go on as things were; and now to crawl back on the strength of having had my hand forced, and to take up things again, not knowing that I've a bit more right to do it than when I left!"

"I went to see Max yesterday. You know what he thinks about all that." He took an uneasy turn up and down the balcony.

"But who?" he demanded. "Who would do such a thing? I tell you, Christine, it is impossible."

She did not pursue the subject. Her thoughts had flown ahead to the little house without K., to days without his steps on the stairs or the heavy creak of his big chair overhead as he dropped into it.

But perhaps it would be better if he went. She had her own life to live. She had no expectation of happiness, but, somehow or other, she must build on the shaky foundation of her marriage a excuse of life, with resignation serving for content, perhaps with fear lurking always. That she knew. But with no active misery. Misery implied affection, and her love for Palmer was quite dead.

"Sidney will be here this afternoon," "Good." His tone was noncommittal.

"Has it occurred to you, K., that Sidney is not very happy?"

He stopped in front of her.

"She's had a great anxiety."

"She has no anxiety now. Max is doing well."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm not quite sure, but I think I know. She's lost faith in Max, and she's not like me. I—I knew about Palmer before I married him. It's all rather hideous—I needn't go into it. But Sidney has more character than I have. Max isn't what she thought he was, and I doubt whether she'll marry him."

K. glanced toward the street where Sidney's name and Max's lay open to the sun and to the gaze of the Street. Christine might be right, but that did not alter things for him.

Christine's thoughts went back inevitably to herself; to Palmer, who was doing better just now; to K., who was going away—went back with an ache to the night K. had taken her in his arms and then put her away. How wrong things were! What a mess life was!

"When you go away," she said at last, "I want you to remember this. I'm going to do my best, K. You have taught me all I know. All my life I'll have to overlook things; I know that. But, in his way, Palmer cares for me. He will always come back, and perhaps sometime—"

Her voice trailed off. Far ahead of her she saw the years stretching out, marked, not by days and months, but by Palmer's wanderings away, his remorseful returns.

"Do a little more than forgetting," K. said. "Try to care for him, Christine. You did once. And that's your strongest weapon. It's always a woman's strongest weapon. And it wins in the end."

"I shall try, K.," she answered obediently.

But he turned away from the look in her eyes.

Harriet was abroad. She had sent cards from Paris to her "trade." It was an innovation. The two or three people on the Street who received her engraved announcement that she was there, "buying new chic models for the autumn and winter—afternoon frocks, evening gowns, reception dresses, and wraps, from Poiret, Martial et Armand, and others," left the envelopes casually on the parlor table, as if communications from Paris were quite to be expected.

So K. lunched alone, and ate little. Sidney came home at half-past two—came delicately flushed, as if she had hurried, and with a tremulous smile that caught Katie's eyes at once.

"Bless the child!" she said. "There's no need to ask how he is today. You're all one smile."

The smile set just a trifle.

"Katie, someone has written my name out on the street, in chalk. It's with Doctor Wilson's, and it looks so silly. Please go out and sweep it off."

"I'm about crazy with their old chalk. I'll do it after a while."

"Please do it now. I don't want anyone to see it. Is—Mr. K. upstairs?"

But when she learned that K. was upstairs, oddly enough, she did not go up at once. She stood in the lower hall and listened. Yes, he was there. She could hear him moving about. Her lips parted slightly as she listened.

Christine, looking in from her balcony, saw her there, and, seeing something in her face that she had never suspected, put her hand to her throat.

"Sidney!"

"Oh—hello, Chris."

"Won't you come and sit with me?"

"I haven't much time—that is, I want to speak to K."

"You can see him when he comes down."

Sidney came slowly through the parlor. It occurred to her, all at once, that Christine must see a lot of K., especially now. No doubt he was in and out of the house often. And how pretty Christine was! She was unhappy, too. All that seemed to be necessary to win K.'s attention was to be unhappy enough. Well, surely, in that case—

"How is Max?"

"Still better."

Sidney sat down on the edge of the railing; but she was careful, Christine saw, to face the staircase. There was silence on the balcony. Christine sewed; Sidney sat and swung her feet idly.

"Doctor Ed says Max wants you to give up your training and marry him now."

"I'm not going to marry him at all, Chris."

Upstairs, K.'s door slammed. It was one of his fallings that he always slammed doors. Harriet used to be quite disagreeable about it. Sidney slid from the railing.

"There he is now."

Perhaps, in all her frivolous, selfish life, Christine had never had a bigger moment than the one that followed. She could have said nothing, and, in the queer way that life goes, K. might



"I'm Not Going to Marry Him at All, Chris."

have gone away from the Street as empty of heart as he had come to it. "Be very good to him, Sidney," she said unsteadily. "He cares so much."

CHAPTER XXVII.

K. was being very dense. For so long had he considered Sidney as untalented that now his masculine mind, a little weary with much wretchedness, refused to move from its old attitude.

"It was glamour, that was all, K.," said Sidney bravely.

"But, perhaps," said K., "it's just because of that miserable incident with Carlotta. That wasn't the right thing of course, but Max has told me the story. It was really quite innocent. She fainted in the yard, and—"

Sidney was exasperated.

"Do you want me to marry him, K.?" K. looked straight ahead.

"I want you to be happy, dear."

They were on the terrace of the White Springs hotel again. K. had ordered dinner, making a great deal about getting the dishes they both liked. But now that it was there, they were not eating. K. had placed his chair so that his profile was turned toward her. Past K.'s profile Sidney could see the magnolia tree shaped like a heart.

"It seems to me," said Sidney suddenly, "that you are kind to everyone but me, K."

He fairly stammered his astonishment:

"Why, what on earth have I done?"

"You are trying to make me marry Max, aren't you?"

She was very properly ashamed of that, and, when he failed to reply out of sheer inability to think of one that would not say too much, she went hastily to something else: "It is hard for me to realize that you—not you, living a life of your own, a busy life, doing useful things, before you came to us. I wish you would tell me something about yourself. If we're to be friends when you go away,—she had to stop there, for the lump in her throat—"I'll want to know how to think of you—who your friends are—all that."

He made an effort. He was thinking, of course, that he would be visualizing her, in the hospital, in the little house on its side street, as she looked just then, her eyes like stars, her lips just parted, her hands folded before her on the table.

"I shall be working," he said at last. "So will you."

"Does that mean you won't have time to think of me?"

"I believe I'm stupider than usual tonight. You can think of me as never forgetting you or the Street, working or playing."

Playing! Of course he would not work all the time. And he was going back to his old friends, to people who had always known him, to girls—

He did his best then. He told her of his old family house, built by one of his forebears who had been a king's man until Washington had put the case for the colonies, and who had given himself and his oldest son then to the cause that he made his own. He told of old servants who had wept when he decided to close the house and go away. When she fell silent, he thought he was interesting her.

But a terrible thing was happening to Sidney. Side by side with the wonders he described so casually, she was placing the little house. What an exile it must have been for him! When K., trying his best to interest her and to conceal his own heaviness of spirit, told her of his grandfather's old carriage, she sat back in the shadow.

"Fearful old thing," said K.—"regular cabriolet. I can remember yet the family rows over it."

"When I was a child," said Sidney quietly, "and a carriage drove up and stopped on the Street, I always knew someone had died!"

There was a strained note in her voice. K., whose ear was attuned to every note in her voice, looked at her quickly.

"My great-grandfather," said Sidney in the same tone, "sold chickens at market. He didn't do it himself; but the fact's there, isn't it?"

K. was puzzled.

"What about it?" he said.

"Go on," said Sidney dully. "Tell me about the women you have known, your friends, the ones you liked and the ones who liked you."

K. was rather apologetic.

"I've always been so busy," he confessed. "I know a lot, but I don't think they would interest you. They don't do anything, you know—they travel around and have a good time. They're rather nice to look at, some of them. But when you've said that you've said it all."

Nice to look at! Of course they would be, with nothing else to think of in all the world but of how they looked.

Suddenly Sidney felt very tired. She wanted to go back to the hospital, and turn the key in the door of her little room, and lie with her face down on the bed.

"Would you mind very much if I asked you to take me back?"

He did mind. He had a depressed feeling that the evening had failed. And his depression grew as he brought the car around. He understood, he thought. She was grieving about Max. After all, a girl couldn't care as she had for a year and a half, and then give a man up because of another woman, without a wrench.

"Do you really want to go home, Sidney, or were you tired of sitting there? In that case, we could drive around for an hour or two. I'll not talk if you'd like to be quiet."

Being with K. had become an agony, now that she realized how wrong Christine had been, and that their worlds, hers and K.'s, had only touched for a time. But she was not disposed to skip as to agony. She would go through with it, every word a stab, if only she might sit beside K. a little longer, might feel the touch of his old grey coat against her arm.

"I'd like to ride, if you don't mind."

K. turned the automobile toward the country roads.

"K."

"Yes?"

"Was there anybody you cared about—any girl—when you left home?"

"I was not in love with anyone, if that's what you mean."

"You knew Max before, didn't you?"

"Yes. You know that."

"If you knew things about him that I should have known, why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't do that, could I? Anyhow—"

"Yes?"

"I thought everything would be all right. It seemed to me that the mere fact of your caring for him—that was shaky ground; he got off it quickly. K. was suddenly aware that Sidney was crying. She sat with her head turned away, using her handkerchief stealthily. He drew the car up beside the road, and in a masterful fashion turned her shoulders about until she faced him.

"Now, tell me about it," he said.

"It's just silliness. I'm—I'm a little bit lonely. Aunt Harriet's in Paris, and with Joe gone and everybody—"

"Aunt Harriet?"

He was properly dazed, for sure.

"And with you going away and never coming back—"

"I'll come back, of course. How's this? I'll promise to come back when you graduate, and send you flowers."

"You won't, K. You'll be back with your old friends. Girls who have been everywhere, and have lovely clothes, and who won't know a T bandage from a figure eight!"

"There will never be anybody in the world like you to me, dear." His voice was husky.

"You are saying that to comfort me."

"To comfort you! I—who have wanted you so long that it hurts even to think about it! Ever since the night I came up the Street, and you were sitting there on the steps—oh, my dear, my dear, if you only cared a little!"

Because he was afraid that he would get out of hand and take her in his arms—which would be idiotic, since, of course, she did not care for him that way—he gripped the steering-wheel. It gave him a curious appearance of making a pathetic appeal to the windshield.

"I have been trying to make you say that all evening!" said Sidney. "I love you so much that— K., won't you take me in your arms?"

Take her in his arms! He almost crushed her. He held her to him and muttered incoherences until she gasped. It was as if he must make up for long arrears of hopelessness. He held her off a bit to look at her, as if to be sure it was she and no changing, and as if he wanted her eyes to corroborate her lips. There was no lack of confession in her eyes; they showed him a new heaven and a new earth.

"It was you always, K.," she confessed. "I just didn't realize it. But now, when you look back, don't you see it was?"

He looked back over the months when she had seemed as unattainable as the stars, and he did not see it. He shook his head.

"I never had even a hope."

"Not when I came to you with everything? I brought you all my troubles, and you always helped."

Her eyes filled. She bent down and kissed one of his hands. He was so happy that the foolish little caress made his heart hammer in his ears.

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"I think, K., that is how one can always tell when it is the right one, and will be the right one forever and ever.

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THE CENTRE COUNTY BANK,
BELLEFONTE

(Continued on page 7, column 1.)