

"K"

A thrilling mystery story about a man who lost his courage and the girl who helped him to find it again

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

CHAPTER I.

The Street stretched away north and south in two lines of ancient houses that seemed to meet in the distance. It had the well-worn look of an old coat, shabby but comfortable. It was an impression of home, really, that it gave. There was a house across and a little way down the Street, with a card in the window that said: "Meals, twenty-five cents." The Nottingham curtains were pinned back, and just inside the window a throaty baritone was singing:

Home is the hunter, home from the hill; And the sailor, home from the sea.

For perhaps an hour Joe Drummond had been wandering down the Street. His slender shoulders, squared and resolute at eight, by nine had taken on a disconsolate droop. Prayer meeting at the corner church was over; the Street emptied. The boy wiped the warm band of his hat and slapped it on his head again. Ah!

Across the Street, under an old allanthus tree, was the house he watched, a small brick, with shallow wooden steps and—curious architecture of the Middle West sixties—a wooden cellar door beside the steps. In some curious way it preserved an air of distinction among its newer and more pretentious neighbors. The taller houses had an appearance of protection rather than of patronage. It was a matter of self-respect, perhaps. No windows on the Street were so spotlessly curtained, no doornut so accurately placed, no "yard" in the rear so tidy with morning-glory vines over the whitewashed fence.

The June moon had risen. When the girl came out at last, she stepped out into a world of soft lights and wavering shadows, fragrant with tree blossoms hushed of its daylight sounds. The house had been warm. Her brown hair lay moist on her forehead, her thin white dress was turned in at the throat. She stood on the steps and threw out her arms in a swift gesture to the cool air. From across the Street the boy watched her with adoring, humble eyes. All his courage was for those hours when he was not with her. "Hello, Joe."

"Hello, Sidney."

He crossed over, emerging out of the shadows into her enveloping radiance. His ardent young eyes worshiped her as he stood on the pavement.

"I'm late. I was taking out bastings for mother."

"Oh, that's all right."

Sidney sat down on the doorstep, and the boy dropped at her feet. She settled herself more comfortably and drew a long breath.

"How tired I am! Oh—I haven't told you. We've taken a roomer!" She was half apologetic. The Street did not approve of roomers. "It will help with the rent. It's my doing, really. Mother is scandalized."

Joe was sitting bolt upright now, a little white.

"Is he young?"

"He's a good bit older than you, but that's not saying he's old."

Joe was twenty-one, and sensitive of his youth.

"He'll be crazy about you in two days."

She broke into delightful laughter.

"I'll not fall in love with him—you can be certain of that. He is tall and very-solemn. His hair is quite gray over his ears."

"What's his name?"

"K. Le Moyne."

Interest in the roomer died away. The boy fell into the ecstasy of content that always came with Sidney's presence. His inarticulate young soul was swelling with thoughts that he did not know how to put into words. It was easy enough to plan conversations with Sidney when he was away from her. But, at her feet, with her soft skirts touching him as she moved, her eager face turned to him, he was miserably awkward and strangely speechless.

Unexpectedly, Sidney yawned. He was outraged.

"If you're sleepy—"

"Don't be silly. I love having you. I sat up late last night, reading. I wonder what you think of this: One of the characters in the book I was reading says that every man who—who cares for a woman leaves his mark on her!"

"Every man! How many men are supposed to care for a woman, anyhow?"

"Well, there's the boy who—likes her when they're both young."

A bit of innocent mischief this, but Joe straightened.

"Then they both outgrow that foolishness. After that there are usually

two rivals, and she marries one of them—that's three. And—"

"Why do they always outgrow that foolishness?" His voice was unsteady.

"Oh, I don't know. One's ideas change."

Sidney was fairly vibrant with the zest of living. Sitting on the steps of the little brick house, her busy mind was carrying her on to where, beyond the Street, with its dingy lamps and blossoming allanthus, lay the world that was one day to lie to her hand. Not ambition called her, but life.

The boy was different. Where her future lay visualized before her, heroic deeds, great ambitions, wide charity, he planned years with her, selfish, contented years. As different as smug, satisfied summer from visionary, palpitating spring, he was for her—but she was for all the world.

By shifting his position his lips came close to her bare young arm. It tempted him.

"Don't read that nonsense," he said, his eyes on the arm. "And—I'll never outgrow my foolishness about you, Sidney."

Then, because he could not help it, he bent over and kissed her arm.

She was just eighteen, and Joe's devotion was very pleasant. She thrilled to the touch of his lips on her flesh; but she drew her arm away.

"Please—I don't like that sort of thing."

"Why not?" His voice was husky.

"It isn't right. Besides, the neighbors are always looking out of the windows."

The drop from her high standard of right and wrong to the neighbors' curiosity appealed suddenly to her sense of humor. She threw back her head and laughed. He joined her, after an uncomfortable moment. But he was very much in earnest. He sat, bent forward, turning his new straw hat in his hands.

"I thought, perhaps," said Joe, growing red and white, and talking to the hat, "that some day, when we're older, you—you might be willing to marry me, Sid. I'd be awfully good to you."

It hurt her to say no. Indeed, she could not bring herself to say it. In all her short life she had never willfully inflicted a wound. And because she was young, and did not realize that there is a short cruelty, like the surgeon's, that is mercy in the end, she temporized.

"There is such a lot of time before we need think of such things! Can't we just go on the way we are?"

"I'm not very happy the way we are."

"Why, Joe?"

She leaned over and put a tender hand on his arm.

"I don't want to hurt you; but, Joe, I don't want to be engaged yet. I don't want to think about marrying. There's such a lot to do in the world first. There's such a lot to see and be."

"Where?" he demanded bitterly.

"Here on this Street? Do you want more time to pull bastings for your mother? Or to slave for your Aunt Harriet? Or to run up sud-down stairs, carrying towels to roomers? Marry me and let me take care of you."

Once again her dangerous sense of humor threatened her. He looked so boyish, sitting there with the moonlight on his bright hair, so inadequate to carry out his magnificent offer. Two or three of the star blossoms from the tree had fallen on his head. She lifted them carefully away.

"Let me take care of myself for a while. I've never lived my own life. You know what I mean. I'm not unhappy; but I want to do something. And some day I shall—not anything big; I know I can't do that—but something useful. Then, after years and years, if you still want me, I'll come back to you."

He drew a long breath and got up. All the joy had gone out of the summer night for him, poor lad. He glanced down the Street, where Palmer Howe had gone home happily with Sidney's friend Christine. Palmer would always know how he stood with Christine. But Sidney was not like that. A fellow did not even caress her easily. When he had only kissed her arm—He trembled a little at the memory.

"I shall always want you," he said. "Only—you will never come back."

It had not occurred to either of them that this coming back, so tragically considered, was depending on an entirely problematical going away. Nothing, that early summer night, seemed more unlikely than that Sidney would ever be free to live her own life. The

Street, stretching away to the north and to the south in two lines of houses that seemed to meet in the distance, hemmed her in. She had been born in the little brick house, and, as she was of it, so it was of her. Her hands had smoothed and painted the pine floors; her hands had put up the twine on which the morning-glories in the yard covered the fences; had, indeed, with what agonies of slacking lime and adding blueing, whitewashed the fence itself!

"She's capable," Aunt Harriet had grudgingly admitted, watching from her sewing machine Sidney's strong young arms at this humble spring task.

"She's wonderful!" her mother had said, as she bent over her handwork. She was not strong enough to run the sewing machine.

So Joe Drummond stood on the pavement and saw his dream of taking Sidney in his arms fade into an indefinite futurity.

"I'm not going to give you up," he said doggedly. "When you come back, I'll be waiting."

The shock being over, and things only postponed, he dramatized his grief a trifle, thrust his hands savagely into his pockets and scowled down the street. Sidney smiled up at him.

"Good night, Joe."

"Good night. I say, Sidney, it's more than half an engagement. Won't you kiss me good-night?"

She hesitated, flushed and palpitating. Perhaps, after all, her first kiss would have gone without her heart—gone out of sheer pity. But a tall figure loomed out of the shadows and approached with quick strides.

"The roomer!" cried Sidney, and backed away.

"D—n the roomer!"

The roomer advanced steadily. When he reached the doorstep, Sidney was demurely seated and quite alone. The roomer looked very warm. He carried a suitcase, which was as it should be. The men of the Street always carried their own luggage, except the younger Wilson across the way. His tastes were known to be luxurious.

"Hot, isn't it?" Sidney inquired, after a formal greeting. She indicated the place on the step just vacated by Joe. "You'd better cool off out here. The house is like an oven. I think I should have warned you of that before you took the room. These little houses with low roofs are fearfully hot."

The new roomer hesitated. He did not care to establish any relations with the people in the house. Long evenings in which to read, quiet nights in which to sleep and forget—these were the things he had come for.

But Sidney had moved over and was smiling up at him. He folded up awkwardly on the low step. He seemed much too big for the house. Sidney had a panicky thought of the little room upstairs.

"I don't mind heat. I—I suppose I don't think about it," said the roomer, rather surprised at himself.

"I'm afraid you'll be sorry you took the room."

The roomer smiled in the shadow.

"I'm beginning to think that you are sorry."

His quick mind grasped the fact that it was the girl's bedroom he had taken. Other things he had gathered that afternoon from the humming of a sewing machine, from Sidney's businesslike way of renting the little room, from the glimpse of a woman in a sunny window, bent over a needle. Genteel poverty was what it meant, and more—the constant drain of disheartened, middle-aged women on the youth and courage of the girl beside him.

K. Le Moyne, who was living his own tragedy those days, what with poverty and other things, swore a quiet oath to be no further weight on the girl's buoyant spirit. He had no intention of letting the Street encroach on him. He had built up a wall between himself and the rest of the world, and he would not scale it. But he held no grudge against it. Let others get what they could out of living. Sidney, suddenly practical, broke in on his thoughts:

"Where are you going to get your meals?"

"I hadn't thought about it. I can stop in somewhere on my way downtown. I work in the gas office—I don't believe I told you."

"It's very bad for you," said Sidney, with decision. "It leads to slovenly habits, such as going without when you're in a hurry, and that sort of thing. The only thing is to have someone expecting you at a certain time."

"It sounds like marriage." He was lastly amused.

"It sounds like Mrs. McKee's board-

ing house at the corner. Twenty-one meals for five dollars, and your ticket is good until it is punched. But Mrs. McKee doesn't like it if you miss."

"Mrs. McKee for me," said Le Moyne. "I dare say I'll be fairly regular to my meals."

It was growing late. The Street, which mistrusted night air, even on a hot summer evening, was closing its windows. By shifting his position, the man was able to see the girl's face. Very lovely it was, he thought. Very pure, almost radiant—and young. From the middle age of his almost thirty years, she was a child. There had been a boy in the shadows when he came up the Street. Of course there would be a boy—a nice, clear-eyed chap—

Sidney was looking at the moon. With that dreamer's part of her that she had inherited from her dead, and gone father, she was quietly worshipping the night. But her busy brain was working, too—the practical brain that she had got from her mother's side.

"What about your washing?" she inquired unexpectedly. "I suppose you've been sending things to the laundry, and—what do you do about your stockings?"

"Buy cheap ones and throw 'em away when they're worn out." There seemed to be no reserves with this surprising young person.

"And buttons?"

"Use safety pins. When they're closed one can button over them as well as—"

"I think," said Sidney, "that it is quite time someone took a little care of you. If you will give Katie, our maid, twenty-five cents a week, she'll do your washing and not tear your things to ribbons. And I'll mend them."

Sheer stupefaction was K. Le Moyne's. After a moment:

"You're really rather wonderful, Miss Page. Here am I, lodged, fed, washed, ironed and mended for seven dollars and seventy-five cents a week!"

"I hope," said Sidney severely, "that you'll put what you save in the bank."

He was still somewhat dazed when he went up the narrow staircase to his sweat and garished room. Never in all of a life that had been active—until recently—had he been so conscious of friendliness and kindly interest. He expanded under it. Some of the tired lines left his face.

"New underwear for yours tomorrow, K. Le Moyne," he said to himself, as he unknotted his cravat. "New underwear, and something besides K. for a first name."

He pondered over that for a time, taking off his shoes slowly and thinking hard. "Kenneth, King, Kerr—"

None of them appealed to him. And after all, what did it matter? The old heaviness came over him.

Sidney did not sleep much that night. She lay awake, gazing into the scented darkness, her arms under her head. Love had come into her life at last. A man—only Joe, of course, but it was not the boy himself, but what he stood for, that thrilled her—Lad asked her to be his wife.

The desire to be loved! There was coming to Sidney a time when love would mean, not receiving but giving—the divine fire instead of the pale flame of youth. At last she slept.

A night breeze came through the windows and spread coolness through the little house. The allanthus tree waved in the moonlight and sent sprawling shadows over the wall of K. Le Moyne's bedroom.

Who is this K. Le Moyne, anyway? Why not make a guess now as to his identity, and see how close you come to the truth when the climax is reached. That's what makes a good story interesting, and believe us, this serial is thrilling.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Lucky to the Finish.

Rook—Taylor was always a fortunate man, but doesn't it seem wonderful that his luck should stay with him to the very last?

Raleigh—How was that?

Rook—Why, he was operated on for the removal of a pearl which he had accidentally swallowed while eating oysters, and when the pearl was examined it was found to be valuable enough to pay for both the operation and the funeral.

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