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The Street

1876–1895

“The Street *is* life.”

“K” (1914)

IT WAS NOT PRECISELY A STORY of rags to riches. Arch Street, where Mary Ella Roberts lived as a child, was a respectable neighborhood, if far from a wealthy one—by no means a slum. Riches, on the other hand, were to come, as well as fame and the friendship of powerful men. Unlike other American women of the time who found their way to wealth and position in brilliant marriages, Mary Roberts Rinehart made her own success. Her life story, the ambition and the hard work that made possible her progress from genteel poverty to what some have called “tycoon-hood,” may qualify her as America’s first female Horatio Alger.

Rinehart’s life story began in America’s centennial year. The well-to-do made their way to Philadelphia and the great Exposition. The Roberts family, at the western end of the state, were not among those well-heeled visitors. Tom Roberts, a young man with a new wife, worked as a clerk. His small salary could not support a house and, as was customary in those days, he brought his bride to live with his mother. Even after Mary Ella was born on August 12, 1876, the Tom Robertses stayed on at 6 West Diamond Street with Grandmother Roberts, Uncle John and his wife Sade, and three young aunts.¹

It was a household accustomed to hard work and few luxuries. James William Roberts, Mary’s grandfather, had been born in 1817 in rural Washington County, south of the growing industrial city of Pittsburgh. He came from a family of Seceder Presbyterians who had emigrated from Northern Ireland to America in the middle of the eighteenth century and moved to western Pennsylvania before 1800. The Roberts men were ministers and teachers; the women, wives of ministers and teachers. James’s father, Abram (Mary’s great-grandfather), had taught arithmetic, but unlike the rest of the family, James had no profession. Seeking work, he moved north to Allegheny, across the river from Pittsburgh, sometime before 1850, when Thomas, his first child, was born. He and his wife Margaret lived on Beaver

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Street and he supported his growing family as a carpenter and a watchman until his death in 1863, at the age of forty-six.

When Roberts died, his widow, Margaret Mawhinney Roberts, left with five surviving children and no money, “turned to her needle,” in the contemporary phrase. The boys, Thomas and John, were thirteen and ten then; the three girls were younger: Letitia, eight; Anna Margaret, five; and Matilda, an infant under a year old. From her house in Allegheny the Widow Roberts built something of a little business, hiring sewing girls to help her with her orders. They worked in a back room, “badly lighted and cluttered with sewing machines,” as Rinehart recalled years later in her autobiography, *My Story*.²

Allegheny was Pittsburgh’s smaller sister city in the 1860s. At the beginning of the Civil War it had 25,000 inhabitants, half as many as Pittsburgh. The ratio remained the same through the next two decades; by 1880 Allegheny’s population was 78,000 compared with Pittsburgh’s 156,000. After 1880, however, the great influx of immigrant labor swelled Pittsburgh to half a million, while Allegheny had, by 1890, grown to only 100,000. In fact, the two cities were developing very differently in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As Pittsburgh became a great industrial city, its central area, where the three rivers meet, changed from a place where small brick houses shared city blocks with factories, warehouses, stores, and markets, in the older American manner, to a modern downtown. By the 1870s, well-to-do Pittsburghers were moving to newly fashionable neighborhoods, among them Allegheny. Allegheny itself had been made up of small manufacturies, business establishments, stores, markets, and houses—a smaller replica of Pittsburgh across the river. Slowly the manufacturing moved out of Allegheny and more of the area was given up to private residences. Some were the grand new houses on Ridge Avenue; more were the old two- and three-story brick houses in which families like the Robertses lived on Diamond Street.

While Mrs. Roberts provided money for the family from her dressmaking business, the boys picked up what jobs they could, at first as errand boys, later as clerks. Thomas Roberts was twenty-five and working as a clerk when he married Cornelia Gilleland. She, too, came of Seceder Presbyterian people from Northern Ireland. She was brought up on the family farm in Valencia, about twenty miles north of Pittsburgh. Her mother had died, probably when Cornelia was in her teens, and her father had remarried. Disliking her new stepmother, Cornelia, with her sister Ella, left the farm and moved to Allegheny.

Not long after, at the age of twenty-two, she married Thomas Roberts and a year later their first child, Mary Ella, was born. Mary, or Mamie as she was called as a child, lived in her grandmother’s house for four years. Her

parents occupied the front room on the second floor and above them, on the third floor, lived Uncle John and his wife Sade. Sade, whose neurasthenic “delicacy” fascinated young Mamie, and John, her loving and generous uncle, would become central figures in Rinehart’s life and imagination.

In 1880, when Mamie’s sister Olive was born, Tom Roberts moved his family to their own home on Arch Street. The two-story brick row house was not large but it was “solid and substantial.”³ On the first floor were a parlor, a dining room, and a kitchen. Behind the kitchen a shed housed the hydrant from which Cornelia Roberts drew water. Across the alley at the end of the yard rose the gray walls of the penitentiary. On the second floor were three bedrooms and, at the top of the stairs, a back room, for a maid—when times were good—for storage in leaner times. That house, like the street on which it stood, deeply impressed itself on Mary’s imagination and reappeared frequently in her fiction.

Under an old ailanthus tree, was the house . . . 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 more pretentious neighbors, much as a very old lady may now and then lend tone to a smart gathering. On either side of it, 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 doormat so accurately placed, no “yard” in the rear so tidily with morning-glory vines over the whitewashed fence.⁴

The house was Cornelia’s province. She was hard-working, a farmer’s daughter, and she scrubbed away at the ceaseless Pittsburgh grime, and cooked and baked and marketed and sewed her daughters’ clothes. “Nothing was ever so immaculate as her house, so white as the oilcloth on the kitchen table, so red as the legs of those tables, so smooth as her beds.”⁵

The parlor was seldom used. It was furnished with rosewood upholstered in black horsehair, and on each chairback was a carved rose surrounded by leaves. There was an old square piano [Cornelia’s Hardman upright, bought on the installment plan], also, and between the two windows a long gilt mirror, with a marble slab a foot or so from the floor.⁶

The house was part of a row of four. Next door lived a deaf and dumb professor with his spinster sister and beside them, the Millers. Clem Miller

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was a veteran of the Civil War and a survivor of Andersonville Prison. Bessie Miller was Mamie's playmate. Together they created a house for their dolls in Cornelia's shed—except on the days when the washerwoman came to work and shooed the girls away. Mamie lost her friend in 1884; at seven Bessie died of scarlet fever. The last family in the row had pretensions and steadfastly ignored their neighbors. Around the corner were John and Sade, expressing a new prosperity with a stable at the end of their lot, and close by was Grandmother Roberts, who now took in roomers. Matilda (Mary's favorite Aunt Tillie) helped with her mother's house. The other daughters were also kept busy. Letitia (Aunt Tish) was sent to a seminary to be trained as a teacher, but Tish, "the great lady of the family,"⁷ never worked as a teacher. Anna Margaret (Maggie), destined to become the spinster sister, eventually took a job in a department store.

Tom Roberts, meanwhile, was doing well. The year he rented the house, he became a sewing machine agent; the year after, the manager of a sewing machine agency. By 1882, with whatever know-how he had picked up from his mother's dressmaking establishment, he was managing the Domestic Sewing Machine Company near the corner of Sixth Street in Pittsburgh. The next year the agency had changed its name, becoming T. B. Roberts and Co. At that time, in the middle 1880s, Roberts left his house each day in the morning coat and high silk hat that marked him as a solid man of business. He walked with other men of affairs down Federal Street, the main street of Allegheny, and across the Sixth Street Bridge. Only a few yards along Sixth Street was Roberts's office. There was horse-car service as well, and sometimes Mamie paid the nickel fare and took the car to her father's office, where "two or three women sat at sewing machines, demonstrating what sewing machines could do, and the window was filled with examples of this work, puffings and ruffings."⁸ Roberts sat at his desk at the back of the establishment; he spent less time selling than hoping to sell machines and most of his time dreaming up ideas for new patents.

The life of the Street was to provide a rich source of memories for Mary Roberts Rinehart, representing both the security and warmth of family life and the trap, the narrowness, of middle-class mores. But for Mamie Roberts in the mid-1880s, the Street was the whole world. The milkman came daily to fill a quart pitcher for five cents; cream, a luxury, cost twenty cents a quart. The butcher was a German, with a shop in the Old Market on Federal Street; he sold the Rineharts their Sunday roast for fifteen cents a pound. Country people brought vegetables and fruit, chickens and eggs and butter to the Old Market. The center aisle was given over to women selling dairy products, and Cornelia bought her eggs and butter from distant Gilleland relatives. Cornelia fed her family on nine dollars a week, and they ate well. On Tuesday,

Thursday, and Saturday, her daughters in tow, she did her marketing. Mamie loved to watch oysters being “ladled out of a great hollow marble bowl.”⁹ The grocer had a telephone, introduced to Pittsburgh in 1877 and improved in 1879 with a new switchboard to serve its 777 subscribers. When Mamie Roberts was a child, the grocer’s telephone was used only for emergencies like summoning the doctor, as when Olive fell desperately ill of typhoid fever. Years later she would use the butcher’s telephone to hear her husband read her a publisher’s letter accepting the manuscript of *The Circular Staircase*, her first published book.

The market, an occasional car ride to her father’s office, and the Street—Allegheny was a narrow but comfortable world. Horses and carts rode over the cobblestone streets, cattle were driven through on their way to the slaughterhouse, cows grazed on the Common. But changes came. Gas lights were installed. The Common became a park. In the winter Mary and Olive skated there on the frozen lake and in the summer Cornelia sometimes made them sandwiches to take on picnics. And there was the Second Ward School where Mary, a chubby “little girl with a round face, blue eyes, almost black hair, and a snub nose,”¹⁰ began her education. The very first thing she learned there was the necessity of becoming right-handed; a smart rap over the knuckles of her left hand, gripping a pencil, enforced that lesson.

Saturdays brought the weekly bath. Cornelia pumped up the water from the hydrant and heated it in the boiler on the stove. Then Mamie and Olive were thoroughly scrubbed in the tin tub on the kitchen floor. They were ready now to suffer another Presbyterian sabbath, another day of prohibitions. Although Tom Roberts did not attend church, the rest of the family did. After morning services came the heavy Sunday dinner and then the long, long day of sabbath quiet, broken by Sunday school in the afternoon. Olive recalled sitting quietly on the front stoop, hands folded;¹¹ Mary remembered that the piano could be played—but only for hymns. In the silence and inactivity, she could brood about salvation and about the change of heart necessary for conversion. God was a grim judge; salvation seemed doubtful.

Many years later from the incalculably different world of 1954, Rinehart remembered her childhood as contented but not particularly joyful. There were few recreations for children and many restrictions. Tom and Cornelia were not demonstrative, not to one another nor to their daughters. Misbehavior was treated severely. “[My parents] believed in corporal punishment, and my mother kept a small whip for that purpose.” Sometimes there was “trouble” between Mamie’s parents, particularly if Tom stopped on his way home for a drink or two; his wife had no tolerance for his “weakness.”¹²

Cornelia was not, however, so rigid as her mother-in-law, for she did

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attend the theater. Once, in the mid-eighties, she and Tom went to Pittsburgh to see *The Black Crook*, a scandalous affair in which the leading lady appeared in black tights. That same evening, Aunt Ella, Cornelia's sister, treated Mamie to a visit to the exposition grounds. While the two were examining pianos, exhibited on a balcony above the main hall, the balcony gave way. Mamie fell onto an iron fence, her cheek impaled and her thigh broken. Grandmother Roberts interpreted this "as a penalty" for Tom and Cornelia's playgoing.¹³

An even more frightening episode occurred for Mamie when she was about five. A woman applying for a domestic job lured her away from the house, taking her a considerable distance. Mamie slowly became alarmed and when she began to cry, the woman took her "into a courtyard filled with wagons and there shut me in an outbuilding." She took a pin and ring that Mamie wore and warned her to be quiet.¹⁴ Much later, Mamie emerged from the courtyard and was found by a policeman. She was safe, but the frightening memory lingered for many years.

There was violence, too, on the Street. The butcher's daughter murdered her mother with an axe. In the new steam laundry next to the four row houses, a young laundress caught her hand between the hot rollers of the mangle, and Mamie long remembered her horrible screams. There were, too, the periodic floods and "resignedly the families in the district prepared for them." In February 1884 the waters crested at 36.5 feet and low-lying Allegheny was inundated. Tom Roberts is recalled "rowing his family through his Sixth Street office," silk hat on his head.¹⁵ Five years later Mary stood with her mother and watched dead bodies carried by on the rivers swollen with the waters of the Johnstown Flood. Still, Mamie Roberts was growing up in a fairly protected world, far from the strikes, violence, poverty, and typhoid epidemics of industrial Pittsburgh. Not until she entered the hospital as a nurse-in-training would she encounter that world.

The model Cornelia Roberts provided for her daughter Mamie was a conventional one but as things turned out a puzzling one. The industrious Cornelia cared for her house, her daughters, and her husband—ironing each morning the splendid silk hat Tom sported on his way down Federal Street to the office. But the reward for this model existence was not forthcoming, and Cornelia Roberts faced a series of savage blows in the years ahead.

In contrast was the model provided by Cornelia's sister-in-law Sade, the "delicate" one. Sade spent much of her time in ill health, often confined to her room. As an older woman, Rinehart recognized the neurotic nature of Sade's indisposition, understanding that ill health was real enough to her but at the same time provided an escape—an escape from childbearing,

Rinehart later thought, and she observed how “the club of [Sade’s] delicacy was held over all our heads. She must never be worried, never do any labor.” She died, many years later, of cancer; until then “she sat in her immaculate house, her beautiful hands folded, her little shawls about her shoulders, and I looked at her with admiration and with awe.”¹⁶ Unlike Cornelia, Sade was protected, for Uncle John prospered and in his prosperity lavished care upon his wife. By 1890 John and Sade moved to elite Sewickley up the Ohio River—a move Mary herself would make some twenty years in the future.

The contrasting examples of Cornelia and Sade were to become deeply impressed on Mary Roberts Rinehart’s mind. She would always endeavor to live up to her mother’s exact example as wife, mother, and housekeeper. On the other hand, she had learned from Sade the attractions of escape from domestic and maternal responsibilities: “In writing I was seeking escape, as Aunt Sade had sought it in her delicacy.”¹⁷ In fact, she could imitate Aunt Sade more exactly, and sometimes she, too, used ill health as an escape from her own furious energy.

For the Thomas Roberts family prosperity did not last long. Financial problems began in the late 1880s; by 1887 Roberts had lost his sewing machine franchise, and the Domestic Sewing Machine Company had found a new manager. By 1888 he was on the road as a traveling salesman. Then, in 1890, Mamie’s first year in high school, the family left Arch Street for Poplar, farther north in Allegheny and farther away from the Common, center of genteel houses and family life.

For Mamie, hard times first became apparent when the maid was let go and piano lessons ceased. Clearer evidence was to come. One day Mamie found that she had been moved into Olive’s room, for there were to be roomers in hers. “With the innate snobbishness of children I hated having ‘roomers.’ The girls I knew were of well-to-do families. Practically all of them were infinitely better off than we were. They gave little sub-deb parties . . . with real dance programs with tiny pencils tied to them, and with a man at the piano and sometimes a violinist also.” Although roomers were not so demeaning as boarders, who had to be provided with meals, the change was humiliating for a sixteen year old. Mamie and Olive, moreover, had to help their mother with the housework; with or without a maid Cornelia Roberts maintained her immaculate house and middle-class ways, undergoing what Rinehart later called “that agonizing strain to keep up appearances which is the real tragedy of the impoverished genteel family.”¹⁸

In high school Mamie elected the “English Course,” more academic than the practical “Normal Course” or “Commercial Course”; she also edited and wrote for the school paper and was a member of the debating society. There were fifty-nine students who completed high school in Mamie’s

class, eighteen in the English course. In her first year she did her best work, attaining an average of 81.7. She took six courses: rhetoric, history, literature, physical geography, algebra, and Latin, in which she progressed over the next years through Caesar and Vergil. Her average fell a bit in her second year—most notably through a descent in her history grade, from 83 to 71. Her senior year showed a further decline, to a 76.2 average, probably reflecting her distress and self-consciousness about the family situation in the early nineties. She took only four courses that year: literature, geometry, natural philosophy, and rhetoric.¹⁹

The courses in which Mamie did consistently well were rhetoric and literature. She had done a great deal of reading from the time when she discovered that the mayor's office housed not only the city jail but a library as well. She read "with amazing rapidity" but in a hit or miss fashion that took her through the great English novelists of the nineteenth century and on to the more morally dubious Dumas, Balzac, and Zola. She read, however, "for the stories alone and with no comprehension whatever of the human relations involved." By 1890 Mamie could borrow books from the splendid new Free Library in Allegheny, Andrew Carnegie's gift to the city.²⁰

There was another source of books as well, books of a less high-minded cast. In the summers Mamie spent some weeks in the country, visiting Gilleland aunts and uncles in Valencia. One day she stumbled upon a cache of dime novels, stashed under the hinged cover of a kitchen bench. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, with its lurid descriptions of men burned at the stake, was on top; underneath were such treasures as *Deadwood Dick* and *Red Hand, the Avenger*. This was not, or so Mary Roberts Rinehart recalled in 1909, the reading matter of the Gilleland relatives, but of that stock-farm character of the nineteenth century, the hired man, "pale-eyed, pale-haired, melancholy."²¹

Although Mamie had no burning desire for self-expression, she did like, as Rinehart recalled, "to sit down with a clean sheet of paper and put words on it." In 1892, her imagination filled with romantic fiction and her practical side with the determination to supplement the diminished family income, she published her first piece of fiction. In September 1891 the *Pittsburgh Press* had announced a monthly contest open to "Our Amateur Contributors." The *Press* would print the best stories (600-word limit) in the Sunday paper and, each month, award the writer of the best story two five-dollar gold pieces. On March 27, 1892, M. E. Roberts' story, "Lord Ainsleigh's Heir," appeared in the *Pittsburgh Press*. It was followed, on April 17, by "A Double Tragedy," by M. E. R. The *Press* did not award pieces of gold for either of these works.²²

"Lord Ainsleigh's Heir" is a story of a young American's discovery of his true parentage. The pleasure that Charlie Gilbert takes in learning that

he is the son of a titled Englishman is blighted, however; for it appears he is (as a consequence) the brother of his fiancée. But in the end this difficulty is resolved when Charlie's betrothed finds that she, too, has been misled about her real parents. The story closes with Charlie and Belle married and, as Lord and Lady Ainsleigh, established "in their beautiful London home, among all the paintings of ancestors." While it is incautious to look too deeply into an adolescent story, particularly one so filled with the stereotypes of sentimental and sensational Victorian fiction, it is curious to find that a couple of the recurrent, though often buried, themes in Rinehart's fiction do appear in it. One is the disguising of a young man's or woman's real parentage. The other is the threat of incest, in later stories implied through extremely complex chains of relationships.

"A Double Tragedy" is a story of revenge and remorse, too complicated even to summarize, featuring Mary Roberts Rinehart's first detective—Richards, known as "The Shadower." Rinehart, years later, had "no recollection of those early efforts, except that they must have been terrible, but I do remember that my Uncle John read one of them, and said there was enough plot in it to make a book!"²³ Uncle John was right, whichever of the stories he read.

As an adult, Mary Roberts Rinehart saw two distinct sides of her character, reflecting the different qualities of her parents: "I inherited from my mother a sort of fierce driving energy and a practical outlook on life which have been most helpful. But such invention as I have, such dreams as I have



A cartoonist's view (1920) of Mary Roberts finding the "hired man's" reading matter.

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dreamed have come from [my father]. And quite early by unconscious imitation I assumed his viewpoint.” In Rinehart’s 1914 novel “*K*,” young Sidney Page, who like Mamie lives in a house where women earn money by doing needlework and taking in roomers, sits on her porch, looking at the darkening street, and the author tells us that “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.”²⁴

Tom Roberts, in his life and, even more powerfully in his death, was the central figure of Mamie Roberts’s childhood. He was, like his brother John, a very handsome man. A portrait photograph of the two brothers shows young men as similar as twins, with oval faces, regular features, and striking dark eyes, John seated in a casual pose, Tom beside him, wearing his tall silk hat.²⁵



Tom Roberts (standing)
with Uncle John.

In the early 1890s, when hard times settled over the whole country, Tom Roberts's financial situation worsened. He tried selling insurance, selling wallpaper on the road for his brother John, and promoting the new cash register—but those business ventures met with no more success than his previous attempts. Suffering continual frustration, Roberts apparently began to drink more heavily.

Financial hardship only exacerbated Roberts's more generalized sense of frustration. His ambition lay in inventing and he developed some kind of rotary shuttle for sewing machines. When the patent expired, he did not have the money to renew it. It was a particularly bitter pill, for he had once turned down, so Rinehart recalled, an offer of \$10,000 for the rights. He attempted to make other innovations as well: an insulation material for telegraph wires, a scheme for making cement out of the slag from Pittsburgh mills—a feat of alchemy for the slag that sat in great ugly mountains along Pittsburgh's riverbanks. Rinehart recalled her father working at his drawings in his Sixth Street office and at home, with his close friend, D. F. Patterson, an attorney who lived nearby on North Avenue. Patterson and Roberts schemed together, at one time working on an idea for a new washing machine. Patterson was to supply the capital, Roberts the know-how. "Together they would go into the dining room, where the table was large, and spread out their drawings and blue-prints. They dreamed and talked in low voices and high figures, and in their dreams they were incredibly rich, incredibly successful."²⁶

Only in his dreams, however, did Tom Roberts ride the wave of American prosperity. Cornelia, more practical and saddled with roomers, "did not approve." In his dreamy ambition, perhaps also in his growing frustration, Roberts lived somewhat apart from the domestic realities of the household. When his lawyer-friend was not with him, he read. Olive recalled that her responsibility was to fetch two books a day from the library for her father.²⁷ "He loved us all, I am sure," Rinehart remembered, "but we were curiously detached from his inner life." The judgment is generous. Mary Roberts Rinehart had learned to cope with the memories of her father, but for young Mamie Roberts there was confusion and resentment. She was helping with the housework; her room had gone to the roomers. Her resentment echoes in a curious story she told about the death of her little bird. "But his death alone was not the tragedy. It was that his death had been unnecessary. We had gone into the country, and my father was to look after the bird. But he and his friend the dreamer had had some new and magnificent idea. They went away to talk it over, and Dicky had died of starvation."²⁸ As she learned from the roles played by Cornelia and Aunt Sade, Mamie learned from her father's example as well. What she learned was never to fall a passive victim to poverty.

Even as a child Mary Roberts was ambitious and independent. Her progressive parents allowed her a bicycle, freeing her at once from the immediate vicinity of the Street and from the innumerable restrictions on the life of a young girl growing up in a still-Victorian world. The neighbors protested; bicycle riding was “unfeminine and immodest. It would make me bold.” With boys as playfellows, Mamie could ride out to the country on a Saturday, carrying her box of lunch. It was freedom and exercise, and it was also a way in which boys were removed “from the unpleasant world of ugly whispers into the open air of good fellowship.”²⁹

It was, though, still a morally stifling world. Mamie was taught not to see the evidences of sin. There were girls who cut and curled their hair and who painted their faces. “But,” Rinehart remembered, “you never looked at them. You looked away quickly, as though they were not there.” She was trained, as well, not to look at saloons or at billiard halls. Divorce was possible but, with respectable people, it was met with ostracism. No “spirits” were kept, at least openly, in the house. Mamie did enjoy the chaste romances appropriate to a girl of her time. She once adventured out to lunch and a matinee with her high school Latin teacher. And at about the same time, when Mamie was fifteen or sixteen, she “even became engaged . . . to a tall blonde boy,” who gave her “a ring set with a sardonyx.” Engagements were official enough to permit an embrace every now and then, but Rinehart noted that “nothing more passionless can be imagined.”³⁰

The conventional expectation for young girls was marriage. Those who wanted or needed to support themselves until marriage might work. New kinds of jobs were opening for young women—they could become clerks in the department stores that were replacing the older dry-goods establishments or office workers, perhaps “typewriters”—but these were not jobs appropriate to young women of good family. Teaching, of course, remained respectable work for women, and it would have been suitable for Mamie, like her younger sister, to prepare through the high school “Normal Course” for a position as a teacher. In any event, she was beginning to recognize that she should prepare herself for a career, for even as a child Mamie had seen the plight of dependent single women, living with relatives, their position “always humiliating and often actually wretched.”

Economically, they were almost helpless. Unmarried women of good family had practically no resources. They could, like my grandmother, resort to the needle, or open their houses to paying guests; or if sufficiently trained they could “teach school.” Also in dire emergency they could go into shops as saleswomen. This last, however, implied a loss in social status.³¹

A new career possibility for Mamie Roberts appeared one day in the person of a female doctor. C. Jane Vincent, M.D., moved onto the Street. As Rinehart recalled, the Street did not give her any trouble; they simply did not patronize her. Mamie announced to her amused family and her derisive school friends that she would become a doctor, and she continued to cherish that idea when the time came for her to graduate from high school.

Mamie was graduated in June 1893, the year of the panic and the beginning of the severe depression that followed it. Hard times came with particular viciousness to industrial Pittsburgh. Many workers had not yet recovered from the suffering that came with the Homestead Strike the previous summer. So serious was the situation that in a period before welfare and in a city where management, and the “respectable people,” had come to hate and fear the factory workers—especially the immigrant factory workers—on whom the economy now relied, it became essential to provide relief. In the winter of 1893–1894, the city gave over \$130,000 to needy workers and their families. Private charities, spurred by Andrew Carnegie and working through the mills, provided another quarter of a million. (Some of that money, as it turned out, was subsequently deducted from the workers’ paychecks as better times returned.)³²

For Mamie Roberts hard times meant the end of any college plans. But Uncle John made a generous offer; he would send her to medical college. Unfortunately though, Mamie was too young, at sixteen, to enter, and she came up with the alternative idea of going to nursing school. In 1884 the Homeopathic Medical and Surgical Hospital and Dispensary had begun to train nurses, the first school for nurses between the Allegheny Mountains and Chicago. Although Rinehart did not recall how the idea of nursing had occurred to her, perhaps she had been intrigued by stories about this new profession for women.

One such story, curiously enough, appeared in the *Pittsburgh Press* right beside M. E. Roberts’s first published story, “Lord Ainsleigh’s Heir.” “TRAINED NURSES,” the headline read, “Graduating Exercises at the Allegheny General Hospital. ELEVEN WILL GET DIPLOMAS.” The article was illustrated with drawings of two nurses, Miss Tildesley and Miss Perkins, and informed interested readers that

there is not a more attractive commencement service at any educational hall than the white-capped nurses hold at the presentation of the hard won diploma, that appears so innocent a roll, with a blue ribbon knotted around it, but means so much labor, courage, watchfulness and so thorough a learning of the healing in the soft, deft touch of a woman’s hand in the sick room.

And, if that were not sufficiently appealing to a young girl, the article went on to describe the “frock” of the new nurses, “of a delicate blue-gray chambray, with large white apron and half sleeves of the finest linen, and white cap.” Such a costume had “much of the picturesqueness of the winsome attire of the nun added to in effect by the silver chain hung from the waist, with scissors, a little cushion for often-needed pins, and such necessities.”³³ That was an article the fifteen-year-old Mamie had to have read.

Her enthusiasm was not shared. Mrs. Roberts was appalled. Not only would her daughter be working, but the kind of work, the exposure to what Rinehart would come to call “life in the raw,” was something to which Cornelia was fundamentally opposed. Mamie, with the determination that already marked her character, went to see the family doctor about arrangements. The doctor was on vacation and his practice was being overseen by “a very dark young man, black hair, small black mustache, black eyes behind *pince-nez*.”³⁴ He was Dr. Stanley Marshall Rinehart.

Dr. Rinehart, at twenty-four, was a very young doctor, but in relation to the sixteen-year-old girl who came to his office, he was the voice of maturity and professionalism. He accused her of believing that nursing was a romantic career but finally agreed to take her through the hospital. He was very proprietary, very tough: “I know every rat hole in it,” he asserted. Mamie toured the hospital and, altogether undiscouraged, made application to the superintendent of nurses—lying a bit about her age, which she claimed was seventeen. Then, “Late in the afternoon of August eighteenth, 1893, my father took me to the great gloomy red brick building which was to be my home for two years. . . . He gave my bag to a smiling colored doorman, and went away.”³⁵ Mamie had left the Street, entering the Pittsburgh Training School for Nurses as Miss Roberts, probationer.

Despite Dr. Rinehart’s warning that a nurse’s life was not all a matter of smoothing pillows (a comment repeated to young Katie Walters in *The Doctor* [1935]), Mary was not prepared for the life she would meet at Homeopathic. “I had had no preparation for it, nor for the human wreckage I was to encounter. I had no knowledge whatever of brutality, or cruelty, or starvation.” Genteel poverty had represented, after all, a sheltered life. Now Mary would learn not only about sickness and mutilation, about work and fatigue, but about the laboring men of Pittsburgh and their families, and about the prostitutes, the toughs, the police. Like Sidney Page, the student nurse in “K,” she had “outgrown the Street,”³⁶ but she had not yet learned about the world.

Much of what Mary Roberts saw in the hospital reappeared in the works of Mary Roberts Rinehart. Occasionally the stories were comic. Rinehart’s

wonderful spinster Tish would be laid up with a bruised knee in Mary's hospital in "The Amazing Adventures of Letitia Carberry" (1911). More often, hospital situations were sentimentalized in comic romances like "Jane" and "In the Pavilion" (both 1912) or in stories of unwed mothers like "The Miracle" (1912) and "God's Fool" (1913). Nurses figure frequently in Rinehart's fiction, sometimes as minor characters, occasionally in a central role, the best known being Hilda Adams, the nurse-detective "Miss Pinkerton." Most significant are Rinehart's two long novels about hospital life, "*K*" and *The Doctor*, in which young women enter nurse's training, providing Rinehart the opportunity to recall and reexamine her own early experiences.

Mary Roberts was introduced to the medical world in E Ward, where the women typhoid victims were sent. In August 1893 the ward was overcrowded, five cots added to the customary fifteen beds, for typhoid came to Pittsburgh every summer. Like other probationers, Mary was set to the most menial tasks, revolting to stomach and pride, but somehow she began to fit into hospital life. What had seemed confusion became routine. At first, however, there was only chaos—for Mary and for Sidney Page in "*K*":

There were uniformed young women coming and going, efficient, cool-eyed, low of voice. There were medicine-closets with orderly rows of labeled bottles, linen-rooms with great stacks of sheets and towels, long vistas of shining floors and lines of beds. There were brisk internes with duck clothes and brass buttons, who eyed her with friendly, patronizing glances. There were bandages and dressings, and great white screens behind which were played little or big dramas, baths or deaths, as the case might be. And over all brooded the mysterious authority of the superintendent of the training-school, dubbed the Head, for short.

Mary worked a twelve-hour day, bathing patients, changing beds, carrying food trays, feeding the more critically ill. More than anything else, Mary cleaned. Her second day in the hospital she was sent to clean up in the operating room. In those days operations "were untidy things," wet and bloody, so that "an operating room after a series of operations looked like a shambles."³⁷ Mary was told to carry a pail out of the room and to her revulsion found that the pail contained a human foot.

As a probationer she was the lowliest of creatures. The hospital was made up of juniors and seniors. The staff, the doctors themselves—awesome figures—were divided into medical and surgical men, and each category had its junior and senior members. The internes, too, came as juniors and seniors. At the top of the ladder was the hospital supervisor, and he had an assistant supervisor. The nurses were ruled by a superintendent, she too with

an assistant. Mary grew to admire and love the superintendent, Marguerite Wright, “a great lady, cultivated and of fine family. She had been a pioneer in her profession, graduating in one of the very first classes from Bellevue Hospital in New York.” Like the other probationers and student nurses, Mary was, of course, in terror of Miss Wright, but years later she would paint a deeply affectionate portrait of her as Miss Nettie Simpson in *The Doctor*, dedicated to service and “ruling her school with a rod of iron.”³⁸

After her probationary period, Mary Roberts was accepted as a student nurse. Until then, she had worn washable dresses of her own, covered with an apron; now she had striped uniforms with white collars and little white ties. The caps were “of stiff tulle, pleated into a narrow band,” and worn on the top of the head. At her side she carried a black bag for her surgical scissors, forceps, and thermometer. Junior nurses, moreover, were salaried; they received eight dollars a month, but they had to replace their own thermometers.³⁹

Student nurses, unlike probationers, were given night duty—twelve hours of grueling work. The hospital had one hundred and fifty beds, plus its emergency and operating rooms. The nursing staff consisted entirely of thirty student nurses. On night duty they not only carried the responsibility of the

The 1896 graduating class of nurses from the Pittsburgh Training School for Nurses at Homeopathic Hospital. Nurse Roberts is fourth from the left in the second row.



wards and the private patients, but also handled the cases brought into emergency—the sick or injured, sometimes men who had been fished out of the river “dazed with drugs, writhing with poison.” The drug cases had to be kept awake. One interne would beat them with wet, knotted towels while he and an orderly walked them up and down the emergency room. On night duty there were also deaths—expected deaths in the wards, sudden and violent deaths in the emergency room. And there was delirium, particularly the delirium that came with typhoid. One night a delirious patient escaped; he had freed himself from the long roller towel used to tie him to his bed. He accosted Mary in the linen room, “eyes blazing with fever,” and then turned and ran.⁴⁰ That man with his roller towel found his way into “The Amazing Adventures of Letitia Carberry” and in that benign atmosphere became a good deal less frightening. In another version, in “K,” he races down a fire escape only to be chased and apprehended by a heroic Sidney Page.

It was not only the moments of violence, the sickness, and the death that made the hospital seem to Mary “life in the raw.” Even the obstetrics ward was a shock to her, for she knew practically nothing about human sexuality and childbirth. At the end of the nineteenth century there was seldom any anesthesia used, and the ward cases very rarely went through childbirth with any pain-killing drugs. The ward housed expectant mothers, new mothers, and newborn infants. Close by were the delivery rooms. The wards, moreover, held a mixed population—black and white, immigrant and native-born, married and unwed. Although the first labor she assisted at struck Mary with horror, she trained herself to see “something of beauty . . . [in] these distorted women, going heavily about in their blue wrappers.” They listened to the screams of other women in labor with dignity and calm, “accepting the common lot of women without complaint.” Katie, in *The Doctor*, never sees that “something of beauty,” and Rinehart uses that fact as evidence for the hardness in her character. Katie “hated the sight of women in their loose wrappers waiting in the ward for their hour to come, and sitting and rocking placidly their grotesque and distorted bodies.” When Katie, the nurse who “loathed their swollen faces, their swollen legs and feet,” marries a doctor herself, she refuses to bear a child.⁴¹

The obstetrics ward also brought Mary Roberts into contact with unwed mothers and prostitutes—those females with the short, curled hair and painted faces she had been brought up not to see. Those in the maternity ward Mary came to see with great sympathy, claiming that their illegitimate children, “love children” in the language of the day, were more beautiful than others. But there were prostitutes in other wards as well, some ill, some drunk or on drugs, some suicidal. One night two women from “disorderly houses” were brought in; “they had quarreled, and slashed each other badly

with razors.”⁴² Mary was struck by the fact that they harbored no bitterness toward one another, merely blaming the episode on drink.

Another side of life to which the hospital exposed Mary Roberts was that of the Pittsburgh working class. She saw them first in the typhoid wards and in wards filled by the destitution of the winter of 1893–1894, later in the operating room, to which “came the accidents from the great steel mills, many railroad and street car cases.” Mary learned that these men, and those sick from starvation and exposure, were the victims of a system in which “the employer still bought his labor as a commodity in a highly competitive market.” The workers had no individual value to the mill owners, for “when a man was hurt another automatically took his place.”

The men were injured, were brought in and forgotten. Practically always the hospital cared for them without compensation, although here and there was one who either paid himself, or was paid for, the six dollars a week which entitled him to a napkin on his tray. The burden of this care was passed on to the community, which bore it for many of the great industries which were reaping fortunes.

Mary Roberts Rinehart was never a radical thinker, but her pity and her sense of social justice were aroused. Without unions, pensions, or profit-sharing and with no money for lawyers, these men taught Mary that something “was wrong, rottenly wrong.” Even a policeman, still recovering from a bullet wound received during the Homestead Strike, told her that the men “got plenty of trouble,” and, as Mary said, his heart was with the workers. At times, their suffering grew almost more than she could stand. One night she watched the too-long death of a man who had been caught in a flywheel “and whose body felt like jelly.”⁴³ But she did go on.

Recalling her hospital days in *My Story*, Rinehart talks of how she wanted to write about life as she was seeing it in the wards. What she was seeing all about her was creating “a gulf” between her and her family, “the unbridgeable gulf of differing interests.” Even with Uncle John, when Mary spent a day with him and Sade riding horses at their Sewickley house, the young nurse found there was much she could no longer talk about. She was, she realized, still a little girl in their eyes, and it would have horrified her aunt and uncle to hear what she had been encountering in her work. She found out, however, that she was not able to write about the real drama of the hospital either, “about the injustices and kindnesses and violence of that life”; instead, she turned the material into comedy and romance. Stories about the realities of life, as Mary had discovered them in the wards of Homeopathic, were beyond her. In one section of her autobiography, Rinehart

concedes that such writing had always been beyond her, perhaps because she felt it too deeply. “I wanted escape from remembering,”⁴⁴ she wrote, for remembering frightened her.

The painful experiences at Homeopathic dulled Mary’s appetite for studying medicine, and the half-formed expectation of going on to medical college slowly faded. In fact, by March 1894 she had altogether altered her plans; ironically the change involved Dr. Stanley Marshall Rinehart again. In the early days of her training, Mary saw the young doctor only occasionally. He was a junior member of the surgical staff, a gruff perfectionist with a fierce temper, and Miss Roberts was as intimidated by him as were the other nurses. After a time they met elsewhere than the operating room; when Mary saw him with his young patients in the children’s ward, she was struck by his warmth and playfulness.

Dr. Rinehart came from a family that had moved to Pittsburgh in 1811 when his father, William, was five years old. Later, William and a brother ran a tobacco warehouse, manufacturing and dealing in “all kinds of tobacco, snuff and segars.”⁴⁵ William Rinehart married three times, and Stan was the son of his third wife, Louise Gillespie. William was sixty-one when Stan was born and he died, in 1881, when his son was only fourteen. Subsequently, Stan was brought up by two of his half brothers, T. C. and Fred Rinehart, with whom he lived on Western Avenue in Allegheny.

A bequest from another half brother provided money to send Stan to Adrian College in Michigan, but he also worked during the summers to help with the expenses and he found employment as a pickle counter for the young Heinz Company. After college he went on to medical school at Hahnemann Hospital in Philadelphia. Stan returned to Pittsburgh in 1891 for his internship at Homeopathic Hospital. By 1893, when Mamie Roberts first met him, he had an office on Second Street, was affiliated with Homeopathic, and was still living on Western Avenue with his half brothers.⁴⁶

Friendships were not encouraged between doctors and nurses; romances were forbidden. Therefore, it was a bold young nurse who told a surgeon on the staff of the hospital that she wanted to study German. Stan lent her a German book and occasionally Mary went to his house “and in his office he gave me a lesson.” As Rinehart confesses, the German was very hard for her, “and soon the lessons were the most barefaced of excuses.” If the German did not progress, the romance did, and in May 1894 Mary and Stan became engaged. The engagement was, of course, kept secret, and Mary wore her ring on a ribbon around her neck. But the secret was soon discovered and Dr. Rinehart was called before a meeting of the board. If the board hoped to cow the young surgeon, it was mistaken. Mary, eavesdropping from a nearby staircase, heard Stan “in a shockingly loud voice . . . announce that

he meant to marry me.”⁴⁷ The board acquiesced but insisted there be no announcement. Mary continued her training, for Stan was as yet in no position to support a wife, and in 1894 a young man did not marry until he was financially established. At the same time, a young lady did not marry and undertake a career. Mary’s training continued, but she knew that she would not become a nurse.

By the fall of 1894, in her second year in training, Mary was occasionally sent out on private cases, charity cases, and she had her first exposure to the slums of industrial Pittsburgh. Her first assignment took her to a filthy house in a remote part of the city to nurse a typhoid patient. Never before had she seen the slums of industrial Pittsburgh—wooden row houses, overcrowded, filthy, and rat infested. Other private-duty assignments were less sordid; once she was sent to a sanatorium in the mountains to nurse a paranoid patient. While there, she received news that her grandmother had died. Margaret Mawhinney Roberts had been living with Aunt Tillie, her youngest daughter, who had married Joe Aikens. As she was going down the cellar stairs, her foot caught in the trailing hem of her wrapper, and she broke her neck in the fall. Not long after, Tillie’s daughter was run down by a railroad train, and “a cloud seemed to have settled down” on the family.⁴⁸ But worse lay ahead.

Tom Roberts’s economic situation had been serious enough before the panic of 1893. The depression that followed increased his difficulties. Although he maintained his one-room insurance office, he sold little or no insurance. He continued to draw his plans, devise his inventions, and apply for his patents. He had told his daughter, when he left her at Homeopathic to begin her training, that soon he would be able to take proper care of her: “His ship would come in, somebody would buy a patent, and I would go home again.”⁴⁹ Mary had long since ceased believing in that magical windfall. And she saw little of him now, for he was on the road, carrying one product after another to the small towns of Pennsylvania and Ohio. There was little money in these towns and even if a sale was made, it was sure to be a small one. The work was exhausting and discouraging, and Roberts was drinking heavily.

On October 23, 1895, Tom Roberts arrived in Buffalo, New York, and checked into the Tremont House. Although he was traveling for a Pittsburgh-based soft-drink firm called the Nux-Phospho Company, he apparently went to Buffalo to see about a position there and to consider settling in that city. Some days after his arrival, Roberts received a letter from Nux-Phospho dismissing him for his drinking and consequent negligence of business. If he had felt a brief spurt of optimism at a new chance in Buffalo, that gave way to despair. Roberts lingered on at Buffalo for three weeks; then, shortly after

dinner time on November 14, he returned to his hotel room, took a large dose of chloroform, and shot himself through the heart.⁵⁰

Mary was on a private case, caring for a pathetic woman who was dying of cancer. The woman had an illegitimate child and was consequently abandoned by her family, shunned by her neighbors. On the night of November 14, Mary received a telegram at that bleak house. Roberts's friend, the lawyer, wired to tell her that her father had died. On the morning of the fifteenth, Mary took a train back to Pittsburgh. She read the morning paper on her way and only then learned that her father's death was self-inflicted. His suicide was treated in the sensational manner of the day. "CRAZED BY REVERSES" read the *Press* headline. A detailed story described Roberts's financial and drinking problems, quoting the letter from Nux-Phospho and one from "a daughter, who signed herself 'Mary.'" That letter, the reporter confided to his readers, "bore a touch of pathos, and was a model of penmanship and composition." Besides the letters, Roberts's effects included two or three insurance policies, a silver watch, and thirty-seven cents.⁵¹

Mary had left the Street two and a half years before, feeling she had outgrown it, hoping to evade the trap of the ordinary. Now she had come back to wait, with her mother and Olive, for the train carrying her father's body back to Pittsburgh. The funeral took place at home, on Poplar Street, on Sunday, November 17. Like Sidney Page, Mary learned that November day that "the Street *is* life: the world is only many streets."⁵²