

A TALE of RED ROSES

By
GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

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He kissed her and held her while he talked to her of the social triumphs which awaited them, the topic which had always pleased her most in their plans for the future. After all, they would make a splendidly matched couple. Moreover, she did owe it to her father and Bert to give them another business start.

CHAPTER XV.

A Large Surprise For Each of the Girls.

SLEDGE began his deliberate siege upon Molly with the same care and vigor that he would have exercised in conducting a most important political campaign.

On that first evening at the theater he made Molly's wishes, expressed or unexpressed, both a study and a law. A draft blew on her. She had a scarf around her shoulders before she was through with her first slight shiver, and immediately thereafter Sledge snapped his fingers for an usher and ordered the fire escape doors closed. She looked over the program of entr'acte music and sighed for a missing favorite.

"Write it down," directed Sledge, handing her a fountain pen and a check blank.

Laughing, she wrote it, thinking that he would no doubt send her the sheet music next day.

Again he called the usher.

"Take this to Joe, and tell him to have it played," he ordered. "Anything else you'd like, Miss Molly?"

"I'm afraid to mention a wish for fear I'd get it," she laughed in more or less embarrassment. But Fern, who was having the time of her life, giggled and, telling him to recall the boy, added a favorite of her own to the musical program.

"You can have a good time most any place," Sledge complimented her, with a growing fondness for Molly's friend. "You're a nice kid. I ought to have invited your gentleman friend along."

"I don't see who it would be," laughed Fern. "Molly knows so many nice chaps, but the most of them are such boys."

"Excuse me a minute, girls," begged Sledge and unlooked himself from the background.

"Where now has he gone?" wondered Molly, half amused and half apprehensive.

"He's probably noticed that some girls have candy," surmised Fern, who had come to believe him infallible. "He'll bring back a ton of it."

"I hope he isn't going to order the spotlights turned this way," snickered Molly. "He'd do it, I think. He's capable of anything."

"As long as it's nice," admitted Fern. "I'll bet you never had a man treat you with more respect."

"That's true enough. He's rather a surprise to me in that. He's a fine friend to have, Fern."

Just as the overture struck up Sledge returned to the box, followed by a large handed man of about thirty-five, whose face and neck were red from much cheerful exposure to the weather. He had a merry blue eye and pompadour hair, and he wore diamond shirt studs and cuff buttons.

"Tommy Reeler, girls," introduced Sledge. "Miss Fern Burbank, Tommy, Miss Molly Marley."

Mr. Reeler in great heartiness and in friendliness all unafraid shook hands with both the girls and sat down by Fern.

"I'm in luck," he confided to the crowd. "I'm feeling lonesome enough to take a drink when Ben dug me up and slipped me the news that he had a girl for me. How do you like our town, Miss Fern?"

"I love it," returned Fern, not daring to look at Molly, whose brimming eyes she knew to be fixed upon her.

Under the crescendo of the music the conversation became paired off, and Sledge, with complacent self approbation, watched the couple in front of him.

"Tommy's a right guy," he confided to Molly. "Big contractor, paving and city buildings. Wife died last winter."

"That was too bad," responded Molly sympathetically. "She was due," declared Sledge. "I'd 'a' killed her."

"Was she so dreadful?" inquired Molly, forcing her share of the conversation.

"A soue," grunted Sledge. "Tommy don't touch it, but she got a different kind of a Heinz on every night."

"Drank?" guessed Molly, trying to remember for Fern's benefit.

"For the family," Sledge corroborated, "and all this time Tommy a decent guy. He deserves a good woman, but he don't get to meet 'em. He'd be a great pal for your little friend if she can nail him."

"I never heard Fern express a preference for widowers," she suggested.

"He's the same as not," Sledge as-



"Why, it's a diamond!" she gasped, sured her. "There's no kids. Tommy's a grand boy."

The music struck a pianissimo passage. "Me for a blond," Tommy Reeler unintentionally explained to the audience, and before she could stop it the clear silvery giggle of Fern blended with the piccolo obligato.

Reeler looked around at Sledge with a broad grin and nodded his head emphatically in the direction of Fern.

"Having a nice party?" asked Molly softly, bending forward. But Fern was speechless.

The curtain rose, and the play began, and Sledge, bending knotted brows upon the stage, sat decently aloof. If anybody liked this sort of thing far be it from him to interfere with their pleasure. Between the acts, however, he came right back on the job.

He arranged for Tommy and himself to take the girls out to see the new waterworks plant on the following day and to witness as balcony patrons on the following night a barn dance of the West End club. He planned a Country club dinner for the day after, and then reaching nonchalantly into his waistcoat pocket he dropped into Molly's lap a glittering bauble, which looked like a glass hickory nut.

"Take that down to Duval's and have it fitted to your finger," he directed.

She picked it up incredulously. It couldn't be real!

"Why, it's a diamond!" she gasped as it lay flashing and gleaming in her hand, and she saw the perfect cutting and wonderful fire of it. The realization startled her so that she almost dropped it.

"It had better be or somebody goes to jail," he informed her. "That rock set me back the price of a house and lot."

"But, Mr. Sledge, I can't accept this," she earnestly assured him.

"Why not?" he demanded, studying her heavily. "You're to be my wife."

She was panic stricken more by his look than his words.

"It's too large for a ring, for one thing," she evaded.

"Why?" he again rumbled.

She decided to leave out the question of good taste.

"You couldn't put a glove over it," he explained.

He looked at it reproachfully.

"Hunh!" he commented. "It's a peach, though, ain't it?"

Here was a proposition on which she could heartily agree.

"It's a beauty—a marvel!" she enthusiastically told him, ashamed, in some degree, that she so much admired the live thing as it lay in her palm.

She handed it over to him, and as his palm touched hers she felt the tingle of him for the first time. It was as if she had inadvertently touched an electric battery, and she jerked back her hand.

out, but by that time Molly had given up all hope of heading Sledge off. The only thing she could do, she resolved, in a hilarious conference with Fern, would be to accept temporarily any crazy extravagant gift he showered upon her. After the need for fooling him was over, she could send them back, and this resolution, once having been formed, the girls spent much time in eager expectation of what the next surprise might be. Sledge was at least making the game exciting, and his perfectly mad, but equally earnest, antics gave both Molly and Fern more fun than they had ever known.

In the meantime, while Sledge and his cheerful co-worker, Tommy Reeler, were keeping the girls busy day and night, the preparations for the secret wedding went steadily on, as did the business preparations of Bert and Frank Marley. Thanksgiving day approached, and things began to focus themselves in the Marley home. The representative of the up state syndicate came to town on schedule. He spent three days in going over the books of the company and examining into Marley's loans. Also, he looked up the matter of the franchises. The company had been given originally a twenty year city charter, which had been twice renewed for ten year periods, its present renewal having three years to run.

"It looks like the regular thing," he said to Marley. "I'm satisfied to give you thirty-six straight through for your stock, take up your loans and allow you the difference in value; but, before I do business, I'll have to see Sledge about this franchise."

"It was part of our understanding that you were to stay away from him," insisted Marley. "If your presence and your errand here are known, Sledge will do something destructive. He has it in for me and will wipe me right off the map."

"He might have it in for me, and I have to see what he can do."

"I'll make it \$34 a share, and you see him afterward," offered Marley.

"Now, I'm bound to see him," declared Mr. Goldman, who was a wiry little man, of great energy and decisiveness. "Don't you worry. We won't connect me with you. I've been in this game too long not to be able to cover my tracks."

Goldman's interview with Sledge was brief, concise and satisfactory, and he began by stating exactly who he was and whom he represented.

"We're looking for street car bargains," he explained, "and we've been advised that stock in the Ring City street railway is well worth picking up at its present price. Do you think so?"

"Uh-hunh!" grunted Sledge. "None for sale, though."

"It does seem to be scarce," admitted Goldman. "Still, we'll take what we can get if it looks good. I understand there's some talk of consolidation."

"Uh-hunh!" grunted Sledge. "That would probably bring the stock up to par," judged Goldman.

"Can't tell," commented Sledge.

"Is there any trouble about renewal of franchises?" inquired Goldman, pondering deeply upon whether Sledge was remarkably frank or remarkably adept in seeming so.

"Guess not," said Sledge. "I got a date, and he went to keep it, wearing his new Prince Albert and his silk hat, his gray gloves and his red rosebud with such complacency as almost to induce Phil to give up his job."

Marley went home intoxicated with elation that night.

"Molly, girl, we've won!" he announced. "Go ahead with your wedding tomorrow, and be as open about it as you like. Tomorrow I lift the mortgage on this house and sell it to Mordstone, who has offered to buy it as soon as I can give it to him unencumbered. I have already sold my stock and Bert's, including the amusement park; have delivered it, and here is the check."

"I told you we would win!" exulted Molly and ran with the news to Fern.

"I'm sorry," confessed that young lady. "The fun's all over."

"It was fun, wasn't it?" admitted Molly, startled to find that she almost regretted the ending of it. "You still have Tommy, though."

"No," denied Fern. "I'll have to put Tommy in my pretty little blue car and send them back together. Poor Sledge!"

"Here's where he gets the first blow," sighed Molly. "You have to go up and phone him that I'm ill and can't see him tonight nor tomorrow."

"Coward!" hissed Fern, in mock tragedy and went in to telephone. She came back slowly. "Poor fellow!" she said. "Honestly, it's a shame, Molly."

Molly herself was rather listless. She was standing in front of a huge vase containing Sledge's latest consignment of red roses. She broke off one of the most perfect specimens and pinned it to her belt.

"Poor fellow!" she agreed; then her eyes snapped. "I'm going to make him send me his dog."

"I wouldn't dare," declared Fern. "I'd feel miserable every time he barked. I wonder what Sledge will do tonight."

CHAPTER XVI.

Interesting News For the Big Boy.

SLEDGE did what any other fool lover would have done. He telephoned three times that evening to see how Molly was, and when he went home he drove two miles out of the way to pass the house. He was equally solicitous the next morning and handled his business with singular lack of concentration. The last two weeks had made him more slavishly in love with Molly than ever, and he missed her as a morphine fiend does his "dope."

Coldman dropped in to see him at 2 o'clock.

"I want to talk consolidation with you, Mr. Sledge," he offered, sitting smilingly in the visitor's chair.

"What consolidation?" asked Sledge. "The street railway companies. We have just purchased the controlling interest in the company now operative."

Sledge turned on him a slow glance. "From Frank Marley?" he demanded. "From Frank Marley?" repeated Coldman pleasantly, looking as if he expected to be applauded for his enterprise.

"You're up against it," Sledge warned him. "Did you pay?"

"Gave Marley my check yesterday afternoon."

"Today's a holiday," advised Sledge. "Better stop payment."

"I don't understand," faltered Coldman.

"You will when you're stung," advised Sledge.

"I'm not stung," announced Coldman emphatically. "Our people don't take a chance on getting in wrong. That check can be stopped."

"Go for it," ordered Sledge and punched the bell. "Where's Bendix?" he demanded of Adolph.

"Don't know. Want him?"

"Quick!" ordered Sledge. "Why didn't you tell me you was after control? Now you don't get anything."

"I got out—that's one cinch!" stated Coldman, rising and looking at his watch.

"How?" asked Sledge.

"That's my affair. I'd be a sucker to lay myself liable by an admission of the knowledge."

"I want to know," persisted Sledge. "I want to be sure of it."

"We're gunning for Marley," surmised Coldman.

"Sure I am!" agreed Sledge. "I don't want you stung. How do you crawl?"

"Do I get back in after it's all straightened out?"

"You can have a chunk of it."

Goldman surveyed him thoughtfully. "They do say you stick to a promise like that," he mused. "Well, two weeks ago I had a written authority to make contracts, conclude business and write checks, in the name of my corporation. Day before yesterday that authority was revoked. We always do that."

Bendix came in.

"Marley got out from under," Sledge told him. "Why?"

"So the wedding could come off."

Returned Bendix, with an involuntary glance at the red rose boutonniere.

"The wedding!" repeated Sledge. "Look here, Bendix, don't you kid me!"

"I wish I was," replied Bendix, showing, for the first time, his knowledge of how important all this was to the big boy. "Molly and Bert Glider are to be married right off the bat."

"No man had ever seen Sledge pale before."

"This afternoon, being married now!"

Although there were to be no guests at the Marley wedding, the house was naturally in a state of much tenseness as the time approached. Molly, for two hours before the minister was to arrive, was engaged in the finishing touches of her toilet, which was fully as elaborate, though not so conventional, as if the function was to be the most formal one possible, and her boudoir, from one end to the other, was cluttered with fluffy finery, with toilet accessories, with two maids and Fern Burbank, the three latter articles being in a state closely bordering on hysteria.

Downstairs Bert Glider wandered from room to room feeling more in the way than if he were an unbidden guest at somebody else's wedding, his only human companion being an occasional contact with the thin legged butler, who, under the excitement of the occasion, had opened a surreptitious bottle of champagne in the pantry, and there being plenty of room in his intellect, had succumbed to the inevitable gloom of the occasion.

The most busily occupied one of all, however, was Frank Marley, who, from immediately after breakfast, had ensconced himself in his den, where he somewhat sadly finished his connection with many odds and ends of local business and social institutions, writing checks and friendly notes all the morning.

Even had his lunch brought in to him, for, truth to tell, he preferred rather to be alone than to be with Bert on this particular day. He felt somehow as if he could never be quite in accord with the man who was to take from him his motherless Molly, and he tried to quell the fear for her which arose in him. Moreover, Bert represented the new life which stretched before him, and he was not quite ready for it now that the time had come. He was an old man, he realized, and it is a dangerous matter to uproot old trees. He had lived the best years of his life in this city, had worked here, and had married here, and had built up his fortunes here, and here had occupied a position of some honor and respect. And, try as he would, he could not look with too much confidence upon achieving the same thing as a stranger in a strange place.

It was all wrong, he told himself, and he would not even be properly thankful for the crumb of luck which he had wrested from the bygone feast. In his pocket he had the check which removed him from the nerve racking fluctuations of his street car fortunes, which insured Molly and Bert and himself an entrance into a new life and new opportunities, which made him safe from Sledge, and yet he felt no great exultation.

It was a relief to him when Molly



"Right away. This afternoon! They're being married now!"

had him called to look at her where she stood at the head of the stairs in her bridal gown, a fresh and glowing vision in her pure, shimmering white. The sight of her gave him a thrill of hopefulness too, the first of the day.

"You're a beauty, Molly," he called up to her. "I declare, I don't see how I have been lucky enough to keep you with me so long as this."

"That's a nice daddy," she gayly assured him.

Bert came in from the conservatory for the glimpse of her which he was to be permitted, and naturally he spoiled the picture by starting to dart upstairs, an action which had the result of sending not only Molly and Fern, but the admiring maids scurrying back to the boudoir, the door of which sacred apartment they locked and bolted and would have barred had there been any means to do so. Bert, quite properly defeated, came back down the stairs and joined Marley.

"A bridegroom doesn't amount to much anyhow," he conventionally admitted.

"And a husband to less," supplemented Marley. "You'll discover by and by, my boy, that the lords of creation are only lords by proxy."

"You're trying to scare me," protested Bert.

"No, only to encourage you," insisted Marley. "The happiest man in the world is one who finds a wife capable of directing him and generous enough to let him think he is doing it all himself."

"That's a new idea to me," pondered Bert complacent through condescension only as he stroked his carefully curled mustache and reflected upon his own ability.

"The worst of it is you have to grow old to realize it," Marley gently insisted. "I was a smart man until my wife died. Won't you have a drink?"

"No, thanks," refused Bert, walking disconsolately to the library. "I promised Molly the minister shouldn't smell it on my breath."

"Afterward, then," laughed Marley, and, returning to his den, closed the door just as the bell of his extension telephone rang.

"Hello, Marley!" hailed the voice of Willie Walters. "Had your franchise canceled and regranted?"

"Don't need it," replied Marley, reflecting instantly that he was out of the franchise worry, but curious never the less. "What do you mean?"

"The Allerton bill was put through its final passage last night," explained Walters.

"Oh, yes, the Allerton bill," smiled Marley. "I knew all about that."

"You don't seem to have got in early on the advantages," remarked Walters, scenting a story. "It's a law now, operative from its passage."

"It won't hurt anybody," chuckled Marley. "There wasn't much of importance in it."

"No?" queried Walters. "Just enough to make a political corpse of Allerton. They'll embroider that fifty year franchise clause on his shroud."

"Franchise clause? I don't understand."

"I thought you didn't know the provisions of the bill," went on Walters delighted to have unearthed a new angle to the story. "The thing is so beautifully juggled that it automatically extends all franchises granted within the last ten years to the same terms as their original charter."

"Good!" returned Marley. "All my franchises have been renewed within the last ten years."

"Now I know you've been asleep," rejoiced Walters, not that he had any enmity for Marley, but merely that he liked a good story. "The bill specifically does not apply to renewals, but to original franchises. Why, yours absolutely expires in three years, if that's the case; moreover, the franchises at the end of that time belong to Sledge's company."

"Impossible!" gasped Marley. "Get your alarm clock fixed," advised Walters. "Monday night the council in secret session granted franchises to Sledge's company covering every street in the city, including—now, listen—including those streets now covered by franchises when those franchises expire."

For just a moment Marley felt the strength leaving him, a spasmodic impulse due to an entirely automatic men-

tal impression that he still owned the old company.

"It's a bald faced steal!" he hotly charged, indignant at Sledge's whole sale appropriation.

"It's a pippin!" agreed Walters. "Fact of the matter is, Marley, that unless you completed that consolidation with Sledge at the expiration of three years he can make you tear up your rolling stock and other trash. Did you consolidate?"

(To be continued.)



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