

A TALE of RED ROSES

By
GEORGE
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GRANDE

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 guys, but the most of them are stuck boys."

"Excuse me a minute, girls," begged Sledge and unloomed 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 was 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 souse," 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-

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 crazily 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. Coldman, who was a wiry little man, of great energy and decisiveness. "Don't you worry. He won't connect me with you. I've been in this game too long not to be able to cover my tracks."

Coldman'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-huh!" grunted Sledge. "None for sale, though."

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

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

"Can't tell," commented Sledge.

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

"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 Murdstone, 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's the check."

"I told you we would win!" exhorted 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 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 at her belt.

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

Between them they dropped the diamond, and it rolled under Fern's chair. Tommy Reeler picked it up.

"Swell pebble, Ben," he approved and poured it into Fern's hand, where it lay glittering and glittering and glistening and would not be still.

"Oh, you darling!" Fern murmured to it. "Where did this drop from?"

"Present for Molly," explained Sledge modestly. "Too big for a ring. Can't pull a glove over it. I'm gonna have it in a necklace."

Three days later the necklace came

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