

A TALE OF RED ROSES

By
**GEORGE
RANDOLPH
CHESTER**

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SYNOPSIS

Sledge, a typical politician, becomes infatuated with Molly Marley, daughter of a street car company president. He sends her red roses.

CHAPTER II.

Molly invites an Additional Guest.

"WHERE are the red roses, Molly?" asked Bert Glider as he walked into the reception parlor of Marley's pretentious big house that night.

"I don't know," replied Molly, much concerned. "Did you send some?"

"No, but I thought some were to be sent to you," laughed Bert. "It's too good to keep, Fern. By the way, that Fern just slipped, and you'll have to pardon me for it. It's Molly's fault. She never called you anything else."

"Who is it?" demanded Molly, more eager to hear the news than he liked to see. "The information is highly important, if true, and I must not be kept in suspense."

"Hold on to something, then," he warned her. "One, two, three—Sledge!"

"Sledge?" she repeated. "What? That great big?" She paused for lack of words, and her face flamed suddenly scarlet with indignation.

"Sledge," he joyously insisted, and to the puzzled Fern, "You remember the big fellow whose car stopped just abreast us last night?"

Mr. Glider, who as a boy had been an expert in pulling the wings from flies, went straight on with the slaughter, seizing immediately the glorious opportunity which presented itself when Mr. Marley, brave in smoking jacket and pumps, sauntered into the parlor.

"Great news, Marley!" hailed Bert, beaming with delight upon the joyous laughter of Fern. "Molly has captured a new honor for the family. Whose do you suppose is the latest scalp at her belt?"

"It might be almost anybody," returned Marley, who felt that his motherless daughter's popularity reflected somehow on himself. "Who is the particular victim you have in mind?" and he laughed in advance.

"Sledge!" exploded Bert. "By the way, Marley, he gave you a hint of it too. Didn't he ask you today while I was there for an invitation to Molly's party tomorrow night or something like that?"

"Well, not exactly, but he did throw out some pretty strong hints," acknowledged Marley with a grin, entering into the joyous spirit of the occasion. "He asked permission to call a Molly. I told him that was up to her."

"How unusually considerate!" observed Molly, biting her lips to suppress the rising fury which had driven the blushes from her cheeks and left them almost waxen.

The Marley butler, a thin faced and thin legged young man with a painfully intellectual countenance, stalked past the hallway portieres in answer to a below stairs ring and returned from the front door with:

"Mr. Sledge, sir, to see Mr. Marley."

"Show him into the library," hastily directed Marley, suddenly contrite and feeling a sinking horror, as did all the others in the room, of having this man face to face with Molly, especially after the crimes against her, of which they had themselves been guilty.

"The instructions were too late, however."

"Good evening," rumbled the deep voice of Sledge, who just then appeared directly in the center of the opening in the portieres. He wore an lavender topcoat, the open front of which disclosed a marvelous expanse of white shirt front, spaced with diamond studs, the glitter of which paled, however, by contrast with the enormous sapphire which illuminated the solid gold watch fob presented to him by the Young Men's Marching club of Ward G. His hair was pressed as smoothly to his skull as an earnest Italian barber could plaster it, and various angry specks on his cheeks told how microscopically he had been shaved, however, he carried. In his right hand he bore, held by a wide velvet loop, in the same huge fingers which clutched the gold-headed cane presented by the Capital City Sledge club, a thirty dollar box of candy, two feet across, wrapped with six beribboned layers of fancy paper and provided with an absolute maze of drawers and partitions. In his left hand he carried a speckless silk hat of the latest French shape, and that arm encircled a conical parcel, so big that it would have staggered a small man, while from the upper end of the cone protruded a square yard of screaming red roses.

"Good evening, Miss Molly," he added, becoming more specific. "I brought these for you myself," and he beamed his cordial good-will upon the entire

assemblage.

It was in this breathless crisis that Molly Marley, aggravated beyond endurance, took her merciless revenge. "How perfectly delightful!" she cried, and she swept toward him with more eager cordiality than she had ever bestowed upon Bert Glider himself. "We've just been talking about you," and then, to the intense consternation of her father and her foremost suitor, she added: "I want you at my party tomorrow night. Won't you come, please?"

The next day Smash, Molly's pet, like the way of many good dogs, fell into the hands of the official dog catcher and was taken off to the pound. Molly was in a pitiable state. She appealed to her father. He testily said that he was busy. In her desperation and hardly knowing why she did it, she telephoned to Sledge. One of Sledge's men said that he was very busy. But when he heard it was Molly he jumped into an automobile, accompanied Molly to the pound and got Smash. On the way home Sledge talked of his dog Bob, and Molly shivered when he said he'd like to match Bob against Smash. As if noticing her displeasure, he changed the subject to Molly's party, and for the hundredth time Molly was sorry she invited him.

A yelp on the front porch announced the arrival of Ben Sledge, and he appeared in the brilliantly lighted hall, holding a tightly stretched chain, to the other end of which was attached a one-eyed, stub eared, battle scarred ball terrier, which took such a violent dislike to the intellectual faced Marley butler that Sledge was compelled to hold him clear of the floor with one brawny hand and spank him loudly in the ribs with the other, whereupon Bob gave a single yelping promise to be good, and Sledge let him down.

"This is Bob, Miss Molly," introduced Sledge. "I'm sending him right back with Mike, but you said you'd like to see him."

"Delighted to meet you, Bob," laughed Molly, stooping down and patting him on the seamy head.

Bob deliberately batted his good eye with all the effect of a wink and wagged his absurd stump of a tail by

way of friendly greeting, then he suddenly made a lunge of about four feet and strained, choking, at the end of his chain, on his hind feet, with his tongue hanging out. From the rear of the lot he had heard the bark of the suspicious Smash.

"Where's Mike?" demanded Molly hastily and in some fear.

Bert Glider and five of the eight couples whom Molly had invited had already arrived and were now, of course, thronged eagerly in the doorway.

"What's your hurry, Molly?" snickered loose jointed Dicky Reynolds. "Hold your caller till I run out and get Smash. He knows me."

"Don't you dare!" shrieked Molly, distrusting him with good reason.

Bob loosened his throat enough to answer the challenge from the kennel, and there wasn't a girl left in the doorway except Jessie Peters, who cing to Dicky's sleeve.

"I'll go with you, Dicky," offered circular little Willie Walters, with an echo of Dicky's snicker.

"If you do he'll bark at you," holly retorted Molly, knowing Wee Willie's cautious propensities.

The rest of the boys were for keeping up the good work, but Sledge cut short the incipient hysteria by picking up Bob by the neck, returning to the door and booming into the night the silent, potent syllable:

"Mike!"

A squatty man, who looked so much like Bob, even to a patched eye, that they could have been taken for twins, emerged from the darkness, hurred Bob to his bosom like a brother and hurried away.

Fern and Molly looked at each other with dismay. "If this was the start of the evening what else might they expect!"

"Why didn't Mike take them both away?" whispered Fern. "You poor girl!"

"I'm not!" denied Molly fiercely. "I said this morning that I'd like to see Bob, and, of course, Mr. Sledge brought him. The only trouble is he's so quick."

"He's instantaneous," corrected Fern. "You have to admire it," laughed Molly. "Well, the only thing I can do is to be as game as he is." And upon Sledge's return from some careful directions to an unseen companion of Mike's she introduced him to her friends with all the sprightliness of which she was capable.

In that process she firmly intended to make him the center of things and to see that he had a good time. He relieved her of that tremendous burden, however, for after moving through the introductions with a cordial ease which not only delighted but surprised her, until she was reminded that he had been introduced to more notable than she would probably ever see, he quietly disappeared into Marley's den and smoked fat cigars in calm comfort, with a stein of cool beer at his elbow, leaving the young people to enjoy their hilarity without the damper of his presence.

Molly, mindful of her duties as hostess, dropped in occasionally to see that he was satisfied, and each time she found him in exactly the same position, as placidly contented as he could possibly have been in the little back room of the Occident saloon. On one of her visits, after answering in the affirmative her inquiry if he was all right, he rose from his comfortable nest in the big leather chair.

"I suppose we eat," he guessed. "I think you'd call it bluff," she laughingly returned.

"I get you," he replied. "Mostly decorations. Souvenirs?"

"The usual," he answered. "Hand 'em these," and he thrust into her hands two bundles of small envelopes, red ones and white ones.

She looked at them blankly a moment.

"I-get you," she smiled, flushing slightly as she wondered whether her adoption of his phrase was flattery or ridicule. "Red ones, in honor of the roses, are for girls, and the white ones for the boys. What are they?"

"Aw, nothing much," he diffidently replied as he resumed his seat. "Season tickets for grand opera week in the red ones and for the Athletic club fights in the white ones. Admit two. Is it all right?"

"Is it all right? It's glorious!" she assured him, with shining eyes.

Delighted with this unmatchable novelty, Molly was herself placing the red and white envelopes at the covers in the dining room when Bert Glider found her there and closed the door after himself.

"Molly, you're carrying this Sledge joke too far!" he holly charged.

"Who elected you?" she quietly wanted to know and laid a white envelope at his place with extreme care, angling the corner of it just so.

"Both of us, I hope," he stated, displaying a warning signal by pulling at the top of his collar to give his throat more room. "Molly"—and he advanced toward her.

The symptoms were unmistakable. Molly, having rounded the end of the table, slipped out through the pantry door and handed her remaining envelopes to the intellectual looking butler.

"Place these on the table just as I have done. Alternate red and white ones," she kindly directed, and the next time Bert saw her she was the live center of the laughing taffy pulling. She had preferred to escape rather than to treat this matter either seriously or flippantly when she was annoyed with him.

At 11:30 Mr. Marley, with the worry of eight absent mothers on his own shoulders, was fretting over some invention to send them home when the earth split open in the wide stretch of vacant land across the street and ejected into the sky, with a loud, unearthly noise, a tremendous assortment of fiery meteors, mostly red. Roman candles in reckless bunches shot up from behind every bush, skyrocketed dragged their spiraling tails through all the available circumference, while fancy bombs carried their aerial sooters and other brilliant pyrotechnical surprises into all the celestial territory hitherto unoccupied.

Through it all Sledge stood as immovable and as impassive as if he had been glued to the spot and frozen. Even when the display flowed out into the middle of the highway and piled up the street cars for two blocks in both directions he remained a calm and disinterested spectator. The president of the traction company was thrown into extreme agitation by this excess of zeal, for he had some consideration for the feelings of the public, and he rushed right out to restore the scattered schedule.

"Here, what's this?" he demanded of a demon with a smoke blackened face. "Why are you holding up the cars?"

"Sledge's orders," replied the demon, lighting the fuse of a red rose set piece. "He said everything went, and it's going."

Mr. Marley came back.

Sledge was no longer on the porch. Molly had slipped in to wrap up some cake for Baby Peters, and Sledge, who seemingly saw nothing, had followed her.

"Well, is your party a hit?" he anxiously inquired.

"It's a scream!" she said, unable to control her laughter. "Really, Mr. Sledge, I have you to thank for the most extravagantly joyous occasion at which I have ever had the good fortune to preside."

"We'll open her another notch next time," he confidently promised her. "Molly, marry me."

"Oh, it's impossible!" she blurted. "Really, I'm sorry, Mr. Sledge. I know it's my own fault, but I didn't mean it to go this far. I don't mean that—that is—well, I don't know what I mean. You've been so good, and I do appreciate it so, but it is impossible! I simply couldn't. Don't you see?"

"You'll come around to it."

"I bet I don't!" she blazed.

"What'll you bet—Smash against Bob?"

"Anything you like!" she angrily agreed, furious enough to poison him.

"You're on," he said.

CHAPTER III.

An Engagement Without a Kiss.

BERT, annoyed by the events of the evening, but relieved to some extent by Molly's inexorable and delightful chance of manner toward him in the pleasant half hour before the party had dispersed, took his thoughtful place in Sledge's machine and prepared for the usual welcome silence, which those who knew him had a right to expect from the reticent boss. To his surprise, however, Sledge talked.

"Great party Molly had," observed the donor of the fireworks and the music and the passes and the red roses. "A feverish success," agreed Bert. "Molly is inclined to give you all the credit for it."

"She can have anything she wants," stated Sledge. "I'm going to marry her."

"Did she say so?" inquired Bert.

"Not yet," acknowledged Sledge. "She's thinking it over."

"Oh!" returned Bert, much relieved and smiling in the darkness. He complacently twirled his mustache. He had a good one on Molly.

"What time am I to see you in the morning about that Porson property?" he inquired, determined not further to discuss the lady.

"Eleven o'clock."

Bert went into the house, half amused and wholly vexed. It might be very funny to see this blundering big boor making a fool of himself, but the fact that at the same time he was making a fool of everybody else.

Bert knew, to the share, how much street railway and Gas and Electric stock Marley held. The growing city needed vastly increased transportation facilities, and with the increase of these would come an increase of Marley wealth and influence. It might be a very handy thing for a young real estate dealer to have the president of a rapidly expanding street railway company for a father-in-law. He went to sleep, dreaming pleasantly of extensions and subdivisions and advance information on factory sites—and of Molly, of course!

He awoke determined to concretize these dreams or to dismiss them and find others. Molly had either to accept him or definitely to turn him loose after what other fish there might be in the sea. The absurdity of having Sledge for a rival was too much to endure.

He went to his office, dividing this train of thought with his plans for the marketing of the Porson tract, hurried to the First National to secure a loan of ten thousand on the new property and arranged at the German bank for an extension of certain other loans which would have to be deferred if he used his ten thousand available funds to complete the cash purchase which Bendix demanded. These more urgent matters disposed of, he called up Molly.

"May I come out?" he demanded.

"When?" drawled a languid voice.

"Right away."

"No," she drawled again.

"But, Molly, I must see you," he seriously insisted. "It's important."

"It always is," she laughed. "What's it about this time?"

"Oh, the same old thing," he acknowledged, "only more so."

"You're crowding them closer together," chided Molly. "Moreover, this is the first time by telephone, I think."

"I didn't mean it to be so," he apologized. "You're trapped me into it and taken away any chance I might have of persuasiveness. Now I suppose it will be the same old answer."

"Not necessarily," was her astounding reply, in the same sleepy drawl.

"What?" he gasped. "Say that again."

"Not necessarily," she repeated, and he caught the sound of a repressed giggle.

"You're teasing me," he protested. "You don't mean that I'm to have the right answer this time."

"It depends on what you mean by the right answer."

"The one I've always wanted."

"What one is that?"

"Yes, he blurted.

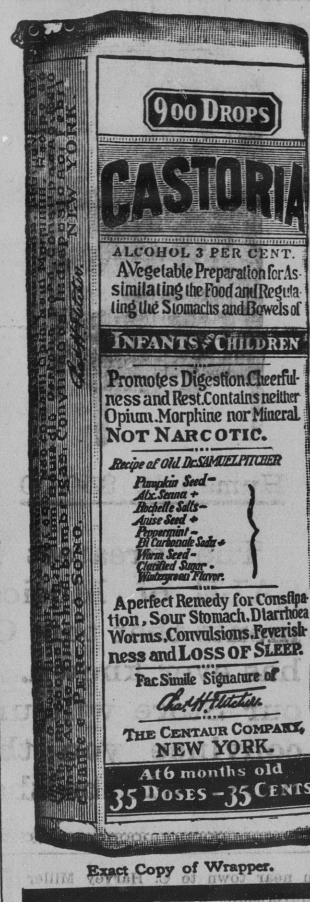
"Yes, what?"

"Yes, what?" he confusedly demanded.

"I will. Say, Bert, I don't like the all platinum settings. I like the gold with the platinum prongs. Size six and a half."

"I'm cheated," he earnestly complained. "There are certain formalities which I am keenly missing. I'm coming out."

The governor's ball being considered by common consent the first social gun of the season, after which lesser social lights might presume to shine with authorization, everybody who was anybody made it a point to be there and compare artillery. They made it a special point this year since Governor Waver's term was expiring.



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DEATHS IN THIS COUNTY

Some Friends Whom You Knew and Loved Who Have Passed Away Recently in This Vicinity.

JOSEPH LOWRY.

The remains of Joseph Lowry of Fair Hope, who died at the Mont Alto sanitarium on Saturday, were brought to Meyersdale on Monday for burial. Services were held in the Catholic Church, following which interment was made in the Catholic cemetery. Mr. Lowry was 27 years of age and is survived by his wife and four small children, his parents and several brothers and sisters, all living at Fairhope.

WILLIAM BEALS.

A well known former citizen of this vicinity died yesterday at the home of his son, J. C. Beals, at Hazelwood. The remains were received here this place to-morrow afternoon and will be taken by Undertaker Reick for that as soon as the brother-in-law of the deceased is notified.

"You're almost as libidinous as I will be held complimented Fern. 'I wouldn't give up that spangle fan for worlds. What do you suppose is keeping Bert, Molly?' 'He's probably 'slewed,' to use the Sledge dictionary," responded Molly calmly.

"Does that mean the same as jagged?"

"Spificated," elucidated Molly. "Don't look so shocked, Fern. Bert isn't in the habit of it. Any of the boys will tell you that he's so sober he breaks up most of their parties."

"Then why did he show off tonight?"

"I believe they call it drowning their sorrows," explained Molly quietly. "He lost everything today—money, business, prospects. Sledge broke him."

"Poor Bert!" sympathized the warm hearted Fern. "Why, that putty faced old thief! Molly! He did it on your account! Isn't he clever! How on earth did he work it?"

"Had Bert tie up all his money, including some he borrowed, in property Sledge depreciated in value, then Sledge had the bank call the loan. Bert can't pay, and the bank seizes the property. Moreover, nobody will invest in Bert's enterprises since they know that Sledge is against him."

"I don't blame him for getting—what does Sledge call it?"

"Slewed."

"Do you?" asked Fern.

"He'll probably feel sorry for it to-morrow," evaded Molly. "A man's conscience usually hurts him when he can't eat."

They had neared the house, and now a slender figure in black came rapidly toward them.

"Is that you, Molly?" inquired the anxious voice of Frank Marley.

"It is your fair daughter," she lightly assured him.

"They are missing you," he declared with all the responsibility of a successful showman. "The governor and his wife, Senator Allerton, the mayor and a dozen others have been inquiring about you. You are this year's prize beauty," and he laughed proudly.

Embarrassed by the display he apparently wished to make of her, Molly followed him into the maze of gorgeous drawing rooms, where the aristocracy of King county and the state displayed its evening clothes in constantly shifting array.

The mayor himself, a keen eyed young man with a preternaturally bald head and a reputation which followed him about like a black cat, came hurrying up to her with her dance program in his hand. With him was a gangling old beau with a professional lady killer smile, whom he introduced by an unrecognizable name and handed to Fern as a remembrance of all her misdeeds.

(To be Continued.)