

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.

On Molly's invitation Sledge attends a party. Before the crowd disperses Molly thanks Sledge for his kindness, and then he proposes marriage. Her refusal is treated as only temporary by Sledge.

Molly attends the governor's ball, and her attractiveness results in her climbing the dizzy heights of popularity. The notable respect accorded Sledge, however, perplexes her.



Inspected Her Rapturously Through Half Inch Thick Glasses.

seemed absorbedly interested in him, and her leading millionaire came back to him again and again. She wondered why men sought him, and she was still wondering when the eminent sociologist fairly snatched her out of the arms of the mayor after the eighth dance.

"Come and watch me smoke a cigarette," he begged her. "I've been trying to get a chance to talk with you again the entire evening, but there's always such an increasingly mad scramble around you that the attempts made me feel undignified."

"You'd worry a lot about that," she guessed.

"Wouldn't I?" he laughed. "Will you chill if we step out on the terrace?"

"I don't know how," she happily told him, and they hurried outside, where he led her to a seat in the moonlight and deftly made her comfortable with three cushions from as many chairs.

Sledge and Senator Allerton passed them as he lit his cigarette, and he looked after Sledge until the match burned his fingers.

"There is the biggest man I have seen in a long while," he remarked as he sat beside her on the settee.

"They say he is not only the boss of the city, but of the state," replied Molly, very much interested. "You knew that, didn't you?"

"Of course," he acknowledged, "but I scarcely think that would influence my judgment. I have studied a great many men of power and influence than he has at present, but none of them, so far as I can recollect, seemed to have his elemental force. Wherever he was born, he would have been a leader. He is a wonderful man. Throw him in a savage country and he would be king."

A huge figure approached them.

"Hello, Watt," rumbled the deep voice of Sledge. "My dance, Molly."

"Well, you having a good time?" asked Sledge, sitting comfortably in the seat Mr. Watt had just vacated.

"The time of my life," she assured him, with happy animation.

"That's the word," he heartily approved. "If there's anybody here you want just tell Cameron. If he don't trot 'em right over tell me."

"The mayor has been very kind," acknowledged Molly, beginning to wonder.

"He's got his orders," returned Sledge complacently. "Let me see your dance program," and he took it from her lap. "I thought so," he commented. "There's a dark horse turned up, and you didn't get him."

"A dark horse?" she faltered.

"A ringer," he explained. "Lord Bunnchase, Andrew Lepton, the big coffee monopolist, sneaked him in here under an alias, and nobody's on." He unzipped over the card a moment. "Exchange me till I fix it," and he stalked away.

Molly sat silently, allowing a cold wave of humiliation slowly to chill her soul. Why, Sledge had carefully prearranged her triumph of the evening. He had assumed control of her dance card and of her succession of delightful tete-a-tetes. He had driven the star performers into her net as if they had been doves of sheep. True, men had sought her a second time of their own accord because of that charm which she knew she possessed—a vaguely understood attractiveness, which was more than beauty, more than cleverness, more than mere sex receptiveness. She had won by her own power, but Sledge had given her the glorious opportunities. His omnipotence began to annoy her and his ruthlessness to inflame her already inflamed resentment.

She knew precisely what was happening at this moment. He was creating havoc in not less than half a dozen dance cards, with no compunction about having discommoded or dismissed any one. Then there was Bert downtown battling with a disaster which had thrown him completely from his feet. Poor Bert! She had by no means forgotten him, even amid the height of her excitement. She should have been there to comfort him, and yet—well, he had not seen fit to come to her for comfort. Men were queer creatures. A woman when disaster overtook her did not need to

deaden her intelligence. She needed it then more than ever.

After all, though, Bert was a man, and that was the way of men, and there was no use to dream of overturning the entire accepted order of creation. She was certain, however, that she could be of more help to Bert after they were married. He was weaker than she had thought.

Very well; Sledge had thrown down the gauntlet. He had laughed when he was threatened and had ruined Bert in challenging defiance. Let him now take the consequences. If he went to the penitentiary, well and good. He had probably sent other people there, with no more qualms of mercy than she would now show to him. She could be as ruthless as he. What was it Professor Watt had called the quality? Elemental force—that was it. Well, she possessed it too. She felt it within her, stirring with the same physical nascency as the virility of parenthood, to which it was so closely allied.

Just off the governor's stuffed leather library was a small room, with a hard desk and six hard chairs, and a hard looking letter file, and a hard, fireproof safe into the wall, and here, while Lord Bunnchase led Molly Marley through the paces of a hard two-step, Governor Waver and Senator Allerton and Sledge and Frank Marley gathered for a few moments of comfortable chat such as elderly gentlemen love to indulge in while frivolous younger people dance the flying hours away. All four being gentlemen who, by the consent of the public, bore the grave responsibility of the public welfare on their shoulders. It was not strange that their chat should turn to public affairs.

"I am glad to be identified with the enterprise," avowed State Senator Allerton, who was a suave, clean faced gentleman, with a good forehead and a quite negotiable tongue. "At the same time, as far as I am privately concerned, I can only regard it as a temporary investment."

"Why temporary?" demanded Frank Marley, who was feeling particularly capable this evening. His \$175,000 worth of street railway stock had been increased to \$262,500. He was to have \$87,500 cash out of the undivided surplus of the old company, and his daughter, Molly, was the most popular girl at the governor's ball. "The street railway company has always made money, and the city needs additional transportation facilities. We have reached the normal period of extension, and I do not see what is to prevent us from limitless prosperity."

"The franchises," Senator Allerton reminded him. "Your present permits have less than five years to run."

"I have never had any trouble in having them renewed," objected Marley, priding himself on his management.

"Times are changing," sighed Allerton. "There is a growing disposition on the part of the public to charge public service corporations for the use of public property."

"The people are ungrateful," mourned Governor Waver, who had enriched himself through furnishing electric light at his own price to a public which had known nothing better than gas. "The moment they see a profit on their luxuries they want part of it. An undivided surplus such as the street car company has had is a constant menace."

"That was a sinking fund for extensions and improvements," Marley reminded him. "The stockholders had no right to ask for a division of it." "They would if we had not put it out of harm's road," insisted the governor. "That's not much has been saved to the men who really earned it, but I should not like to see a similar profit exposed. To my mind, a 7 per cent dividend is an even worse folly."

"It gives confidence in the stock," argued Marley. "The public would never be so eager to take up this new issue if it had not been for that 7 per cent dividend."

"That's what it was for," interpolated Sledge, looking out of the window into the sunken garden and vainly hunting the hand hole in the gate.

"It has served its purpose," granted Allerton, "but taxpayers are becoming greedy. When they see the stockholders of a public corporation making 7 per cent they want some of it and try to make the corporations pay part of their taxes. In every city of importance the voters are demanding pay for street car franchises and making the street railway companies, in addition, bear half the cost of all street improvements."

"It's a bad outlook," agreed Governor Waver. "Frankly, as soon as I receive my new issue of stock I shall have it quietly placed on sale."

Marley looked at him indignantly.

"Why, the street railway company is entering on the greatest period of prosperity in its career," he asserted. "There'll be no trouble about franchises. The city is wild to have the improvements and must have them."

Allerton looked at him wonderingly.

"Waver is right," he stated. "I shall sell my own stock, and I'll venture to say that Sledge has already made silent arrangements for disposing of his. Do you know that the franchises at present granted in this state are revocable and that it is not possible to secure one which is positively safe for longer than ten year periods? When you come to the renewal of your franchises, Marley, you will be met with a demand for pay and will have other restrictions imposed on you. Our present franchise law, in view of the public tendency, is a bad one for investors."

"Let's fix it," suggested Sledge. "I'm afraid it's too late," protested Allerton.

"Not for a new gag," dissented Sledge. "A new one can be put over

quick."

"I fancy that there should be protection somewhere," opined the governor. "No matter what changes in public sentiment the investing class, upon which the public depends for prosperity, must always be protected."

"But how?" inquired the senator.

"How in this particular case?"

"Head 'em off," granted Sledge. "I'm keeping my stock."

"I'd be glad to hold mine," stated the senator. "But how is it to be made of future value?"

"That's up to you," Sledge replied, rising. "Figure it out and see me tomorrow. Marley, I want to talk to you."

Mr. Marley, today a man worth over a third of a million dollars in the street railway stock alone, arose in offended dignity. He was a trifle too important, too capable and too wealthy to be ordered about like a messenger boy by a man who might shortly be a convicted criminal. Molly had arranged an interview between her father and Bert on the previous afternoon, and Mr. Marley also now knew a thing or two.

"I would suggest tomorrow," he stated coldly. "I should much prefer to talk with you during business hours."

"This ain't business," said Sledge, leading the way into the library, where he took a seat in an alcove.

"If it is my family affairs"—he began in protest.

"Sit down," directed Sledge. "Bert Glider has been making threats against me."

"Has he?" inquired Marley noncommittally.

"Tell him to quit or make good," ordered Sledge.

"Really, Mr. Sledge, I don't see where I can interfere," reproved Mr. Marley. "The matter is entirely between you and Bert."

"He's a friend of yours," charged Sledge.

"Yes," acknowledged Marley, feeling that he could afford to acknowledge it now that the street car reorganization had gone beyond the point where Sledge could stop it.

"How about this marriage with Molly?"

"That's Molly's affair," stated Marley stiffly.

"You know he's broke, don't you?"

"I heard something of the sort," admitted Marley. "He's a clever young man, however, and until he gets on his feet again I have money enough for both."

"You won't stop it, then?"

"Certainly not," declared Marley, feeling that he might just as well make capital for courage out of the fact that he could not in the slightest degree influence Molly. "I might, perhaps, prefer a more brilliant match for Molly, but I do not need to make it a matter of money, and there is no better family in America than Bert's. The Maryland Gliders are the oldest and best

distilled.

"I'm sorry for you, Molly," Sledge told her as he pre-empted the piano alcove. "I got to hand you another jolt."

"You're a fast worker," she complimented him. "But you'll have to work faster. I just gave Willie Walters a hint of the splendid news we are to have for the Blade, and he is tickled to death."

"Good work!" applauded Sledge. "I want that pulled quick."

Molly smiled.

"All right. Go as far as you like," she confidently invited him. "We'll see who gets the worst of it. By the way, maybe you wouldn't mind telling me the new jolt I am to receive."

Sledge chuckled.

"Your dad says he don't care if Bert is a bum."

"He isn't!" she hotly denied.

"Your dad's a game sport. He says he has enough money for both."

"Good for daddy!" she cried, delighted.

"Sure!" granted Sledge. "I'm gonna break him too."

CHAPTER V.
Sledge Reduces His Salary List.

SLEDGE walked back through the Occident in such a mood that the regular members of the "Good morning, Ben," brigade fell away from him like bar flies from a cake of ice. Even Doc Turner, waiting the daily arrival of the boss, met with the rebuff of stony silence and sat down in his favorite newspaper corner, with his crusty brown derby jammed down to his ears and his inch long stub of cigar puckered tightly in at the corner of his wrinkled lips, where it looked at a distance like a speck of black rot in a dusty potato. Doc had digested, condensed and purveyed news to the big chief so long that he felt a proprietorship in that department and was justly offended when Tom Bendix came in a few minutes later.

"What's the matter with Sledge this morning?" snarled Doc.

"How do I know?" immediately snarled Bendix. "I don't sleep with him."

"He's got a grudge on him a foot thick," complained Doc. "He gave me a cold turn-down. Walked straight through me without even a grunt."

"I'll tell Sledge he'd better be careful," sarcastically commented Bendix. "Well, Molly, what do you want?"

Schooner Kelly, who was afflicted with pink whiskers and a perennial thrist, stopped scratching.

"Two bits," he stated, with admirable clarity. "What's the matter with Big Ben?"

"He's teething," replied Bendix, producing the desired two bits, without which Schooner Kelly would be a nuisance for hours to come.

A low browed thug, with a long and wide scar sunk in one cheek, drew Bendix mysteriously aside.

"The Dutchman down in the Eighth ward has rented his back room to the Hazelnut club," he stated.

"Well?" inquired Bendix.

"Well, the Hazelnut club has Charley Atwood for its president, and Charley is a brother-in-law of Purcell."

"I see," said Bendix. "I suppose Dutch Klein knew this?"

"The Cameron picture's down off his back bar."

"Tell him you told me," advised Bendix, weighing the matter carefully, for of such trifles was political control constructed.

"Is that the worst news I can carry?" demanded the other, disappointed.

"If there's any worse we'll send it out when the wagon backs up," responded Bendix dryly.

stock in this country. Moreover, above all things, I wish to see my daughter happy."

"So do I," asserted Sledge. "That's why she can't marry this pinhead. I want her myself."

"Molly has made her choice," declared her father firmly.

"So you lay down, eh?"

"I decline to interfere."

"Making Bert a bum cuts no ice?"

"His temporary financial condition has no bearing in the matter. I should feel humiliated to think that I had allowed that trifling consideration to be a factor."

"Huh!" granted Sledge. "You got enough for both, eh?"

"Quite enough," and Marley reflected, with a pleasant feeling of superiority, upon the moment soon to come when this political and commercial bully would be crashing.

"Then watch out for your eye," warned Sledge and, rising, walked out into the drawing rooms.

He found Molly quite busy, but, since she was only occupied with a state representative and a local millionaire and the mayor and the young champion of the tennis players' club, he borrowed her.

She was astounded to see how they melted before him and almost had a feeling of wildly clutching at the coat tails of the mayor, whom she heartily

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"All right, captain," agreed the tale bearer. "Say, can you slip me an ace?"

Bendix slipped him an ace from a fund provided for that purpose.

"Thanks," said the thug. "Say, what's the matter with Sledge?"

"None of your business," snapped Bendix, with a wondering glance at the back room, and he waded through the usual morning lineup with that usual morning lineup with that usual wonder growing on him. The actions and bearing of Sledge varied by so thin a hair's breadth from day to day that a notable variation meant something.

He found Sledge standing up, and then he knew that there was something in the wind.

"Get Bazzam," directed Sledge, and Bendix went straight out to the telephone.

"Get Davis," directed Sledge when Bendix came back, and Bendix, vaguely pitying somebody, hurried out to the telephone again.

"Get Feeder," was the next order. Bendix almost whistled as he hurried out to locate by telephone the ex-county treasurer, who for two years had been drawing a handsome salary from Sledge for keeping his mouth shut about the public funds scandal.

"Get Gally," rumbled Sledge, who had not moved from his contemplative post by the window, and Bendix, keeping his growing wonder to himself and replying with a shrug to the sberly questioning glance of the concerned Phil, telephoned for the Sledge leader in the city council.

Sledge, having sent for everybody he needed, was sitting more quietly in his accustomed chair when Bendix returned from his last trip and was looking with his usual stolidness out of the window after having donned the fresh red rose, which he had put on religiously three times a day since he had met Molly Marley.

"Council meeting this afternoon?" he asked.

"Two-thirty," answered Bendix.

"How much of the stock is subscribed in the reorganized street railway?"

"Hundred and eighty-five thousand. I got the report just before I came over."

"Get ours on the market. Gum shoe sales, but do it quick."

"Who's to be soaked—Marley?" guessed Bendix.

"The limit," assented Sledge. "Bendix, what's the worst they could hand me on that public funds case?"

"Two or three years if they got you going," judged Bendix. "That's dead now, however."

"It's back."

"Has Feeder been talking?" Sledge nodded.

"Who knows anything?"

"Glider—Marley."

"Huh!" granted Bendix in unconscious imitation of Sledge. "What are you going to do?"

"Call it."

"You don't mean to bring it to a showdown!" protested Bendix. "We can't afford it with Lansdale and Blake on the bench. Judge Lansdale especially would part with his right arm to toss a harpoon into you."

"Get rid of him."

"I don't see how," worried Bendix. "We've tried for two years to get something on him. He can't be reached, and I don't think it's safe to beat him up."

Sledge pondered that matter weightily and stibed.

(To be Continued.)

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