

A TALE OF RED ROSES

By
GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

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SYNOPSIS

Sledge, a typical politician, becomes intimated 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.

Sledge moves for the car company's reorganization. He asks Marley for Molly's hand, but is refused. Having financially ruined Bert Gilder, Sledge threatens to do the same to Marley.

Marley's loans are ordered called by Sledge. Fearing that he will lose his salary for keeping quiet about the public fund scandal, confesses during Sledge's questioning and is roughly handled.

Molly becomes angry at her father's obvious fear of Sledge. He tells her to marry him, but she refuses and suggests a fight on Sledge, which encourages Marley.

Sledge visits Bozzam, and a heated argument arises. The chief finds Bozzam is working against him. The reorganized railway company stockholders meet. Marley presides, and Sledge is present.

The two votes of Marley and Bert Gilder are sufficient to carry the resolution to the purchase of the franchise for \$50,000 cash.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Stockholders Wield Their Mighty Ballots.

If a slight feeling of panic threatened Sledge when he stepped into the stockholders' meeting of the reorganized street railway company nobody knew it, for he sat off to one side of the president's table, facing the gathering, as heavily indifferent as ever, his big face expressionless and his small gray eyes gazing steadily straight ahead at nothing.

Marley was far more nervous than he, waiting impatiently, navel in hand, for Acting Secretary Hunt to finish his tedious job of clerical work. Considerable stock had been brought in to be entered on the books, and, as the certificates were displayed to him, Hunt, with a lavender silk handkerchief tucked in his cuff, looked occasionally across at Sledge, evidently worried that he could not catch the eye of the big chief.

Bert Gilder was the last man in line at Hunt's desk, and as he handed over a large bundle of certificates Hunt glanced at the name on the back of the top one and coughed loudly. He scraped his chair. He dropped his corporate seal on the floor with a loud clatter, but Sledge looked straight ahead. Whatever had happened to him he would know in good time, but in the meantime he was going to rest mind and body and nerves, and, if the big boss had one faculty which more than another had helped him to success, this was it—his putty-like inertia.

Marley, waiting, gavel in hand and pulling with rapid strokes at his goatee, watched this little tableau until, with another perspiring glance at Sledge, Hunt handed back the bunch of certificates to Gilder and closed his books. Then, at last, the president's gavel fell, and he announced the special stockholders' meeting of the Ring City Street Railway company open for business.

Immediately he made a neat little speech to his faithful friends, the staunch investors who had believed in the future of their heretofore prosperous organization well enough to hold to their stock or to purchase more in the face of apparent adversity. It was true that certain purely manipulative transactions had seemed to militate against the company and had temporarily depressed the market value of its stock.

Bendix stole a sly look at Sledge. He had never batted an eyelash.

However, the president went on, the intrinsic value of the stock was still there, and, with that thought constantly in mind, there was no need for a panic. The stock was worth and should command par. The improvements, for which the reorganization had been made, were to be carried out, and others vastly greater were in immediate contemplation.

It was a hopeful speech, a rousing speech, a reassuring speech, and President Marley felt when he sat down, bathed in self approbation and perspiration, that, there being six reporters present by special invitation, he had raised the market value of his stock from ten to fifteen points.

So impressive was his speech that little Henry Peters, whose cheeks were shrunken and pale and whose wrinkled framed eyes were beamed from the loss of sleep, turned to his nearest neighbor and said, with a sigh of relief:

"I'm glad I didn't sell my stock day before yesterday. I almost took thirty-five for it, but the man didn't come back."

His neighbor, a wattle necked man with a crooked nose and towlike hair which swept down his forehead and curled up over his eyebrows, said through his nose, like the wheeze of a penny whistle:

"Nyah; everything's all talk."

Up rose Attorney Tucker, a sharp nosed little man with beady eyes and the crisp business air which frowns on a smile and hates a holiday.

Let his fellow stockholders beware of too much optimism. He himself had been, next to President Marley, the largest individual holder of stock in the company. He had sold all but an extremely small portion before the panic and wished that he had sold the balance, for the outlook was very gloomy. He did not wish to make his remarks in the form of a personal tirade, but he did feel it necessary to point out that the downfall and ultimate ruination of their company was due, not to mismanagement, but to political manipulation.

"Let me tell you the truth" he shouted. "We have with us today, at this very meeting, a man of tremendous power and influence; a politician of national renown; one who is at this moment under the searching eye of the law; an omnipotent friend and a relentless foe, and this man has chosen, for reasons of his own, to wreck, and devastate and turn to useless rust the Ring City Street railway company."

Every eye was turned to Sledge, but that omnipotent friend and relentless foe, without moving a corpuscule, gazed straight ahead at nothing.

"He is no friend of the working man!" swore little Henry Peters.

As if infuriated by his impassiveness, Attorney Tucker, who was paid by Sledge for the purpose, figuratively ripped the big boss up the back, skinned him alive, hung up his hide to dry, and scattered his ashes to the winds, painting him as an insatiable monster, and chiefly calling attention to his habits of ruthless devastation. Wherever the present street car company had a line the new one would have one on an adjoining street, with newer and better and swifter cars, and a closer schedule, and unless something radical were done he would not give a continental cuss per bale for the stock of the now rapidly dying Ring City Street Railway company.

A long low sigh, like the midnight sighing in a churchyard, arose from that meeting, as Attorney Tucker sat down. Little Henry Peters, with a livid face, clutched the arm of his wattle necked neighbor.

"If that man had only come back I could have got thirty-five for my stock!" he wailed. "I'm ruined. I shall lose my home! Frank Marley is a rotten business man!"

"Yeh," intoned the crooked nosed one. "They're all thieves."

Jim Delaney, who, with a clear eye and a straight countenance, could make louder speeches than any man in the Eighth ward, painted even a blacker picture than Attorney Tucker, and when he sat down he had bankrupted every stockholder within the sound of his voice. It even seemed incredible that a street car should still be whizzing outside. Little Henry Peters sat numbly, with his hair clutched in his hands. If he could have swapped his \$9,000 worth of street railway stock for a jackknife with two broken blades his conscience would have hurt him, and every stockholder was in his class. Misery sat enthroned on every countenance.

Daniel B. Atkins, a rising young lawyer, with no capital but an empty conscience and a silver tongue, was the first individual since Marley to offer a gleam of hope.

He admitted all that the preceding gentlemen had said and believed, himself, that the company was reduced to pauperism unless something radical could be done. He had believed this so thoroughly that he had lain awake nights trying to evolve a plan for their salvation.

He had evolved it—a scheme whereby the company could not only raise its stock to par, but place it at a premium; whereby the company could become a monopoly and extend its business to meet the growing demands of the city and become again a 7 per cent dividend concern, capable of piling up again a tremendous construction surplus. On his own responsibility he had gone to the organizer of the rival new company and had labored with him for hours to persuade him to come to this meeting and lay before it a rather novel but life saving proposition. Would the stockholders permit him to introduce the eminent promoter and organizer, Mr. Bozzam, who would present his proposition in person?

The stockholders would. They said so, with so vociferous and almost fearful a clamor that President Marley could scarcely make himself heard to obtain a formal vote on the proposition.

Mr. Bozzam entered, with his hair not too smoothly brushed nor his clothes not so immaculate, but he looked businesslike and sat down quietly in the seat courteously offered him by President Marley. He was a wide shouldered man, with a pleasant countenance and a good forehead, who looked as if he had muscles under his coat, and he was well liked by the concourse. Little Henry Peters judged that he was a keen business man, but square and said so.

"Wagh!" nasaled the tow haired neighbor. "I wouldn't trust anybody."

"How many shares of stock have you got?" asked little Henry.

"Three," boasted the wattle necked one. "My brother-in-law give 'em to me."

Mr. Marley introduced the caller in a few, neat, aseptic words. He had met Mr. Bozzam socially and only

hoped that he would prove as pleasant commercially.

Laughing gracefully at this clever turn of speech, Mr. Bozzam continued the introduction himself, stating exactly who and what he was—an organizer, representing a group of eastern capitalists devoted to the promotion and extension of the street railway industries. Back of his backers were certain huge electrical, steel and car building industries. It had been his pleasure to organize and to put in shape for immediate construction operations a new company in their own thriving city. They were ready to begin laying rails at once, but it had been earnestly represented to him that the manufacturing interests of his group of capitalists would be just as well served by permitting the new lines to be erected by the old company, and after a conference with his principals it had been decided that if the Ring City Street Railway company wished to monopolize their legitimately anticipated profits this could be done by the purchase of their franchises and good will at a purely nominal figure.

A buzz of satisfaction followed this magnanimous offer, and little Henry Peters was for purchasing the franchises immediately.

"I'd have lost all my years of saving if I'd sold my stock at thirty-five," he told his neighbor.

"I don't understand it, but it's a skin game," announced the crooked nosed man. "Who is this fellow, anyhow?"

Mr. Marley turned to Mr. Bozzam with the frank smile of a gentleman.

"And how much would your company consider a merely nominal figure?" he inquired, with smoothness.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars cash," stated Bozzam lightly. Young Daniel B. Atkins immediately moved to accept that price.

"No!" hotly yelled Bert Gilder.

"I second the motion," announced Attorney Tucker.

"It has been moved and seconded that we purchase the franchises and good will of the street car company represented by Mr. Bozzam for the sum of \$250,000 cash," stated President Marley, looking about him with cool aloofness. "Are there any remarks?"

There were—a perfect pandemonium of them—and out of the battle President Marley recognized Attorney Tucker.

Attorney Tucker begged leave of the chair to ask Mr. Bozzam just one question and received it.

"Have you named your bottom figure?" he wanted to know.

"Positively," declared Mr. Bozzam, with vast firmness.

"One more question. Are you empowered to close this deal?"

"I am," replied Mr. Bozzam. "I have a free hand."

Sledge almost looked at the genial promoter.

"Then we must pay the price," fervently asserted Attorney Tucker. "This is a gleam of hope in the darkness, a way out of our difficulties, a solution to our troubles. We have the cash to purchase these franchises, which will give us a practical monopoly of the city's street car business. We can either increase our capitalization or issue bonds to pay for our extensions, and, in the meantime, the moment we conclude this deal our stock jumps back to par."

Loud cries of "Question!" came from all over the hall, and little Henry Peters, after the demand had started, shouted louder than anybody.

Young Daniel B. Atkins wanted to make a speech and was granted that privilege.

He was more enthusiastic about paying out that \$250,000 than anybody, and, being a professional whooper-up, he used his clarion voice and silver tongue to such good advantage that the throng was with difficulty restrained from rushing up to Bozzam and paying him the money on the spot.

In defiance of the madly expressed wishes of the multitude, however, President Marley recognized Bert Gilder.

"Move to amend the resolution to read fifty thousand in place of two hundred and fifty" he shouted.

"Second the motion!" yelled a big mouthed young man sitting next to him.

"Mr. President," exclaimed Mr. Bozzam, rising to his feet, "that amendment is positively useless."

A frantic hubbub arose. The hall was a sea of open mouths. Little Henry Peters held his mouth open wider than any stockholder present. One could see his tonsils perfectly. He was helping to howl down Bert Gilder's absurd amendment.

President Marley tapped his gavel energetically.

"I perceive that it is useless to waste time on speeches against this amendment," he announced. "Are there any remarks to be made in favor of it? The chair will permit five minutes for such argument." He waited a moment. No one arose. Attorney Tucker stood up.

"If the chair please"—he began.

"Are you about to speak in favor of this amendment?" interrupted the chair.

"No," replied Attorney Tucker.

"The chair refuses to recognize the gentleman," announced the president. "The secretary will take a roll call vote on the amendment."

They endured that as men do, only venting their emotions by the vehemence of their "No!" on the roll call vote. A scant few had the temerity to vote "Yes" and were nearly mobbed by their daring. The most of them kept their eyes on Bozzam in fearful anxiety lest, offended by this proceeding, he might withdraw his generous offer and walk out, leaving them doomed to extinction by his mighty rivalry.

"Albert T. Gilder," called the secretary, "a thousand shares."

"Yes," voted Bert and curled both sides of his mustache, looking across at Sledge and grinning. He had the intense satisfaction of seeing Sledge turn, but was disappointed after all. Sledge did not look at him, but at Hunt.

There followed another wilderness of "No's!" voted by holders of from five to a hundred shares each.

"B. Franklin Marley," called Hunt, and this time he caught Sledge's eye. "4,020 shares."

"Yes!" voted Marley, with a snarlingly triumphant laugh at Sledge, a laugh which showed his teeth and made his nose an acute triangle down over them, like the point of a pen.

CHAPTER IX.

Sledge Rises to Emergency.

SLEDGE walked across to the secretary's desk while the balance of the rattle were shouting "No!" and conferred with Hunt a moment; then he went back to his chair and gazed steadily straight ahead at nothing. His small gray eyes had no more gleam in them than a dusty marble.

Hunt announced the net result of the vote, but Sledge paid no attention to



"It looks like we're up against it," he stated.

the figures. The two votes of Marley and Bert Gilder had been sufficient to carry the amendment against the other 200 stockholders.

"We will now vote on the original motion as amended," observed Marley. "The motion carries." Marley was pleased to state, after the dazed stockholders had shouted "No!" to their formal record over such matters as this. Heretofore I have been helpless, but today, for the first time in the history of this company, I control the majority of the stock, and my vote is sufficient to carry or defeat any question. To begin with, I refuse to be held up. I am willing to pay \$50,000, for the franchises are worth \$50,000 to us, but I won't pay a cent more. That's flat."

Bozzam took the chair next to Sledge.

"It looks like we're up against it," he stated. "I guess fifty thousand's the best we can do."

"Hunh!" grunted Sledge.

"Mr. President," said Bozzam, rising to his feet, "since the matter seems to be entirely in your hands, allow me to ask if that is your ultimatum?"

"It is," announced Marley, glancing at him with only the faint suspicion of a twinkle in his eye.

"Then I must beg time to confer again with my principals."

Again the trace of a twinkle escaped Marley's eyes.

"There is a time limit on my ultimatum," he returned. "You stated that you were empowered to act. I'll give you five minutes to make up your mind. After that my offer is withdrawn."

Mr. Bozzam quite obviously struggled with his pride.

"I accept," said he, turning both his palms upward.

A cheer, loud and prolonged, greeted that humiliating capitulation. In the midst of it the huge Sledge arose, his mere bulk a symbol of disaster.

"Nix!" he thundered, and departed.

Both Phil and Blundy were sincerely mournful faces when Sledge walked through to the back room the next day.

"He's game, all right," commented Phil.

"You couldn't make him holler if you cut his head off," replied Blundy, polishing a glass so vigorously that it burned his hand. "I wonder how Bob is this morning."

"Must be dead, from what the papers said," judged Phil.

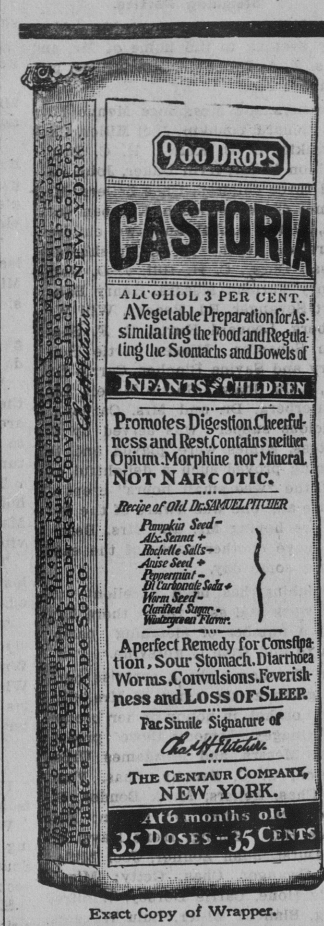
"That King Pin must be some dog," "He's younger, that's all," immediately explained Blundy. "He never will be the dog Bob was. Match 'em at the same age and Bob would chew him up for an appetizer."

"Bob ought've been retired," criticized Phil. "It wasn't fair to hand him his first leekin' when he's old like this. The big boy's late this morning. He's been so busy he's been coming around at 9 o'clock, and now it's 12."

"Bob's either dead or better, or he wouldn't be here at all," asserted Blundy. "You know, I like that big slob."

"That's easy," carelessly commented Phil. "There goes his bell. I think I'll beat Adolph to it."

He grabbed down Sledge's favorite stein, filled it carefully, with exactly



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the right collar of creamy foam, and hurried with it into the little back room just five steps in front of Adolph, who had been making change for an early lunch customer.

Sledge sat in his accustomed seat, but he was not looking out at the hand hole in the gate. For the first time in all their acquaintance Phil saw the chief with his chin sunk on his collar. He industriously wiped a dry spot moist to set the wet stein on, but Sledge made no movement, even of his eyes, and Phil, who had come in with the express intention of asking about the dog, changed his mind and turned to tiptoe away. Adolph, however, was more persistent in his eagerness.

"How's Bob this morning?" he asked in that particularly hushed tone one uses in inquiring about the critical illness of near and dear relatives.

The mighty breast of Sledge heaved with a long, full sigh.

"He's all right," he grumbled. "Not a whimper out of him. Call up and find out."

"Ask for Mike?" suggested Phil.

"Naw, he may be asleep."

"That's right," apologized Phil. "I know Mike. He hasn't slept nor eaten since the fight."

"Nor took a drink," added Sledge, and another sigh, which was almost like a sob, impeded his utterance.

"By the way," Phil informed him. "Sunny Jim Keeler is dead."

"Gee, the boss is cut up about Bob?" Phil reported to Blundy. "I told him about Sunny Jim, and he never even grunted. That means the whole third ward's gone."

Sledge was not so unimpressed as he seemed to be, however, for presently he sent for Phil and instructed that a big floral piece be sent and that the widow's affairs be looked into.

Bendix came in by and by, looking very much worried, and sat down heavily.

"How's Bob?" he asked.

"He's all right," declared Sledge. "Not a whimper out of him."

Bendix hesitated a moment.

"Did you hear that Sunny Jim Keeler is dead?" he inquired.

Sledge nodded.

"There ain't a man up there could take the leadership of that ward," went on Bendix, much discouraged. "It's the Third that has always saved us."

Sledge, sitting heavily, did not answer. He seemed to have collapsed like a huge figure of dough settling into a pan.

"That means we lose the Third ward," Bendix spiritlessly pursued, "so we're in bad, politically."

Sledge was still motionless.

"I looked up Marley's Ridgewood avenue franchise," resumed Bendix. "It's good, all right. Yesterday's meeting was a bright one for him. A few shares of traction stock traded hands on the board today. The last lot brought fifty-one. Bert Gilder is floating his amusement park. He's made a dicker with the company already formed to abandon the Lincoln Road park, and they're to take over the Porson tract. The Lincoln road property is to be used for car barns, according to the latest dope from Marley, and Gilder gets \$50,000 in stock and management of the park. It looks like a cinch for pretty Bert."

Sledge raised his chin a half inch and dropped it again.

"I saw Bozzam," Bendix went on with his report. "He claims that, while you own 75 per cent of the stock of the new traction company and could swing everything in a vote, he is the duly authorized agent of the company and has the right to sell its franchises at the best price he can get, so he's going to close with Marley."

"Hunh!" grunted Sledge.

"So we lose there," reluctantly pursued Bendix. "At this stage of the game you had expected to have Marley entirely frozen out and to own the majority of stock yourself, announce the purchase of the franchises and raise the stock to par. Now the stock's going up, and most of it has been grabbed by Marley. I figure he'll clean up about \$100,000 on this deal."

Sledge favored him with the beginning of a chuckle at himself, but that was all.

"Waver has decided not to sell his house. He'll go to Switzerland, all right, but he prefers to keep his residence here."

Sledge smiled. It was like the grimace of a man in the electric chair.

"But the worst is yet to come," persisted Bendix, beginning to have a certain lugubrious enjoyment in the interminable list of disasters. "Schwarzman tells me that Judge Lansdale positively refuses that appointment as attorney for the anti-dog movement. If he stays on the bench, Sledge, nothing on earth will make you right. With all your power, and all your influence, and all your money, and all your friends, you can't get away from that trial; and if you ever come to a showdown they'll get you. The best you can do will be two years away from the sunshine. When you go out for a walk you'll have your hand on the shoulder of the man in front of you, and when you get back into the Occident you won't have enough of the organization left to act as palbearers."

Sledge's chin sank a little lower on his collar. He had never permitted the shadow of defeat to touch even the hem of his coat, but now its dimness seemed very close to him, and in that shade there was a chill.

Adolph brought in a letter, a square white envelope which looked strangely out of place on the edge of a beer tray.

Bendix took it, sent Adolph out with a jerk of his thumb and started to open it, but the flap was sealed with a fancifully wrought monogram stamped in gold sealing wax, and after a moment of reflection he passed it silently over to his chief.

Sledge opened it mechanically and drew out a neatly engraved card, which read as follows:

Mr. B. Franklin Marley begs to announce the engagement of his daughter, Ethelyn, To Mr. Albert T. Gilder.

Sledge slipped that announcement calmly in his pocket and turned slowly to his pitcher on the table. Whatever his idea concerning that may have been he changed it, for his eyes slowly distending, he reached out and grabbed the pitcher, and suddenly there was a splintering crash. He had thrown the pitcher with its contents straight through the window, glass and all!

"All off with the roses, eh?" surmised Bendix, considerably concealing his sympathetic knowledge of the hurt which had been inflicted.

"Naw!" roared Sledge. "They sent me some blanked pink ones!"

(To be continued.)

ued Bendix. "At this stage of the game you had expected to have Marley entirely frozen out and to own the majority of stock yourself, announce the purchase of the franchises and raise the stock to par. Now the stock's going up, and most of it has been grabbed by Marley. I figure he'll clean up about \$100,000 on this deal."

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