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A TALE OF RED ROSES

By
GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER
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Sledge walked into Marley's office with his parlor smile, the recently out-lived one which belonged of right to the red rose he wore, and he sat down before he began to speak. His usual method was to deliver his messages standing.

"We ought to figure a consolidation," he suggested. Marley considered that statement carefully. He was beginning to learn that he really needed caution in dealing with Sledge.

"One of us might be gobbled up," he sagely concluded. "As I understand it, you own 75 per cent of the new company, while I only hold a bare majority of the old one. It would scarcely be possible that in a consolidation I would still have control."

"We'd have to pool our stock for either one to hold it," agreed Sledge. Marley looked at him wonderingly. "I don't quite understand the advantage to you in this," he puzzled. "Frankly, Mr. Sledge, I'd have to see that advantage before I could consider the matter."

"There ain't any," Sledge confessed. "I want to protect you if everything's all right. Molly was just over." "Yes; she said she was going to see you," replied Marley, clutching eagerly at the straw.

"I thought she'd get enough," stated Sledge, and he chuckled. "She's a smart girl." "Yes; she is," assented Marley, wondering just how much she had said to make such a remarkable change in Sledge. "A consolidation would probably be a very sensible thing. It would enable us to plan extensions, lines and loops which would increase our revenues tremendously, with no possibility of dividing the patronage. Moreover, a mere announcement of such a move would add immediately to the market value of the stock in both companies."

"We consolidate after the marriage," amended Sledge. "We get all ready now." "Any time you say," readily consented Marley. "I'll meet with you and arrange the details tonight."

"Naw!" refused Sledge. "Theater tonight." "With Molly?" inquired Marley, wanting to smile. "Molly and Fern. Fern's a nice kid."

"All right; tomorrow night, then," suggested Marley, his mind firmly fixed on the commercial opportunity. "Daytime," corrected Sledge. "I'm busy nights. Say, Marley, is that game between Molly and Bert called card off?"

"Did Molly say so?" evaded Marley. "No," Sledge hesitated. "Is it?" "That's entirely Molly's affair."

curtains. He walked slowly toward it, his habitually cold gray eyes brightening, and as he stood before it he thrust his hands deep in his pockets and positively laughed aloud.

"That's our newest ladies' car," explained the salesman, following him. "The women are crazy about them. Self starting, electric lights inside, shopping flaps everywhere, adjustable satin seat coverings and all the latest bondior improvements."

Sledge scarcely heard him. He was still laughing. Nothing he had ever seen had struck him so humorously as the "cuteness" of this car. "It's swell!" he chuckled. "Got a red one?"

"No, they're only made in black," the salesman told him. "The color effects are obtained by the cushion coverings and silk curtains." "Put red ones in this. Got another one?"

"There's one just being set up in the shop," stated the overjoyed salesman. "It's an order." "Make that one blue." "Do you want them this afternoon?" asked the clerk, figuring that it was worth while to put off the other customer.

"Sure!" said Sledge. "Right away." "I'll get busy immediately," promised the salesman, delicious with happiness. "Where do they go?" "Molly Marley gets the red one. The blue one's for her friend Fern. Nix on who sent 'em."

"They'll want to know," the salesman insisted. "Aw, tell 'em Frank Marley." Just across the street was the largest jewelry store in town, and the display in its windows gave him an idea. He strode in, asked for the proprietor and got him.

"I want a rock that weighs about a pound," he stated. "A diamond? Yes, Mr. Sledge. Something for an emblem?" "Naw! Lady's ring—sapphire." "We have some beauties," bragged the jeweler, immediately aglow with enthusiasm. "Here is a nice little three carat stone which is flawless and perfectly cut."

"Is this the best you got?" inquired Sledge, looking into the case. "We have some larger ones unset, but they are not usually mounted in ladies' rings," responded the jeweler, struggling between his artistic conscience and his commercialism. "Let's see 'em."

Reverently the jeweler produced from his safe a covered and locked tray, in which on white velvet reposed a dozen sparkling white stones. Sledge poked a stuffy forefinger at the largest one. "Is this one right?" he wanted to know.

"It's a very good stone," the jeweler told him. "The next one to it, however, though a trifle smaller, is of much finer quality. In fact, we have not one in the shop of any size which I consider so perfect as this one. It's worth \$500 more than the large one."

"That'll do," Sledge decided. "Put it in a ring." "Very well," agreed the jeweler, trying to be nonchalant as he consulted a slip of paper in the edge of the tray. "This one weighs six and three-eighths carats, plus a sixteenth, Mr. Sledge. Have you the size of the ring?"

"Heaven knows," snapped Bert. "He says he's going to the theater with you tonight. Is that correct?" Molly gleefully nodded her head.

"Did you forget that you were going to the club dance with me?" he indignantly went on, feeling like shaking her. "This time Molly shook her head, her eyes gleaming with delight, and from Fern, still on the stairway, there arose a wild peal.

Bert closed the library doors. "I forbid it," he commanded. "The change in Molly was so abrupt that it startled him into barking his other shin. First of all she threw open the library doors, knowing, however, that Fern by this time was back in the bondior."

"You may do your forbidding to Mr. Sledge," she told him, with blazing eyes. "You were thoughtful enough to consider seriously sending me to him, and now whatever follows is up to me. I am going to the theater tonight with Mr. Sledge."

"Molly, Molly, Molly!" shrieked Fern, half running and half bumping down the stairs. "Run to the window, quick, and see the parade! O-o-o-oh! It's coming here!"

Molly laid aside her just indignation for a moment, feeling intuitively that a Sledge miracle was some place in the neighborhood, and glanced out of the window, as Fern, gurgling incoherently, flashed by on her way to the door.

Up the winding driveway, one following the other, were two of the most beautiful little colonial coupes in the world, such cars as would make any girl go stark howling mad with ecstasy. They were exactly alike, except that the one in front was hung

with lace and filmy red silk curtains, and the other had blue with its fluffly white. Both the cars were empty, except for the hard featured men who were driving them, looking as much out of place as a coal heaver in a lingerie bonnet.

"The blue one's mine!" exclaimed Fern, dancing up and down in a delirium of joy as Molly joined her at the door, through the hangings of which the girls now peered out in frantic impatience.

"I wonder what brings them here?" speculated Molly, dreading the worst. "I don't care," returned Fern. "That blue car's mine, and I know it. Molly, do you really suppose it could be a present?"

"Certainly not," decided Molly promptly. "Oh, but aren't they exquisite?" "Exquisite? They're the dearest, sweetest, darlings little things I ever saw!" cried Fern. "The only thing that's missing is that there should be a hand leading them. Say, Molly, and here she sank her voice to a gurgling whisper. "I'll bet you that Sledge—"

"Certainly not!" interrupted Molly, almost fiercely, and then she, too, giggled, and the two girls scattered away from the door as the chauffeur of the red car who was the gentlemanly salesman in disguise, dismounted and came slowly up to the door.

"Your father," replied the conscienceless salesman, looking her more clearly in the eye than any honest man could have done. "If you have the time we shall be pleased to give you a lesson in running them."

Fern was halfway upstairs. "Do you want your gray coat or your furs, Molly?" she called as she went. "Something light," replied Molly, equally excited, running out to inspect the car, with the gentlemanly salesman right at her elbow and highly pleased with his job. The chauffeur in the blue car waited with bright eyes.

Fern, followed by Mina and another maid, both of them too slow to be of any service, came clattering on the porch with two afternoon coats and two bonnets selected with less discrimination than she had ever used and tossed any of them to Molly. "I'll bet it was Sledge," she whispered as she ran and popped into the blue car.

Her coupe was the first to whirl down the driveway, but the red one followed in close order. Bert stood on the edge of the porch, with his hands rammed in his pockets, and watched the end of the world. Being a young man of keen thought, however, after fifteen minutes of numbness he curled his mustache, took up the telephone and called Frank Marley.

"Did you make a present of two automobiles to the girls?" he inquired. "Did I what?" gasped Marley out of the midst of his plans for making the proposed street car consolidation worth twenty points' advance on his stock to the up state syndicate.

"I thought not," returned Bert, with a very near approach to profanity. "I didn't think you'd weaken our capital by a \$5,000 extravagance of that sort." "I don't understand you," puzzled Marley.

"Two small inclosed cars came out here about fifteen minutes ago, and the man in charge of them said that you sent them. Personally I think Sledge has been getting fresh."

"It's barely possible," agreed Marley, feeling a dangerous indignation rising within him. "Leave that to me, Bert. As Molly's father it is my affair. I'll investigate it at once."

Palpating with all a righteous father's jealous care, Frank Marley kept the telephone busy until he located Sledge. "I say, Sledge," he blurted. "Did you send out a couple of automobiles to my house?"

"Naw, Marley," chuckled Sledge. "They're toys. You sent 'em. Do they like 'em?" "I haven't inquired," returned Marley, still standing by his father's dignity. "Really, Mr. Sledge, you know I can't allow my daughter to receive extravagant presents of that sort from any one other than myself."

"Aw, cut it," advised Sledge. "I get you. If they don't like 'em, I'm the goat. If they do, close your trap. You sent 'em."

"Well, but—" "I say you sent 'em," insisted Sledge, with a gruff loss of his cordiality, which had been apparent in his former tones, and Marley heard the click of disconnection.

Sledge into the belief that you intend to put yourself in the position of receiving presents from him, and either this thing must be stopped or there will be unpleasantness between you and me."

"There is one way we can head that off," Molly quietly assured him. "We can break our engagement." "Impossible!" immediately declared Bert, frightened. "I didn't mean anything like that, Molly, and I attempted to take her hands and perform a little of the lovemaking which he had rather neglected."

"I mean it, though," she insisted, drawing her hands away from him. "Our engagement has only brought trouble to everybody concerned and has subjected me to more than one insult which I had no right to expect. If we declare it off both you and father can go right back to where you were in a business way."

"It's too late for that," he assured her, sitting down to reason it out with her on the commercial plane since she seemed to insist upon it. "I could never regain the political friendship which is necessary to my style of business. My commercial career in this city is at an end, and my social standing would be also. Knowing this, I have been in correspondence with my people in Baltimore. They have a magnificent business opening there for me, but it takes \$100,000 to obtain control of it. I laid the matter before your father, and he investigated it. Our conclusion is this—if we can close up our business satisfactorily here and he can sell this place we shall have in the neighborhood of \$150,000 clear between us. You and I are to marry, go to Maryland with your father, enter into business and take up the social position to which we are entitled. When I take you there as my bride, Molly, everybody's going to be very proud of you, and I am quite sure that you will like the social atmosphere there much better than here. I've dwelt on this so often to you that it must seem like an old story, and yet this is the first time that it has seemed very near to us."

Molly felt herself wondering why this glittering promise failed to thrill her as it had used to do. "I'll be the proudest Gilder that was ever in the family when I can take you home as my wife," he went on. "It's all cut and dried, Molly, and we expect to have everything closed up before our wedding day if we can hold Sledge off that long."

"And yet you sold me for helping you hold Sledge off when you couldn't do it yourselves," she retorted. "Why, you actually suggested to me that I should see what I could do with him."

"I don't like the way you're going about it," he confessed. "You should be proud of me," she reproved him. "I think that Fern and I have done a beautiful job of it," and she began laughing. "We're going to put on our very best frocks tonight and be a credit to you. You're ungrateful," and she began to look indignant again. "Let's forget it," offered Bert, laughing, and took her in his arms. "You're the girl for me, Molly, and there won't be any more envied couple in Maryland than we."

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.

Continued in next week's Banner.

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