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A TALE OF RED ROSES

By
**GEORGE
RANDOLPH
CHESTER**

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CHAPTER XVII.

The Minister Comes.

"HONEST, I can't giggle about anything any more," regretted Fern, rescuing a discarded shoe of Molly's from under the boudoir couch and looking anxiously about her for any other

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traces of untidiness which the flustered maids might have left behind them. "I'm solemn in spite of myself."

"Please don't," objected Molly almost piteously. "If you turn solemn my last prop is gone."

"I didn't mean to," apologized Fern. "But getting married is rather a weighty thing after all. Besides that, my conscience hurts me."

"It should, I suppose," agreed Molly. "Anybody's should. Why?"

"About Sledge. Molly, he's a nice old fatty."

"I never can remember him with an ugly thought," admitted Molly. "I don't sympathize with him, though. He started a rough game with me, and I beat him. I had to be rough to do it."

"We were mean to him," declared Fern. "I've a notion to marry him myself to make up for it."

The pang of distaste which Molly felt at that speech was not jealousy; far from it. If anything, it was a mere questioning of Fern's taste in making such a remark. That was it. "I suppose poor Bert's handsome," she suggested. "We really ought to go down and keep him company until the minister comes."

"Murder!" objected Fern. "Molly, you haven't a bit of style about you. You mustn't even see Bert until you walk in the parlor on your father's arm and take him for better or—well, for better."

"You don't seem any too hopeful," laughed Molly, looking longingly at the couch, but remembering her gorgeous gown. "I don't believe you like Bert very well."

"Indeed I do!" remonstrated Fern almost too quickly. "He's still the handsomest fellow I ever saw—tall and big and fine looking and the very best dancer I ever swung across a floor with. I just couldn't get through envying you when I first came."

"Yes, I was jealous of you," confessed Molly. "Bert is a fine dancer."

"All the girls will be envious of you," went on Fern, determined to say nice things. "You should be very happy. Molly, about the new home and the fine business prospects and the social triumphs which I know are waiting for you, and you'll have a polished husband, of whom you can always be proud, and just bushels and bushels of love, of course."

"Of course," agreed Molly, looking at the little Dresden clock on the mantel. "Goodness, Fern, the minister is due to arrive in ten minutes, and Jessie Peters isn't here yet!"

"If she knew the importance of your informal invitation to call this afternoon she'd have been here hours ago,"

she said. "I don't believe you're the one you insisted on having here. She's a darling!"

"She's true," added Molly. "Somehow I always feel sad, even against myself, when she's around me. I love you to death, Fern, but you're wicked."

"I guess I am," giggled Fern. "I never can see anything else when there's a chance for declamation."

"Miss Peters," announced Mina, gloating once more over her handiwork as she surveyed the handsome Molly and the pretty Fern.

"Have her come right up," directed Molly, brightening, and waited with an expectant smile, which changed to a look of concern when she saw the poorly concealed traces of tears in Jessie's eyes.

"What's the matter, Jessie?" she asked, stepping hastily forward, and Jessie, forgetting or not seeing that painfully fluffy wedding gown, threw herself dismally into Molly's arms.

"They didn't want me to come!" she gulped. "But I had promised you, and Dicky said I might."

"Where is Dicky?" asked Molly.

"He went on downtown on an errand. He'll be back after me in an hour."

"Why didn't they want you to come?" asked Molly anxiously.

"On account of your father."

"Father?" gasped Molly. "What about him?"

"Don't you know?" wondered Jessie, half crying again.

"Why, no, child," worried Molly. "What is it? Tell me," and she heard Fern slipping quietly out of the room. She led Jessie over to the couch, and all forgetful of her shimmering satin, with its beautifully increased folds, sat down.

"It's the street car stock," Jessie explained. "Dicky just came out to the house with the news. There is to be no consolidation. The old tracks are to be torn up three years from now, and nobody would have the stock for a gift. And it's Thanksgiving day!"

"That's only some wild rumor," Molly assured her, wondering, nevertheless, at this new and strange turn of financial gossip. "Even if it were true, though, how is father to blame?"

"I don't know, except that my father's like a mauler about it all and forbade me to come near this house."

Molly held her closer.

"Dicky brought me, though. He said that he didn't think Mr. Marley was the thief, and that if he was you weren't, and that if I wanted to come I was coming. He's a good Dicky, Molly," and here Jessie cried a little more, just on account of Dicky's goodness.

"It isn't father's fault, it's mine," confessed Molly, agitated, as she began for the first time to fully realize the hundreds of real sufferers in this high handed game which she and Sledge had played. "Mr. Sledge wanted to marry me, and I was engaged to Bert. He broke Bert. Then father said he had money enough for all of us; so Sledge tried to break father, and I don't know how many people besides us have had to suffer for that. It's Sledge and I, Jessie, not father."

"Sledge is a beast," charged Jessie vehemently. "He is the most cruel and vicious man in the world, I think. Dicky says he should be killed."

"He isn't really so bad," declared Molly, trying to be just. "He's like other strong people. He doesn't know how badly he hurts. He's like a football player shaking hands with you."

"He is a brute!" shuddered Jessie. "I stood by him in Mabel's candy store yesterday, and I was actually afraid of him for fear I would annoy him by being in his way and he might turn around and be rough to me."

Molly laughed softly at the idea of Sledge's being rough to little Jessie Peters.

"Why, he'd be so gentle to you as to be ridiculous," she said. "Not even Dicky could be more gentle."

Jessie straightened immediately.

"How absurd!" she laughed. "You don't know Dicky, Molly. He isn't like other men. Why, when we found that we had lost every cent we had in the world and would be in debt besides and would even lose our home father blamed mother for signing the mortgage and has been cross with her ever since he got into difficulties, and there isn't a better father than mine. But Dicky! Why, when the West End bank failed because it held too many street railway securities and Dicky lost the \$5,000 he saved to buy us a home, do you know what he did? He took me to the theater and put my hand all through the show and told me how young we were, and how much money we were going to make, and how happy we'd be even if we didn't, and he wouldn't hear of father's having us postpone our wedding for a minute. Why, Molly, he can't do without me, and I can't do without him. It's wonderful!"

Molly patted Jessie's shoulder thoughtfully.

"I guess you and Dicky love each other very much," she suggested.

"I don't know how to tell it," confessed Jessie shyly. "Love is such a tremendous thing, Molly. It cries."

Molly was startled into silence. What was this thing that she was doing? She was entering on the most serious relationship in life as the termination of a game in which love, such as Jessie knew had had no part, in which even romance, to which every girl is entitled at least once, had been made subservient to business, to stock manipulations, to real estate deals and to stubbornness. The only one who had been at all romantic—and she smiled with a trace of humiliation as she remembered it—was the big, coarse Sledge.

"Of course," admitted Molly, refusing to own she was envious.

"I'm so happy I'm selfish," replied Jessie comfortably. "I've even forgotten to ask why you were so insistent this morning upon having me come over at such an exact minute."

"I wanted you at my wedding," smiled Molly.

"Molly!" exclaimed Jessie. "That's why you and Fern are all in white. Oh, and I came over in my old blue tailored suit."

"That's lucky," laughed Molly. "You know the old rime, 'Something old and something new, something borrowed and something blue.'"

"I shan't be something blue," declared Jessie. "I'm too happy for that, and so are you. You're a lucky girl, Molly. You have everything in the

world, you come down with me. I'll send up Mr. Marley, and when he and Molly start downstairs you're to play the wedding march, while I back Bert up under the chandelier. Now, everybody to their posts."

She flew down the stairs and hurried back to the den. A moment later they heard a shriek, and running to the den, they found Frank Marley sprawled on the floor with Coldman's check crumpled in his nerveless fingers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Molly Starts For a Drive.

LOOSENING of his collar, a dash of cold water into his face, a sip of brandy, restored Frank Marley to consciousness, but he was an old man. He seemed visibly to have shrunk in his clothes and the flesh to have sagged in his cheeks. He tried to smile bravely when they set him in his chair, but the attempt was a pathetic failure.

"I guess I'm out of the game," he confessed. "My heart's bad."

Molly took up the telephone.

"I'll call Dr. Brand," she anxiously declared.

"Don't!" he begged, stopping her with his hand. "It isn't physical; it's mental. I've lost my nerve. Molly, Sledge wins. We're broke."

"How can that be?" she puzzled, unable to comprehend it. "You even showed me the check."

"Here it is," said Bert, who had picked it up from the floor and was smoothing it out.

"Worthless!" Marley growled at sight of it. "I can sue for it, but they'll beat me."

Bert edged in between Molly and Fern, so that he could stand directly in front of Marley and see his face.

"Do you mean to tell me that our whole plan has fallen to the ground?" Marley nodded miserably.

"How did it happen?"

"I don't quite understand," wavered Marley. "I haven't the details, but by some trick Sledge has secured fifty year franchises for every street in the city, including mine."

"How does that affect you?" persisted Bert, his eyes falling again to the check. That document looked so much like real money that he was inclined to believe it rather than Marley.

"Affect me?" protested Marley, warmed into a trifle more of life as he explained. "It renders my street railway company a junk heap. We lose everything."

"But the sale," insisted Bert.

"Invalid. Coldman claims he was not authorized to act."

"I suppose that if the sale had been a profitable one you never would have heard of the invalidity."

Marley smiled and shook his head.

"Then all our plans are off," discovered Bert. "The Porson tract is unsalable for enough to clear its own mortgage. Your stock and mine are worthless. You lose this house. I am stuck for the loan I made to give you control. We haven't money enough to go into business, and we can't go back east. Molly, it looks like a postponement!"

Jessie Peters edged closer and slipped her arm around Molly.

"Not on my account," protested Marley, fumbling at his collar, and he arose feebly to adjust it before the mantel mirror.

Molly, seeing that he wavered, hurried to his support.

He turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Molly," he said simply, looking into her eyes with more fondness than he was in the habit of showing her.

"We can stand it," she comforted him. "After all, it's only just. I feel so much less wicked if we suffer with all the poor people we have helped to ruin."

A short laugh from Bert interrupted her, and she turned to him with a rising flame in her eyes, but little Jessie Peters had caught her hand and was looking up into her face.

The minister, a tall chap who had won the hammer throwing medal in his last year at college, had withdrawn discreetly to the parlor when the conversation had begun, but now came back apologetically.

"I am sorry to urge you," he observed, looking at his watch. "I have a brief appointment, but I can return."

"I don't know," hesitated Molly, glancing at Bert. "Wait just a minute."

The thin butler, who was now cross-eyed, came through the hall to the front door, which he opened, and a second later he was sitting in the umbrella rack.

"Say, youse!" belated the voice of Sledge as his huge bulk, followed by Tommy Reeler, slammed back through the hall, filling the perspective like a ferry crowding into her dock. "Is it all over?"

Fern was the first one to recover from the shock.

"No," she said meekly, but her eyes danced of the devil as they met those of Tommy Reeler.

"Then it's off!" yelled Sledge and grabbed the startled Molly by the wrist.

Bert endeavored to throw himself in between the two and to face Sledge, but that experienced old ward leader, who had not forgotten the training of his early days, gave him a quick elbow in the pit of the stomach, and Bert doubled up in the middle like a jackknife and dropped heels up on a couch, clawing for breath while Sledge, as resistless as an auto dromy, dragged the struggling Molly steadily toward the front door.

Opposite the library he met with an unexpected defender. The tall young preacher threw himself upon the big

boy bodily, avoided the pile driver elbow, grabbed Sledge around the neck with his steel-like left wrist and with his right fist poked him in the jaw. Sledge shook his head and spluttered as he would in a shower bath, but never let go of Molly's wrist and plodded on toward the front door, trying to force off the clutch of the tall young minister with his mighty left arm.

The minister, whose heart was particularly in his work because this was the first opportunity he had ever enjoyed to wallop a man in a righteous cause, industriously slammed Sledge on his other jaw, and the smack was like a kiss at a country dance.

Tommy Reeler, who had been clearing the legs of the limp butler out of the path of progress, now sprang on the minister's back and plonched his busy arms from behind, while Sledge

steadily dragged them all toward the front door, with Molly now screaming and Mrs. Reeler, her mistress, waiving her from behind.

"Mina!" cried Molly. "Let go! You're pulling my arm in two!"

The weight of Tommy Reeler told at last. The minister's hold on Sledge's neck loosened, and he and Tommy tumbled back with a thud into the middle of the parlor, rolling under the very chandelier which was to have been the pivot of the wedding. Tommy, who had risen to be a boss contractor largely through muscular will, enjoyed a lively tussle with the young minister, but luck favored him, and he landed on top.

"Now, you behave!" he panted, with his hand at the minister's throat and his fist held in convenient range for microscopic scrutiny. "I don't want you to start anything with me because I aren't a preacher."

With as steady a progress as if he had been marching behind a hearse Sledge dragged Molly out of the hall and across the porch and to the door of his waiting limousine, into which he pulled her with the same careful force as a man landing a particularly game bass.

"Home, Billy!" he chuckled to the driver.

Molly's first and perfectly normal action when the limousine drove away with her was to indulge in a splendid case of hysteria, not one detail of which was omitted. She laughed, she cried, she shrieked, she pounded her heels on the floor of the car, she tried to jump out of the machine, she laughed and she cried again, and Sledge was so scared that he wilted his collar.

"You're all right, Miss Molly," he hoarsely cooed over and over, but finally a happy thought struck him, and opening a forward window, he gruffly directed, "Say, Billy, stop at Sheeny Jake's and bring out a slug of rye."

Molly dabbed at her eyes with the filmy lace handkerchief which she had intended to carry under the cut glass chandelier.

"You are hurting my wrist," she complained.

He let go slowly and looked at the deep white indentations of his big fingers. He almost blubbered.

"I'm a slob!" he confessed. "Why, Miss Molly, I'd saw my leg off before I'd hurt you! Why, doggone it, you're like a dower or a butterfly or a canary to me! Look at that wrist!"

She drew her hand away, with a splendid assumption of cold disdain, although, through some freak or fancy, she could see the giggling face of Fern.

"Mr. Sledge, where are you taking me?"

"Home," he informed her. "We're gonna get married."

In spite of her tearing anger, there was something in this so ridiculous that she was compelled to laugh, and with the first peal Sledge paled.

"Hilt'er up!" he yelled to his driver. "I want that booze quick! Please don't, Miss Molly; you're all right!"

And he made the futile attempt of mopping his brow with the foolish little handkerchief which he somehow found in his hand.

"Let me out of here!" she demanded.

"Nix!" he gruffly replied. "You don't fool me again. I'm gonna marry you."

"You can't," she told him. "It isn't legal if I don't say 'Yes.'"

"You got to say 'Yes,'" he insisted. "Look here, Molly, I couldn't let you marry that pinhead. He's a woman fusser. He's been mixed up with them since you were engaged, and he'd never stop."

"It won't do you any good to belittle Bert," she dared.

"I can't," he informed her. "I kept my mouth shut, but now I got to spill what I know. These pretty men are always worse after they're married. Bert's a bum! He's got a streak of yellow the size of a canal. He ain't got the brains of a tadpole. He can't make a living unless somebody helps him. You'd hate his bones in six months. So don't you marry him!"

"I am the one to decide on that," Molly indignantly advised him.

Sledge looked at her a moment contemptuously, then he opened the forward window.

"Stop!" he ordered Billy, and closed the window again. "All right; go to it; decide," he unexpectedly told her as the machine stopped. "But be on the level now. Do you love Bert?"

"That's my affair," she evaded, flushing.

"Now, it ain't," he insisted. "It's mine. Do you love him enough to be poor with him? Now, be square."

Molly was silent.

"You don't," he concluded. "Put it the other way. How about Bert? Now, don't kid yourself."

Again Molly was silent. She could answer that question if she chose, and the picture of little Jessie Peters' sublime adoration of Dicky Reynolds came before her eyes, linked with the memory of Bert's face when he had suggested a postponement. Being broke was an incident with Jessie and Dicky and entirely aside from their love. With Bert and herself it was the love which had been incidental.

Sledge waited a reasonable time for her to allege Bert's enthusiasm.

"Home!" he commanded Billy. "You see, I'm wise, Miss Molly. That pinhead couldn't love anybody enough to go the distance. I can. I'll murder anybody you name. Want anybody killed?"

"You!" she savagely retorted and then, to her own surprise, laughed. She had put her hand on the catch of the door; but, since he made no attempt to stop her, she left it there.

"You don't hate me that much," he calmly informed her. "You like me." Again she laughed, this time at his naivete. "You see, it's like this, he explained: 'I'm a big slob, and I'm rough. I ain't pretty, and I know it, but I can start something any minute, and when I do I can finish it. You don't know it, but you're strong for that.'"

With a thrill Molly realized that he was right in this. She did admire force. She admired Sledge, and now that she had time to think it over, something within her responded to his direct and simple method of breaking up her wedding.

"But love is different," she replied, arguing more to herself than to him.

"Nix!" he denied. "It's the strongest thing there is."

"Love cries," Molly mused, remembering Jessie.

"It hurts," he agreed. "I got to sound like a joke to me—fill it up. Now I want to break chains with my chest. Molly, when I think of you I could holler. I don't dare touch you. It makes me weak. You don't want to go back and marry Bert, do you?"

His voice had in it a trembling plea, so un-Sledge-like that she would have pitied him had she not been so absorbed in her startling attitude toward the question he had asked her. Nothing seemed more remote and absurd than that she should go back and marry Bert.

"No!" she blurted confessed. Sledge opened the front window.

"Hurry up!" he admonished Billy, and Molly laughed.

CHAPTER XIX.

Molly Feels Sense of Relief.

SOMEHOW she felt a sense of vast relief, of freedom, of exhilaration in her release from Bert. It would have been wicked to have entered into a lifelong marriage with him, and now she seemed always to have had an undercurrent of that feeling which she had hidden from herself. A little trace of resentment rose in her that girls were taught to look so lightly upon the marriage relation that it might be entered into so thoughtlessly; that a girl might select her life partner because he was a good dancer.

"I don't mind confessing that I would in all likelihood have broken the engagement, even had you not come," she told Sledge, deciding suddenly to have it all out, to be perfectly frank, and for the first time to look her own self squarely in the face. "I had realized just at the last moment," she went on, "that Bert's attitude toward our marriage was not what it should be. That does not necessarily mean, however, that I am willing to marry you. That's one thing you can't make me do, Mr. Sledge," and she looked him quietly in the eye.

He studied her a long time and felt foolish.

"I guess not," he humbly confessed. "I thought I could, but I got to let you be the boss."

She could not know how much that admission hurt him, but she vaguely guessed at it, and something like pity stirred within her.

"In that I must be," she asserted. "I thought we were going to your home," she added, puzzling over the out of the way route.