

The Free Press' Short Story

THE MESSAGE OF THE ROSE

MARGARET R. SANGSTER

KAREN HILDRETH often wondered how a life so crowded with beauty as her own could be lonely. Working from morning until evening, surrounded by glorious flowers, should be enough to satisfy any girl! Yet there were moments when Karen, ruling like a princess over the fairy realm of the Vogue Flower Shoppe, was acutely conscious of a great lack.

When young men came into the shop with radiant girls, to buy corsages, bouquets of gardenias and violets, Karen was perhaps a little lonely. When other young men came dashing in to send boxes of dewy roses to girls who were not with them, and when—these same young men flushed and wrote laborious cards which they sealed tightly in waxy white envelopes, she felt completely solitary.

Karen, you see, had never had the leisure to devote to romance. She had worked steadily from that time when, at fourteen, she had left school. She had supported her invalid mother until her death, nearly a year ago. Now, at twenty-one, she had no contacts other than business ones. Although she attended church and Sunday school, she had no leisure to devote to socials and entertainments, and so she met none of the fine young people who were also regular churchgoers. The Vogue Flower Shoppe was Karen's life; its narrow boundaries formed her horizon line.

Karen had begun work as a messenger girl in the flower shop when she was fourteen. At sixteen she had become a clerk, and at nineteen she was the manager. With the coming of depression times when the staffs were cut in all businesses, Karen had, through necessity, become clerk and manager combined. She ran the business unaided save for the boys who delivered flowers. She had no advice or interference other than the weekly call from the owner of the shop, who checked over her accounts and paid her salary. The rest of the time she managed the place alone and in a completely efficient manner. The flowers that she purchased were always the freshest, the bouquets that she sent out in answer to telephone orders invariably were marked by good taste.

For that reason Karen Hildreth was making the Vogue Flower Shoppe pay, which was saying quite a bit in an era of hard times. Being the entire staff of the shop, however, kept her very busy. She rose almost with the birds so that she could get to the wholesale markets in time to do her buying. Often the shop did not close until ten o'clock at night, and by that time she was so weary that she almost fell into bed. "I'll probably still be tending this flower shop when I'm fifty," Karen often said in her heart. "I'll doubtless be as wrinkled and weary as a two-weeks-old daffodil by that time, and I'll have just as few friends as I have now."

One bright springtime morning, then, romance paused in front of the window of the Vogue Flower Shoppe and smiled at her through the clear glass of it. Romance was in the shape of a young man, as romance to a girl of twenty-one usually is.

The young man in question was very well dressed and attractive. His rough tweeds were English in cut, his lips curved in the nicest sort of way, and his brown eyes twinkled. He glanced through the window at Karen, arranging a great bowl of lavender tulips. Suddenly, then, as though acting on an irresistible impulse, he swung on his heel and entered the shop.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," he said to Karen, while his eyes said quite a lot more. "But I'd like to buy a flower." "You mean a plant?" asked Karen. "I've some awfully nice ones to-day—primroses, crocuses and even early ranunculus."

The young man laughed. "No," he said. "I don't want a plant. I just want one rose, a single, red rose, the loveliest you have in the place."

Karen went swiftly to the glassed-in refrigerator where the cut flowers were kept. As she went, she sighed. This young man had looked especially pleasant for a moment she had wished that they might be friends. That wish was pointless now for when a man buys a single red rose, it can have only one meaning. A single red rose is a sign that a young man loves some one very much, indeed. Karen had spent seven years in a flower shop, she knew the signs! Her face was thoughtful as she decided the pedestal of the American Beauty in stock, but her lips were smiling as she turned back to the young man. "Will this one do?" she asked.

"It will do very, very nicely," answered the young man, but his eyes were on Karen and not on the flower. As she wrapped it deftly in tissue paper and handed it to him, she gave him change for the bill he proffered, his eyes were still on her face. "You've a lovely shop here," he ventured, in the manner of one making conversation.

"I like it," said Karen. "Of course, it's the you who have made it lovely," the young man went on. "I've never seen a window arranged so charmingly as your window. I've just moved into the neighborhood," he added, in

explanation. "I'll have to do all my flower buying here, now, I know."

"That will be nice," said Karen, and turned to her annoyance, that she was flushing. "The young man then bowed and walked through the door, his tissue-wrapped rose in his hand. Karen told herself, "That's that! I probably won't see him again!"

She did not see him again—not until the next morning! Bright and early he was again bowing to her through the glass of her window, was again entering the flower shop. "I'll have another rose, if you please," he said. As Karen went to get it, he asked, "Do you do all this work here yourself? Do you own this shop, I mean?"

Karen answered, "No, I don't own it. I'm just the manager."

"Then," said the young man, "I suppose you have considerable time off?"

"No," Karen told him. "I don't. I'm here day in and day out."

"Oh!" said the young man. He sighed as he paid for his rose, and then he was on his way.

The next morning it was raining, not a velvety spring shower but a downpour that made Karen's very soul ache. Karen had gotten her feet wet when she was going through the flower market, and she was tired. The patter of the rain made her feel alone, made her miss her mother, and the telephone orders had been busy all day. Perhaps that was the reason she did not see the young man until he had come dripping through the door and had closed it sharply behind him. "Karen could not help smiling when she saw him.

"I suppose," she said, "you want a rose?"

The young man answered her smile brightly. "I suppose I do," he said.

"Some girl," Karen told him, "is awfully lucky, having you bring her a red rose every morning. It must be like being engaged to a poet."

"Oh, I'm not a poet," said the young man. "I'm not even engaged," he added.

"You mean not yet," corrected Karen. "That," said the young man, "is exactly what I mean." He took the rose and departed into the rain. Suddenly Karen was lonelier than she ever had been before.

Matters went on like that through the whole of two weeks. The other customers came and went, buying jonquills, potted ferns, sweet peas and clumps of lilac. Somehow the day, for Karen Hildreth, revolved around that morning hour when a young man came smilingly through the door and bought a rose. He called her Miss Hildreth now, and she knew that his name was Ralph Jennings, and that he worked down town in a brokerage firm. She did not know to whom the roses went, however, and she was too busy to ask.

"At the beginning of the third week of their acquaintance, Ralph Jennings said one morning, as he was waiting for his flower to be wrapped, "Don't you ever go out to dinner, Miss Hildreth? You must eat, you know, unless you live on flowers!"

"You make me sound like a butterfly or a bee," smiled Karen, "but no, I don't live on flowers. I usually go to dinner in the little tea shop two doors from here. You see, I have to close the shop when I'm out and so I can't leave for long."

"I was hoping," said Ralph Jennings, "that sometime I might induce you to go to dinner with me. I eat in that same tea shop. As I told you before, I live in the neighborhood. And, though we haven't been formally introduced, we're practically old friends."

Karen gave a hard little twist to the paper in which she was wrapping the flower. "How about the girl who receives your morning roses?" she asked. "The one you're not engaged to yet? How would she feel about your inviting me to dinner?"

"I don't think she'd mind at all," said Ralph Jennings. "She's very broad-minded," he added, with a twinkle.

"She must be," said Karen soberly, "but I don't think I'd better accept your invitation. After all, we've only met in a business way."

"Just as you say," agreed the young man gravely and then he bowed himself out.

That night, however, when Karen seated herself at a little table in the tea room and ordered her hurried dinner, she saw Ralph Jennings sitting at a table not too far distant. He grinned engagingly at her, and when she had finished giving her order, she saw him coming toward her across the room. "Would you mind," he asked, "if I brought my coffee over to your table? I'm just finishing my own dinner."

Karen really meant to make an objection and then the objection did not seem

worth while. After all, this was not exactly going to dinner with him. It was, at least on her part, an accident. "No, I wouldn't mind if you did! I think it would be fun," she said.

While she ate her soup and roast and salad, she and the young man talked. She found that she was telling him about her lonely existence, her mother who had passed away, her church and a score of other things. She found, also, that she in turn was learning something of the young man. He, too, was alone in the world. He had come from a distant city to take on a new job, and he was making strides ahead in the business. He, too, longed for a real home and a family of his own.

"But you'll have all that soon," said Karen, "if the roses you buy from me are as effective as they should be."

The young man looked at her strangely. "Yes," he said, "if the roses that I buy from you are as effective as they should be, a lot of things will happen."

All at once Karen realized that her eyes were lowered and that she was blushing beneath his glance. When she left him to go back to the shop, she had made up her mind to one thing. She had decided that their next meeting would be on a more formal basis and that if necessary she would change her eating place. Lonely or not, she would not interfere with a man who was another girl's property.

So, the next morning, Karen allowed herself to be preoccupied when Ralph Jennings came jauntily into the store. "I have your rose all wrapped and waiting for you," she told him shortly. "I've a rush order to fill and I'm very busy. And anyway, I knew just what you wanted."

Ralph looked at her strangely. "You're sure you know just what I wanted?" he asked.

"I ought to by this time," answered Karen.

Ralph spoke in an odd, choked voice. "It's almost a month that I've been coming here," he said, "and I don't believe that you like me a bit better than you did on the day when I bought the first rose."

"Why should I?" said Karen. "After all, I'm only a saleswoman who serves you. The roses you buy are for somebody else."

"Ralph had come close to her. "I'd like to send you all the roses in the world," he said in a low, breathless tone. "That's how I feel about you!"

Karen felt her cheeks go pale. Could it be, she wondered, that she was in love; that at last she had touched hands with romance only to find that the romance was out of reach? She should not have allowed herself to become interested in this casual customer who was buying flowers for somebody else. It was best to treat the matter as lightly as possible.

"Oh," she said, "I don't want all the roses in the world! Sending roses to me would be like sending coals to Newcastle. Maybe, at that," she added, and there was desperation in her tone. "It would even be better if you bought your roses in another shop. I shall be sorry to lose a good steady customer, but after all

my business is to sell flowers, not to receive empty compliments."

The face of the young man was as pale as her own. "What do you mean—empty compliments?" he said.

Karen had turned her back, however, and had hurried across the shop toward the refrigerating case. "I'm very busy. I'm sorry but I can't go on talking with you," she said.

Just then another customer came in and Ralph turned sharply on his heel and went out. He did not come back.

At the end of a week Karen went back for the first time, since her dinner with Ralph, to the little tea room.

When she was half through with dinner, she spoke hesitantly to the waitress. "The young man who had his coffee with me a week or two ago," she said, "with an attempt at being casual, 'has he been in recently?'"

The waitress bent understanding eyes on Karen. "He hasn't been here for a few days," she said. "He's a nice fellow, too. I thought he was sort of stuck on you," she added, with the familiarity of an old friend. "He's real lonely, I think, but he's jolly. We all liked him. He

used to come in for breakfast and most every day he'd give one of us a red rose."

Karen felt her cheeks flushing. All at once a light was speaking on her. "He bought those red roses at my shop," she said. "I thought he was buying them for some special girl. Didn't he ever come in here with a young lady?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," answered the waitress. "You're the only young lady we've ever seen him with."

Karen was silent for a moment. "I don't suppose you know where he lives?" she questioned them.

The waitress chuckled. "Yes," she said, "I do know where he lives. It's in that brownstone building over there."

"Thanks for telling me," said Karen. She then finished her dinner hurriedly and went back to the shop. As she worked among her flowers, everything was suddenly clear to her. Ralph had felt the same emotion that she had felt when they had glimpsed each other through the shop window on that first day. It had been that rare thing love at first sight. He had come in because of it, and had bought the roses as an excuse to keep coming in. The things he had said to her were really taking on a dear and a new meaning.

She had been so stupid that she had not understood his interest in herself. She had actually insulted him, had not given him a chance to explain. Her eyes were wet with tears as Karen went to the refrigerator where the cut flowers were kept. Behind the tears, however, her eyes were sparkling. At last she knew how to handle the situation. She selected the reddest of the roses, swathed it in tissue paper and laid it in one of the shop's pretty boxes. She then dispatched it, by one of the boys who did the shop's errands, to the brown apartment house in which the young man lived. She did not put any card with the rose. "He'll know," she said, as she closed the shop.

The next morning, when Karen Hildreth looked through the clear glass of the window and saw the approaching figure of a young man in tweeds, a young man whose eyes were aglow and whose face as all one smile, she knew that she would not ever be lonely any more. Her life would soon be as full of loveliness as a window crowded with Maytime flowers!

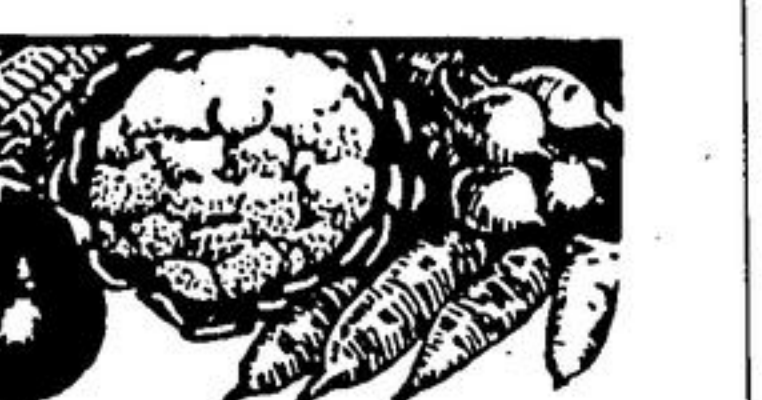
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