

THE BALL OF FIRE

By GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER
and LILLIAN CHESTER

ILLUSTRATED BY C. D. RHODES

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SYNOPSIS.

At a vestry meeting of the Market Square church Gail Sargent listens to a discussion about the sale of the church to Edward E. Allison, local traction king, and when asked her opinion of the church by Rev. Smith Boyd, says it is apparently a lucrative business enterprise. Allison takes Gail riding in his motor car.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

Gail, too, was disturbed. While she had laughed to cover the embarrassment of her mishap, she had been quite collected enough to thank Allison for his ready aid; but she had felt the thrill of that tensed arm, and it had awakened in her mind an entirely new vein of puzzled conjecture.

Gravity with a man invariably leads him back to the consideration of his leading joy in life, business; and the first thing Allison knew he was indulging in quite a unique weakness, for him; he was bragging! Not exactly flat-footed; but, with tolerably strong insinuation, he gave her to understand that the consolidation of the immense traction interests of New York was about as tremendous an undertaking as she could comprehend, and that, having attained so dizzy a summit, he felt entitled to turn himself to lighter things, to enjoy life and gaiety and frivolity, to rest, as it were, upon his laurels.

Gail was amused, as she always was when men of strong achievement dropped into this weakness to interest girls. She did appreciate and admire his no doubt tremendous accomplishment; it was only his naïveté which amused her, and to save her she could not resist the wicked little impulse to tease him. To his suggestion that he could now lead a merry life because he was entitled to rest upon his laurels, she had merely answered, "Why?"

He dropped into a silence so dense that the thump was almost audible, and she was contrite. She had pricked him deeper than she knew, however. She had not understood how gigantic the man's ambitions had been, nor how vain he was of his really marvelous progress. After all, why should he pause, when he had such power in him? She did well to speak slightly of any achievement made by a man of such proved ability. New ambitions sprang up in him. The next time he talked business with her he would have something startling under way; something to compel her respect.

CHAPTER III.

The Change in the Rector's Eyes.

The grand privilege of Mrs. Jim Sargent's happy life was to worry all she liked. Just now, as she sat on the seven chairs and the four benches of the mahogany paneled library, amid a wealth of serious-minded sculpture and painting and rare old prints, she was bathed in a new ecstasy of painful enjoyment. She was worried about Gail! It was six-thirty now, and Gail had not yet returned from Lucile's.

Mrs. Helen Davies, dressed for dinner with as much care as if she had been about to attend one of the unattainable Mrs. Waverly-Gaites' annuals, came sweeping down the marble stairs with the calm aplomb of one whom nothing can disturb and, for a moment in hand, turned into the library, breathed Mrs. Sargent, with a sigh of relief. "I'm so worried!" Gail hasn't come home from Lucile's!

Mrs. Helen Davies sat beneath the statue of Minerva presenting wisdom to the world, and arranged the folds of her gown to the most graceful advantage.

"You shouldn't expect her on time, coming from Lucile's," she observed, with a smile of proper pride. She was immensely fond of her daughter Lucile; but she preferred to live with her sister. "I have a brilliant idea, Grace. I'll telephone," and without seeming to exert herself in the least, she glided from her picturesque high-backed Flemish chair, and sat at the library table, and drew the phone to her, and secured her daughter's number.

"Hello, Lucile," she called, in the most friendly of tones. "You'd better send Gail home, before your Aunt Grace develops wrinkles."

Mrs. Helen Davies listened to the answer, a sparkle in her black eyes.

"Where is she?" interrupted Mrs. Sargent, holding her thumb.

"Out driving," reported sister Helen. "Have you sent your invitations for the house party, Lucile?" and she discussed that important subject until Mrs. Sargent's thumb ached.

"With whom is Gail driving, and where?" asked sister Grace, anxious for detail.

Mrs. Helen Davies touched all of her fingertips together in front of her on the library table, and beamed on Grace.

"Don't worry about Gail," she smilingly advised. "She is driving with Edward E. Allison. He is the richest bachelor in New York, though not so socially prominent. No one has ever been able to interest him. I predict for Gail a brilliant future," and she

moved over contentedly to her favorite contrast with Minerva.

"Gail would attract anyone," returned Mrs. Sargent complacently, and then a little crease came in her brow. "I wonder where she met him."

"At the vestry meeting, Lucile said."

"Oh," and Mrs. Sargent's brow cleared instantly. "Jim introduced them. I wonder where Jim is?"

The door opened, and Jim Sargent came in, wiping the snow from his stubby mustache before he distributed his customary hearty greetings to the family.

"Where's Gail?" he wanted to know. "Out driving with Edward E. Allison," answered both ladies.

"Still?" inquired Jim Sargent, and then he laughed. "She's a clever girl. Smart as a whip!" She nearly started a riot in the vestry.

"Was Willis Cunningham there?" inquired Mrs. Davies interestedly.

"Took me in a corner after the meeting and told me that Gail bore a remarkable resemblance to the Fratelli Madonna, and might be called."

The telephone bell rang, and Sargent, who could not train himself to wait for a servant to sift the messages, answered it immediately, with his characteristic explosive first-syllabled:

"Hello!"

"Oh, it's you, Uncle Jim," called a buoyant voice. "Mr. Allison and I have



Rev. Smith Boyd Came Out With His Most Active Vestryman.

found the most enchanting roadhouse in the world, and we're going to take dinner here. It's all right, isn't it?"

"Certainly," he replied, equally buoyant. "Enjoy yourself, Chubay, and he hung up the receiver."

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Davies, in a tone distinctly chill. She had a premonition that Jim Sargent had done something foolish. He seemed so pleased.

"Gail won't be home," he announced carelessly, starting for the stairs. "She's dining with Allison at some roadhouse."

"Unchaperoned!" gasped Mrs. Davies.

"She's all right, Helen," remarked Jim, starting upstairs. "Allison's a fine fellow."

"But what will he think of Gail!" protested Helen. "That sort of unconventionality has gone clear out of Jim, you'll have to get back that number!"

"Sorry," regretted Jim. "Can't do it. Against the telephone rules," and he went upstairs, positively humming.

The two ladies looked at each other, and sat down in the valley of the shadows of gloom. There was nothing to be done!

It was not until nine o'clock that they expressed their worry again. At that hour Ted and Lucile Teasdale and Arly Fosland came in with the exuberance of a New Year's eve celebration.

"It's great sleighing tonight," stated Lucile's husband, who was a thin-waisted young man, with a splendid natural gift for dancing.

"All that's missing is the bells," chattered the black-haired Arly, breaking straight for her favorite big couch in the library. ("The only way to have any speed in an auto is to go sidewise.")

"We're to get up a skidding match, so I can bet on our chauffeur," laughed Lucile, fluffing her blonde ringlets before the big mirror in the hall. "We slid a complete circle coming down through the park, and never lost a revolution!"

"I've been thinking it must be bad driving," fretted Mrs. Sargent. "Gail should be home by now!"

"Allison's a safe driver," comforted Ted, who liked to see everybody happy.

Jim Sargent came to the door of the study, in which he was closeted with Rev. Smith Boyd. Jim was practically the young rector's business guardian.

"Hello, folks," he nodded. "Gail home?"

"Not yet," responded Mrs. Sargent, in whose brow the creases were becoming fixed.

"It's hardly time," estimated Jim, and went back into the study.

"I'm terribly vexed," confided Lucile, stopping behind Ted's chair, and idly tickling the back of his neck. "I thought it would be such a brilliant scheme to give a winter week-end party, but Mrs. Acton is going to give one at her country place."

"Before or after?" demanded Mrs. Davies, with whom this was a point of the utmost importance.

"A week after," answered Lucile, "but her invitations are out. I wish I hadn't mailed mine. What can we do to make ours notable?"

That being a matter worth considering, the entire party, with the exception of Aunt Grace, who was listening for the doorbell, set their wits and their tongues to work. Mrs. Helen Davies took a keener interest in it than any of them. The invitation list was the most important of all, for it was a long and arduous way to the heaven of the socially elect, and it took generations to accomplish the journey. The Murdock girls, Grace and herself, had no great-grandfather. Murdock Senior had made his money after Murdock Junior was married, but in time to give the girls a thorough polishing in an exclusive academy. Thus launched, Helen had married a man with a great-grandfather, but Grace had married Jim Sargent. Jim was a dear, and had plenty of money, and was as good a railroader as Grace's father, with whom he had been great chums; but still he was Jim Sargent. Gail's mother, who had married Jim's brother, had seven ancestors, but a mother's family name is so often overlooked. Nevertheless, when Gail came to marry, the maternal element, all other things being favorable, might even secure her an invitation to Mrs. Waverly-Gaites' annual! Reaching this point in her circle of speculation, Mrs. Helen Davies came back to her starting place, and looked at the library clock with a shock. Ten; and the girl was not yet home!

Rev. Smith Boyd came out of the study with his most active vestryman, and joined the circle of waiting ones. He was a pleasant addition to the party, for, in spite of belonging to the clergy, he was able to conduct himself in Rome in a quite acceptable Roman fashion. Pleasant as he was, they wished he would go home, because it was not convenient to worry in his company; and by this time Lucile herself was beginning to watch the clock with some anxiety. Only Mrs. Sargent felt no restraint. An automobile honked at the door as if it were stopping, and she half arose; then the same honk sounded half way down the block, and she sat down again.

"I'm so worried about Gail!" she stated, holding her thumb.

"We all are," supplemented Mrs. Davies, quickly. "She has been dining with a party of friends, and the streets are so slippery."

"I should judge Mr. Allison to be a very capable driver," said Rev. Smith Boyd; and the ladies glared at him. "I envy them their drive on a night like this. I wonder if there will be good coasting."

"Fine," judged Jim Sargent, looking out of the window toward the adjoining rectory. "That first snow was wet and it froze. Now there's a good inch on top of it and, at this rate, there should be three by morning. A little thaw, and another freeze, and a little more snow tomorrow, and I'll be tempted to make a bob-sled."

"I'll help you," offered Rev. Smith Boyd, with a glow of pleasure in his particularly fine eyes. "I used to have a twelve-sected bob-sled, which never started down the hill with less than fifteen."

"I never rode on one," complained Arly. "I think I'm due for a bob-sled party."

"You're invited," Lucile promptly told her. "Uncle Jim, you and Doctor Boyd will have to hunt up your hammer and saw."

"I'll start right to work," offered the young rector, with the alacrity which had made him a favorite.

"If the snow holds, we'll go over into the Jersey bills, and slide," promised Sargent with enthusiasm. "I'll give the party."

"I seem to anticipate a pleasant evening," considered Ted Teasdale, whose athletics were confined entirely to dancing. "We'll ride downhill on the sleds, and uphill in the machines!"

"That's barred," immediately protested Jim. "The boys have to pull the girls uphill. Isn't that right, Boyd?"

"It was correct form when I was a boy," returned the rector, with a laugh. He held his muscular hands out before him as if he could still feel the cut of the rope in his palms. He squared his big shoulders, and breathed deeply, in memory of those health-giving days. There was a flush in his cheeks, and his eyes, which were sometimes green, glowed with a decided blue. Arlene Fosland, looking lazily across at him,

from the comfortable nest which she had not quitted all evening, decided that it was a shame that he had been cramped into the ministry.

"There's Gail!" cried Mrs. Sargent, jumping to her feet and running into the hall, before the butler could come in answer to the bell. She opened the door and was immediately kissed, then Gail came back into the library without stopping to remove her furs. She was followed by Allison, and she carried something inside her coat. Her cheeks were rosy from the crisp air and the snow sparkled on her brown hair like tiny diamonds.

"We've been buying a dog!" she breathlessly explained, and opening her coat, she produced an animated teddy bear, with two black eyes and one black pointed nose protruding from a puff ball of pure white. She set it on the floor, where it waddled uncertainly in three directions, and finally curled down between Rev. Smith Boyd's feet.

"A collie!" and Rev. Smith Boyd picked up the warm infant for an admiring inspection. "It's a beautiful puppy."

"Isn't it a dear!" exclaimed Gail taking it away from him, and favoring him with a smile. She whisked the fluffy little ball over to her Aunt Grace and left it in that lady's lap, while she threw off her furs.

"Where could you buy a dog at this hour?" inquired Mrs. Davies, glancing at the clock, which stood now at the accusing hour of a quarter of eleven.

"We woke up the kennel men," laughed Gail, turning with a sparkling glance to Allison, who was being introduced ceremoniously to the ladies by Uncle Jim. "We had a perfectly glorious evening! We dined at Roseleaf Inn, entirely surrounded by hetic lights, then we drove five miles into the country and bought Flakes. We came home so fast that Mr. Allison almost had to hold me in." She turned, laughing, to find the eyes of Rev. Smith Boyd fixed on her in cold disapproval. They were no longer blue!

CHAPTER IV.

Too Many Men.

"A conscience must be a nuisance to a rector," sympathized Gail Sargent, as she walked up the hill beside Rev. Smith Boyd.

The tall young rector shifted the thin rope of the sled to his other hand.

"Epigrams are usually more clever than true," he finally responded, with a twinkle in his eyes. It had been in his mind to sharply defend that charge, but he reflected that it was unwise to assume the speech worth serious consideration. Moreover, he had come to this toboggan party for healthful physical exercise!

"Then you're guilty of an epigram," retorted Gail, who was annoyed with Rev. Smith Boyd without quite knowing why. "You can't believe all you are compelled, as a minister, to say."

"That," returned Rev. Smith Boyd coldly, "is a matter of interpretation." He commended himself for his patience, as he proceeded to instruct this mistaken young person. She was a lovely girl, it spite of the many things he found in her of which to disapprove. "The eye of the needle through which the camel was supposed not to be able to pass, was, in reality, a narrow city gate called the Needle's Eye."

Gail looked at him with that little smile at the corners of her red lips, eyelids down, curved lashes on her cheeks, and beneath the lashes a sparkle brighter than the moonlight on the snow crystals in the adjoining field.

"It seems to me there was something about wealth in that metaphor," she observed, her round eyes flashing open as she smiled up at him. "If it



"Why Are You So Bitter Against the Church?"

was so difficult even in those days for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, how can a rich church hope to enter the spirit of the gospel?"

Rev. Smith Boyd hastily, and almost roughly, drew her aside, as a long, low bob-sled, accompanied by appropriate screams, came streaking down the hill, and passed them. They both turned and followed its progress down the narrowing white road, to where it curved away in a silver line far at the bottom of a hill. Hills and valleys, and fences and trees, and even a distant stream were covered with the fleecy mantle of winter, while high overhead in a sky of blue, hung a round, white moon, which flooded the

countryside with mellow light, and strewn upon earth's fresh robe a wealth of countless sparkling gems.

"This is a wonderful sermon," mused Gail; then she turned to the rector. She softened toward him, as she saw that he, too, had partaken of the awe and majesty of this scene. He stood straight and tall, his splendidly poised head thrown back, and his gaze resting far off where the hills cut against the sky in tree-clad scallops.

"It is an inspiration," he told her, with a tone in his vibrant voice which she had not heard before; and for that brief instant these two, between whom there had seemed some instinctive antagonism, were nearer in sympathy than either had thought it possible to be. Then Rev. Smith Boyd happened to remember something. "The morality or immorality of riches depends upon its use," he sonorously stated, as he stepped out into the road again, dragging his sled behind him, following the noisy, loitering crowd with the number two bob-sled. "Market Square church, which is the one I suppose you meant in your comparison with the rich man, intends to devote all the means with which a kind Providence has blessed it, to the glory of God."

And the glorification of the billionaire vestry," she added, still annoyed with Rev. Smith Boyd, though she did not know why.

Again Rev. Smith Boyd drew her out of the road, almost ungenially, and unnecessarily in advance of need, to permit a thick man to glide leisurely by on his stomach on a handled sled. He slid majestically onward, with happy forgetfulness of the dignity belonging to the president of the Towanda Valley railroad and a vestryman of Market Square church.

"That used to be lots of fun," remembered Gail, looking after her Uncle Jim in envy.

"Market Square church has dispensed millions in charity," the rector felt it his duty to inform her, as they started up the hill again.

"If it's like our church at home it costs ninety cents to deliver a dime," she retorted, bristling anew with bygone aggravations. "So long as you can deliver baskets of provisions in person, it is all right, but the minute you let the money out of your sight it filters through too many paid hands. I found this out just before I resigned from our charity committee."

He looked at her in perplexity. She was so young and so pretty, so charming in the ermine which framed her pink face, so gentle of speech and movement, that her visible self and her incisive mind seemed to be two different creatures.

"Why are you so bitter against the church?" and his tone was troubled, not so much about what she had said, but about her.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

SHORTER FORM WELL CHOSEN

State Department's Use of the Word "Identical" Altogether Proper and Orthodox.

To not a few readers of the English and American "notes" the word "identical," which was used by both governments, must have seemed a novel and rather unpleasing substitute for, or shortening of, the familiar "identical."

The word has long been used, however, in diplomatic correspondence and documents, no doubt because of the influence exerted by the French, once the common language of international exchanges, and still familiar to more diplomats than any other one tongue. The French say and write "identique," and of that "identical" is a natural translation.

The shorter form, however, has a valid claim for preference, in that it says exactly what "identical" says, and does it without the pleonasm or redundancy which marks so many of our words ending in "ical." Why we persist in lengthening such sufficiently long words as "philosophic" and "geographic" with a wholly needless "al" it would be hard to explain—almost as hard as to explain the frequent appearance of such absurdities as "disembark," "disassociate," "coincidentally," and "superimpose."

One should not be too fussy about such things, however, for in language whatever is, is right, and enough usage makes any usage right.

Tribute to Trees.

The trees formed the first temples of the gods, and even at the present day the country people, preserving in all their simplicity their ancient rites, consecrate the finest of their trees to some divinity. Indeed, we feel ourselves inspired to adoration not less by the sacred groves, and their very stillness, than by the statues of the gods, resplendent as they are with gold and ivory. Each kind of tree remains immutably consecrated to some divinity: the beech to Jupiter, the laurel to Apollo, the olive to Minerva, the myrtle to Venus and the poplar to Hercules. In more recent times it was the trees that, by their juices, more soothing even than corn, first mollified the natural asperity of man.—Pliny.

Out to Kill.

Bacon—The quantity of cattle in this country has decreased in recent years, while the poultry flock has grown larger.

Egbert—Which would seem to prove that the poor-shot gunner is more dangerous than the automobile driver.

The Worshipers.

He—I didn't see you at church this morning.
She—No; I was late and went in while you were asleep.—Boston Transcript

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