

The Ball of Fire

by GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER and LILLIAN CHESTER

ILLUSTRATED BY C. D. RHODES

SYNOPSIS.

At a vestry meeting of the Market Square church Gail Sargent listens to a discussion about the sale of the church tenements 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. When he suggests he is entitled to rest on the laurels of his achievements, she asks the disturbing question: "Why?" Gail, returning to her Uncle Jim's home from her drive with Allison, finds cold disapproval in the eyes of Rev. Smith Boyd, who is calling there. At a bobbed party Gail finds the world uncomfortably full of men.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"I didn't know I was," she confessed, concerned about it herself. "All at once I seem to look on it as an old shoe which should be cast aside. It is so elaborate to do so little good in the world. Morality is on the increase, as any page of history will show."

"I believe that to be true," she hastily assured her, glad to be able to agree with her upon something.

"But it is in spite of the church, not because of it," she immediately added. "You can't say that there is a tremendous moral influence in a congregation which numbers eight hundred, and sends less than fifty services. The balance show their devotion to Christianity by a quarterly check."

Rev. Smith Boyd felt unfairly hit. "That is the sorrow of the church," he sadly confessed; "the lukewarmness of its followers."

She felt a trace of compunction for him; but why had he gone into the ministry?

"Can you blame them?" she demanded, as much aggrieved as if she had suffered a personal distress.

The rector flushed as if he had been struck, and he turned to Gail with that cold look in his green eyes.

"That is too deep a subject to discuss here, but if you will permit me, I will take it up with you at the house," he quietly returned, and there was a dogged compulsion in his tone. "I shall be highly interested in the defense," accepted Gail, with an aggravating smile.

There seemed to be but very little to say after that, and they walked silently up the hill together towards the yellow camp fire, fuming inwardly at each other. Near the top of the hill her ermine scarf came loose at the throat, and, with her numbed hands, she could not locate the little clasp with which it had been held.

"May I help you?" offered the rector, constraining himself to politeness. "Thank you." She was extremely sweet about it, and he reached up to perform the courtesy. The rounded column of her neck was white as marble in the moonlight, and as he sought the clasps, his fingers, drawn from his woollen gloves, touched her warm throat, and they tingled. He started as if he had received an electric shock, and as he looked into her eyes, a purple mist seemed to spring between them. He mechanically fastened the clasps, though his fingers trembled. "Thank you," again said Gail, and he did not notice that her voice was unusually low. She went on over to the group gathered around the fire, but Rev. Smith Boyd stood where she had left him, staring stupidly at the ground. He was in a whirl of bewilderment, amid which there was some unreasoning resentment, but beneath it all there was an inexplicable sadness.

"Just in time for the Palisade special," Gail called Lucile Teasdale. "I don't know," laughed Gail. "I think of going on a private car this trip," and she sought among the group for distraction from certain oppressive thoughts. Allison, and Lucile and Ted and Arly, were among the more familiar figures, besides a startling Adonia, proudly introduced as Dick Rodley, by Arlene, early in the evening, with an air which plainly stated that he was a personal discovery for which she gave herself great credit.

"The Palisades special will not start without Miss Sargent," she declared, bending upon her an ardent gaze, and bestowing upon her a smile which displayed a flash of perfect white teeth. Gail breathlessly thought him the most dangerously handsome thing she had ever seen, but she missed the foreign accent in him. That would have made him complete.

"I'm sorry that the Palisade special will be delayed," she coolly told him, but she tempered the deliberateness of that decision with an upward and sidelong glance, which she was startled to recognize in herself as distinct coquetry.

"I have a prior claim," laughed Allison, stepping up and taking her by the arm. "It's my turn to guide Miss Sargent on the two-passenger sled."

There was something new about Allison tonight. There was the thrill and the exultation of youth in his voice, and twenty years seemed to have been dropped from his age. There was an intensity about him, too, and also a proprietorlike compulsion, which decided Gail on a certain diversion she had entertained. She was

oppressed with men tonight. The world was full of them, and they had closed too nearly around her.

Suddenly she broke away with a laugh, and, taking the two-passenger sled from Smith Boyd, who still stood in preoccupation at the edge of the group, she picked it up and ran with it, and threw herself face forward on it, as she had done when she was a kiddy, and shot down the hill, to the intense disapproval of Reverend Boyd! Dick Rodley, ever alert in his chosen profession, grabbed a light steel racer from the edge of the bank, and, with a magnificent run, slapped himself on the sled and darted in pursuit!

The rector's lip curled the barest trace at one corner, but Edward E. Allison, looking down the hill, grinned, and lit a cigar.

"Coming Allison?" called Cunningham. "There's room for you both, doctor."

"I don't think I'll ride this trip, thanks," returned Allison, and, as the rector also declined with pleasant thanks, Allison gave the voyagers a hearty push, and walked back to the camp fire.

"I received the ultimatum of your vestry today, Doctor Boyd," observed Allison when they were alone. "Still that eventual fifty million."

"Well, yes," returned the rector briskly, and backed up comfortably to the blaze. He was a different man now. "We discussed your proposition thoroughly, and decided that, in ten years, the property is worth fifty million to you, for the purpose you have in mind. Consequently why take less?"

Allison surveyed him shrewdly for a moment.

"That's the argument of a bandit," he remarked. "Why accept all that the prisoner has when his friends can raise a little more?"

"I don't see the use of metaphor," retorted the rector, who dealt professionally in it. "Business is business." Allison grunted, and flicked his ashes into the fire.

"By George, you're right," he agreed. "I've been trying to handle you like a church, but now I'm going after you like the business organization you are."

Rev. Smith Boyd reddened. The charge that Market Square church was a remarkably lucrative enterprise was becoming too general for comfort.

"The vestry has given you their decision," he returned, standing stiff and straight, with his hands clasped behind him. "You may pay for the Veder court tenement property a cash sum which, in ten years, will accrue to fifty million dollars, or you may let it alone, and his tone was as forcefully crisp as Allison's, though he could not hide the musical timbre of it.

"I won't pay that price, and I won't let the property alone," Allison snapped back. "The city needs it."

For a moment the two men looked each other levelly in the eyes. There seemed to have sprung up some new enmity between them. A thick man with a stubby mustache came puffing up to the fire, and sat down on his sled with a thump.

"Splendid exercise," he gasped, holding his sides. "I think about a week of it would either reduce me to a living skeleton, or kill me."

"Your vestry's an ass," Allison took pleasure in informing him.

"Same to you and many of them," puffed Jim Sargent. "What's the trouble with you? Trying to take a business advantage of a church?"

"I'd have a better chance with a Jew," was Allison's contemptuous reply.

"Oh, see here, Allison!" remonstrated Jim Sargent seriously. He even rose to his feet to make it more emphatic. "You mustn't treat Market Square church with so much indignity."

"Why not? Market Square church puts itself in a position to be considered in the light of any other grasping organization."

Rev. Smith Boyd, finding in himself the growth of a most unclimatic anger, decided to walk away rather than suffer the aggravation which must ensue in this conversation. Consequently, he started down the hill, dragging Jim Sargent's sled behind him for company. There were no further insults to the church, however.

"Jim, what are the relations of the Towanda Valley to the L. and C.?" asked Allison, offering Sargent a cigar. "Largely paternal," and the president of the Towanda Valley grinned. "We feed it when it's good and spank it when it cries."

"Hold control of the stock?" "No, only its transportation," returned Sargent complacently.

"Stock is a good deal scattered, I suppose?" "Small holdings entirely, and none of the holders proud," replied Sargent. "It starts no place and comes right back, and the shareholders won't pay postage to send in their annual proxies."

"Then the stock doesn't seem to be worth buying," observed Allison, with vast apparent indifference. "Only to piece out a collection," chuckled Sargent. "I didn't know you were interested in railroads."

"I want a week ago," and Allison looked out across the starry sky to the tree-scattered hills. "With the completion of the consolidation of New York's transportation system, and the building of a big central station, I thought I was through. It seemed a big achievement to gather all these lines to a common center, like holding them in my hand; to converge four millions of people to one point, to handle them without confusion, and to redistribute them along the same lines, looked like a life's work; but now I'm beginning to become ambitious."

"Oh, I see," grinned Jim Sargent. "You want to do something you can really call a job. If I remember rightly, you started with an equipment of four horse cars and two miles of rusted rail. What do you want to conquer next?"

Allison glanced down the hill, then back out across the starlit sky. Some new fervor had possessed him tonight which made him a poet, and loosened his tongue which, previous to this, could almost calculate its utterances in percentage.

"The world," he said.

CHAPTER V.

Edward E. Allison Takes a Vacation. Edward E. Allison walked into the offices of the Municipal Transportation company at nine o'clock, and set his basket of opened and carefully annotated letters out of the mathematical center of his desk; then he touched a button and a thin young man, whose brow, at twenty, wore the traces of preternatural age, walked briskly in.

"Take Mr. Gregory these letters and ask him if he will be kind enough to step here."

"Yes, sir," and the concentrated young man departed with the basket, feeling that he had quite capably borne his weight of responsibility.

Gregory walked in, a fat man with no trace of nonsense about him.

"Out for the day, Ed?" he surmised, gauging that probability by the gift of the letters.

"A month or so," amended Allison, rising and surveying the other articles on his desk calculatingly. "I'm going to take a vacation."

"It's about time," agreed his efficient general manager. "I think it's been four years since you stopped to take a breath. Going to play a little?"

"That's the word," and Allison chuckled like a boy.

"I suppose we'll have your address," suggested Gregory.

"No."

Gregory pondered frowningly. He began to set a weight piling up on him and, though he was capable, he loved his flesh.

"About that Shell Beach extension?" he inquired. "There's likely to be trouble with the village of Waveview. Their local franchisees—"

"Settle it yourself," directed Allison carelessly, and Gregory stared. During the long and arduous course of Allison's climb, he had built his success on personal attention to detail. "Good-by," and Allison walked out, lighting a cigar on his way to the door.

He stopped his runabout in front of a stationer's and bought the largest globe they had in stock.

"Address, please?" asked the clerk, pencil poised over delivery slip.

"I'll take it with me," and Allison

helped them secure the clumsy thing in the seat beside him. Then he streaked up the avenue to the small and severely furnished house where four ebony servants protected him from the world.

"Out of town except to this list," he directed his kinky-haired old butler, and going into the heavy oak library, he closed the door. On the wall, depending from the roller case, was a huge map, a broad familiar domain between two oceans, and he smiled as his eye fell upon that tiny territory near the Atlantic, which, up to now, he had called a world, because he had mastered it.

His library phone rang. "Mr. Allison?" a woman's voice. Gail Sargent, Mrs. Sargent, Mrs. Davies, or Lucile Teasdale. No other ladies were on his list. The voice was not that of Gail. "Are you busy tonight?" Oh, yes, Lucile Teasdale.

"Free as air," he gaily told her. "I'm so glad," rattled Lucile. "Ted's just telephoned that he has tickets for 'The Lady's Maid.' Can you join us?" "With pleasure." No hesitation whatever; prompt and agreeable; even pleased.

"That's jolly. I think six makes such

a nice crowd. Besides you and ourselves, there'll be Arly and Dick Rodley and Gail." Gail, of course, he had known that. "We'll start from Uncle Jim's at eight o'clock."

Allison called old Ephraim. "I want to begin dressing at seven-fifteen," he directed. "At three o'clock set some sandwiches inside the door. Have some fruit in my dressing room."

He went back to his map, remembering Lucile with a retrospective smile. The last time he had seen that vivacious young person she had been emptying a box of almonds, at the side of the camp fire at the toboggan party. He jotted down a memorandum to send her some, and drew a high stool in front of the map.

Strange this new ambition which had come over him. Why, he had actually been about to consider his big work finished; and now, all at once, everything he had done seemed trivial. The eager desire of youth to achieve had come to him again, and the blood sang in his veins as he felt of his lusty strength. He was starting to build, with a youth's enthusiasm but with a man's experience, and with the momentum of success and the power of capital. Something had crystallized him in the past few days.

Across the fertile fields and the mighty mountains and the arid deserts of the United States, there angled four black threads, from coast to coast, and everywhere else were shorter main lines and shorter branches, and, last of all, mere fragments of railroads. He began with the long, angling threads, but he ended with the fragments, and these, in turns, he gave minute and careful study. At three o'clock he took a sandwich and ordered his car.

He was gone less than an hour, and came back with an armload of books; government reports, volumes of statistics, and a file of more intimate information from the office of his broker. He threw off his coat when he came in this time, and spread, on the big, lion-clawed table at which Napoleon had once planned a campaign, a varicolored mass of railroad maps. At seven-fifteen old Ephraim found him at the end of the table in the midst of some neat and intricate tabulations.

"Time to dress, sir," suggested Ephraim.

"Oh, it's you," remarked the absorbed Allison, glancing up.

"Yes, sir," returned Ephraim. "You told me to come for you at seven-fifteen."

Allison arose and rubbed the tips of his fingers over his eyes.

"Keep this room locked," he ordered, and stalked obediently upstairs. For the next thirty minutes he belonged to Ephraim.

He was as carefree as a boy when he reached Jim Sargent's house, and his eyes snapped when he saw Gail come down the stairs, in a pearl-tinted gown, with a triple string of pearls in her waving hair and a rose-colored cloak depending from her gracefully sloping shoulders.

Her own eyes brightened at the sight of him. He had been much in her mind today; not singly but as one of a group. She was quite conscious that she liked him, but she was more conscious that she was curious about him. He stepped forward to shake hands with her and, for a moment, she found in her an inclination to cling to the warm thrill of his clasp. She had never before been so aware of anything like that. Nevertheless, when she had withdrawn her hand, she felt a sense of relief.

"Hello, Allison," called the hearty voice of Jim Sargent. "You're looking like a youngster tonight."

"I feel like one," replied Allison, smiling. "I'm on a vacation." He was either vain enough or curious enough to glance at himself in the big mirror as he passed it. He did look younger; astonishingly so; and he had about him a quality of lightness which made him restless. He had been noted among his business associates for a certain dry wit, scathing, satirical, relentless; now he used that quality agreeably, and when Lucile and Ted, and Arly and Dick Rodley joined them, he was quite easily a sharer in the gaiety. At the theater he was the same. He participated in all the repartee during the intermissions, and the fact that he found Gail studying him, now and then, only gave him an added impulse. He was frank with himself about Gail. He wanted her, and he had made up his mind to have her. He was himself a little surprised at his own capacity of entertainment, and when he parted from Gail at the Sargent house, he left her smiling, and with a softer look in her eyes than he had yet seen there.

Immediately on his return to his library, Allison threw off his coat and waistcoat, collar and tie, and sat at the table.

"What is there in the icebox?" he wanted to know.

"Well, sir," enumerated Ephraim carefully; "Mirandy had a chicken potpie for dinner, and then there's—"

"That will do; cold," interrupted Allison. "Bring it here with as few service things as possible, a bottle of Vichy and some olives."

He began to set down some figures, and when Ephraim came, shaking his head to himself about such things as cold dumplings at night, Allison stopped for ten minutes, and lunched with apparent relish. At seven-thirty he called Ephraim and ordered a cold plunge and some breakfast. He had been up all night, and on the map of the United States there were penciled two thin straight black lines, one from New York to Chicago, and one from Chicago to San Francisco. Crossing them, and paralleling them, and angling close to them in the main, were lines of green and lines of orange; these three.

Another day and another night he

spent with his maps, and his books, and his figures; then he went to his broker with a list of railroads.

"Get me what stock you can of these," he directed. "Pick it up as quietly as possible."

The broker looked them over and elevated his eyebrows. There was not a road in the list which was important strategically, but he had ceased to ask questions of Edward Allison.

Three days later Allison went into the annual stockholders' meeting of the L. and C. railroad, and registered majority of the stock in that insignificant line, which ran up the shore opposite Crescent Island, joined the Towanda Valley shortly after its emergence from its hired entrance into New York, ran for fifty miles over the roadway of the Towanda, with which it had a long-time tracking contract, and wandered up into the country, where it served as an outlet to certain conservatively profitable territory.

The president reached for his gavel and called the meeting. The stockholders, gray and grave, and some with watery eyes, drew up their chairs to the long table; for they were directors, too. They answered to their names, and they listened to the minutes, and waded mechanically through the routine business, always with their gaze straying to the new force which had come among them. Every man there knew all about Edward E. Allison. He had combined the traction interests of New York by methods as logical and unsympathetic as geometry, and where he appeared, no matter how pacific his avowed intentions, there were certain to be radical up-heavings.

Election of officers was reached in the routine, and again that solemn inquiry in the faded eyes. The "official slate" was proposed in nomination Edward E. Allison voted with the rest. Every director was re-elected!

New business. Again the solemn inquiry.

"Move to amend Article Three, Section One of the constitution, relating to duration of office," announced Allison, passing the written motion to the secretary. "On a call from the majority of stock, the stockholders of the L. and C. railroad have a right to demand a special meeting, on one week's notice, for the purpose of reorganization and re-election."

They knew it. It had to come.

Edward E. Allison waited just long enough to vote his majority stock, and left the meeting in a hurry, for he had an engagement to take tea with Gail Sargent.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

LOWERING THE DEATH RATE

Report Shows a Gratifying Decrease in the Victims of Tuberculosis During Recent Years.

At the convention of the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, held recently at Seattle, it was shown that the national death rate from tuberculosis has decreased from 326 per 100,000 in 1880 to 146.5 in 1913. This decrease is equivalent to the saving of 179,027 lives in a single year. It proves that the fight against the scourge is being waged wisely and effectively.

It is estimated that there are today 1,430,000 consumptives in the United States. Their existence means an economic loss of \$214,500,000 a year. Any movement to lessen the number of sufferers is commendable, not only from the standpoint of the humanitarian, but also from that of the practical economist.

Such figures are highly interesting just at present. They show that while more than half the world is almost wholly absorbed in the work of taking life, the American republic remains concerned in the business of saving life. The contrast between the humanitarianism in session at Seattle and the strategy boards which are meeting today in all the great European capitals is sufficiently striking—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Thoughtlessness and Accidents. "The vast majority of personal injury accidents are not due to mechanical defects," writes H. L. Gannett, inspector of safety and fire prevention of the Commonwealth Edison company at Chicago, "but are plainly due to some thoughtless act on the part of the injured or his fellow man."

"An arm or leg off can never be replaced—an eye lost cannot be put back, and a life once surrendered can never be recalled.

"Life is sweet. A home with a crippled father is not filled with the happiness that it is entitled to enjoy; and a home from which the father has been called to that land from whence no traveler returns is truly in distress, and has an added sadness when it is known that an avoidable accident caused by the thoughtless act had caused the untimely call of the grim reaper."

Peter the Great. "What Alfred the Great is to early Britain, that Peter the Great, in his crude way, is to Russia. If ever a race of people found adequate expression in one person, that race was the Slavic race in their great czar. As an accorn enfolds an oak, the type of a great forest, so Peter the Great enfolds the Russian people. Into him they have flowed from the twilight of time, and from him they have gone out to the ends of the earth. And this was one of his dreams, that his country might have ample boundaries."—From "The World Storm—and Beyond," by Edwin Davies Schoonmaker.

Fools ofttimes rush in and win while wise men investigate.

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