

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, she 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 boisterous party Gail finds the world uncomfortably full of men, and Allison tells Jim Sargent that his new ambition is to conquer the world. Allison starts a campaign for consolidation and control of the entire transportation system of the world. Gail becomes popular and Aunt Helen thinks it necessary to advise her as to matrimonial probabilities. Allison gains control of transcontinental traffic and arranges to absorb the Vedder court "eminent property" of Market Square church.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

"How about the Crescent Island subway?"

"Ripe any time," and Tim Corman flicked the ashes from his cigar with a heavily gemmed hand. "The boosters have been working on it right along, but never too strong."

"There's no need for any particular manipulation in that," decided Allison, who knew the traction situation to the last nickel. "The city needs that outlet, and it needs the new territory which will be opened up. I think we'd better push the subway right on across to the mainland. The extension would have to be made in ten years anyhow."

"It's better right now," immediately assented Corman. In ten years he might be dead.

"I think, too, that we'd better provide for a heavy future expansion," went on Allison, glancing expectantly into Tim's old eyes. "We'd probably better provide for a double-deck, eight-track tube."

Tim Corman drew a wheezy breath, and then he grinned the senile shadow of his old-time grin; but it still had the same spirit.

"You got a hen on," he decided. In "society," Tim could manage very nicely to use fashionable language, but in business he found it impossible after the third or fourth minute of conversation. He had taken in every detail of the room on his entrance, and his glance had strayed more than once to the red streaks on the big map. Now he approached it, and studied it with absorbed interest. "You're a smart boy, Ed," he concluded. "Across Crescent Island is the only leak you could make in a railroad. You found the only crack that the big systems haven't tied up."

"All you can get me to admit, just now, is that the city needs an eight-track tube across Crescent Island, under lease to the Municipal Transportation company," stated Allison, smiling.

"This list isn't complete," he judged, and turned to Allison with a serious question in his eye.

"Almost," and Allison hitched a little closer to the desk. "There remains an aggregate of three hundred and twenty miles of road to be built in four short stretches. In addition to this, I have a twenty-year contract over a hundred-mile stretch of the Inland Pacific, a track right entry into San Francisco, and this," he displayed to Urbank a preliminary copy of an ordinance, authorizing the immediate building of an eight-track tube through Crescent Island to the mainland. "Possibly you can understand this whole project better if I show you a map," and he spread out his little pocket sketch.

If it had been possible to reverse the process of time and worry and wearing concentration, President Urbank of the Midcontinent would have risen from his inspection of that map with a brow as smooth as a baby's. Instead, his lips went dry, as he craned forward his neck at that funny angle, and projected his chin with the foolish motion of a goose.

"A direct entrance right slam into the center of New York!" he exclaimed, cracking all his knuckles violently one by one. "Vedder court! Where's that?"

"That's the best part of the joke," exulted Allison, with no thought that Vedder court was, at this present moment, church property. "It's just where you said—right slam in the center of New York; and the building into which the Midcontinent will run its trains will be also the terminal building of every municipal transportation line in Manhattan! From my station platforms passengers from Chicago or the far West will step directly into subway, L., or trolley. When they come in over the line which is now the Midcontinent, they will be landed, not across the river, or in some side street, but right at their own doors, scattering from the Midcontinent terminal over a hundred traction lines!" His voice, which had begun in the mild banter of a man passing an idle joke, had risen to a ring so triumphant that he was almost shouting.

"But—but—wait a minute!" Urbank protested. He was stuttering. "Where



"All I Know is a Guess, and I Don't Tell Guesses."

does the Midcontinent get to the Crescent Island tube?"

"Right here," and Allison pointed to his map. "You come out of the tube to the L. and C., which has a long-time tracking privilege over fifty miles of the Towando Valley, and terminates at Windfield. At Forgeason, however, just ten miles after the L. and C. leaves the Towando, that road—"

"Is crossed by our tracks!" Urbank eagerly interpreted. "The Midcontinent, after its direct exit, saves a seventy-mile detour! Then it's a straight shoot for Chicago! Straight on again out west—Why, Allison, your route is almost as straight as an arrow! It will have a three-hundred-mile shorter haul than even the Inland Pacific! You'll put that road out of the business! You'll have the king of transcontinental lines, and none can be built that will save one kink!" His neck protruded still further from his collar as he bent over the map. "Here you split off from the Midcontinent's main line and utilize the White Range branch; from Silverknob—My God!" and his mouth dropped open. "Why—why—why, you cross the big range over the Inland Pacific's own tracks!" and his voice cracked.

Edward E. Allison, his vanity gratified to its very core, sat back comfortably, smiling and smoking, until Urbank awoke.

"I suppose we can come to some arrangement," he mildly suggested.

Urbank looked at him still in a daze for a moment, and a trace of the creases came back into his brow, then they faded away.

"You figured all this out before you came to me," he remarked. "On what terms do we get it?"

CHAPTER VIII.

The Mine for the Golden Altar.

Vedder Court was a very drunkard among tenement groups. Its decrepit old wooden buildings, as if weak-kneed from dissipation and senile decay, leaned against each other crookedly for support, and leered down at the sodden swarms beneath, out of broken-paned windows which gave somehow a ludicrous effect of bearded eyes. There had once been a narrow strip of curbed soil in the center of the street, where three long-since-departed trees had given the quarter its name of "court," but this space was now as bare and dry as the asphalt surrounding it, and as it was too small even for the purpose of children at play, a wooden bench, upon which no one had ever sat, as, indeed, why should they? had long ago been placed on it, to become loose-jointed and weather-splintered and rotted, like all the rest of the neighborhood.

As for its tenants; they were exactly the sort of birds one might expect to find in such foul nests. They were of many nations, but of just two main varieties: stupid and squalid, or thin and furtive; but they were all dirty, and they bore, in their complexions, the poison of crowded breathing spaces, and bad sewerage, and unwholesome or insufficient food.

Into this mire there drove an utterly out-of-place little electric coupe. At the wheel was the fresh-cheeked Gail Sargent and with her was the twinkling-eyed Rufus Manning, whose white beard rippled down to his second waistcoat button. They drove slowly the length of the court, and back again, the girl studying every detail with acute interest. They stopped in front of Temple Mission, which, with its ugly red and blue lettering nearly erased by years of monthly scrubbing, occupied an old store room once used as a saloon.

"So this is the chrysalis from which the butterfly cathedral is to emerge," commented Gail, as Manning held the door open for her, and before she rose she peered again around the uninviting "court," which not even the bright winter sunshine could relieve of its dinginess; rather, the sun made it only the more dismal by presenting the ugliness more in detail.

"This is the mine which produces the gold which is to gild the altar," asserted Manning, studying the sidewalk. "I don't think you'd better come in here. You'll spoil your shoes."

"I want to see it all this time because I'm never coming back," insisted Gail, and placed one daintily shod foot on the step.

"Then I'll have to shame Sir Walter Raleigh," laughed the silvery-bearded Manning, and, to her gasping surprise, he caught her around the waist and lifted her across to the door, whereat several soiled urchins laughed, and one vinegary-faced old woman grinned. In horrible appreciation, and dropped Manning a familiarly respectful curtsy as he passed.

There was no one in the mission except a broad-shouldered man with a roughly hewn face, who ducked his head at Manning and touched his forehead to the side of his head. He was placing huge soup kettles in their holes in the counter at the rear of the room, and Manning called attention to this.

"A practical mission," he explained. "We start in by saving the bodies."

"Do you get any further?" inquired Gail, glancing from the empty benches and the atrociously colored "religious" pictures on the walls to the windows, past which eddied a mass of humanity all but submerged in hopelessness.

"Sometimes," replied Manning gravely. "I have seen a soul or two even here. It is because of these two or three possibilities that the mission is kept up. It might interest you to know that Market Square church spends fifteen thousand dollars a year in charity relief in Vedder court alone."

Gail's eyelids closed, her lashes curyed on her cheeks for an instant, and the corners of her lips twitched.



He Dropped Behind to Slip Something Which Looked Like Money.

And how much a year does Market Square church take out of Vedder court?"

"I was waiting for that bit of impertinence," laughed Manning. "I shall be surprised at nothing you say since that first day when you characterized Market Square church as a remarkably lucrative enterprise. Have you never felt any compunctions of conscience over that?"

"Not once," answered Gail promptly. She had started to seat herself on one of the empty benches, but had changed her mind. "If I had been given to any such self-injustice, however, I should reproach myself now. I think Market Square church not only commercial but criminal."

"I'll have to give your soul a chastisement," smiled Manning. "These people must live somewhere, and because Vedder court, being church property, is exempt from taxation, they find cheaper rents here than anywhere in the city. If we were to put up improved buildings, I don't know where they would go, because we would be compelled to charge more rent."

"In order to make the same rate of profit," responded Gail. "Out of all

this misery, Market Square church is reaping a harvest rich enough to build a fifty million dollar cathedral, and I have sufficient disregard for the particular deity under whom you do business, to feel sure that he would not destroy it by lightning. I want out of here."

"Frankly, so do I," admitted Manning; "although I'm ashamed of myself. It's all right for you, who are young, to be fastidious, but your Daddy Manning is coward enough to want to make his peace with heaven, after a life which put a few blots on the book."

She laughed at him speculatively for a moment, and then she laughed. "You know, I don't believe that, Daddy Manning. You're an old fraud, who does good by stealth, in order to gain the reputation of having been picturesquely wicked. Tell me why you belong to Market Square church."

"Because it's so respectable," he twinkled down at her. "When an old sinner has lost every other claim to respectability, he has himself put on the vestry."

He dropped behind on their way to the door, to surreptitiously slip something, which looked like money, to the man with the roughly hewn countenance, and as he stood talking, Rev. Smith Boyd came in, not quite breathlessly, but as if he had hurried.

"I knew you were here," he said, taking Gail's slender hand in his own; then his eyes turned cold.

"You recognized my pink ribbon bows," and she laughed up at him frankly. "You haven't been over to sing lately?"

"No," he replied. "Will you be at home this evening?"

"I'll have our music selected," and, in the very midst of her brightness, she was stopped by the sudden somberness in the rector's eyes.

Simple little conversation; quite trivial indeed, but it had been attended by much shifting thought. To begin with, the rector regretted the necessity of disapproving of a young lady so undeniably attractive. She was a pleasure to the eye and a stimulus to the mind, and always his first impulse when he thought of her was one of pleasure. An incident flashed back to him. The night of the toboggan party, when she had stood with her face upturned, and the moonlight gleaming on her round white throat. He had trembled, much to his later sorrow, as he fastened the scarf about her warm neck. However, she was the visiting niece of one of his vestrymen, who lived next door to the rector.

Gail jerked her pretty head impatiently. If Rev. Smith Boyd meant to be as somber as this, she'd rather he'd stay at home. However, he was the rector, and her Uncle Jim was a vestryman, and they lived right next door.

"You just escaped a blowing up, Doctor Boyd," observed "Daddy" Manning, joining them, and his eyes twinkled from one to the other. "Our young friend from the West is harsh with the venerable Market Square church."

"Again?" and Rev. Smith Boyd was gracious enough to smile. "What is the matter with it this time?"

"It is not only commercial, but crim-

inal," repeated Manning, with a sly smile at Gail, who now wore a little red spot in each cheek.

Rev. Smith Boyd's cold eyes turned green, as he glanced at this daring young person. In offending the dignity of Market Square church she offended his own.

"What would you have us do?" he quietly asked.

"Retire from business," she informed him, nettled by the covert sneer at her youth and inexperience. She laid aside a new perplexity for future solution. In moments such as this the rector was far from ministerial, and he displayed a quickness to anger quite out of proportion to the apparent cause. "The whole trouble with Market Square church is that they have no God. The creator has been reduced to a formula."

Daddy Manning saved the rector the pain of any answer.

"You're a religious anarchist," he charged Gail.

Her face softened.

"By no means," she replied. "I am a devoted follower of the divine spirit, the divine will, the divine law; but not of the church; for it has forgotten these things."

"You don't know what you are saying," the rector told her.

"That isn't all you mean," she retorted. "What you have in mind is that, being a woman, and young, I should be silent. You would not permit thought if you could avoid it, for when people begin to think, religion lives but the church dies, as it is doing today."

Now Rev. Smith Boyd could be triumphant. There was a curl of sarcasm on his lips.

"Are you quite consistent?" he charged. "You have just been objecting to the prosperity of the church."

"Financially," she admitted; "but it is a spiritual bankrupt. Your financial prosperity is a direct sign of your religious decay. Your financial bankruptcy will come later, as it has done in France, as it is doing in Italy, as it will do all over the world. Humanity treats the church with the generosity due a once valuable servant who has outlived his usefulness."

"My dear child, humanity can never do without religion," interposed Daddy Manning.

"Agreed," said Gail; "but it outgrows them. It outgrows paganism, idolatry, and a score of minor phases in between. Now it is outgrowing the religion of creed, in its progress toward morality. What we need is a new religion."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Activities of Women.

Women are paid ten cents a day for making army shirts in France.

Of the 75,846 women registered for war work in England, only 1,915 have been utilized.

Very few of the nearly 400,000 woman school teachers in the United States are married.

As soon as the war is over Miss Genevieve Caulfield, a teacher at the Pennsylvania Institution for Instruction of the Blind, will sail for Japan, where she will devote her life to teaching the blind there.

Should Dr. Ella B. Everitt of Philadelphia accept the presidency of Wilson college, she will be obliged to sacrifice a large medical practice which she now enjoys in the Quaker City.

Mrs. B. Castleton, who has just been graduated from the Atlanta Law school, took up law mainly that she might have an understanding sympathy in the work of her husband, an Atlanta attorney.

Found That Enemy Could Shoot.

A correspondent, sending news of himself, sends this hospital experience from the British front: "He and I were occupants of neighboring beds in the same ward. He had come from the trenches with a hole through his nose. I was inquisitive and he responsive. 'I got this 'ere just by Noove Chapel. Pal o' mine said the blighters could shoot; I said they couldn't hit me if I give 'em a chance. I stuck up me 'ead and looked at 'em. 'E got 's tanner an' I got pipped.' Of course, the surgeon could only plug the nose of such a man with cheek."

Seville Nights.

In all the principal plazas and gardens of Seville moving picture screens are erected and small tables and chairs set out, the exhibitors either making their profits from the drinks sold or by rental of chairs at two cents each. Thousands of people go nightly to the different plazas and gardens, and the entire life of the city for about four months centers around these moving picture shows.—From Commerce Reports.

Couldn't Be More So.

"How was the party last night at the Gadders' house?"

"Oh, the usual fubdub and foolishness."

"Was there no serious note?"

"One. I overheard Mr. Gadders tell Mrs. Gadders in a whisper that another blowout like that would break him."

His Justification.

"Why did you strike this man?" asked the court.

"He told me to use my head," pleaded the prisoner.

"Well, that's no crime, is it?"

"But, your honor, I was crushing stone at the time"—Buffalo Express.

Hardest Thing to Ride.

"There is nothing so hard to ride as a young broncho," said the Westerner.

"Oh, I don't know," replied the man from back East. "Did you ever try the water wagon?"

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