

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 tells Rev. Smith Boyd that Market Square church is apparently a lucrative business enterprise. Allison takes Gail riding in his motor car. She finds cold disapproval in the eyes of Rev. Smith Boyd. Allison starts a campaign for consolidation and control of the entire transportation system of the world. Gail becomes popular. Allison gains control of transcontinental traffic and arranges to absorb the Velder court tenement property of Market Square church. Gail tells Boyd that the cathedral Market Square church proposes to build will be out of profits wrung from the equator. At a meeting of the seven financial magnates of the country, Allison organizes the International Transportation Company. Rev. Smith Boyd undertakes Gail's spiritual instruction and Gail unconsciously gives Allison a hint that solves the Velder court problem for him. On an inspection trip in Allison's new subway the tunnel caves in. Gail goes back to her home in the West. Her friends love and Arly back to New York. In the midst of a struggle with the dress of humanity in Velder court Rev. Smith Boyd suddenly finds that he is a real living—and loving—man. He proposes to Gail but, on the verge of acceptance, she refuses. Through Allison's connivance with the political boss Velder, court is condemned by the city as unsanitary. Rev. Smith Boyd proposes to the vestry to replace the old Velder court buildings with model tenements.

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"I attend a vestry meeting now and then," he replied, and then he laughed shortly. "I'd rather do business with forty corporations than with one vestry. A church always expects to conduct its share of the negotiations on a strictly commercial basis, while it expects you to mingle a little charity with your end of the transactions."

"The Velder court property," she guessed, with a slight contraction of her brows.

"Still after it," said Allison, and talked of other matters.

Jim Sargent returned, and glancing into the little reception tete-a-tete as he passed, saw Allison and came back.

"I didn't expect to see you so soon," wondered Allison.

"We broke up in a row," laughed Jim Sargent. "Clark and Chisholm were willing to accept your price, but the rest of us listened to Doctor Boyd and Nicholas Van Ploon, and fell. We insist on our cathedral, and Doctor Boyd's plan seems the best way to get it, though even that may necessitate a four or five years' delay."

"What's his plan?" asked Allison.

"Rebuilding," returned Sargent. "We can put up tenements good enough to pass the building inspectors and to last fifteen years. With the same rents we are now receiving we can offer them better quarters, and, as Doctor Boyd suggested, redeem ourselves from some of the disgrace of this whole proceeding. Clever, sensible idea, I think."

Gail was leaning forward, with her fingers clasped around her knee; her brown eyes had widened, and a little red spot had appeared in either cheek; her red lips were half parted, as she looked up in wonder at her Uncle Jim.

"Is that the plan upon which they have decided?" and Allison looked at his watch.

"Well, hardly," frowned Sargent. "We couldn't swing Clark and Chisholm. At the last minute they suggested that we might build lots, and the impending fracas seemed too serious to take up just now, so we've tabled the whole thing."

Allison smiled, and slipped his watch back in his pocket.

"It's fairly definite, however, that you won't sell," he concluded.

"Not at your figure," laughed Sargent. "If we took your money, Doctor Boyd would be too old to preach in the new cathedral."

"He'll pull it through some way," declared Allison. "He's as smart as a whip."

Neither gentleman had noticed Gail. She had settled back in her chair during these last speeches, weary and listless, and overcome with a sense of some humiliation too evasive to be properly framed even in thought. She had a sense that she had given away something vastly precious, and which would never be valued, and which they notice that she changed suddenly to relief. She had been justified in her decision.

She took the reins of conversation herself after Uncle Jim had left, and entertained Allison so brightly that he left with impatience at the tea party which monopolized her.

Later, when Rev. Smith Boyd dropped in, he met with a surprising and disconcerting vivacity in his eyes. There were pain and suffering, and inexpressible hunger, but in hers there was only dancing frivolity; a little too ebullient, perhaps, if he had been wise enough to know; but he was not.

The study door was open when late that evening Houston Van-Ploon sedately escorted Mrs. Davies and Gail into the library, one of those rooms which appoint themselves the instinctive lounging places of all family intimates. Gail turned up her big eyes in sparkling acknowledgment as the punctilious Van Ploon took her cloak, and, at that moment, as she stood gracefully poised, she caught the gaze of Rev. Smith Boyd fixed on her with such infinite longing that it distressed her. She did not want him to suffer.

Uncle Jim strode out with a hearty greeting, and, at the sound of the voices of no one but Gail and Mrs. Davies and Houston Van Ploon, old "Daddy" Manning appeared in the doorway, followed by the rector.

"The sweetest flower that blows in any dale," quoted "Daddy" Manning, patting Gail's hand affectionately.

The rector stood by, waiting to greet her, after Manning had monopolized her a selfish moment, and the newly aroused eye for color in him seized upon the gold and blue and red of her straight Egyptian costume, and recognized in them a part of her endless variety. The black on her lashes. He was close enough to see that; and he marveled at himself that he could not disapprove.

Gail was most uncomfortably aware of him in this nearness; but she turned to him with a frank smile of friendship.

"This looks like a conspiracy," she commented, glancing towards the study, which was thick with smoke.

"It's an offensively innocent one," returned Manning, giving the rector but small chance. "We're discussing plans for the new Velder court tenements."

"Oh!" observed Gail, and radiated a distinct chill, whereupon Rev. Smith Boyd, divesting himself of some courteous compliment, exchanged inanely with Mrs. Davies and young Van Ploon, and took his committee back into the study.

Mrs. Davies remained but a moment or so. She even seemed eager to retire, and as she left the library, she cast a hopeful backward glance at the dancing-eyed Gail and the correct young Van Ploon, who, with his Dutch complexion and his blonde English mustache and his stalwart American body, to say nothing of his being a Van Ploon, represented to her the ideal of masculine perfection. He was an eligible who never did anything second too early or a second too late, or deviated by one syllable from the exact things he should say.

If the anxious Aunt Helen had counted on any important results from this evening's opportunities, she had not taken into her calculations the adroitness of Gail. In precisely five minutes Van Ploon was on his doorstep, with his Inverness on his shoulders and his silk hat in his hand, with out even having approached the elaborate introduction to certain important remarks he had definitely decided to make. Gail might not have been able to rid herself of him so easily, for he was a person of considerable momentum, but he had rather planned to make a more deliberate ceremony of the matter, impulsive opportunities not being in his line of thought.

A tall young man in an Inverness walked rapidly past the door while Van Ploon was saying the correctly clever things in the way of adieu; and before she had closed the door on Van Ploon, Dick Rodley walked into the house with careless assurance.

"Gracious, Dicky, you can't come in!" protested Gail, with half frowning, half laughing remonstrance. "It's a fearful hour for calls."

"I'm a friend of the family," insisted Dick, calmly closing the door behind them and hanging his hat on the rack. "I guess you've forgotten the program."

"Oh, yes, the proposal. Well, have it over with."

"All right," he agreed, and taking her arm and tucking her shoulder comfortably close to him, he walked easily with her back to the library. Arrived there, he seated her on her favorite chair, and drew up another one squarely in front of her.

"I'm going to shock you to death," he told her. "I'm going to propose seriously to you."

Some laughing retort was on his lips, but she caught a look in his eyes which suddenly stopped her.

"I am very much in earnest about it, Gail," and his voice bore the stamp of deep sincerity. "I love you. I want you to be my wife."

"Dick," protested Gail, and it was she who reached out and placed her hand in his. The action was too confidently frank for him to mistake it.

"I was afraid you'd think that way about it," he said, his voice full of a pain of which they neither one had believed him capable. "This is the first time I ever proposed, except in fun, and I want to make you take me seriously. Gail, I've said so many pretty things to you, that now, when I am in such desperate earnest, there's nothing left but just to try to tell you how much I love you; how much I want you!" He stopped, and, holding her hand, patting it gently with unconscious tenderness, he gazed earnestly into her eyes. His own were entirely without that burning glow which he had, for so long, bestowed on all the young and beautiful. They were almost somber now, and in their depth was a humble wistfulness which made Gail's heart flow out to him.

"I can't Dick," she told him, smiling affectionately at him. "You're the dearest boy in the world, and I want you for my friend as long as we live; for my very dear friend!"

He studied her in silence for a moment, and then he put his hands on her cheeks, and drew her gently towards him. Still smiling into his eyes, she held up her lips, and he kissed her.

"I'd like to say something jolly before I go," he said as he rose; "but I can't seem to think of it."

Gail laughed, but there was a trace of moisture in her eyes as she took his arm.

"I'd like to help you out, Dicky, but I can't think of it either," she returned.

She was crying a little when she went up the stairs, and her mood was not even interrupted by the fact that Aunt Helen's door was ajar, and that Aunt Helen stood just beyond the crack.

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"Then we'll make it an annual payment," decided Allison, putting away some figures he had prepared. "We'll make it a sliding scale, increasing each year with the earnings."

The grand duke considered that proposition gravely, and offered an amendment.

"After the first year," he said. "We shall begin with a large bonus, however."

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"There is only one man who stands in the way," he calculated. "He will be removed immediately upon my return."

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"We have still much to learn from your country," he courteously confessed.

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There came a famous diplomat a heavy blond man with a red face and big spectacles and a high, wide, round forehead.

"I do not know what you want," said the visitor, regarding Allison with a stolid stare. "I have come to see."

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"That is history," replied the visitor noncommittally. "We are now at peace."

"Never peace," denied Allison. "There will never be friendship between phlegmatism and mercurialism. You might rest for centuries with your neighbors to the west, but rest is not peace."

"Excuse me, but what do you mean?" and the visitor stared stolidly.

"In your affairs of mutual relationship with the land to the west, there are not less than a dozen causes upon which war could be started without difficulty," went on Allison. "In fact, you require perpetual diplomacy to prevent war with that country."

The visitor locked his thick fingers quietly together and kept on stolidly staring.

"You are about to have a war," Allison advised him.

"No, it is not true," and the visitor went so far, in his emphasis, as to unlock his fingers and rest one hand on the back of the other.

"I think I am a very fair prophet," said Allison easily. "I have made money by my prophecy. I have more money at my command at the present time than any man in the world, than any government; wealth beyond handling in mere currency. It can only be conveyed by means of checks. Let me show how easy it is to write them, and, drawing a blank book to him he wrote a check, and signed his name, and filled out the stub, and tore it out, and handed it to the visitor for inspection. The visitor was properly pleased with Allison's ease in penmanship.

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The grand duke, who had played poker in America and fan-tan in China and roulette in Monte Carlo, and at the other games throughout the world, smiled with his impressive big eyes, and put his hand up under his beard.

"The matter then seems to resolve itself into a question of price," he commented.

"No; protection," responded Allison. "If I were buying these railroads outright, I should expect my property interests to be guarded, even if I had to appeal to international equity; but I am not."

"No," admitted the grand duke. "They cannot be purchased."

"The proposition resolves itself then into a matter of virtual commercial seizure," Allison pointed out.

The grand duke, still with his hand in his beard, chuckled, as he regarded Allison amusedly.

"I shall not mind if you call it pi racy," he observed. "We, in Russia, must collect our revenues as we can, and we are as frank as Americans about it. Returning to your matter of protection, I shall admit that the only agreement upon which we can secure what you want, would not hold in international equity; and, in consequence, the only protection I can give you is my personal word which you will not be molested in anything which you wish to do, providing it is pleasant to myself and those I represent."

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"In your affairs of mutual relationship with the land to the west, there are not less than a dozen causes upon which war could be started without difficulty," went on Allison. "In fact, you require perpetual diplomacy to prevent war with that country."

The visitor locked his thick fingers quietly together and kept on stolidly staring.

"You are about to have a war," Allison advised him.

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Gail laughed, but there was a trace of moisture in her eyes as she took his arm.

"I'd like to help you out, Dicky, but I can't think of it either," she returned.

She was crying a little when she went up the stairs, and her mood was not even interrupted by the fact that Aunt Helen's door was ajar, and that Aunt Helen stood just beyond the crack.

"Why, child, that Egyptian black is running," was Aunt Helen's first observation.

"Yes, child, that Egyptian black is running," was Aunt Helen's first observation.

"I shall not mind if you call it pi racy," he observed. "We, in Russia, must collect our revenues as we can, and we are as frank as Americans about it. Returning to your matter of protection, I shall admit that the only agreement upon which we can secure what you want, would not hold in international equity; and, in consequence, the only protection I can give you is my personal word which you will not be molested in anything which you wish to do, providing it is pleasant to myself and those I represent."

"Then we'll make it an annual payment," decided Allison, putting away some figures he had prepared. "We'll make it a sliding scale, increasing each year with the earnings."

The grand duke considered that proposition gravely, and offered an amendment.

"After the first year," he said. "We shall begin with a large bonus, however."

Allison again put out of his mind certain figures he had prepared to suggest. Apparently the grand duke needed a large supply of immediate cash, and the annual payments thereafter would need to be decreased accordingly, with still another percentage deducted for profit on the duke's necessities.

"Let us first discuss the bonus," proposed Allison, and quite amiably they went into the arrangement, whereby Ivan Strolezky filched the only valuable railroad lines in his country from the control of its present graft-ridden possessors, and handed it over to the International Transportation company.

"By the way," said Allison. "How soon can we obtain possession?"

Ivan Strolezky put his hand in his beard again, and reflected.

"There is only one man who stands in the way," he calculated. "He will be removed immediately upon my return."

There was something so uncanny about this that even the practical Allison was shocked for an instant, and then he laughed.

"We have still much to learn from your country," he courteously confessed.

When Ivan Strolezky had gone, Allison went to his globe and drew a bright red line across the land of the frozen seas.

There came a famous diplomat a heavy blond man with a red face and big spectacles and a high, wide, round forehead.

"I do not know what you want," said the visitor, regarding Allison with a stolid stare. "I have come to see."

"I merely wish to chat international politics," returned Allison. "There is an old-time feud between you and your neighbors to the west."

"That is history," replied the visitor noncommittally. "We are now at peace."

"Never peace," denied Allison. "There will never be friendship between phlegmatism and mercurialism. You might rest for centuries with your neighbors to the west, but rest is not peace."

"Excuse me, but what do you mean?" and the visitor stared stolidly.

"In your affairs of mutual relationship with the land to the west, there are not less than a dozen causes upon which war could be started without difficulty," went on Allison. "In fact, you require perpetual diplomacy to prevent war with that country."

The visitor locked his thick fingers quietly together and kept on stolidly staring.

"You are about to have a war," Allison advised him.

"No, it is not true," and the visitor went so far, in his emphasis, as to unlock his fingers and rest one hand on the back of the other.

"I think I am a very fair prophet," said Allison easily. "I have made money by my prophecy. I have more money at my command at the present time than any man in the world, than any government; wealth beyond handling in mere currency. It can only be conveyed by means of checks. Let me show how easy it is to write them, and, drawing a blank book to him he wrote a check, and signed his name, and filled out the stub, and tore it out, and handed it to the visitor for inspection. The visitor was properly pleased with Allison's ease in penmanship.

"I see," was the comment, and the check was handed back. He drew his straight-crowned derby towards him.

"I have made a mistake," said Allison. "I have left off a cipher," and correcting this omission with a new check, he tore up the first one.

"I see," commented the visitor, and put the second check in his pocket.

That had required considerable outlay, but when Allison was alone, he went over to his globe and made another long red mark.

A neat-waisted man, with a goatee of carefully selected hairs and a luxuriant black mustache, called on Allison, and laid down his hat and his stick and his gloves, in a neat little

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