

The BALL of FIRE

By GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER and LILLIAN CHESTER

ILLUSTRATED BY C. D. RHODES

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

Howard again in the start night, still that whirl of exultation. It was somewhat chillier now, and Allison bundled her into the machine with rough tenderness. She felt the thrill of him as he sat beside her, and the firm strength with which he controlled the swiftly speeding runabout, was part her strength. They were kindred spirits, these two, soaring above the affairs of earth in the serene complacency of those who make trifles of vastness itself. They did not talk much, for they had not much to talk about. The details of a scheme so comprehensive as Allison's were not things to be explained, they were things to be seen in a vision. Once she asked him about the bringing of the foreign railroads into the combination, and he told her that this would only be accomplished by a political upheaval, which would take place next month, and would probably involve the whole of Europe. It was another detail; and it seemed quite natural. She was so interested that he told her all about his foreign visions.

In the park, Allison stopped at the little outlook house where they had climbed on that snowy night, and they stood there, with the stars above, the trees below, and the twinkling lights stretching out to the horizon, all alone above the world of civilization. Below sounded the clang of street cars, and far off to the left, high in the air there gleamed the lights of a curving L. train. That was a part of Allison's world which he had long since conquered a part which he already held in the hollow of his hand; and the fact that every moving thing which clung upon a track in all this vast panorama was under his dominion, served only to illustrate and make plain the marvel of the accomplishment which was now under way. Beyond that horizon lay another and still another, and in them all, wherever things moved or were transported, the lift of Allison's finger was to start and stop the wheels, to the uttermost confines of the earth! Oh, it was wonderful; wonderful! And she was part of it!

It was there that he proposed to her. It did not surprise her. She had known it when they had entered the park, and that this was the place.

He told her that all this empire was being bulled to lay at her feet, that she was the empress of it and he the emperor, but that their joy was to be not in the sway, not in the scepter and crown, but in the doing, and in the having done, and in the conceiving and having conceived.

Was this a cold painting of pomp and glory and advantage and reward? He added to it the fire of a lover and to that the force and mastery and compulsion of his dynamic power. She felt again the potent thrill of him, and the might and sweep and drive of him and with the hot, tumbling words of love in her ears, and her senses reel, and her mind in its whirling exultation, she felt between them a sympathy, and a union which it was not in human strength to deny! Something held her back, something made her withhold the word of promise, on the plea that she must have more time to think, to consider, to straighten out the tangle of her mind; but she suffered him to sweep her in his arms, and rain hot kisses upon her face, and to tell her, over and over and over and over that she belonged to him, for ever!

CHAPTER XXI.

Allison's Private and Particular Devil. The free and entirely uncurbed enjoyed an unusual treat. It had a sensation which did not need to be supported by a hectic imagination or a lurid vocabulary. Vedder court had been condemned for the use of the Municipal Transportation company! A new eight-track, double-deck tube was to be constructed through Crescent island to the mainland!

Grand climax! Through this tube and into Vedder court, at the platforms of the surface and L and subway cars, were to come the passenger trains of the new Atlantic-Pacific railroad, a line three hundred miles shorter than any now stretching between Broadway and the Golden Gate! Any reader of the daily press, of whom there are several, knows precisely what the free and entirely uncurbed did with this bit of simon-pure information. The glittering details began on the first page, turned on the second, continued on the fourth, jumped over to the seventh, and finished back among the real estate ads. It began early in the morning and it continued until late at night, fresh details piling upon each other in mad profusion, their importance limited only by the restrictions of type!

Extra! The trick by which the A.-P. ran through the mountains over the Inland Pacific track!

Extra, extra! The compulsion by which the Midcontinent was brought to complete the big gap in the new A.-P. system!

Tremendous extra! The contracts of freightage, subject strictly to the interstate commerce law, between

A.-P. and the cereal trust, the metal trust, the fuel trust, the cloth trust, and all the other iniquitous combinations in restraint of everything! Wow! Zowie! That was the hot one! The A.-P. was the main stem, and within thirteen seconds of the appearance on the streets of the tremendous extra, every other fragile branchlet of a railroad not under the immediate protection of the A.-P., was reduced to a shivel, and its stocks began to drop with the sickening plunge of an unopened parachute!

Gail Sargent kept Nanette on the rush for extras from the first yell on the streets, and she read every word, including the underlines on the miscellaneous portraits of Allison and the funny pi-lines which invariably occurred in the middle of the most interesting sentences.

It was true, all true! Here was the first step in Allison's tremendous project an accomplished fact. The rest of it would be gradually revealed, from day to day, as suited his needs, and the empire he had planned would spread, until its circle touched, and overlapped, and broke into an intricate webbing, over all the land and water of the earth! And she was to be the empress!

Was she? Through all the night she had battled that question, and the battle had left traces of darkness around her luminous eyes.

Late in the afternoon Jim Sargent came home, drawn, fagged, and with hollows under his eyes. He had a violent headache, and he looked ten years older. He walked slowly into the library where Mrs. Sargent and Mrs. Davies and Gail were discussing the future of Vedder court, and dropped into a chair.

Grace Sargent rang a bell instantly. When Jim felt that way, he needed a hot drink first of all.

"What is the matter?" she asked him, the creases of worry flashing into her brow.

"It's been a hard day," he explained, forcing himself, with an effort, to answer. Years of persistent experience had taught him to follow the line of least resistance. "There has been a panic on change. Railroads are going to smash all up and down the line. Allison's new A.-P. road, it's the star piracy of the century. Allison has brought into the railroad game the same rough-and-ready methods he used in his traction manipulations."

"Has your company been hurt, Jim?" asked his wife, fully prepared for the worst, and making up her mind to bear up bravely under it.

"Not yet," replied Sargent, and he passed his hand over his brow. He was already making a tremendous effort to brace himself for tomorrow's ordeal. "I escaped today by an accident. By some mistake the Towanda Valley was mentioned as belonging to the new A.-P. combination. Of course I didn't correct it, but tomorrow they'll know."

"Mr. Allison was responsible for that statement," Gail serenely informed her uncle. "He promised he'd take care of you."

"Great guns!" exploded her uncle. "What did you know about this thing?"

"All of it," smiled Gail. She had known that Allison would keep his word, but it gave her a strange sense of relief that he had done so.

Her Aunt Helen turned to her with a commanding eye; but Gail merely dimpled.

"Of course I couldn't say anything," went on Gail. "It was all in confidence. Isn't it glorious, Uncle Jim!"

"You wouldn't have thought so if you'd been down town today," responded her uncle, trying again to erase from his brow the damage which had been done to his nerves. "They wanted to mob Allison! He has cut the ground from under the entire railroad business of the United States! Their stocks have deflated an aggregate of billions of dollars, and the slump is permanent! He has bankrupted a host of men, rifled the pockets of a million poor investors; he has demoralized the entire transportation commerce of the United States; and he gave no one the show of a rat in a trap!"

"Isn't that business?" asked Gail, the red spots beginning to come into her cheeks.

"Not quite!" snapped her Uncle Jim. "Fiction has made that the universal idea, but there are decent men in business. The majority of them are, even in railroading. Most roads are organized and conducted for the sole purpose of carrying freight and passengers at a profit for the stockholders, and spectacular stock jobbing deals are the exception rather than the rule."

"Has Mr. Allison been more unfair than others who have made big consolidations?" demanded Gail, again aware of the severely inquiring eye of Aunt Helen.

"Rotten!" replied her uncle, with an emphasis in which there was much of personal feeling. "He has taken tricky advantage of every unprotected loophole. He won from the Inland Pacific, at the mere cost of trackage, a passage which the Inland built through

the mountains by brilliant engineering and at an almost countless cost."

"Isn't that accounted clever?" asked Gail.

"So is the work of a confidence man or a wire-tapper!" was the retort. "But they are sent to jail just the same. The Inland created something, it built, with brains and money and force, and sincere commercial enterprise, a line which won it a well-earned supremacy of the Pacific trade. It was entitled to keep it; yet Allison, by making with it a tricky contract for the restricted use of the key to its supremacy, uses that very device to destroy it. He has bankrupted, or will have done so, a two thousand mile railroad system, which is of tremendous commercial value to the country, in order to use a hundred miles of its track and remove it from competition! Allison has created nothing. He has only seized, by stealth, what others have created. He is not even a commercial highwayman. He is a commercial pickpocket!"

"Gail had paled by now.

"Tell me one thing," she demanded. "Wouldn't any of the railroad men have employed this trick if they had been shrewd enough to think of it?"

"A lot of them," was the admission, after an awkward pause. "Does that make it morally and ethically correct?"

"You may be prejudiced, Jim," interpolated Aunt Helen, moving closer to Gail. "If they are all playing the game that way, I don't see why Mr. Allison shouldn't receive applause for clever play."

"You bet I'm prejudiced!" snarled Sargent, overcoming his weariness and pacing up and down the library floor. "He came near playing my road the same trick he did the Inland Pacific. He secured control of the L. & C., because it has a twenty-year contract for passage over fifty miles of our track. He'd throw the rest of our line away like a peanut hull, if he had not promised Gail to protect me. I'm an object of charity!"

"Oh!" It was a scarcely audible cry of pain. Aunt Helen moved closer, and patted her hand. Gail did not notice the action.

"Why did he make you that promise, Gail?" demanded her uncle, turning on her suddenly, with a physical motion so much like her father's that she was startled.

"He wants me to marry him," faltered Gail.

Aunt Grace sat down by the other side of Gail.

"Have you accepted him, dear?" she asked.

There was a lump in Gail's throat. She could not answer!

"She'll never marry him with my consent!" stormed her Uncle Jim. "Nor with Miles! The fellow's an unscrupulous scoundrel! He's made of cruelty from his toes to his hair! He



When Jim Felt That Way He Needed a Hot Drink.

stops at nothing! He even robbed Market Square church of six million dollars!"

Gail's head suddenly went up in startled inquiry. She wanted still to defend Allison; but she dreaded what was to come.

"We wouldn't sell him Vedder court at his price; so he took it from us at six million less than he originally offered. He did that by a trick, too."

All three women looked up at him in breathless interest.

"He had the city condemn Vedder court," went on Sargent. "If he had condemned it outright for the Municipal Transportation company, he would have had to pay us about the amount of his original offer; but his own private and particular devil put the idea into his head that the Vedder court tenements should be torn down anyhow, for the good of the public! So he had the buildings condemned first, destroying six million dollars' worth of value; then he had the ground condemned! Tim Corman probably got about a million dollars for that humanitarian job!"

A wild fit of sobbing startled them all.

CHAPTER XXII.

Love.

Allison swept Gail into his arms, and rained hot kisses upon her, crushing her closely to him. She offered no resistance, and the very fact that she held so supinely in his arms, made Allison release her sooner than he might otherwise have done. She had known that this experience must

come, that no look or gesture or word of hers could ward it off.

"You must never do that again," she told him, stepping back from him, and regaining her breath with an effort. She had lingered in the front parlors to receive him before her Uncle Jim should know that he was in the house, and she had led him straight into the little tete-a-tete reception room. She meant to free herself quickly.

"Why not?" he laughed, and advanced toward her, taking her attitude lightly, ascribing her action to a girlish whim, confident in his power over her. He meant to dispose of her coyness by taking her in his arms again. She belonged to him.

"Mr. Allison," The tone was cold enough, and deadly in earnest enough to arrest him.

"What's the matter, Gail?" he protested, ready to humer her, to listen to what she had to say, to smooth matters out.

"You have no right," she told him. "Yes I have," he jovially assured her. "I hope I don't have to wait until after marriage for a kiss. If that's the case I'll take you out and marry you right now."

There was an infection in his laugh, contagion in the assumption that all was right between them, and that any difference was one which could be, straightened out with jolly patience, and Gail, though her determination would not have changed, might have softened toward him, had she not seen in his face a look which paled her lips. Ever since last night he had anticipated her, had rejoiced in his possession of her, had dreamed on the time when he should take her for his own; and his eyes were cloudy with his thoughts of her.

"Let us have a clear understanding, Mr. Allison." She was quite erect, and looking him directly in the eyes. Her own were deep and troubled, and the dark trace which had been about them in the morning had deepened. "I told you last night that I should need time in which to decide; I have decided. I shall not marry you."

He returned her gaze for a moment, and his brow clouded.

"You've changed since last night," he charged her.

"Possibly," she admitted. "It is more likely, however, that I have merely crystallized. I prefer not to discuss it." She saw on his face the growing instinct to humiliate her.

"You must discuss it," he insisted. "Last night when I took you in my arms you made no objection. I was justified in doing it again tonight. You're not a fool. You knew from the first that I wanted you, and you encouraged me. Now, I'm entitled to know what has made the change."

The telltale red spots began to appear in her cheeks.

"You," she told him. "Last night, your scheme of world empire seemed a wonderful thing to me; but since then I've discovered it cannot be built without dishonesty and cruelty; and you've used both."

His brow cleared. He laughed heartily.

"You've been reading the papers. There isn't a man in the financial field who wouldn't do everything I've done; and be proud of it. I can make you see this in the right light, Gail."

"It's a proof of your moral callousness that you think so," she informed him. "Can you make me see it in the right light that you even used me, of whom you pretended to think sacredly enough to marry, to help you in your most despicable trick of all?"

"Look here," he protested. "That would be impossible! You're misinformed."

"I wish I were," she returned. "Unfortunately, it is a matter of direct knowledge. You caused Vedder court to be torn down because I thought it should be wiped out of existence, and in the process you cheated Market Square church out of six million dollars!"

He could not have been more shocked if she had struck him.

"I knew you did not understand," he kindly reproved her. "I didn't want those old buildings. They couldn't have sold them for the wreckage price. When you suggested that they should be torn down, I saw it. They were a public menace, and the public was right with the movement. The condemnation price will cover all they could get from the property from any source. You see, you don't understand business," and his tone was forgiving.

"I'd have been foolish to pay six million dollars for something I couldn't use. You know, Gail, when the building commissioners came to look over those buildings, they were shocked! Some of them wouldn't have stood up another year. It was only the political influence of Clark and Chisholm and a few of the other big guns of the congregation, which kept them from being condemned long ago. You shouldn't interfere in business. It always creates trouble between man and wife," and he advanced to put his arm around her, and soothe her.

The hand with which she warded him off was effective this time. She stared at him in wonder. It seemed inconceivable that the moral sense of any intelligent man should be so blunted.

"There's another reason," she told him, despairing of making him realize that he had done anything out of the way. "I do not love you. I could not."

For just a moment he was checked; then his jaws set.

"That is something you must learn. You have young notions of love, gleaned from poetry and fiction. You conceive it to be an ideal stage of existence, a mysterious something almost too delicate for perception by the human senses. I will teach you love, Gail! Look," and he stretched up his firm arm, as if in his grip he already

held the reins of the mighty empire, he was hewing out for her. "Love is a thing of strength, of power, of desire which shakes, and burns, and consumes with fever! Do you suppose that, with such love driving me on, any objection which you may make will stop me? No! I set out to attain you as the summit of my desire, the only thing in this world I want, and will have!"

Again that great fear of him possessed Gail. She feared many things. She feared that, in spite of her determination, he would still have her, and in that possibility alone lay the other fears so gruesome that she did not dare see them clearly! She knew that she must retain absolute control of herself.

"I shall not discuss the matter any further," she quietly said, and walking



The Hand With Which She Warded Him Off Was Effective Now.

straight towards the door, passed by him quite within the reach of his arm without either looking at him or away from him. Something within his own strength respected her, in spite of his. "I have said all that I have to say."

"So have I," he replied, coming closer to her as she stood in the doorway, and he gazed down at her with eyes in which there was insolent determination, and cruelty. "I have said that I mean to have you, and I will!"

Without a word, she went into the hall. He followed her, and took his hat.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

WOULD SERVE TWO PURPOSES

Proposal of Miss Butterfly to Go as Army Nurse Met Little Opposition From Mother.

The modern well-to-do mother said to her daughter:

"Have you scattered everything about your room until it has a hopeless air of confusion?"

"I have, mother."

"Have you taken all the towels out of the linen closet and strewn them over the bathroom floor?"

"Yes, mother."

"Have you had a lot of extra things charged to your dear papa that he doesn't know about?"

"Yes, mamma."

"And exceeded your allowance?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Then don't you think you ought to do something serious?"

"I do, mamma, and I think it would be just beautiful to be a Red Cross nurse. You know, I read aloud quite well, and it would be so delightful to sit by the bedside of those charming soldiers and smooth their brows, and it would help to bring out my character, wouldn't it, mamma?"

Her dear mother was thoughtful for a moment. Then she replied sweetly: "Yes, darling; and, besides, it would give us such a rest!"—Life.

Education City Girls Miss.

City girls of any class rarely if ever have any domestic education or training, unless they get it in their schools. They are taught the boundaries of the United States and the source of the Nile; they learn that if you buy products at a certain price and sell at a higher you make money but what to do with the money when you make it no one discusses. It is all making money or things, never the right use of money or things, that is impressed upon boys and girls from their primary class on to the bitter end. The children of well-to-do families in smaller places have opportunities for education in the real things of life which these others often lack, but since our grandmother's day education and training in home affairs within the home walls has been neglected to a dangerous degree—Woman's World.

Photograph of Meteor Trail.

Perhaps the most remarkable photograph of a meteor trail that has yet been taken is reproduced in a recent issue of L'Astronomie. The meteor in question was seen from many points in South Africa about 5 p. m. on June 2, 1912—i. e., in broad daylight—and the trail that it left behind it remained visible until some time after sunset, becoming more and more conspicuous as the daylight faded. The photograph in question, which shows the trail as an immense serpentine ribbon in the western sky, was taken at Tempe, Orange Free State, about an hour after the passage of the meteor.

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