

The Ball of Fire

By GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER and LILLIAN CHESTER

ILLUSTRATED BY C. D. RHODES

CHAPTER XXV.

Gall Breaks a Promise.

The Whitecap would have been under way except for the delay of the gay little Mrs. Babbitt and her admiring husband, who sent word that they could not arrive until after dinner, so the yacht, long and low and slender and glistening white, lay in the middle of the Hudson river, while her guests, bundled warmly against the crisp breeze, gathered in the forward shelter deck and watched the beginnings of the early sunset.

"I like Doctor Boyd in his yachting cap," commented Lucile, as that young man joined them, with a happy mother on his arm.

"It takes away that deadly clerical effect," laughed Arly. "His long coat makes him look like the captain, and he's ever so much more handsome."

"I don't mind being the topic of discussion so long as I'm present," commented Rev. Smith Boyd, glancing around the group as if in search of someone.

"I rather restricts the conversation," Mrs. Helen Davies observed.

The cherub-cheeked Marion Kenneth glanced wistfully over at the rail where Dick Rodley, vying with the sunset in splendor, stood chatting with easy Ted Teasdale and the stiff Gerald Fosland.

"Where's Gail?" demanded the cherub-cheeked one.

"It's time that your lady was up on deck," decided Arly, and rose.

"She's probably taking advantage of the opportunity to dress for dinner," surmised Mrs. Davies. "In fact, I think it's a good idea for all of us," but the sunset was too potent to leave for a few moments, and she sat still.

Where indeed was Gail? In her beautiful little curly maple bed, and digging two small fists into the maple-brown coverlet. The pallor of the morning had not yet left her face, and there were circles around the brown eyes which gave them a wan pathos; there was a crease of pain and worry, too, in the white brow.

Gail had come to the greatest crisis in her life. So far she had told no one of what had occurred that morning. When she had rushed into the rector's study he had sprung up, and seeing the fright in her face and that she was tottering and ready to fall, he had caught her in his strong arms, and she had clung trustfully to him, half faint, until wild sobs had come to her relief. Even in her incoherence, however, she realized that there was danger, not only to her but to everyone she loved, in the man from whom she had run away; and she could not tell the young rector any more than that she had been frightened. It was strange how instinctively she had headed for Rev. Smith Boyd's study; strange then, but not now. In that moment of flying straight to the protection of his arms, she knew something about herself, and about Rev. Smith Boyd, too. She knew why she had refused those others who had wooed her: Willis Cunningham and Houston Van Ploon and Dick Rodley; poor Dick and Allison and all the others. She frankly and complacently admitted to herself that she loved Rev. Smith Boyd, but she put that additional worry into the background. It could be fought out later. She would have been very happy about it if she had had time, although she could see no end to that situation but unhappiness.

Where could she turn for advice, or whom could she get to share in the burden which she felt must surely crush her. There was no one. It was a burden she must bear alone, unless she could devise some plan of effective action, and the sense of how far she had been responsible for this condition of affairs was one which oppressed her, and humbled her, and deepened the circles about her wee-smitten eyes.

Gail took her fists from their pressure into the brown coverlet, and held her temples between the finger tips of either hand; and the brown hair, springing into wayward ringlets from the salt breeze which blew in at the half-opened window, rippled down over her slender hands, as if to soothe and comfort them. She had been wasting her time in introspection and self-analysis when there was need for decisive action! Fortunately she had a respite until Monday morning, in the past few days of huge commercial movements which so vitally interested her, she had become acquainted with business methods, to a certain extent, and she knew that nothing could be done on Saturday afternoon or Sunday; therefore Uncle Jim was safe for two nights and a day. Then Allison could deny the connection of her Uncle Jim's road with the A.-P., and the beginning of the destruction of the Sargent family would be thoroughly accomplished! She had been given a thorough grasp of how easily that could be done. What could she do in two nights and a day? It was past her ingenuity to conceive. She must have help!

But from whom could she receive it? Tod Boyd? The same reason which made her think of him first made her

swiftly place him last. Her Uncle Jim? Too hot-headed. Her Aunt Grace? Too inexperienced. Her Aunt Helen? Too conventional. Lucile, Ted, Dick? She laughed. Arly?

There was a knock at the door, and Arly herself appeared.

"Selfish," chided Arly. "We're all wanting you."

"That's comforting," smiled Gail. "I have just been being all alone in the world, on the most absolutely deserted island of which you can conceive. Arly, sit down. I want to tell you something."

"The black hair and the brown hair cuddled close together, while Gail, her tongue once loosened, poured out in a torrent all the pent-up misery which had been accumulating within her for the past tempestuous weeks; and Arly, her eyes glistening with the excitement of it all, kept her exclamations of surprise and fright and indignation and horror, and everything else, strictly to such low monosyllables as would not impede the gasping narration.

"I'd like to kill him!" said Arly, in a low voice of startling intensity, and jumping to her feet she paced up and down the confines of the little stateroom. Among all the other surprises of recent events, there was none more striking than this vast change in the usually cool and sarcastic Arly, who had not, until her return from Gail's home, permitted herself an emotion in two years.

"The only way in which that person can be prevented from attacking your Uncle Jim, which would be his first step, is to attack him before he can do anything," said Arly, pacing up and down, her fingers clasped behind her slender back, her black brows knotted, her graceful head bent toward the floor.

"He is too powerful," protested Gail. "That makes him weak," returned Arly quickly. "In every great power there is one point of great weakness. Tell me again about this tremendously big world monopoly."

Patiently, and searching her memory for details, Gail recited over again all which Allison had told her about his wonderful plan of empire; and even now, angry and humiliated and terror-stricken as she was, Gail could not repress a feeling of admiration for the bigness of it. It was that which had impressed her in the beginning.

"It's wonderful," commented Arly, catching a trace of that spirit of the exultation which hangs upon the unfolding of fairyland; and she began to pace the floor again. "Why, Gail, it is the most colossal piece of thievery the world has ever known!" And she walked in silence for a time. "That is the thing upon which we can attack him. We are going to stop it."

Gail rose, too.

"How?" she asked. "Arly, we couldn't, just we two girls!"

"Why not?" demanded Arly, stopping in front of her. "Any plan like that must be so full of criminal crookedness that exposure alone is enough to put an end to it."

"Exposure," faltered Gail, and struggled automatically with a life-long principle. "It was told to me in confidence."

Arly looked at her in astonishment. "I could shake you," she declared, and instead put her arm around Gail. "Did that person betray no confidence when he came to your uncle's house this morning? Moreover, he told you this merely to overawe you with the glitter of what he had done. He made that take the place of love! Confidence! I'll never do anything with so much pleasure in my life as to betray yours right now! If you don't expose that person, I will! If there's any way we can damage him, I intend to see that it is done; and if there's any way after that to damage him again and again, I want to do it!"

For the first time in that miserable day, Gail felt a thrill of hope, and Arly, at that moment, had, to her, the aspect of a colossal figure, an angel of brightness in the night of her despair! She felt that she could afford to sob now, and she did it.

"Do you suppose that would save Uncle Jim?" she asked, and they had both finished a highly comforting time together.

"It will save everybody," declared Arly.

"I hope so," pondered Gail. "But we can't do it ourselves, Arly. Whom shall we get to help us?"

The smile on Arly's face was a positive illumination for a moment, and then she laughed.

"Gerald," she replied. "You don't know what a dear he is! and she rang for a cabin boy."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Gerald Fosland Makes a Speech. Gerald Fosland, known to be so formal that he had once dressed to answer an emergency call from a friend at the hospital, because the message came in at six o'clock, surprised his guests by appearing before them, in his driving coat and with his motor cap in his hand.

"Sorry," he informed them, with a

stiff bow, "but an errand of such importance that it cannot be delayed, causes Mrs. Fosland and myself to return to the city immediately for an hour or so. I am sincerely apologetic, and I trust that you will have a jolly dinner."

"Is Gail going with you?" inquired the alert Mrs. Helen Davies, observing Gail in the gangway adjusting her furs.

"She has to chaperon me, while Gerald is busy," Arly glibly explained. "You're it, Aunt Grace. You and Uncle Jim have to be hosts. Good-by!" and she sailed out to the deck, followed by the still troubled Gail, who managed to accomplish the laughing adieu for which Arly had set the precedent.

A swift ride in the launch, in the cool night air, to the landing; a brisk walk to the street; then Gerald, having seen the ladies safe under shelter, even if it were but the roof of a night-hawk taxi, stopped at the first saloon. There he phoned half a dozen messages. There were four eager young men waiting in the reception room of the Fosland house, when Gerald's party arrived, and three more followed them up the steps.

Gerald aided in divesting the ladies of their wraps, and slipped his own big top coat into the hands of William, and saw to his tie and the set of his waistcoat and the smoothness of his hair, before he stalked into the reception parlor and bowed stiffly.

"Gentlemen," he observed, giving his mustache one last smoothing, "first of all, have you brought with you the written guarantees which I required from your respective chiefs, that, in whatsoever comes from the information I am about to give you, the names of your informants shall, under no circumstances, appear in print?"

One luckless young man, a fat-cheeked one, with a pucker in the corner of his lips where his cigar should have been, was unable to produce the necessary document, and he was under a scrutiny too close to give him a chance to write it.

"Sorry," announced Gerald, with polite contrition. "As this is a very strict condition, I must ask you to leave the room while I address the remaining gentlemen."

The remaining gentlemen, of whom there were now eleven, grinned appreciatively. Hickey would have been the best newspaper man in New York if he were not such a careless slob. He was so good that he was the only man from the Planet. The others had sent two and three, for Gerald's message, while very simple, had been most effective. He had merely announced that he was prepared to provide them with an international sensation, involving some hundreds of billions of dollars—and he had given his right name!

"Hold the stuff till I telephone," begged Hickey. "Say, if I get that written guaranty up here in fifteen minutes, will it do?"

Gerald looked him speculatively in the eye.

"If you telephone, and can then assure me, on your word of honor, that the document I require shall be in the house before you leave, I shall permit you to remain," he decreed; and Hickey looked him quite soberly in the eye for half a minute.

"I'll have it here all right," he decided, and sprang for the telephone, and came back in three minutes with his word of honor. They could hear him, from the library, yelling, from the time he gave the number until he hung up the receiver, and if there was ever urgency in a man's voice, it was in the voice of Hickey.

Gerald Fosland took a commanding position in the corner of the room, where he could see the countenances of each of the eager young gentlemen present. He stood behind a chair, with his hands on the back of it, in his favorite position for responding to a toast.

"Gentlemen: Edward E. Allison is about to complete a transportation system encircling the globe. The acquisition of the foreign railroads will be made possible only by a war, which is already arranged. The war, which will be between Germany and France, will begin within a month. France, unable to raise a war fund otherwise, will sell her railroads. The Russian line is already being taken from its present managers, and will be turned over to Allison's world syndicate within a week. The important steamship lines will become involved in financial difficulties, which have already been set afoot in England. Following these events will come a successful rebellion in India, and the independence of all the British colonies.

"You will probably require some tangible evidence that these large plans are on the way to fulfillment. I call your attention to the fact that, last week, the Russian duma began a violent agitation over the removal of Olaf Petrov, who was the controller of the entire Russian railroad system. Day before yesterday Petrov was unfortunately assassinated, and the agitation in the duma subsided. This morning I read that France is greatly incensed over a diplomatic breach in the German war office; and it is commented that the breach is one which cannot possibly be healed. Kindly take note of the following facts: From the first to the eighth of this month, Baron von Slachten, who is directly responsible for Germany's foreign relations, was seen in this city at the Fencing club, under the incognito of Henry Brokaw. Chevalier Duchambeau, director of the combined banking interests of France, was here in that same week, and was seen at the Montparnasse Cercle. He bore the name of Andre Tirez. The Grand Duke Jan of Russia was here as Ivan Strolecky. James Wellington Hodge, the master of the banking system of

practically all the world, outside the United States, was here as E. E. Chalmers. Prince Nito of Japan, Yu-Hip-Lun of China and Count Cassioni of Rome were here at the same time; and they all called on Edward E. Allison.

"Furthermore, gentlemen, I will give you now the names of the eight financiers, who, with Edward E. Allison, are interested in the formation of the International Transportation company, which proposes to control the commerce of the world. These gentlemen are Joseph G. Clark, Eldridge Babbitt, W. T. Chisholm, Richard Haverman, Arthur Grandin, Robert E. Taylor, A. L. Vance. I would suggest that, if you disturb these gentlemen in the manner which I have understood you to be quite capable of doing, you might secure from some one of them a trace of corroboration of the things I have said. This is all." He paused and bowed stiffly. "Gentlemen, I wish to add one word. I thank you for your kind attention, and I desire to say that, while I have violated tonight several of the rules which I had believed that I would always hold unbroken, I have done so in the interest of a justice which is greater than all other considerations. Gentlemen, good-night."

"Have you a good photograph handy?" asked the squib, awakening from his trance.

Nine young gentlemen put the squib right about that photograph. Hickey was lost in the fields of Elysian phan-

tasies, and the red-headed begger was still writing and stuffing loose pages in his pocket, and the one with the beard was making a surreptitious sketch of Gerald Fosland, to use on the first plausible occasion. He had in mind a special article on wealthy clubmen at home.

"Company Incorporated?" inquired Hickey, who was the most practical poet of his time.

"I should consider that a pertinent question," granted Gerald. "Gentlemen, you will pardon me for a moment," and he bowed himself from the room.

He had meant to ask that one simple question and return, but in Ariene's blue room, where sat two young women, in a high state of quiver, he had to make his speech all over again, verbatim, and detail each interruption, and describe how they received the news, and answer several times, the variously couched question, if he really thought their names would not be mentioned. It was fifteen minutes before he returned, and he found the twelve young gentlemen suffering with an intolerable itch to be gone. Five of the young men were in the library, quarreling, in decently low voices, over the use of the phone. The imperturbable Hickey, however, had it, and he held on, handing in a story, embellished and colored and frilled and beribboned as he went, which would make the cylinders on the presses curl up.

"I am sorry to advise you, gentlemen, that I am unable to tell you if the International Transportation company is, or is about to be, incorporated," reported Gerald gravely, and he signaled to William to open the front door.

As the rapt and enchanted Hickey passed out of the door, a grip like a pair of ice tongs caught him by the arm, and drew him gently but firmly back.

"Sorry," observed Gerald, "but you don't go."

"Hasn't that d—d boy got here yet?" demanded Hickey, in an immediate mood for assassination. He was a large young man, and defective messenger boys were the bane of his existence.

"William says not," replied Gerald. "For the love of Mike, let me go!" pleaded Hickey. "This stuff has to be handled while it's still sizzling! It's the biggest story of the century! That boy'll be here any minute."

"Sorry," regretfully observed Gerald; "but I shall be compelled to detain you until he arrives."

"Can't do it!" returned the desperate Hickey. "I have to go!" and he made a dash for the door.

Once more the ice tongs clutched him by the shoulder and sank into the flesh.

"If you try that again, young man, I shall be compelled to thrash you," stated the host, again mildly.

Hickey looked at him, very thoughtfully. Gerald was a slim-waisted gentleman, but he had broad shoulders and

a depressingly calm eye, and he probably exercised twenty minutes every morning by an open window, after his cold plunge, and took a horseback ride, and walked a lot, and played polo, and a few other effete things like that. Hickey sat down and waited, and though the night was cold, he mopped his brow until the messenger came!

CHAPTER XXVII.

Chicken, or Steak?

On the outbreak of a bygone rudeness between the United States and Spain, one free and entirely uncurbed metropolitan paper, unable to adequately express its violent emotions on the subject, utilized its whole front page with the one word "War!" printed in red ink.

Now, however, the free and entirely uncurbed, having risen most gloriously in the past to every emergency, no matter how great, positively floundered in the very wealth of its opportunities.

Saturday night, however, saw no late extras. The "story" was too big to touch without something more tangible than the word of even so substantial a man as Gerald Fosland; and long before any of the twelve eager young gentlemen had reached the office, the scout brigade, hundreds strong, were sniffing over every trail and yelping over every scent.

Until three o'clock in the morning every newspaper office in New York was a scene of violent gloom. The world's biggest sensation was in those offices, and they couldn't touch it with a pair of tongs! The deterrent was that the interests involved were so large that one might as well sit on a keg of gunpowder and light it, as to make the slightest error. The gentlemen mentioned as the organizers of the International Transportation company collectively owned about all the money and all the power and all the law in the gloriously independent United States of America; and if they got together on any one subject, such as the squashing of a newspaper, for instance, something calm and impressive was likely to happen. On the other hand, if the interesting story the free and entirely uncurbed had in its possession were true, the squashing would be reversed, and the freedom and entirely uncurbedness would be still more firmly seated than ever, which is the palladium of our national liberties; and heaven be good to us.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

ESCORT COULDN'T SEE JOKE

Incident at Coney Island That Probably Taught Confetti Thrower a Lesson He Needed.

A large well-dressed man and a handsome woman were in the Mardi Gras crowd at Coney Island, New York. They had been waiting some time for the parade and the woman began to yawn. Now yawning is a very unladylike performance in public, and rather a dangerous one in a Coney Island crowd, for while the woman had her mouth wide open and was getting all the worth there is to be had out of a good healthy yawn a young man bent on mischief threw a handful of confetti right pump into the orifice. The woman coughed and spluttered, and the hoodlum shrieked with delight. Those about him thought it was a grand joke, too—all but the woman's escort. He reached out one powerful arm and grabbed the skylarkling youth by the shoulder. Then he brought his fist down on the young man's straw hat, crushing it and driving his head through the crown and partly over his ears. Next he turned the young man around and kicked him with all the force and swiftness that outraged dignity and fierce anger together with great strength afforded if that youth recovers from that kick and throws confetti again he will be careful in picking his target. And maybe, the handsome woman if she yawns again in a hurry will not do so in such a mob as turns out to see a Coney Island celebration.

With the Essayists.

Of all the displays of art the essay is the most undefinable, the most subtle, because it has no schema, no program.

It does not set out to narrate or to prove; it has no dramatic purpose, no imaginative theme; its essence is a sympathetic self-revelation, just as in talk a man may speak frankly of his own experiences and feelings, and yet avoid any suspicion of egotism, if his confidences are designed to illustrate the thoughts of others rather than to provide a contrast and a self-glorification.

The essayist gives rather than claims; he compares rather than praises. He is led by his interest in others to be interested in himself, and it is as a man rather than as an individual that he takes the stage.

He must be surprised at the discoveries he makes about himself, rather than complacent, he must condense his own discrepancies rather than exult in them.

Healthy Reaction.

Fortunate are they who react healthily. They have an easy path through life, no matter what they may meet. The habit of reacting healthily from the small trials gives them power to vanquish the big tests, even the calamities.

And pitiful are they who react unhealthily. Every day of their lives they inflict torment on themselves, no matter how favored they may be by fortune. Their practice of reacting unhealthily from small things makes them easy victims of the big trials.

And it is sometimes said of a man that he drinks like a fish—but he imbibes a different fluid.



There He Phoned Half a Dozen Messages.

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