

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, says it is apparently a lucrative business enterprise. Allison takes Gail riding in his motor car.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

Gail, too, was disturbed. While she had laughed to cover the embarrassment of her mishap, she had been quite collected enough to thank Allison for his ready aid; but she had felt the thrill of that tensed arm, and it had awakened in her mind an entirely new vein of puzzled conjecture.

Gravity with a man invariably leads him back to the consideration of his leading joy in life, business, and the first thing Allison knew he was indulging in quite a unique weakness, for him, he was bragging! Not exactly flat-footed; but, with tolerably strong insinuation, he gave her to understand that the consolidation of the immense traction interests of New York was about as tremendous an undertaking as she could comprehend, and that, having attained so dizzy a summit, he felt entitled to rest himself to lighter frivolity, to enjoy life and gayety and frivolity, to rest as it were, upon his laurels.

Gail was amused, as she always was when men of strong achievement dropped into this weakness to interest her. She did appreciate and admire his no doubt tremendous accomplishment, it was only his naïveté which annoyed her, and to save her she could not resist the wicked little impulse to tease him. To his suggestion that he could now lead a merry life because he was entitled to rest upon his laurels, she had merely answered, "Why?"

He dropped into a silence so dense that the thump was almost audible, and she was contrite. She had pricked him deeper than she knew, however. She had not understood how gigantic the man's ambitions had been, nor how vain he was of his really marvelous progress. After all, why should he pause, when he had such power in him? She did well to speak slightly of any achievement made by a man of such proved ability. New ambitions sprang up in him. The next time he talked business with her he would have something startling under way; something to compel her respect.

CHAPTER III.

The Change in the Rector's Eyes. The grand privilege of Mrs. Jim Sargent's happy life was to worry all she liked. Just now, as she sat on the seven chairs and the four benches of the mahogany paneled library, amid a wealth of serious-minded sculpture and painting and rare old prints, she was bathed in a new ecstasy of painful enjoyment. She was worried about Gail! It was six-thirty now, and Gail had not yet returned from Lucile's.

Mrs. Helen Davies, dressed for dinner with as much care as if she had been about to attend one of the unattainable Mrs. Waverly-Gaites's annuals, came sweeping down the marble stairs with the calm aplomb of one whom nothing can disturb and, lorgnette in hand, turned into the library. "I'm so glad you came down, Helen!" breathed Mrs. Sargent, with a sigh of relief. "I'm so worried! Gail hasn't come home from Lucile's!"

Mrs. Helen Davies sat beneath the statue of Minerva presenting wisdom to the world, and arranged the folds of her gown to the most graceful advantage.

"You shouldn't expect her on time, coming from Lucile's," she observed, with a smile of proper pride. She was immensely fond of her daughter Lucile; but she preferred to live with her sister. "I have a brilliant idea, Grace. Call telephone," and without seeming to exert herself in the least, she glided from her picturesque high-backed Flemish chair, and sat at the library table, and drew the phone to her, and scoured her daughter's number.

"Hello, Lucile," she called, in the most friendly of tones. "You'd better send Gail home, before your Aunt Grace develops wrinkles."

Mrs. Helen Davies listened to the answer, a sparkle in her black eyes.

"Where is she?" interrupted Mrs. Sargent, holding her thumb.

"Out driving," reported sister Helen.

"Have you sent your invitations for the house party, Lucile?" and she disappeared.

STRICTLY MAN OF HIS WORD

Sisworth Squeezer Might Be "Near," but No One Could Accuse Him of Untruth.

It may have been true that Sisworth Squeezer was so mean that he robbed other people's babies' banks because he had no baby of his own, but it was also true that he was strictly a man of his word.

Never had he told an untruth, and as for lying, that would have been a physical impossibility.

As our story opens, Squeezer is walking along Bayrum boulevard with the fair Esmerlina, who has just made him the happiest tightwad in the world by promising to become his'n.

Then four raindrops fell in rapid succession on Sisworth Squeezer's nose.

"There's only one explanation," cried Esmerlina. "It must be raining, Darling. I have on my new crepe de Hymath—it will be ruined! Call a taxi!"

"I will!" he promised before he re-

cused that important subject until Mrs. Sargent's thumb ached.

"With whom is Gail driving, and where?" asked sister Grace, anxious for detail.

Mrs. Helen Davies touched all of her fingertips together in front of her on the library table, and beamed on Grace.

"Don't worry about Gail," she smilingly advised. "She is driving with Edward E. Allison. He is the richest bachelor in New York, though not socially prominent. No one has ever been able to interest him. I predict for Gail a brilliant future, and she moved over contentedly to her favorite contrast with Minerva.

"Gail would attract anyone," returned Mrs. Sargent complacently, and then a little crease came in her brow. "I wonder where she met him."

"At the vestry meeting, Lucile said."

"Oh," and Mrs. Sargent's brow cleared instantly. "Jim introduced them. I wonder where Jim is?"

The door opened, and Jim Sargent came in, wiping the snow from his stubby mustache before he distributed his customary hearty greetings to the family.

"Where's Gail?" he wanted to know.

"Out driving with Edward E. Allison," answered both ladies.

"Still?" inquired Jim Sargent, and then he laughed. "She's a clever girl. Smart as a whip! She nearly started a riot in the vestry."

"Was Willis Cunningham there?" inquired Mrs. Davies interestedly.

"Took me in a corner after the meeting and told me that Gail bore a remarkable resemblance to the Pratielli Madonna, and might be called."

The telephone bell rang, and Sargent, who could not train himself to wait for a servant to sift the messages, answered it immediately, with his characteristic explosive-first-syllabled.

"Hello!"

"Oh, it's you, Uncle Jim," called a buoyant voice. "Mr. Allison and I have



Rev. Smith Boyd Came Out With His Most Active Vestryman.

found the most enchanting roadhouse in the world, and we're going to take dinner here. It's all right, isn't it?"

"Certainly!" he replied, equally buoyant. "Enjoy yourself, Chubby," and he hung up the receiver.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Davies, in a tone distinctly chill. She had a premonition that Jim Sargent had done something foolish. He seemed so pleased.

"Gail won't be home," he announced carelessly, starting for the stairs. "She's dining with Allison at some roadhouse."

"Unchaperoned!" gasped Mrs. Davies.

"She's all right, Helen," remarked Jim, starting upstairs. "Allison's a fine fellow."

"But what will he think of Gail?" protested Helen. "That sort of unconventionally has gone clear out of Jim, you'll have to get back that number!"

"Sorry," regretted Jim. "Can't do it. Against the telephone rules," and he went upstairs, positively humming.

The two ladies looked at each other, and sat down in the valley of the shadows of gloom. There was nothing to be done!

It was not until nine o'clock that

membered that, being strictly a man of his word, he would have to make good, cost what it may.

"Wait under the protection of this telegraph pole," he told her, and dashed off. Three blocks away 17 taxicabs were waiting to be summoned. Sisworth Squeezer rushed by them, for he had thought of a way. Half a mile farther on there wasn't a taxi in sight or sound.

"Taxi!" bellowed Sisworth Squeezer. "Taxi!"

"Well," he reflected, "I've called one, anyway. It's not my fault if it doesn't answer."

And he returned to walk the fair Esmerlina home through the damp rain.

A Close Race. "Is there much competition in your office?" asked Miss Skittles.

"Sure," replied the facetious Miss Skida. "Between the mirror and the clock."—Puck.

Some men are so reckless with their coin that they even use it for paying debts.

they expressed their worry again. At that hour Ted and Lucile Teasdale and Arly Fosland came in with the exuberance of a New Year's eve celebration.

"It's great sleighing tonight," stated Lucile's husband, who was a thin-waisted young man, with a splendid natural gift for dancing.

"All that's missing is the bells," chattered the black-haired Arly, breaking straight for her favorite big couch in the library. "The only way to have any speed in an auto is to go sidewise."

"We're to get up a skidding match, so I can bet on our chauffeur," laughed Lucile, fluffing her blonde ringlets before the big mirror in the hall. "We slid a complete circle coming down through the park, and never lost a revolution!"

"I've been thinking it must be bad driving," fretted Mrs. Sargent. "Gail should be home by now!"

"Allison's a safe driver," comforted Ted, who liked to see everybody happy.

Jim Sargent came to the door of the study, in which he was closeted with Rev. Smith Boyd. Jim was practically the young rector's business guardian.

"Hello, folks," he nodded. "Gail home?"

"Not yet," responded Mrs. Sargent, in whose brow the creases were becoming fixed.

"It's hardly time," estimated Jim, and went back into the study.

"I'm terribly vexed," confided Lucile, stopping behind Ted's chair, and idly tickling the back of his neck. "I thought it would be such a brilliant scheme to give a winter week-end party, but Mrs. Acton is going to give one at her country place."

"Before or after?" demanded Mrs. Davies, with whom this was a point of the utmost importance.

"A week after," answered Lucile, "but her invitations are out. I wish I hadn't mailed mine. What can we do to make ours notable?"

That being a matter worth considering, the entire party, with the exception of Aunt Grace, who was listening for the doorbell, set their wits and their tongues to work. Mrs. Helen Davies took a keener interest in it than any of them. The invitation list was the most important of all, for it was a long and arduous way to the heaven of the socially elect, and it took generations to accomplish the journey. The Murdoch girls, Grace and herself, had no great-grandfather. Murdoch Senior had made his money after Murdoch Junior was married, but in time to give the girls a thorough polishing in an exclusive academy. Thus launched, Helen had married a man with a great-grandfather, but Grace had married Jim Sargent. Jim was a dear, and had plenty of money, and was as good a railroad as Grace's father, with whom he had been great chums; but still he was Jim Sargent. Gail's mother, who had married Jim's brother, had seven ancestors, but a mother's family name is so often overlooked. Nevertheless, when Gail came to marry, the maternal ancestry, all other things being favorable, might even secure her an invitation to Mrs. Waverly-Gaites' annual! Reaching this point in her circle of speculation, Mrs. Helen Davies came back to her starting place, and looked at the library clock with a shock. Ten; and the girl was not yet home!

Rev. Smith Boyd came out of the study with his most active vestryman, and joined the circle of waiting ones. He was a pleasant addition to the party, for, in spite of belonging to the clergy, he was able to conduct himself in Rome in a quite acceptable Roman fashion. Pleasant as he was, they wished he would go home, because it was not convenient to worry in his company; and by this time Lucile herself was beginning to watch the clock with some anxiety. Only Mrs. Sargent felt no restraint. An automobile honked at the door as if it were stopping, and she half arose; then the same honk sounded half way down the block, and she sat down again.

"I'm so worried about Gail!" she stated, holding her thumb.

"We all are," supplemented Mrs. Davies, quickly. "She has been dining with a party of friends, and the streets are so slippery."

"I should judge Mr. Allison to be a very capable driver," said Rev. Smith Boyd; and the ladies glared at him. "I envy them their drive on a night like this. I wonder if there will be good coasting."

"Fine," judged Jim Sargent, looking out of the window toward the adjoining

rectory. "That first snow was wet and it froze. Now there's a good inch on top of it and, at this rate, there should be three by morning. A little thaw, and another freeze, and a little more snow tomorrow, and I'll be tempted to make a bob-sled."

"I'll help you," offered Rev. Smith Boyd, with a glow of pleasure in his particularly fine eyes. "I used to have a twelve-seated bob-sled, which never started down the hill with less than fifteen."

"I never rode on one," complained Arly. "I think I'm due for a bob-sled party."

"You're invited," Lucile promptly told her. "Uncle Jim, you and Doctor Boyd will have to hunt up your hammer and saw."

"I'll start right to work," offered the young rector, with the alacrity which had made him a favorite.

"If the snow holds, we'll go over into the Jersey bills, and slide," promised Sargent with enthusiasm. "I'll give the party."

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"It was correct form when I was a boy," returned the rector, with a laugh. He held his muscular hands out before him as if he could still feel the cut of the rope in his palms. He squared his big shoulders, and breathed deeply, in memory of those health-giving days. There was a flush in his cheeks, and his eyes, which were sometimes green, glowed with a decided blue. Arlene Fosland, looking lazily across at him, from the comfortable nest which she had not quitted all evening, decided that it was a shame that he had been cramped into the ministry.

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"We've been buying a dog!" she breathlessly explained, and, opening her coat, she produced an animated teddy bear, with two black eyes and one black pointed nose protruding from a puff ball of pure white. She set it on the floor, where it waddled uncertainly in three directions, and finally curled down between Rev. Smith Boyd's feet.

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CHAPTER IV.

Too Many Men.

"A conscience must be a nuisance to a rector," sympathized Gail Sargent, as she walked up the hill beside Rev. Smith Boyd.

The tall young rector shifted the thin rope of the sled to his other hand. "Epigrams are usually more clever than trinkets," he finally responded, with a twinkle in his eyes. It had been in his mind to sharply defend that charge, but he reflected that it was unwise to assume the speech worth serious consideration. Moreover, he had come to this toboggan party for healthful physical exercise!

"Then you're guilty of an epigram," retorted Gail, who was annoyed with Rev. Smith Boyd without quite knowing why. "You can't believe all you are compelled, as a minister, to say."

"That," returned Rev. Smith Boyd coldly, "is a matter of interpretation. He commended himself for his patience, as he proceeded to instruct this mistaken young person. She was a lovely girl, in spite of the many things he found in her of which to disapprove. "The eye of the needle through which the camel was supposed not to be able to pass, was, in reality, a narrow city gate called the Needle's Eye."

Gail looked at him with that little smile at the corners of her red lips.

when told by the bank that she had overdrawn her account, insisted that it couldn't be, as she had several blank checks left in her check book.

"The joke about the woman who went up in the air and was grievously insulted because the cashier (who lived on the same street) insisted that she must be identified upon presenting a check for payment."

Our Contagious Accent. "Speaking with a strong American accent," a navy man has returned as a deserter for service here after seven years' across the Atlantic. Seven years! Why seven weeks will do the trick! What is known as the "American accent"—and it differs as widely as the American continent—is the most infectious in the world. A couple of months, as I know personally, is sufficient to alter the pitch of voice, and no man comes back from America without being detected in his speech, which has unconsciously caught the pitch. He gets over it in time. But Britain has never succeeded in imposing its li-gual pitch on America.—London Chronicle

PUTS BAN ON ANCIENT JOKES

Bank Teller, Driven to Desperation, Officially Announces the "Canning" of Nasty Witticisms.

The paying teller in one of the large trust companies, which has many woman depositors, has just had this framed and hung up on the wall of his "cage":

"Notice—The following old jokes are officially canned:

"1. The joke about the woman who drew a check wrong, threw it into the fire, and then called up the bank in a panic and asked that payment on the check be stopped immediately.

"2. The joke about the woman who went into a bank and thought she could open the same kind of an account as in a department store, settling up at the end of the month.

"3. The joke about the woman who, when her husband opened a bank account for her, was afraid to draw checks because she thought people might find out how much she was spending and what it was for.

"4. The joke about the woman who,

eyelids down, curved lashes on cheeks, and beneath the lashes a sparkle brighter than the moonlight on the snow crystals in the adjoining field.

"It seems to me there was some thing about wealth in that metaphor," she observed, her round eyes flashing open as she smiled up at him. "If it was so difficult even in those days for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, how can a rich church hope to enter the spirit of the gospel?"

Rev. Smith Boyd hastily, and almost roughly, drew her aside, as a long, low bobbed, accompanied by appropriate screams, came streaking down the hill, and passed them. They both turned and followed its progress down the narrowing white road, to where it curved away in a silver line far at the bottom of a hill. Hills and valleys, and fences and trees, and even a distant stream were covered with the fleecy mantle of winter, while high overhead in a sky of blue, hung a round, white moon, which flooded the

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