

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 Gall Sargent listens to a discussion about the sale of the church tenebraries to Edward E. Allison, local brewer. Gall and wife are in the discussion of the church. Rev. Smith Boyd says it is apparently a lucrative business enterprise. Allison takes Gall riding in his motor car.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

Gall, 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 turn himself to lighter things, to enjoy life and gaiety and frivolity, to rest, as it were, upon his laurels.

Gall was amused, as she always was when men of strong achievement dropped into this weakness to interest girls. She did appreciate and admire his no doubt tremendous accomplishment. It was only his naivete which annoyed her, and to save her who could not resist the wicked little impulse to settle 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 panelled 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 Gall! It was six-thirty now, and Gall 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-Gates' anniversaries, came sweeping down the marble stairs with the calm aplomb of one whom nothing can disturb and, long-sleaved 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! Gall 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. I'll 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 secured her daughter's number.

"Hello, Lucile," she called, in the most friendly of tones. "You'd better send Gall 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 Squeezier Might Be "Near," but No One Could Accuse Him of Untruth.

It may have been true that Sisworth Squeezier 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, Squeezier is walking along Bayrum boulevard with the fair Esmeralda, who has just made him the happiest tightwad in the world by promising to become his.

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

"There's only one explanation," cried Esmeralda. "It must be raining. Darling, I have on my new crepe de Chizmuth—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 Gall driving, and where?" asked sister Grace, anxious for detail.

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

"Don't worry about Gall," 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 Gall a brilliant future," and she moved over contentedly to her favorite contrast with Minerva.

"Gall 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 Gall?" 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 Gall bore a remarkable resemblance to the Fratelli Madonna, and might be call."

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 boyish voice. "Mr. Allison and I have

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 pink 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.

"A colt!" and Rev. Smith Boyd picked up the warm infant for an admiring inspection. "It's a beautiful puppy."

"Isn't it a dear!" exclaimed Gall taking it away from him, and favoring him with a smile. She whisked the fluffy little ball over to her Aunt Grace and left it in that lady's lap, while she threw off her furs.

"Where could you buy a dog at this hour?" inquired Mrs. Davies, glancing at the clock, which stood now at the accusing hour of a quarter of eleven.

"We woke up the kennel men," laughed Gall, turning with a sparkling glance to Allison, who was being introduced ceremoniously to the ladies by Uncle Jim. "We had a perfectly glorious evening! We dined at Roseleaf Inn, entirely surrounded by hectic lights, then we drove five miles into the country and bought Flakes. We came home so fast that Mr. Allison almost had to hold me in."

She turned, laughing, to find the eyes of Rev. Smith Boyd fixed on her in cold disapproval. They were no longer blue!

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"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 hills, and slide," promised Sargent with enthusiasm. "I'll give the party."

"I seem to anticipate a pleasant evening," considered Ted Teasdale, whose athletics were confined entirely to dancing. "We'll ride downhill on the sleds and uphill in the machines."

"That's barred," immediately protested Jim. "The boys have to pull the girls uphill. Isn't that right, Boyd?"

"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.

"There's Gall!" cried Mrs. Sargent, jumping to her feet and running into the hall, before the butler could come in answer to the bell. She opened the door and was immediately kissed, then Gall came back into the library without stopping to remove her fur. She was followed by Allison, and she carried something inside her coat. Her cheeks were rosy from the crisp air and the snow sparkled on her brown hair like tiny diamonds.

"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 pink 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 Gall 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 true," 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 boggan party for healthful physical exercise!

"Then you're guilty of an epigram," retorted Gall, who was annoyed with Rev. Smith Boyd without quite knowing why. "You can't believe all you are compelled, as 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 mischievous 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 this, a narrow city gate called the Needle's Eye."

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

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 Squeezier rushed them, for he had thought of a way.

Half a mile farther on there wasn't a taxi in sight or sound.

"Notice," he announced. "I'm a very capable driver," said Rev. Smith Boyd; and the ladies glared at Jim. "I envy them their drive on a night like this. I wonder if there will be good coasting!"

"Fine," judge 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."

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eyelids down, curved lashes on his 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

Pantalette Undoubtedly Here



Why Are You So Bitter Against the Church?

countryside with mellow light, and strewed upon earth's fresh robe a wealth of countless sparkling gems.

"This is a wonderful sermon," mused Gall; then she turned to the rector. She softened toward him, as she saw that he, too, had partaken of the awe and majesty of this scene. He stood straight and tall, his splendidly poised head thrown back, and his gaze resting far off where the hills cut against the sky in tree-clad scallops.

"It is an inspiration," he told her, with a tone in his vibrant voice which she had not heard before; and for that brief instant these two, between whom there had seemed some instinctive antagonism, were nearer in sympathy than either had thought it possible to be. Then Rev. Smith Boyd happened to remember something. "The morality or immorality of riches depends upon its use," he sonorously stated, as he stepped out into the road again