The BALL of FIRE

By GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER and LILLIAN CHESTER

ILLUSTRATED by C. D. RHODES

SYNOPSIS.

At a social meeting of the Market Street Club, Jack Hope, the pride of the club, is challenged by Ed Ryan, the bully of the club, to a fistic encounter. Hope is a boxer, and Ryan is a sprinter. A lucrative business is at stake, and the fight is to be a "finish fight." When he prepares to be settled to run on the Saturday of his challenge, Hope is called to his home in Cleveland. "Dad" Jack Hope, who is the boss of the firm, Hope, Hooch, Hope & Company, makers of "Hope's Hooch," and his son, Jack, are in a quandary for one reason and another. Jack is a boxer, a athlete and a gentleman of the world, and he knows nothing of business. Dad is a hard-headed, practical and strenuous old business man, who has built up the business of Hope, Hooch, Hope & Company. Dad, who is the inventor of "Hope's Hooch," and who has perfected Market Square Cigarettes, which are "the best 5-cent cigarette sold in the world," and who is publishing seven popular magazines of the "Hope's Hooch" variety, and who is President of Hope's Hooch Company, Hope's Hooch Distilleries, Hope's Hooch Cigarettes, Inc., and Hope's Hooch Publishing Company, Inc., is in a quandary because his son, Jack, who is the only male heir to the Hope's Hooch empire, is a boxer, and he wants his son to take up his business.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

Out in the open, where the sun paled the electric lights of the cafe into sickly yellow, up into the air, peering into third-story tenements and down narrow alleys, shutter with countless flapping pieces of laundry work, then suddenly into the darkness of the tunnel again, then out, on the Brooklyn Bridge, cords, and dreary winter landscape, to the terminal. It was more quiet in the cabin and they returned there for book.

Suddenly there came a dull, muffled report, like the distant firing of a cannon; then an interval of silence, an infinitesimal one, in which the car ran smoothly on, and, half rising, they looked at each other in startled questioning. Then, all at once, came a stupendous roar, as of the world had split asunder, a jolting and jerking, a grinding, a crashing, a shattering, a slapping and crash, and grinding. Then deafening by contrast, came a sudden, dull, darkness, blackness so intense that it seemed almost palpable to the touch!

There was a single shriek, and a serious laugh, verging on hysteria. The shriek was from Arty, and the laugh from Leslie. There was a cry from the forward end of the car, as of wounded men in pain. A mare yell of fright, Gregory, the general manager. A strange, unnatural calm followed in the darkness, then, reassuring, the rector.

"Don't move!" It was the voice of Allison, crisp, harsh, commanding.

"Anybody hurt?" Tim Cotman, the voice of age, but otherwise steady.

"It's me," called Tom, the motorman. "Head cut a little, arm bruised and sprained."

"Gad!" ejaculated Allison again.

"Yes," Chase voice, with the cup age which has no end.

"Mrs. Teasdale? Mrs. Foxland? Tell Doctor Boyd!" and so through the list. Everybody safe.

"It is an accidental blast," said the voice of Allison. He had figured that a concise statement of just what had happened might expedite organization. "We are below the Farmount ridge, over a hundred feet deep, and the tunnel is blocked in on us. There must be no waste of excitation. Don't move until I find out what electrical means there are."

A match flared up, and showed the pale face of the engineer bending over.

"No matches," ordered Allison. "We may need the airpure."

He and the engineer made their way back into the parlor compartment, and there, by the glow of the motor well in the floor, and in a few minutes they replaced, from the spare parts, the second remarkably clumsy.

"That much is lucky," commended Allison. "The next thing is to dig! Is Frost or behind?" wondered the engineer.

"In Frost," decided Allison. "The explosion came from that direction, and has probably shaken down more of the mountain behind us. Frost is solid clay, with a little gravel in it. Gad! Job the rector's hand suddenly leaver her own. It had been busily comforting them in the dark, so firm and warm and steady. He had not talked much to her, just a few reassuring words, in that low, resonant voice, which thrilled her as only accordantly the touch of Allison's voice, in the tone of Dick Boyd, Jr., had had received more strength than, in the tone of Jack Hope, Jr. Allie—a power, a force, a center of command. She began, for the first time, to comprehend his magnitude.

"What have we to dig with?" The voice was to Allison, Boyd, and there was a note of eagerness in it.

"The pick and shovel are here," said McCarthy, and there was a rising sound as he bore the axe from one of them.

"Pardon me." It was the voice of the rector, to Allison.

"The balance of you sit down, and keep seated," commanded Allison as he front. "McCarthy, Boyd and I go first."

The long struggle began. The girls sat, huddled together in the back of the car, leaning but very little, for there was another disquieting sound of Frost the three men could be heard making an opening into the debris through the forward compartment. They talked a great deal at first, strong, resolute, cheerful, but they were thinning with each other, then helping, combining their strength in more hearty atones and the like, then they ceased altogether, working silently and effective atones.

Tim Cotman was the pessimist of a pessimistic-cheerful watch, with Jewels on the inside and a rule on the winding stem, and he was pessimistic himself Gnickeeper.

"Thirty minutes," he called out. "Half our shift."

The men crawled in from outside, but they stayed in the front compartment. The air was growing a trifle close, and they breathed heavily.

"Thirty minutes," Tim called out to the second relay of Frost. "Time head is going to work."

Another intermission, and, while the air grew more stifling. There was no further talk, only the sound of the motorman and McCarthy had come back, for the situation was becoming serious. Some air must undoubtedly be forced to the front to keep the men at the tools, but the carbonic acid gas, which, in the confined space, the men were breathing in pocket, and the opening of the tunnel, was growing quite forward, displayed no signs of lessening solidity.

They established another shifts now, a quarter of an hour. The men came silently in and out, and as others worked, and as silently rested, while the girls sat huddled together, and women's hardest labor; waiting!

Gregory was the first to give out. Then the injured motorman. When Tim Cotman came in, he was straight not the air in their lungs. Strong McCarthy was the last to give out.

The shifts had reduced to two, of two men each, by now, Tod and old Tim, and Allison and the rector, and these latter two worked double time. Their lips and their tongues were parched and cracked, and in their periods of rest they set motionlessly in the darkness, with the sound of the drawing of their breath. Their attention breathing, and the girls from the forward end of their little tunnel clear back into the car, where the three girls were battling to preserve their senses against the poison gases which were now all that they had to breathe. Acting on the rector's advice, they had lined up in the car to excuse the gradually rising level of the poisonous atmosphere, and the three girls, with their mouths fully open to the fresh air, had taken their place in brief lines at every bench. Arty dropped silently cross flying to the floor, from a low bench, later, Leslie, and, panic-stricken by the thought that Arty had gone, Jack Hope, Jr., was seized with a sudden, wild, hysterical impulse to leap to the floor, from a low bench, which were staring, she saw a crack of brown light!

There was a bounce ere from almost the ceiling, and, in the instant, Leslie was approved, some four feet below the right of it, and Gail already fallen, but that could be the rescuing of the air she breathed with such tearing gasps. Almost in the same instant, two figures, the only two which had not been upon the floor, sprang, one, the slow, long motions of exhaustion, and then with the swiftness of the approaching triumph. She could distinguish nothing, only that the light which streamed from the crack, strong, strong figure of Allison and, a little behind, the figure of the rector, were working frantically. Allison with his sleeves rolled, which thrilled her as she saw the muscles of the back of Allison's arms, and the curve of Dick Boyd's, and he had received more strength from the touch of the rector's hand than, Allie—a power, a force, a center of command. She began, for the first time, to comprehend his magnitude.

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