THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

Illustrations by Ray Walters

SYNOPSIS.

Miss Innes, spinster and guardian of Gertrude and Halsey, established summer headquarters at Sunnyside. The servants desert. Gertrude and Halsey arrive with Jack Bailey. The house was awakened by a revolver shot and Arnold Armstrong was found shot to death in the hall. Miss Innes found Halsey's revolver on the lawn. He and Jack Bailey had disappeared. Gertrude revealed that she was engaged to Jack Bailey, with whom she talked in the billiard room shortly before the murder. Detective Jamieson accused Miss Innes of holding back evidence. He imprisoned an intruder in an empty room. The prisoner escaped. Gertrude was injured because of an injured foot. Halsey disappeared and Miss Innes and Bailey were called away by a telegram. Charles Bailey of First Armstrong's bank, defaulter, was arrested for embezzlement. Paul Armstrong's death was connected. Halsey's fiancée, Louise Armstrong, told Halsey that while she still loved him, she was to marry another. It developed that Dr. Walker was the man. Louise was found at the bottom of the circular staircase. Recovering consciousness, she said something had brushed by her on the staircase and she fainted. Bailey is suspected of Armstrong's murder. After "hunting a clue," Thomas, the bodyguard, was found dead with a slip in his pocket bearing the name of "Lucien Wallace." Dr. Walker asked Miss Innes to relate in favor of Mrs. Armstrong. She refused. A note from Bailey to Gertrude arranging a meeting at night was found. A ladder out of place deepens the mystery.

CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

Apparently only a few minutes elapsed, during which my eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. Then I noticed that the windows were reflecting a faint pinkish light. Liddy noticed it at the same time, and I heard her jump up. At that moment Sam's deep voice boomed from somewhere just below.

"Fire!" he yelled. "The stable's on fire!"

I could see him in the glare dancing up and down on the drive, and a moment later Halsey joined him. Alex was awake and running down the stairs, and in five minutes from the time the fire was discovered three of the maids were sitting on their trunks in the drive, although, excepting a few sparks, there was no fire nearer than 100 yards.

Gertrude seldom loses her presence of mind, and she ran to the telephone. But by the time the Casanova volunteer fire department came toiling up the hill the stable was a furnace, with the Dragon Fly safe but blistered, in the road. Some gasoline exploded just as the volunteer department got to work, which shook their nerves as well as the burning building. The stable, being on a hill, was a torch to attract the population from every direction.

The stable was off the west wing. I hardly know how I came to think of the circular staircase and the unguarded door at its foot. Liddy was putting my clothes into sheets, preparatory to tossing them out the window, when I found her, and I could hardly persuade her to stop.

"I want you to come with me, Liddy," I said. "Bring a candle and a couple of blankets."

She lagged behind considerably when she saw me making for the east wing, and at the top of the staircase she balked.

"I am not going down there," she said firmly.

"There is no one guarding the door down there," I explained. "Who knows?—this may be a scheme to draw everybody away from this end of the house, and let some one in here."

The instant I had said it I was convinced I had hit on the explanation, and that perhaps it was already too late. It seemed to me as I listened that I heard stealthy footsteps on the east porch, but there was so much shouting outside that it was impossible to tell. Liddy was on the point of retreat.

"Very well," I said, "then I shall go down alone. Run back to Mr. Halsey's room and get his revolver. Don't shout down the stairs if you hear a noise; remember—I shall be down there. And hurry."

I put the candle on the floor at the top of the staircase and took off my bedroom slippers. Then I crept down the stairs, going very slowly, and listening with all my ears. Just at the foot of the stairs I stubbed my toe against Halsey's big chair, and had to stand on one foot in a soundless agony until the pain subsided to a dull ache. And then—I knew I was right. Some one had put a key into the lock, and was turning it. For some reason it refused to work, and the key was withdrawn. There was a muttering of voices outside; I had only a second. Another trial, and the door would open. The candle above made a faint gleam down the well-like staircase, and at that moment, with a second, no more, to spare, I thought of a plan.

The heavy oak chair almost filled the space between the newel post and the door. With a crash I had turned it on its side, wedging it against the door, its legs against the stairs. I could hear a faint scream from Liddy at the crash and then she came down the stairs on a run, with the revolver held straight out in front of her.

"Thank God," she said, in a shaking voice. "I thought it was you."

I pointed to the door, and she understood.

"Call out of the windows at the other end of the house," I whispered. "Run. Tell them not to wait for anything."

She went up the stairs at that, two at a time. Evidently she collided with the candle, for it went out, and I was left in darkness.

I was really astonishingly cool. I remember stepping over the chair and gluing my ear to the door, and I shall never forget feeling it give an inch or two there in the darkness, under a steady pressure from without. But the chair held, although I could hear an ominous cracking of one of the legs. And then, without the slightest warning, the cardroom window broke with a crash. I had my finger on the trigger of the revolver, and as I jumped it went off, right through the door. Some one outside swore roundly, and for the first time I could hear what was said.

It Went Off, Right Through the Door.

"Only a scratch. . . . Men are at the other end of the house. . . . Have the whole rat's nest on us." And a lot of profanity which I won't write down. The voices were at the broken window now, and although I was trembling violently, I was determined that I would hold them until help came. I moved up the stairs until I could see into the cardroom, or rather through it, to the window. As I looked a small man put his leg over the sill and stepped into the room. The curtain confused him for a moment; then he turned, not toward me, but toward the billiard room door. I fired again, and something that was glass or china crashed to the ground. Then I ran up the stairs and along the corridor to the main staircase. Gertrude was standing there, trying to locate the shots, and I must have been a peculiar figure, with my hair in crimps, my dressing-gown flying, no slippers, and a revolver clutched in my hand. I had no time to talk. There was the sound of footsteps in the lower hall, and some one bounded up the stairs.

I had gone Berserk, I think. I leaned over the stair-rail and fired again. Halsey, below, yelled at me.

"What are you doing up there?" he yelled. "You missed me by an inch."

And then I collapsed and fainted. When I came around Liddy was rubbing my temples with eau de quinine, and the search was in full blast.

Well, the man was gone. The stable burned to the ground, while the crowd cheered at every falling rafter, and the volunteer fire department sprayed it with a garden hose. And in the house Alex and Halsey searched every corner of the lower floor, finding no one.

The truth of my story was shown by the broken window and the overturned chair. That the unknown had got upstairs was almost impossible. He had not used the main staircase, there was no way to the upper floor in the east wing, and Liddy had been at the window in the west wing, where the servants' stair went up. But we did not go to bed at all. Sam Bohannon and Warner helped in the search, and not a closet escaped scrutiny. Even the cellars were given a thorough overhauling, without result. The door in the east entry had a hole through it where my bullet had gone. The hole slanted downward, and the bullet was embedded in the porch. Some reddish stains showed it had done execution.

"Somebody will walk lame," Halsey said, when he had marked the course of the bullet. "It's too low to have hit anything but a leg or foot."

From that time on I watched every person I met for a limp, and to this day the man who halts in his walk is an object of suspicion to me. But Casanova had no lame men; the nearest approach to it was an old fellow who tended the safety gates at the railroad, and he, I learned on inquiry, had two artificial legs. Our man had gone, and the large and expensive stable at Sunnyside was a heap of smoking rafters and charred boards. Warner swore the fire was incendiary, and in view of the attempt to enter the house, there seemed to be no doubt of it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Flinders.

If Halsey had only taken me fully into his confidence through the whole affair it would have been much simpler. If he had been altogether frank about Jack Bailey, and if the day after the fire he had told me what he suspected, there would have been no harrowing period for all of us, with the boy in danger. But young people refuse to profit by the experience of their elders, and sometimes the elders are the ones to suffer.

I was much used up the day after the fire, and Gertrude insisted on my going out. The machine was temporarily out of commission, and the carriage horses had been sent to a farm for the summer. Gertrude finally got a trap from the Casanova liveryman, and we went out. Just as we turned from the drive into the road we passed a woman. She had put down a small valise, and stood inspecting the house and grounds minutely. I should hardly have noticed her had it not been for the fact that she had been horribly disfigured by smallpox.

"Ugh!" Gertrude said, when we had passed, "what a face! I shall dream of it to-night. Get up, Flinders."

"Flinders?" I asked. "Is that the horse's name?"

"It is." She flicked the horse's stubby mane with the whip. "He didn't look like a livery horse, and the liveryman said he had bought him from the Armstrongs when they purchased a couple of motors and cut down the stable. Nice Flinders—good old boy!"

Flinders was certainly not a common name for a horse, and yet the youngster at Richfield had named his prancing, curly-haired little horse Flinders! It set me to thinking.

At my request Halsey had already sent word of the fire to the agent from whom me had secured the house. Also, he had called Mr. Jamieson by telephone, and somewhat guardedly had told him of the previous night's events. Mr. Jamieson promised to come out that night, and to bring another man with him. I did not consider it necessary to notify Mrs. Armstrong, in the village. No doubt she knew of the fire, and in view of my refusal to give up the house an interview would probably have been unpleasant enough. But as we passed Dr. Walker's white and green house I thought of something.

"Stop here, Gertrude," I said. "I am going to get out."

"To see Louise?" she asked.

"No, I want to ask this young Walker something."

She was curious, I knew, but I did not wait to explain. I went up the walk to the house, where a brass sign at the side announced the office, and went in. The reception room was empty, but from the consultation room beyond came the sound of two voices, not very amicable.

"It is an outrageous figure," some one was storming. Then the doctor's quiet tone, evidently not arguing, merely stating something. But I had not time to listen to some person probably disputing his bill, so I coughed. The voices ceased at once; a door closed somewhere, and the doctor entered from the hall of the house. He looked sufficiently surprised at seeing me.

"Good afternoon, doctor," I said formally. "I shall not keep you from your patient. I wish merely to ask a question."

"Won't you sit down?"

"It will not be necessary. Doctor, has any one come to you, either early this morning or to-day, to have you treat a bullet wound?"

"Nothing so startling has happened to me," he said. "A bullet wound! Things must be lively at Sunnyside."

"I didn't say it was at Sunnyside. But as it happens, it was. If any such case comes to you, will it be too much trouble for you to let me know?"

"I shall be only too happy," he said. "I understand you have had a fire up there, too. A fire and shooting in one night is rather lively for a quiet place like that."

"It is as quiet as a boiler-shop," I replied, as I turned to go.

"And you are still going to stay?"

"Until I am burned out," I responded. And then, on my way down the steps, I turned around suddenly.

"Doctor," I asked at a venture, "have you ever heard of a child named Lucien Wallace?"

Clever as he was, his face changed and stiffened. He was on his guard again in a moment.

"Lucien Wallace?" he repeated. "No, I think not. There are plenty of Wallaces around, but I don't know any Lucien."

I was as certain as possible that he did. People do not lie readily to me, and this man lied beyond a doubt. But there was nothing to be gained now; his defenses were up, and I left, half irritated and wholly baffled.

Our reception was entirely different at Dr. Stewart's. Taken into the bosom of the family at once, Flinders tied outside and nibbling the grass at the roadside, Gertrude and I drank some home-made elderberry wine and told briefly of the fire. Of the more serious part of the night's experience, of course, we said nothing. But when at last we had left the family on the porch and the good doctor was untying our steed, I asked him the same question I had put to Dr. Walker.

"Shot!" he said. "Bless my soul, no. Why, what have you been doing up at the big house, Miss Innes?"

"Some one tried to enter the house during the fire, and was shot and slightly injured," I said hastily. "Please don't mention it; we wish to make as little of it as possible."

There was one other possibility, and we tried that. At Casanova station I saw the station master, and asked him if any trains left Casanova between one o'clock and daylight. There was none until 6 a. m. The next question required more diplomacy.

"Did you notice on the six o'clock train any person—any man—who limped a little?" I asked. "Please try to remember; we are trying to trace a man who was seen loitering around Sunnyside last night before the fire."

He was all attention in a moment.

"I was up there myself at the fire," he said volubly. "I'm a member of the volunteer company. First big fire we've had since the summer house burned over to the club golf links. My wife was sayin' the other day, 'Dave, you might as well 'a' saved the money in that there helmet and shirt.' And here last night they came in handy. Rang that bell so hard I hadn't time scarcely to get 'em on."

"And—did you see a man who limped?" Gertrude put in, as he stopped for breath.

"Not at the train, ma'm," he said. "No such person got on here to-day. But I'll tell you where I did see a man that limped. I didn't wait till the company left; there's a fast freight goes through at 4:45, and I had to get down to the station. I seen there wasn't much more to do anyhow at the fire—we'd got the flames under control"—Gertrude looked at me and smiled—"so I started down the hill. There was folk here and there goin' home, and along by the path to the Country club I seen two men. One was a short fellow. He was sitting on a big rock, his back to me, and he had something white in his hand, as if he was tying up his foot. After I'd gone on a piece I looked back, and he was hobbling on and—excuse me, miss—he was swearing something sickening."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Durability of Concrete.

In the orange garden of the old Capucian monastery, on a hillside about three hundred feet above the Gulf of Amalfi, Italy, there are a number of queer mushroom-shaped tables. These tables, apparently used by the monks for reading purposes, are about two and a half feet high and three feet in diameter at the top and two feet at the base. They are of concrete, and, though, according to local authorities, of an age varying from four hundred to eight hundred years, are in an excellent state of preservation. The excellent condition of these old tables furnishes additional proof of the durability of concrete as applied to lawn and garden ornaments.

Would Make Mother Peevish.

"Your boy is perfectly healthy and happy," said the eminent surgeon. "The trouble with him is that the nerve centers of his brain are atrophied, or perhaps I should say undeveloped, so that he is slow to receive the impressions of his senses. Time may bring about an improvement in his case, but as to that I cannot promise. He is young yet—"

"But, doctor," interrupted the man, "I've read of such things as transplanting a sheep's vein into a human organism with perfect success. Don't you think a sheep's brain might be transferred into the boy's—but that wouldn't do, I suppose—I know his mother would make an awful fuss about it."

Trade in Chinese Girls.

At Chaotong, a city of some 40,000 souls, I was told that one of the briskest directions of local trade was the selling of female children into slavery, and at the time I passed through prices were fairly high, a girl who could boast good looks fetching the alarming figure of 300 taels— this was the highest figure reached—while small children could be had for anything up to 20.

This wholesale disposal of young girls, although the traffic in some quarters was emphatically denied to exist, is one of the chief sorrows of the district. And well it might be, for thousands of children are annually disposed of for a few taels by heartless parents who watch them being carried away as so much merchandise to be converted into silver.

A Bad Memory.

Harvey Worthington Loomis once went abroad to study music.

He was a young man, and when, after two weeks' voyage, he landed in France, he was very homesick. He stood it for two days and then booked his passage on the same ship and returned to America.

When he rang the bell at his home in Brooklyn, his sister opened the door.

"Why, Harvey" she exclaimed, "What is the matter?"

"Oh," he replied innocently, "I forgot my toothbrush."—Success Magazine.

Feathers in Style

THERE is a growing sentiment against wearing the plumage of birds, in varieties where cruelty must be practised to secure it. Women are learning to discriminate in this matter and to forego the wearing of plumage that promises to bring about the extinction of a species of beautiful wild birds or to inflict torture. A proud crest of dainty feathers torn from the back of a mother bird and the death of a nest full of fledglings by slow starvation, are not pleasant suggestions to flaunt with the group of sweeping algrettes upon the head of beauty. For the wearer must be either uninformed, or indifferent, or unmindful of cruelty. None of the excuses will pass muster with intelligent people.

Aside from a very few sorts, the feathers we have worn recently and those we will wear, are made from the plumage of domestic or other edible birds. No cruelty is practised in securing them and thousands of people make a living by manufacturing the millinery trimmings made of them. Feather bands, sewed wings, pompons, breasts and mounted sprays—in fact, a world of airy and attractive decorations—are cleverly fashioned from the feathers of the turkey, chicken, pigeon, peacock and pheasant. These are bleached, dyed, eaten with acids, pieced and pasted until their origin is lost sight of. Other birds of bright plumage, such as the parrot, and birds like the blackbird and sparrow, of which there are myriads, are used, but they are not cruelly treated, unless sudden death is cruel.

The wearing of a bird upon the hat may be in questionable taste and at present one sees almost no birds, but any amount of plumage. Gradually the wearing of feathers may die out, but the signs of the times do not point that way. More plumage is shown now than ever before. Women should learn to discriminate in choosing it, and select those feathers which they may wear with an easy conscience. They are obliged to inform themselves in some states of the Union or run the risk of forfeiting their forbidden property. For laws have been passed and are enforced to protect certain birds, and one may not own their plumage.

JULIA BOTTOMLEY.

MAKES A DAINTY COSTUME

Gray zephyr spotted with blue would look pretty carried out in our design. The skirt has a panel front, which is continued in a deep band at the foot, and has the upper part gathered; it is also gathered at the waist. A panel to match is taken down back and front, the sleeves being cut in with the sides. Lawn claudine cuffs and collar add a dainty finish.

Hat of blue straw, trimmed with gray net and roses.

Material required: Seven and one-half yards zephyr 30 inches wide.

PLEA FOR THE GROWING GIRL

Problem of Maternal Management That Is Worth Some Serious Consideration.

So many older women seem to think that because a girl of from fourteen to twenty or so is likely to be callow and sometimes forward and rather ridiculous in her pretentions of age and dignity she must be continually snubbed and "put down." They keep calling her "child" and laughing at her opinions and criticisms, and leaving her out of discussion and conversation, until some day they awake with a start to realize that the child is a woman, and a pert and embittered woman at that.

Of course, American girls are notorious for their unpleasant presumption, and there are many, many things which a girl in her teens is not competent to decide for herself, let alone for others; but there is no reason why a girl who really is growing up should be made to feel that she is always in the way and must be patronized when she is noticed at all. Give her at least a chance to feel that she is one of the family and that she is a step above the children in the nursery, whom she is likely so to despise.

Here, as elsewhere, "you will go most safely in the middle," and this rather delicate problem of maternal management will settle itself if consideration and common sense are learned on one side and taught on the other.—Exchange.

Garters for Short Socks.

Garters for short socks for the kiddies are being made of hat rubber instead of the wider and more conspicuous garter rubber or the untidy nothing at all. Usually it is white, though for pink or blue socks it can easily be painted the color desired.

Easy Way to Clean Lace Yokes.

If instead of taking lace yokes and cuffs out of dresses to wash when soiled they are rubbed with dry starch, then brushed thoroughly, the lace will look like new.

Short Skirts or Long?

There can be no doubt that the really short skirt has thoroughly established itself this spring. Of course, for walking and all outdoor games it is a delightful and most sensible fashion, but there is some question as to its beauty and suitability where the dressy afternoon frock or evening toilet is concerned. For the quite young woman who is still in her teens, or has recently quitted them, the short frock looks girlish and pretty, and is, moreover, very practical and comfortable. But with the older woman it is quite a different matter. She looks simply ridiculous in these fashionable curtailed skirts, and, far from giving her a girlish appearance, they add years to her apparent age.

To Choose Partners.

A clever way to ask the men to select partners is to ask each girl to bring the earliest picture of herself obtainable. The pictures are numbered, the hostess having a list of each name opposite the number so when the time comes for making revelations she can do it quickly and with certainty. Just before time for the game or refreshments for which partners are necessary pass a basket or tray with the pictures turned face down; ask each man to draw one and find the original. Just imagine the fun this makes. One man actually asked five women, "Is this you?" before he found the original in his wife.

Your Shoes.

Before cleaning, rub over with milk—a little is sufficient. Wipe with a dry cloth and clean with polish as usual. This will clean and soften the leather; the grease in the milk keeps it moist. Stains can be removed by soaking the discolored parts with benzine and letting it dry.

For fine kid an excellent polish may be made of equal parts of neatsfoot oil and vaseline, with the addition of a coloring of lampblack. This preparation should be well rubbed into the uppers of the boots. It will toughen the kid where the strain is greatest and where the friction of the dress has such a bad effect on the ankles of the boots.

Munyon's Witch Hazel Soap

is more soothing than Cold Cream; more healing than any lotion, liniment or salve; more beautifying than any cosmetic.

Cures dandruff and stops hair from falling out.

LIKE CURES LIKE.

Smudge—He calls his new invention a "noiseless automobile."

Grudge—Noiseless? It makes an infernal clatter.

Smudge—He claims that the loudness of the smell drowns out the loudness of the noise, and vice versa.

Opportunity of Suffragist.

Baroness Aletta Korff tells in one of the magazines how the women of Finland came to vote. The fact is that women had to show that they could meet an emergency before the vote came to them. They have not had many opportunities to take the initiative in the world's history and they have not always responded when the opportunity came, but when a crisis, such as that in 1904, when the strike and the revolutionary outbreak in Russia took place at the same time, occurred, they proved they could make peace by doing it. Not until England and the United States find the women helping them to bear some great trouble will they give them the right to vote.

Globular Lightning.

Yesterday the inhabitants of Lewisham were provided with a specimen of that curious phenomenon known as "globular lightning." It is what is commonly called the "fire ball," and as it persists for several seconds it is obviously of a totally different character from any other form of lightning. It is much less brilliant than ordinary lightning, and its brightness appears to be that of iron at the "red hot" stage.

It is not, as some accounts might lead one to infer, a solid missile, but it is always spherical and appears to fall from a thunder cloud by its own gravity, sometimes rebounding after striking the ground.—London Globe.

Try to Come Back.

Not long ago Lord Kinnaird, who is always actively interested in religious work, paid a surprise visit to a mission school in the east end of London and told a class of boys the story of Samson. Introducing his narrative, his lordship added:

"He was strong, became weak, and then regained his strength, enabling him to destroy his enemies. Now, boys, if I had an enemy, what would you advise me to do?"

A little boy, after meditating on the secret of that great giant's strength, shot up his hand and exclaimed: "Get a bottle of 'air restorer."

Scandal.

Mrs. Simmonds glanced at the scare headline: "Bank Robbed! Police at Sea!" and laid down the sheet.

"Naow, look at that, Ez!" she ejaculated, repeating the headline aloud "Here's a big city bank broke into by burglars, and th' city police force all off fishin' somewhere! What a scandal!"—Judge.

Mere Men.

He—I dreamt last night that your mother was ill.

She—Brute! I heard you laugh in your sleep.—Life.

"NO FRILLS"

Just Sensible Food Cured Him.

Sometimes a good, healthy commercial traveler suffers from poorly selected food and is lucky if he learns that Grape-Nuts food will put him right.

A Cincinnati traveler says: "About a year ago my stomach got in a bad way. I had a headache most of the time and suffered misery. For several months I ran down until I lost about 10 pounds in weight and finally had to give up a good position and go home. Any food that I might use seemed to nauseate me.

"My wife, hardly knowing what to do, one day brought home a package of Grape-Nuts food and coaxed me to try it. I told her it was no use but finally to humor her I tried a little, and they just struck my taste. It was the first food I had eaten in nearly a year that did not cause any suffering.

"Well, to make a long story short, I began to improve and stuck to Grape-Nuts. I went up from 135 pounds in December to 194 pounds the following October.

"My brain is clear, blood all right and appetite too much for any man's pocketbook. In fact, I am thoroughly made over, and owe it all to Grape-Nuts. I talk so much about what Grape-Nuts will do that some of the men on the road have nicknamed me 'Grape-Nuts,' but I stand today a healthy, rosy-cheeked man—a pretty good example of what the right kind of food will do.

"You can publish this if you want to. It is a true statement without any frills."

Read the little book, "The Road to Wellville," in pkgs. "There's a Reason."

Ever read the above letter? A new one appears from time to time. They are genuine, true, and full of human interest.