

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
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SYNOPSIS.

Miss Innes, spinster and guardian of Gertrude and Halsey, established summer headquarters at Sunnyside. Arnold Armstrong was found shot to death in the hall. Gertrude and her fiancé, Jack Bailey, had conspired in the billiard room shortly before the murder. Detective Jamieson accused Miss Innes of holding back evidence. Captain Bailey of Fred Armstrong's bank, defamed, was arrested for embezzlement. Paul Armstrong's death was announced. 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 unconscious at the bottom of the circular staircase. She said something had brushed by her in the dark on the stairway and she fainted. Bailey is suspected of Gertrude's murder. Thomas, the lodge-keeper, was found dead with a note in his pocket bearing the name "Louise Armstrong." A letter found out of place deepens the mystery. The stables were burned, and in the dark Miss Innes shot an intruder. Halsey mysteriously disappeared. His car was found wrecked by a freight train. It developed Halsey had an argument in the library with a woman before his disappearance. New clues appear. Miss Innes learned Halsey was alive. Dr. Walker's face becomes livid at mention of the name of Nina Carrington. Evidence was secured from a tramp that a man, supposedly Halsey, had been bound and gagged and thrown into an empty box car.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

Mr. Winters and Alex disposed of the tramp with a warning. It was evident he had told us all he knew. We had occasion, within a day or two, to be doubly thankful that we had given him his freedom. When Mr. Jamieson telephoned that night we had news for him; he told me what I had not realized before—that it would not be possible to find Halsey at once, even with this clue. The cars by this time, three days, might be scattered over the union. But he said to keep on hoping, that it was the best news we had had. And in the meantime, consumed with anxiety as we were, things were happening at the house in rapid succession.

We had one peaceful day—then Liddy took sick in the night. I went in when I heard her groaning, and found her with a hot-water bottle to her face, and her right cheek swollen until it was glassy.

"Toothache?" I asked, not too gently. "You deserve it. A woman of your age, who would rather go around with an exposed nerve in her head than have the tooth pulled! It would be over in a moment."

"So would hanging," Liddy protested, from behind the hot-water bottle.

I was hunting around for cotton and laudanum.

"You have a tooth just like it yourself, Miss Rachel," she whispered. "And I'm sure Dr. Boyle's been trying to take it out for years."

There was no laudanum, and Liddy made a terrible fuss when I proposed carbolic acid, just because I had put too much on the cotton once and burned her mouth. I'm sure it never did her any permanent harm; indeed, the doctor said afterward that living on liquid diet had been a splendid rest for her stomach. But she would have none of the acid, and she kept me awake groaning, so at last I got up and went to Gertrude's door. To my surprise it was locked.

I went around by the hall and into her bedroom that way. The bed was turned down, and her dressing-gown and night-dress lay ready in the little room next, but Gertrude was not there. She had not undressed.

I don't know what terrible thoughts came to me in the minute I stood there. Through the door I could hear Liddy grumbling, with a squeal now and then when the pain stabbed harder. Then, automatically, I got the laudanum and went back to her.

It was fully a half-hour before Liddy's groans subsided. At intervals I went to the door into the hall and looked out, but I saw and heard nothing suspicious. Finally, when Liddy had dropped into a doze, I even ventured as far as the head of the circular staircase, but there floated up to me only the even breathing of Winters, the night detective, sleeping just inside the entry. And then, far off, I heard the rapping noise that had lured Louise down the staircase that other night, two weeks before. It was over my head, and very faint—three or four short muffled taps, a pause, and then again, stealthily repeated.

The sound of Mr. Winters' breathing was comforting; with the thought that there was help within call, something kept me from waking him. I did not move for a moment; ridiculous things Liddy had said about a ghost—I am not at all superstitious, except, perhaps, in the middle of the night, with everything dark—things like that came back to me. Almost beside me was the clothes chute. I could feel it, but I could see nothing. As I stood, listening intently, I heard a sound near me. It was vague, indefinite. Then it ceased; there was an uneasy movement and a grunt from the foot of the circular staircase, and silence again. I stood perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe.

Then I knew I had been right. Some one was stealthily passing the head of the staircase and coming toward me in the dark. I leaned against the wall for support—my knees were giving way. The steps were close now, and suddenly I thought of Gertrude. Of course it was Gertrude. I put out one hand in front of me, but I touched nothing. My voice almost refused me.



When I Came To It Was Dawn.

but I managed to gasp out, "Gertrude!"

"Good Lord!" a man's voice exclaimed, just beside me. And then I collapsed. I felt myself going, felt some one catch me, a horrible nausea—that was all I remembered.

When I came to it was dawn. I was lying on the bed in Louise's room, with the cherub on the ceiling staring down at me, and there was a blanket from my own bed thrown over me. I felt weak and dizzy, but I managed to get up and totter to the door. At the foot of the circular staircase Mr. Winters was still asleep. Hardly able to stand, I crept back to my room. The door into Gertrude's room was no longer locked; she was sleeping like a tired child. And in my dressing room Liddy hugged a cold hot-water bottle and mumbled in her sleep.

"There's some things you can't hold with hand-cuffs," she was muttering thickly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A Scrap of Paper.

For the first time in 20 years I kept my bed that day. Liddy was alarmed to the point of hysteria, and sent for Dr. Stewart just after breakfast. Gertrude spent the morning with me, reading something—I forget what. I was too busy with my thought to listen. I had said nothing to the two detectives. If Mr. Jamieson had been there I should have told him everything, but I could not go to these strange men and tell them my niece had been missing in the middle of the night; that she had not gone to bed at all; that while I was searching for her through the house I had met a stranger who, when I fainted, had carried me into a room and left me there, to get better or not, as it might happen.

And there was something else: The man I had met in the darkness had been even more startled than I, and about his voice, when he muttered his muffled exclamation, there was something vaguely familiar. All that morning, while Gertrude read aloud, and Liddy watched for the doctor, I was puzzling over that voice, without result.

Dr. Walker came up, some time just after luncheon, and asked for me.

"Go down and see him," I instructed Gertrude. "Tell him I am out—for mercy's sake don't say I'm sick. Find out what he wants, and from this time on, instruct the servants that he is not to be admitted. I loathe that man."

Gertrude came back very soon, her face rather flushed.

"He came to ask us to get out," she said, picking up her book with a jerk. "He says Louise Armstrong wants to come here, now that she is recovering."

"And what did you say?"

"I said we were very sorry we could not leave, but we would be delighted to have Louise come up here with us. He looked daggers at me. And he wanted to know if we would recommend Eliza as a cook. He has brought a patient, a man, out from town, and is increasing his establishment—that's the way he put it."

"I wish him joy of Eliza," I said tartly. "Did he ask for Halsey?"

"Yes. I told him that we were on the track last night, and that it was only a question of time. He said he was glad, although he didn't appear to be, but he said not to be too sanguine."

"Do you know what I believe?" I asked. "I believe, as firmly as I believe anything, that Dr. Walker knows something about Halsey, and that he could put his finger on him, if he wanted to."

There were several things that day that bewildered me. About three o'clock Mr. Jamieson telephoned from the Casanova station and Warner went down to meet him. I got up and dressed hastily, and the detective was shown up to my sitting room.

"No news?" I asked, as he entered. He tried to look encouraging, without success.

"It won't be long now, Miss Innes," he said. "I have come out here on a peculiar errand, which I will tell you about later. First, I want to ask some questions. Did any one come out here yesterday to repair the telephone, and examine the wires on the roof?"

"Yes," I said promptly; "but it was not the telephone. He said the wiring might have caused the fire at the stable. I went up with him myself, but he only looked around."

Mr. Jamieson smiled.

"Good for you!" he applauded. "Don't allow any one in the house that you don't trust, and don't trust anybody. All are not electricians who wear rubber gloves."

He refused to explain further, but he got a slip of paper out of his pocket-book and opened it carefully.

"Listen," he said. "You heard this before and scoffed. In the light of recent developments I want you to read it again. You are a clever woman, Miss Innes. Just as surely as I sit here, there is something in this house that is wanted very anxiously by a number of people. The lines are closing up, Miss Innes."

The paper was the one he had found among Arnold Armstrong's effects, and I recall it again:

—by altering the plans for—rooms, may be possible. The best way, in my opinion, would be to—the plan for—in one of the—rooms—chimney.

"I think I understand," I said slowly. "Some one is searching for the secret room, and the invaders—"

"And the holes in the plaster—"

"Have been in the progress of his—"

"Or her—investigations."

"Her?" I asked.

"Miss Innes," the detective said, getting up, "I believe that somewhere in the walls of this house is hidden some of the money, at least, from the Traders' bank. I believe, just as surely, that young Walker brought home from California the knowledge of something of the sort, and, failing in his effort to reinstall Mrs. Armstrong and her daughter here, he or a confederate, has tried to break into the house. On two occasions I think he succeeded."

"On three, at least," I corrected.

And then I told him about the night before. "I have been thinking hard," I concluded, "and I do not believe the man at the head of the circular staircase was Dr. Walker. I don't think he could have got in, and the voice was not his."

Mr. Jamieson got up and paced the floor, his hands behind him.

"There is something else that puzzles me," he said, stepping before me. "Who and what is the woman Nina Carrington? If it was she who came here as Mattie Bliss, what did she tell Halsey that sent him racing to Dr. Walker's, and then to Miss Armstrong? If we could find that woman we would have the whole thing."

"Mr. Jamieson, did you ever think that Paul Armstrong might not have died a natural death?"

"That is the thing we are going to try to find out," he replied. And then Gertrude came in, announcing a man below to see Mr. Jamieson.

"I want you present at this interview, Miss Innes," he said. May Riggs come up? He has left Dr. Walker and he has something he wants to tell us."



Riggs came into the room diffidently, but Mr. Jamieson put him at his ease. He kept a careful eye on me, however, and slid into a chair by the door when he was asked to sit down.

"Now, Riggs," began Mr. Jamieson kindly. "You are to say what you have to say before this lady."

"You promised you'd keep it quiet, Mr. Jamieson." Riggs plainly did not trust me. There was nothing friendly in the glance he turned on me.

"Yes, yes. You will be protected. But, first of all, did you bring what you promised?"

Riggs produced a roll of papers from under his coat, and handed them over. Mr. Jamieson examined them with lively satisfaction, and passed them to me. "The blue-prints of Sunnyside," he said. "What did I tell you? Now, Riggs, we are ready."

"I'd never have come to you, Mr. Jamieson," he began, "if it hadn't been for Miss Armstrong. When Mr. Innes was sprit away, like, and Miss Louise got sick because of it, I thought things had gone far enough. I'd done some things for the doctor before that wouldn't just bear looking into, but I turned a bit squeamish."

"Did you help with that?" I asked, leaning forward.

"No, ma'am. I didn't even know of it until the next day, when it came out in the Casanova Weekly Ledger. But I know who did it, all right. I'd better start at the beginning."

"When Dr. Walker went away to California with the Armstrong family, there was talk in the town that when he came back he would be married to Miss Armstrong, and we all expected it. First thing I knew, I got a letter from him in the west. He seemed to be excited, and he said Miss Armstrong had taken a sudden notion to go home and he sent me some money. I was to watch for her, to see if she went to Sunnyside, and wherever she was, not to lose sight of her until he got home. I traced her to the lodge, and I guess I scared you on the drive one night, Miss Innes."

"And Rosie?" I ejaculated.

Riggs grinned sheepishly.

"I only wanted to make sure Miss Louise was there. Rosie started to run, and I tried to stop her and tell her some sort of a story to account for my being there. But she wouldn't wait."

"And the broken china—in the basket?"

"Well, broken china's death to rubber tires," he said. "I hadn't any complaint against you people here, and the Dragon Fly was a good car."

So Rosie's highwayman was explained.

"Well, I telegraphed the doctor where Miss Louise was and I kept an eye on her. Just a day or so before they came home with the body I got another letter, telling me to watch for a woman who had been pitted with smallpox. Her name was Carrington, and the doctor made things pretty strong. If I found any such woman loafing around, I was not to lose sight of her for a minute until the doctor got back."

"Well, I would have had my hands full, but the other woman didn't show up for a good while, and when she did the doctor was home."

"Riggs," I asked suddenly, "did you get into this house a day or two after I took it, at night?"

"I did not, Miss Innes. I have never been in the house before. Well, the Carrington woman didn't show up until the night Mr. Halsey disappeared. She came to the office late, and the doctor was out. She waited around, walking the floor and working herself into a passion. When the doctor didn't come back, she was in an awful way. She wanted me to hunt him, and when he didn't appear, she called him names; said he couldn't fool her. There was murder being done, and she would see him swing for it."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Dresden China.

Judging by your recent note, writes a correspondent, it seems that the geographical knowledge possessed by girl typists is about on a level with that possessed by the danseurs who represent the postmaster general behind the counters of our suburban post offices. Having occasion recently to telegraph funds to a town in Germany, it became necessary for the clerk to consult the post office guide. After a long and fruitless search I ventured to suggest that she was not likely to find the town I wanted in the section devoted to the celestial empire, where she was looking. "Not under China" she retorted superciliously. "You said Dresden, didn't you?"

The Consoling Volume.

There was a backward student at Balliol who, for failure to pass an examination in Greek, was "sent down." His mother went to see the master, Dr. Jowett, and explained to him what an excellent lad her son was. "It is a hard experience for him, this disgrace," said the old lady; "but he will have the consolation of religion, and there is always one book to which he can turn." Jowett eyed her for a moment and then answered: "Yes, ma'am; the Greek grammar. Good morning."

MASTER OF FRANCE

Unknown Who Has Become the Republic's Star.

Briand, Now Prime Minister, Is Only Forty-six, and Was Not Even a Congressman 10 Years Ago—Considered a Genius.

Paris.—Briand is forty-six years old. He is prime minister and master of the French republic. He was nobody, not even congressman, ten years ago.

Also, he is a genius, in the sense of a Pitt, Jefferson or Robespierre; and geniuses are rare. However they differ, they have an instinct for greatness. Briand will be French president if he wishes. I say "if he wishes," because he is not only a genius, but a strange one.

At thirty-five he was an outsider and, worse, seemingly a failure, even as a lawyer. Suddenly he willed; and all came easy to him.

Only genius could have led the ease-loving, half-fellow cafe charmer, half cases, in ten years to dizzy power as the great man of France. The public is still astounded. Perhaps Briand remains a trifle surprised.

And perhaps not. He remains a bundle of contradictions. France wonders at his erudition. As cabinet minister, successively, of public instruction, beaux-arts, cultes, justice and interior, he appeared a laborious specialist of each. In the separation he held the record of all time for brilliant readiness in the tribune, master of a thousand technicalities. Yet no one has ever seen him open a book or take a note.

He still loves his ease in his cafe. You cannot be with him five minutes without feeling the amusing, easy-going companion, bubbling with the joy of life; yet back of it, even his old cronies feel a negligent force that



Briand, Master of France.

scars them. No one can be more familiar than Briand; but no one gets familiar with him, nowadays, without invitation.

Born in the dull Breton port of St. Nazaire, he conquered a degree of law. Would he have been content to plead party-wall cases, marry an \$8,000 dot, play the violin, sing admirably, beat them all at billiards, and talk politics at the Cafe du Commerce?

When does he prepare those speeches that charm, equally, in cold print? They are all impromptu. When he lets himself go everyone listens. Every listener feels the presence of a mighty intellect, perhaps, a great heart. Yet every foreigner, at first, wonders how he came to be prime minister. He is so negligently gay, almost bohemian. And yet—and yet, with all those easy ways, one feels a gossamer web between himself and the strange, worn young man.

What will he do? Nobody knows. What does he do? He steps through cruel difficulties without effort, nonchalant, cigarette on lip, the young prime minister. Other prime ministers, gray-headed or bald, grow up, slowly, to the perilous position. Briand has stepped into it almost a tenderfoot. He never steps into a trap.

GUM CHEWING IN AMERICA

Omnipresent Habit Strikes Visitors From Abroad as One of the Country's Wonders.

Washington.—Twenty-nine students and three professors of the University of Commerce, in Cologne, now in this country, find the gum chewing habit looming large among the wonders of America. This ought to cause no surprise to Americans as all are familiar with the omnipresent nickel-in-the-slot gum machine, the inexhaustible stacks of chewing gum in jars and piles on candy store and drug store counters, and the jaws almost unanimously in activity in subway jams, trolley car crushes and crowds at large.

Baseball players chew gum to keep off thirst, children and matinee girls chew it because it tastes sweet, many persons chew in the belief that they are adding their digestion, but most people chew because they have got the habit. Probably a final analysis would reveal an intimate connection between nerves and habitual gum chewing. There have been attempts to establish gum in Europe. The results are as yet inconclusive. However, the demand right here in the United States calls for the manufacture of 3,000,000,000 pieces of gum per year and gives prosperity to a very healthy eleven-year-old trust.

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IGNORANT OF ART.



The Kid—Mister, Johnnie says that purple thing in front of the picture's a windmill an' I say it's a tree; which is right?

The Impressionist—That's a cow.

Anticipated.

Margaret—Did you tell the girls at the tea that secret I confided to you and Josephine?

Katherine—No, truly I didn't. Josephine got there first—Harper's Bazar.

I held it indeed to be a sure sign of a mind not poised as it ought to be if it is insensible to the pleasures of home.—Lex.

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