

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WATERS
SYNOPSIS.

Miss Innes, spinster and guardian of Gertrude and Halsey, established summer headquarters at Sunnyside. Amidst numerous difficulties the servants deserted. As Miss Innes looked up for the night, she was startled by a dark figure on the veranda. Unseen noises disturbed her during the night. In the morning Miss Innes found a strange link cuff-button in a hamper. Gertrude and Halsey arrived 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. The link cuff-button mysteriously disappeared. Detective Jamieson arrived. Gertrude revealed she was engaged to Jack Bailey, with whom she talked in the billiard room a few moments before the murder. Jamieson accused Miss Innes of holding back evidence. He imprisoned an intruder in an empty room. The prisoner was suspected. A negro found the other half of what proved to be Jack Bailey's cuff-button. Halsey reported and says he and Bailey left in response to a telegram. Gertrude said she had given Bailey an unloaded revolver, fearing to give him a loaded weapon. Charles Bailey of Paris, Armstrong's bank defunct, was arrested for embezzlement. Halsey said Armstrong wrecked his own bank and could clear Bailey. Paul Armstrong's death was announced. Halsey's fiancée, Louise Armstrong, was found at the hotel. The lodgekeeper said Louise and Arnold had a long talk the night of the murder. Louise was prostrated. Louise told Halsey, that while she still loved him she was to marry another, and that he would despise her when he learned the whole story. It developed that Dr. Walker and Louise were to be married. Walker was found in the house. Louise was found at the bottom of the circular staircase. Louise said she had heard a knock at the door and answered it. She then laughed past her on the stairway and she fainted.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"You heard no other sound?" the coroner asked. "There was no one with Mr. Armstrong when he entered?"

"It was perfectly dark. There were no voices and I heard nothing. There was just the opening of the door, the shot, and the sound of somebody falling."

"Then, while you went through the drawing room and upstairs to alarm the household, the criminal, whoever it was, could have escaped by the east door?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. That will do."

I flatter myself that the coroner got little enough out of me. I saw Mr. Jamieson smiling to himself, and the coroner gave me up, after a time. I admitted I had found the body, said I had not known who it was until Mr. Jarvis told me, and ended by looking up at Barbara Fitzhugh and saying that in renting the house I had not expected to be involved in any family scandal. At which she turned purple.

The verdict was that Arnold Armstrong had met his death at the hands of a parson or persons unknown, and we prepared to leave. Barbara Fitzhugh flounced out without waiting to speak to me, but Mr. Harton came up, as I knew he would.

"You have decided to give up the house, I hope, Miss Innes," he said. "Mrs. Armstrong has wired me again."

"I am not going to give it up," I maintained, "until I understand some things that are puzzling me. The day that the murderer is discovered, I will leave."

"Then, judging by what I have heard, you will be back in the city very soon," he said. And I knew that he suspected the discredited cashier of the Traders' bank.

Mr. Jamieson came up to me as I was about to leave the coroner's office.

"How is your patient?" he asked with his odd little smile.

"I have no patient," I replied, startled.

"I will put it in a different way, then. How is Miss Armstrong?"

"She—she is doing very well," I stammered.

"Good," cheerfully. "And our ghost? Is it laid?"

"Mr. Jamieson," I said suddenly, "I wish you would come to Sunnyside and spend a few days there. The ghost is not laid. I want you to spend one night at least watching the circular staircase. The murder of Arnold Armstrong was a beginning, not an end."

He looked serious.

"Perhaps I can do it," he said. "I have been doing something else, but—well, I will come out tonight."

We were very silent during the trip back to Sunnyside. I watched Gertrude closely and somewhat sadly. To me there was one glaring flaw in her story, and it seemed to stand out for every one to see. Arnold Armstrong had had no key, and yet she said she had locked the east door. He must have been admitted from within the house; over and over I repeated it to myself.

That night, as gently as I could, I told Louise the story of her step-brother's death. She sat in her big, pillow-filled chair, and heard me through without interruption. It was clear that she was shocked beyond words; if I had hoped to learn anything from her expression, I had failed. She was as much in the dark as we were.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Hole in the Wall.

My taking the detective out to Sunnyside raised an unexpected storm of protest from Gertrude and Halsey. I was not prepared for it, and I scarcely

knew how to account for it. To me Mr. Jamieson was far less formidable under my eyes, where I knew what he was doing, than he was off in the city, twisting circumstances and motives to suit himself and learning what he wished to know about events at Sunnyside in some occult way. I was glad enough to have him there, when excitements began to come thick and fast.

A new element was about to enter into affairs; Monday, or Tuesday at the latest, would find Dr. Walker back in his green and white house in the village, and Louise's attitude to him in the immediate future would signify Halsey's happiness or wretchedness, as it might turn out. Then, too, the return of her mother would mean, of course, that she would have to leave us, and I had become greatly attached to her.

From the day Mr. Jamieson came to Sunnyside, there was a subtle change in Gertrude's manner to me. It was elusive, difficult to analyze, but it was there. She was no longer frank

Liddy heaved a sigh.

"Girl and woman," she said, "I've been with you 25 years, Miss Rachel, through good temper and bad—the idea! and what I have taken from her in the way of sulks!—but I guess I can't stand it any longer. My trunk's packed."

"Who packed it?" I asked, expecting from her tone to be told she had wakened to find it done by some ghostly hand.

"I did, Miss Rachel, you won't believe me when I tell you this house is haunted. Who was it fell down the clothes chute? Who was it scared Miss Louise almost into her grave?"

"I'm doing my best to find out," I said. "What in the world are you driving at?" She drew a long breath. "There is a hole in the trunkroom wall, dug out since last night. It's big enough to put your head in, and the plaster's all over the place."

"Nonsense!" I said. "Plaster is always falling."

But Liddy clenched that.

"Just ask Alex," she said. "When



from the floor, and inside were all the missing bits of plaster. It had been a methodical ghost.

It was very much of a disappointment. I had expected a secret room, at the very least, and I think even Mr. Jamieson had fancied he might at last have a clew to the mystery. There was evidently nothing more to be discovered; Liddy reported that everything was serene among the servants, and that none of them had been disturbed by the noise. The maddening thing, however, was that the nightly visitor had evidently more than one way of gaining access to the house, and we made arrangements to redouble our vigilance as to windows and doors that night.

Halsey was inclined to pooh-pooh the whole affair. He said a break in the plaster might have occurred months ago and gone unnoticed, and that the dust had probably been stirred up the day before. After all, we had to let it go at that, but we put in an uncomfortable Sunday. Gertrude went to church, and Halsey took a long walk in the morning. Louise was able to sit up, and she allowed Halsey and Liddy to assist her downstairs late in the afternoon. The east veranda was shady, green with vines and palms, cheerful with cushions and lounging chairs. We put Louise in a steamer chair, and she sat there passively enough, her hands clasped in her lap.

We were very silent. Halsey sat on the rail with a pipe, openly watching Louise, as she looked broodingly across the valley to the hills. There was something baffling in the girl's eyes; and gradually Halsey's boyish features lost their glow at seeing her about again, and settled into grim lines. He was like his father just then.

We sat until late afternoon, Halsey growing more and more moody. Shortly before six he got up and went into the house, and in a few minutes he came out and called me to the telephone. It was Anna Whitcomb, in town, and she kept me for 20 minutes, telling me the children had had the measles and how Mm. Sweeny had botched her new gown.

When I finished, Liddy was behind me, her mouth a thin line.

"I wish you would try to look cheerful, Liddy," I groaned, "your face would sour milk." But Liddy seldom replied to my gibes. She folded her lips a little tighter.

"He called her up," she said oracularly, "he called her up, and asked her to keep you to the telephone, so he could talk to Miss Louise. A thankless child is sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"Nonsense!" I said brusquely. "I might have known enough to leave them. It's a long time since you and I were in love, Liddy, and—we forget."

Liddy sniffed.

"No man ever made a fool of me," she replied virtuously.

"Well, something did," I retorted.

CHAPTER XIX.

Concerning Thomas.

"Mr. Jamieson," I said, when we found ourselves alone after dinner that night, "the inquest yesterday seemed to me the merest recapitulation of things that were already known. It developed nothing new beyond that story of Dr. Stewart's, and that was volunteered."

"An inquest is only a necessary formality, Miss Innes," he replied. "Unless a crime is committed in the open the inquest does nothing beyond getting evidence from witnesses while events are still in their minds. The police step in later. You and I both know how many important things never transpired. For instance: The dead man had no key, and yet Miss Gertrude testified to a fumbling at the lock, and then the opening of the door. The piece of evidence you mention, Dr. Stewart's story, is one of those things we have to take cautiously; the doctor has a patient who wears black and does not raise her veil. Why, it is the typical mysterious lady! Then the good doctor comes across Arnold Armstrong, who was a graceless scamp—de mortuis—what's the rest of it?—and he is quarreling with a lady in black. Behold, says the doctor, they are one and the same."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Sameness.

"There is a certain sameness about natural scenery," said the man who looks bored.

"Do you mean to compare a magnificent mountain with the broad expanse of the sea?"

"Yes. Wherever you find a spot of exceptional beauty somebody is sure to decorate it with sardine tins and biscuit boxes."

Not So Bad.

Nervous Lady—Don't your experiments frighten you terribly, professor? I hear that your assistant met with a horrible death by falling 4,000 feet from a balloon.

Professor—Oh, that report was greatly exaggerated.

Nervous Lady—Exaggerated! How? Professor—It wasn't much more than 2,500 feet that he fell.—Puck.

KING PETER SILENT

Servian Ruler the Loneliest Potentate on European Throne.

Lives Moodily and Modestly, is Callous to Criticism and is Figurehead in Council—Crime Shadows His Reign.

Belgrade.—They call him "the silent king" in Belgrade and "the king who doesn't care." He is the loneliest monarch in Europe, this King Peter of Servia—this man without friends or amusements, whom other monarchs will not know and whose personality and very thoughts are impenetrable.

Peter Karageorgevitch is an unhappy man because his occupation is gone. All his life he has plotted and intrigued to gain the Servian throne. The years he spent in his little villa at Geneva were devoted to negotiations with conspirators. Conspiracies were meat and drink to him. He thought of nothing but his cipher correspondence with the Karageorge party in Belgrade and the clandestine meetings with his supporters in Switzerland.

Having walked to the throne over the bodies of an assassinated king and queen, he has no further need for conspiracies. His future is fairly assured. It would be a kindness to Peter Karageorgevitch if he lost his crown and were sent back to Geneva to resume his intrigues by post.

He lives in a small, two-storyed, cream-colored palace fronting on Belgrade's principal street. It is a modest royal residence, with French windows, and a lawn separated from the public pavement by an equally modest iron fence.

There was once another palace. It adjoined the present excessively new-looking structure. But, after a king and queen were murdered there one June morning nearly seven years ago, and their mutilated bodies thrown into the forecourt, the building was razed



King Peter of Servia.

to the ground, that the sight might not conjure up unpleasant memories for King Peter when he looked out of his front windows. Hence the stretch of cool, green lawn, with the curious, raised mound in the center, which marks the site of the old palace cellars.

Like most of his subjects, King Peter rises early, usually with the sun. Then, at six o'clock, he rides or drives for perhaps an hour with two or three equestrians. He remains indoors the rest of the day. Sometimes his ordinary program is disturbed by a religious festival or a state ceremony, but at the earliest possible moment he hastens back to his seclusion.

The king has no marked tastes in any direction. He reads very little. Few members of the court dine with him. The officers in attendance are wearied almost beyond expression by their palace duties. His majesty is never cross, never excited, never talkative. His conversation is confined usually to amiable monosyllables.

In no place does the king appear so much of a gorgeous figurehead as when he holds a council. Describing one of these functions, a cabinet minister said:

"There his majesty sits, wearing a general's uniform and all his decorations, anxious to please everyone. We talk of a certain public matter, and presently the king dozes a little. As one minister finishes giving his views the king opens his eyes with a start and says: 'Quite right.' The discussion continues, and perhaps another of my colleagues opposes the view of the one who has just spoken."

"The king again slumbers peacefully for a time, then opens his eyes with an approving smile, and says: 'Quite right.' So between naps and with complacent approval of everyone, he finishes the matter in hand. In the end the decision is what the cabinet desired it to be, and his majesty goes away much relieved to ring for fresh coffee and the latest newspapers."

Sometimes, during the war fever, he rose at four o'clock in the morning to drive into the country and review a regiment or two. He was always back in Belgrade before six o'clock shut up in his cream-colored prison by the time the capital was awake. He is not over-interested in military matters. A man who has spent so many years among tourists in Switzerland cannot be expected to rise to the dignity of a war lord at the age of sixty.

WILLY WAS TOO LIBERAL.

Oversupply of Alcoholic Stimulants Disturbed Schedule of Funeral Arrangements.

Dean Ramsay's memoirs contain an anecdote of an old woman of Strathpey. Just before her death she solemnly instructed her grandnephew: "Willy, I'm deeth, and as ye'll hae the charge o' a' I have, mind now that as much whisky is to be used at my funeral as there was at my baptism."

Willy, having no record of the quantity consumed at the baptism, decided to give every mourner as much as he wished, with the result that the funeral procession, having to traverse ten miles to the churchyard on a short November day, arrived only at nightfall.

Then it was discovered that the mourners, halting at a wayside inn, had rested the coffin on a dyke and left it there when they resumed their journey. The corpse was a day late in arriving at the grave.

The Motive Power.

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