THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

CHAPTER I.

I Take a Country House.

This is the story of how a middle-aged spinster lost her mind, deserted her domestic gods in the city, took a furnished house for the summer out of town, and found herself involved in one of those mysterious crimes that keep our newspapers and detective agencies happy and prosperous. For 20 years I had been perfectly comfortable; for 20 years I had had the window-boxes filled in the spring, the carpets lifted, the awnings put up and the furniture covered with brown linen; for as many summers I had said good-by to my friends, and, after watching their perspiring hegira, had settled down to a delicious quiet in town, where the mail comes three times a day, and the water supply does not depend on a tank on the roof.

And then—the madness seized me. When I look back over the months I spent in Sunnyside, I wonder that I survived at all. As it is, I show the wear and tear of my harrowing experiences. I have turned very gray—Liddy reminded me of it only yesterday by saying that a little bluing in the rinse water would make my hair silvery instead of a yellow white. I hate to be reminded of unpleasant things and I snapped her off.

"No," I said sharply, "I'm not going to use bluing at my time of life, or starch, either."

Liddy's nerves are gone, she says, since that awful summer, but she has enough left, goodness knows! And when she begins to go around with a lump in her throat, all I have to do is to threaten to return to Sunnyside, and she is frightened into a semblance of cheerfulness—from which you may judge that the summer there was anything but a success.

The newspaper accounts have been so garbled and incomplete—one of them mentioned me but once, and then only as the tenant at the time the thing happened—that I feel it my due to tell what I know. Mr. Jamieson, the detective, said himself he could never have done without me, although he gave me little enough credit, in print.

I shall have to go back several years—13, to be exact—to start my story. At that time my brother died, leaving me his two children. Halsey was 11 then and Gertrude was seven. When Halsey had finished his electrical course and Gertrude her boarding school both came home to stay. The winter Gertrude came out was nothing but a succession of sitting up late at night to bring her home from things, taking her to the dressmakers between naps the next day, and discouraging ineligible youths with either more money than brains or more brains than money. By spring I was quite tractable. So when Halsey suggested camping in the Adirondacks and Gertrude wanted Bar Harbor, we compromised on a good country house with links near, within motor distance of town and telephone distance of the doctor. That was how we went to Sunnyside.

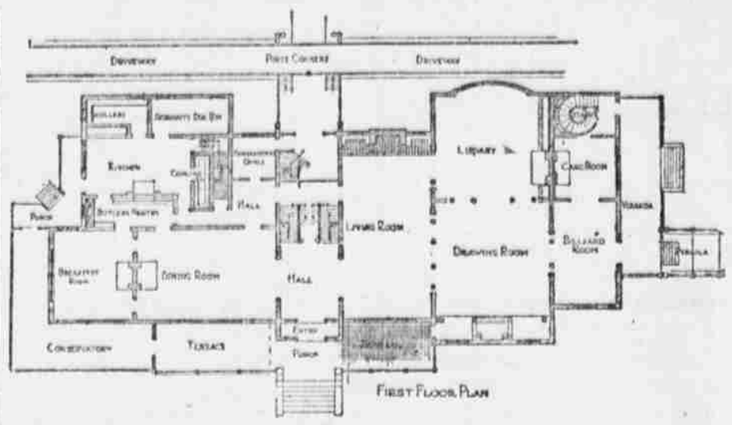
We went out to inspect the property, and it seemed to deserve its name. Its cheerful appearance gave no indication whatever of anything out of the ordinary. Only one thing seemed unusual to me: The housekeeper, who had been left in charge, had moved from the house to the gardener's lodge a few days before. As the lodge was far enough away from the house, it seemed to me that either fire or thieves could complete their work of destruction undisturbed. The property was an extensive one; the house on the top of a hill, which sloped away in great stretches of green lawn and clipped hedges, to the road, and across the valley, perhaps a couple of miles away, was the Greenwood Club house. Gertrude and Halsey were infatuated.

The property was owned by Paul Armstrong, the president of the Traders' bank, who at the time we took the house was in the west with his wife and daughter, and a Dr. Walker, the Armstrong family physician. Halsey knew Louise Armstrong—had been rather attentive to her the winter before, but as Halsey was always attentive to somebody, I had not thought of it seriously, although she was a charming girl. I knew of Mr. Armstrong only through his connection with the bank, where the children's money was largely invested, and through an ugly story about the son, Arnold Armstrong, who was reported to have forged his father's name for a considerable amount to some bank paper. However, the story had had no interest for me.

I cleared Halsey and Gertrude away to a house party, and moved out to Sunnyside the first of May.

The first night passed quietly enough. I have always been grateful for that one night's peace; it shows what the country might be under favorable circumstances. Never after that night did I put my head on my pillow with any assurance how long it would be there; or on my shoulders for that matter.

On the following morning Liddy and Mrs. Ralston, my own housekeeper, had a difference of opinion, and Mrs. Ralston left on the 11 train. Just after luncheon, Burke, the butler, was taken



unexpectedly with a pain in his right side, much worse when I was within hearing distance, and by afternoon he was started cityward. That night the cook's sister had a baby—the cook, seeing indecision in my face, made it twins on second thought—and, to be short, by noon the next day the household staff was down to Liddy and myself. And this in a house with 22 rooms and five baths!

Liddy wanted to go back to the city at once, but the milkboy said that Thomas Johnson, the Armstrongs' colored butler, was working as a waiter at the Greenwood club and might come back. I have the usual scruples about coercing people's servants away, but few of us have any conscience regarding institutions or corporations—witness the way we beat railroads and street car companies when we can—so I called up the club, and about eight o'clock Thomas Johnson came to see me. Poor Thomas!

Well, it ended by my engaging Thomas on the spot, at outrageous wages, and with permission to sleep in the gardener's lodge, empty since the house was rented. The old man—he was white-haired and a little stooped, but with an immense idea of his personal dignity—gave me his reasons hesitatingly.

"I ain't sayin' nothing', Mis' Innes," he said, his hand on the door-knob, "but there's been goin's-on here this las' few months as ain't natchal. 'Tain't one thing an' 'taint another—it's jest a door squealin' here, an' a winder

That Completed Our Demoralization.

closing' there, but when doors an' winders gets to cuttin' up capers and there's nobody nigh 'em, it's time Thomas Johnson sleeps somewhar's else."

Liddy, who seemed to be never more than ten feet away from me that night, and was afraid of her shadow in that great barn of a place, screamed a little, and turned a yellow-green. But I am not easily alarmed.

It was entirely in vain I represented to Thomas that we were alone, and that he would have to stay in the house that night. He was politely firm, but he would come over early the next morning, and if I gave him a key, he would come in time to get some sort of breakfast. I stood on the huge veranda and watched him shuffle along down the shadowy drive with mingled feelings—irritation at his cowardice and thankfulness at getting him at all. I am not ashamed to say that I double-locked the hall door when I went in.

"You can lock up the rest of the house and go to bed, Liddy," I said severely. "You give me the creeps standing there. A woman of your age ought to have better sense." It usually braces Liddy to mention her age; she owns to 40—which is absurd. Her mother cooked for my grandfather, and Liddy must be at least as old as I. But that night she refused to brace.

"You're not going to ask me to lock up, Miss Rachel!" she quavered. "Why, there's a dozen French windows in the drawing room and the billiard room wing, and every one opens on a porch. And Mary Anne said that last night there was a man standing by the stable when she locked the kitchen door."

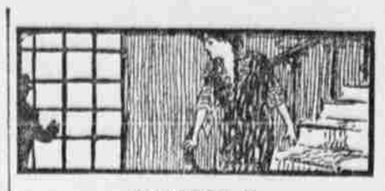
"Mary Anne was a fool," I said sternly. "If there had been a man there she would have had him in the kitchen and been feeding him what was left from dinner, inside of an hour, from force of habit. Now don't be ridiculous. Lock up the house and go to bed. I am going to read."

But Liddy set her lips tight and stood still.

"I'm not going to bed," she said. "I am going to pack up, and to-morrow I am going to leave."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I snapped. Liddy and I often desire to part company, but never at the same time. "If you are afraid, I will go with you, but for goodness' sake don't try to hide behind me."

The house was a typical summer residence on an extensive scale. Wherever possible, on the first floor, the architect had done away with partitions, using arches and columns instead. The effect was cool and spacious, but scarcely cozy. As Liddy and I went from one window to another, our voices echoed back at us uncomfortably. There was plenty of light—the electric plant down in the village supplied us—but there were long vistas of polished floor, and mirrors which reflected us from unexpected



CHAPTER II.

A Link Cuff-Button.

Liddy's knees seemed to give away under her. Without a sound she sank down, leaving me staring at the window in petrified amazement. Liddy began to moan under her breath, and in my excitement I reached down and shook her.

"Stop it," I whispered. "It's only a woman—maybe a maid of the Armstrongs'. Get up and help me find the door." She groaned again. "Very well," I said, "then I'll have to leave you here. I'm going."

She moved at that, and, holding to my sleeve, we felt our way, with numerous collisions, to the billiard-room, and from there to the drawing-room. The lights came on then, and, with the long French windows unshuttered, I had a creepy feeling that each one sheltered a peering face. In fact, in the light of what happened afterward, I am pretty certain we were under surveillance during the entire ghostly evening. We hurried over the rest of the locking-up and got upstairs as quickly as we could. I left the lights all on, and our footsteps echoed cavernously. Liddy had a stiff neck the next morning, from looking back over her shoulder, and she refused to go to bed.

"Let me stay in your dressing room, Miss Rachel," she begged. "If you don't I'll sit in the hall outside the door. I'm not going to be murdered with my eyes shut."

It was 11 o'clock when I finally prepared for bed. In spite of my assumption of indifference, I locked the door into the hall, and finding the transom did not catch, I put a chair cautiously before the door—it was not necessary to rouse Liddy—and climbing up put on the ledge of the transom a small dressing-mirror, so that any movement of the frame would send it crashing down. Then, secure in my precautions I went to bed.

I did not go to sleep at once. Liddy disturbed me just as I was growing drowsy, by coming in and peering under the bed. She was afraid to speak, however, because of her previous snubbing, and went back, stopping in the doorway to sigh dismally.

Somewhere down-stairs a clock with a chime sang away the hours—eleven-thirty, forty-five, twelve. And then the lights went out to stay. The Casanova Electric Company shuts up shop and goes home to bed at midnight: when one has a party, I believe it is customary to fee the company, which will drink hot coffee and keep awake a couple of hours longer. But the lights were gone for good that night. Liddy had gone to sleep, as I knew she would. She was a very unreliable person: always awake and ready to talk when she wasn't wanted and dozing off to sleep when she was I called her once or twice, the only result being an explosive snore that threatened her very windpipe—then I got up and lighted a bedroom candle.

My bedroom and dressing room were above the big living room on the first floor. On the second floor a long corridor ran the length of the house, with rooms opening from both sides. In the wings were small corridors crossing the main one—the plan was simplicity itself. And just as I got back into bed, I heard a sound from the east wing, apparently, that made me stop, frozen, with one bedroom slipper half off, and listen. It was a rattling metallic sound, and it reverberated along the empty halls like the crash of doom. It was for all the world as if something heavy, perhaps a piece of steel, had rolled clattering and jangling down the hardwood stairs leading to the card-room.

In the silence that followed Liddy stirred and snored again. I was exasperated; first she kept me awake by silly alarms, then when she was needed she slept like Joe Jefferson, or Rip—they are always the same to me. I went in and aroused her, and I give her credit for being wide awake the minute I spoke.

"Get up," I said, "if you don't want to be murdered in your bed."

"Where? How?" she yelled vociferously, and jumped up.

"There's somebody in the house," I said. "Get up. We'll have to go to the telephone."

"Not out in the hall!" she gasped; "Oh, Miss Rachel, not out in the hall!" trying to hold me back. But I am a large woman and Liddy is small. We got to the door, somehow, and Liddy held a brass andiron, which it was all she could do to lift, let alone brain anybody with. I listened, and, hearing nothing, opened the door a little and peered into the hall. It was a black void, full of terrible suggestion, and my candle only emphasized the gloom. Liddy squealed and drew me back again, and as the door slammed, the mirror I had put on the transom came down and hit her on the head. That completed our demoralization. It was some time before I could persuade her she had not been attacked from behind by a burglar, and when she found the mirror smashed on the floor she wasn't much better.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

JUST A "LITTLE MITE DEAF"

Circumstantial Evidence That Emma Salter Needed Some Artificial Aid in Hearing.

"You know how Emma Salter used to say she was a mite deaf, but when she was real deaf she'd buy her some kind of a contrivance so's to make it easy for her friends," said Mrs. Jennings to her daughter; and the young woman nodded, forbearing to remind her mother that the span of her recollections was not precisely the duplicate of the old lady's.

"She never bought one, and she never will, now," said Mrs. Jennings, who had an exhausted air.

"I hollered to her all the way out to the Light, and all the way back; and while we were visitin' Mis' Gorham the sunset gun sounded and made a great noise.

"I thought sure she'd hear that, and didn't suspicion how she'd hear it till Bert Gorham come into the room a second after.

"'You've grown considerable heavier'n you were, Bert,' Emma said to him. 'I heard you coming up the stairs plain as day!'"—Youth's Companion

His Future.

Ella—What did your aged suitor say when he proposed to you?

Stella—Will you be my widow?

Arithmetic.

Teacher—If I give you one apple—

Young American—Don't do it, teacher, and you won't start any of that trouble that Adam and Eve got into.

Too Lavish.

Mrs. Dobbs was trying to find out the likes and dislikes of her new boarder, and all she learned increased her satisfaction.

"Do you want pie for breakfast?" she asked.

"No, I thank you," said the new boarder, with a smile. "Pie for breakfast seems a little too much."

"That's just the way I look at it," said Mrs. Dobbs, heartily. "I say pie for dinner is a necessity, and pie for supper gives a kind o' finishing touch to the day; but pie for breakfast is what I call putting on airs."—Youth's Companion.

Importation of Leeches.

Leeches are enumerated by the bureau of statistics under its general head of animals imported, the total value of the imports of this species in 1908 having been $5,341; in 1907, $6,922; in 1906, $4,494; in 1905, $3,862; in 1904, $3,589; in 1903, $3,240, and in 1902, $2,412—the commerce in leeches being thus of a growing character. The total value of the leeches imported into the United States in the decade ending with 1908, is about $40,000. Leeches are imported free of duty. Snails were at one time enumerated as an article of importation, the records from 1894 to 1898 showing snails imported to the extent of about $5,000; but the snail trade so dwindled, showing only $24 of imports in 1898, that the bureau discontinued its statements of this article.

Really a Serious Dilemma.

"The chap who works on one side of me," said an office man, "has been married six weeks and he sneaks to the telephone about four times a day and calls up his wife, and then I hear him saying: 'Dear, how is your headache now? I hope you are feeling better.' Then pretty soon he comes back to his desk and goes to work again all smiling.

"The man who works on the other side of me has been married six years and he goes to the telephone only when he's called and then I hear him saying: 'Why, I can't possibly do that, I can't spare the money,' and then he comes back to his desk all scowling.

"And really, when I hear the way these two men go on I don't know what to do. I don't know whether to get married or stay a bachelor."

Is what you are worrying about really worth while?

Truth is said to be stranger than fiction, yet it is only in fiction they get married and live happily ever after.

His Way.

Knicker—Is Jones charitable?

Bocker—Well, he doesn't let his right foot know whom his left foot kicks.

New Work for Women.

Mrs. Frederick H. Snyder is the only woman impresario on earth, she says. She decided that grand opera would be a good thing for St. Paul and made her first venture so successful that she has continued in the business after the fashion of men engaged in the same work.

One Type of Religion.

"Too many people," said Rev. Charles F. Aked, at a luncheon in New York, "regard their religion as did the little boy in the jam closet.

"His mother pounced on him suddenly. He stood on tiptoe, ladling jam with both hands from the jam pot to his mouth.

"'Oh, Jacky!' his mother cried. 'And last night you prayed to be made a saint!'

"His face, an expressionless mask of jam, turned towards her.

"'Yes, but not till after I'm dead,' he explained."

Shows Value of Steel Car.

That the steel car is of great value as a protection to passengers in the event of collision was demonstrated in a recent clash of two trains in the Hudson tunnel, New York city. There was no such telescoping as would probably have occurred with wooden cars, and the injuries were merely such as resulted from the passengers' being thrown down by the shock of the collision.

An Interruption.

Among the primary pupils enrolled in a Baltimore school this term is the son of a prominent business man of that city.

One afternoon, at close of school, the youngster sought out his father in his office, to him he said:

"Dad, I'm getting tired of school. I think I'll quit."

"Why?" asked the astonished parent; "what's the matter, Tommy? I thought you were fond of going to school."

"So I am, dad," responded the youngster, suppressing a yawn, "but it breaks up the day so."—Harper's Magazine.