

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROY WALTERS
SYNOPSIS.

Miss Innes, spinster and guardian of Gertrude and Halsey, established summer headquarters at Sunnyvale. Amidst numerous difficulties the servants deserted. As Miss Innes locked up for the night, she was startled by a dark figure on the veranda. She passed a terrible night, which was filled with unseemly noises. In the morning Miss Innes found a strange link cuff button in a clothes hamper. Gertrude and Halsey arrived with Jack Bailey. The house was awakened by a revolver shot. A strange man was found shot to death in the hall. It proved to be the body of Arnold Armstrong, whose banker father owned the country house. Miss Innes found Halsey's revolver on the lawn. He and Jack Bailey had disappeared. The link cuff button mysteriously disappeared. Detective Jamieson and the coroner arrived. Gertrude revealed that she was engaged to Jack Bailey, with whom she had talked in the billiard room a few moments before the murder. Jamieson told Miss Innes that she was hiding evidence from him. He imprisoned an intruder in an empty room. The prisoner escaped down a laundry chute. It developed that the intruder was probably a woman. Gertrude was suspected for the intruder left a print of a bare foot. Gertrude returned home with her right ankle sprained. A negro found the other half of what proved to be Jack Bailey's cuff button.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

"Undoubtedly. Why, what could it be but flight? Miss Innes, let me reconstruct that evening, as I see it. Bailey and Armstrong had quarreled at the club. I learned this to-day. Your nephew brought Bailey over. Prompted by jealous, insane fury, Armstrong followed, coming across by the path. He entered the billiard room wing—perhaps rapping, and being admitted by your nephew. Just inside he was shot, by some one on the circular staircase. The shot fired, your nephew and Bailey left the house at once, going toward the automobile house. They left by the lower road, which prevented them being heard, and when you and Miss Gertrude got downstairs everything was quiet."

"But—Gertrude's story," I stammered.

"Miss Gertrude only brought forward her explanation the following morning. I do not believe it, Miss Innes. It is the story of a loving and ingenious woman."

"And—this thing to-night?"

"May upset my whole view of the case. We must give the benefit of every doubt after all. We may, for instance, come back to the figure on the porch; if it was a woman you saw that night through the window, we might start with other premises. Or Mr. Innes' explanation may turn us in a new direction. It is possible that he shot Arnold Armstrong as a burglar and then fled, frightened at what he had done. In any case, however, I feel confident that the body was here when he left. Mr. Armstrong left the club ostensibly for a moonlight saunter, about half after eleven o'clock. It was three when the shot was fired."

I leaned back bewildered. It seemed to me that the evening had been full of significant happenings, had I only held the key. Had Gertrude been the fugitive in the clothes chute? Who was the man on the drive near the lodge, and whose gold-mounted dressing-bag had I seen in the lodge sitting room?

It was late when Mr. Jamieson finally got up to go. I went with him to the door, and together we stood looking out over the valley. Below lay the village of Casanova, with its Old World houses, its blossoming trees and its peace. Above on the hill across the valley were the lights of the Greenwood club. It was even possible to see the curving row of parallel lights that marked the carriage road. Rumors that I had heard about the club came back—of drinking, of high play, and once, a year ago, of a suicide under those very lights.

Mr. Jamieson left, taking a short cut to the village, and I still stood there. It must have been after 11, and the monotonous tick of the big clock on the stairs behind me was the only sound. Then I was conscious that some one was running up the drive. In a minute a woman darted into the area of light made by the open door, and caught me by the arm. It was Rosie—Rosie in a state of collapse from terror, and, not the least important, clutching one of my Coal-port plates and a silver spoon.

She stood staring into the darkness behind, still holding the plate. I got her into the house and secured the plate; then I stood and looked down at her where she crouched tremblingly against the doorway.

"Well," I asked, "didn't your young man enjoy his meal?"

She couldn't speak. She looked at the spoon she still held—I wasn't so anxious about it; thank Heaven, it wouldn't chip—and then she stared at me.

"I appreciate your desire to have everything nice for him," I went on, "but the next time, you might take the Limoges china. It's more easily duplicated and less expensive."

"I haven't a young man—not here." She had got her breath now, as I had guessed she would. "I—I have been chased by a thief, Miss Innes."

"Did he chase you out of the house and back again?" I asked.

Then Rosie began to cry—not silently, but noisily, hysterically. I stopped her by giving her a good shake.

"What in the world is the matter with you?" I snapped. "Has the day of good common sense gone by? Sit up and tell me the whole thing."

Rosie sat up then, and sniffled.

"I was coming up the drive—" she began.

"You must start with when you went down the drive, with my dishes and my silver," I interrupted, but, seeing more signs of hysteria, I gave in. "Very well. You were coming up the drive—"

"I had a basket of—of silver and dishes on my arm, and I was carrying the plate, because—because I was afraid I'd break it. Part-way up the road a man stepped out of the bushes, and held his arm like this, spread out, so I couldn't get past. He said—he said—'Not so fast, young lady; I want you to let me see what's in that basket.'"

She got up in her excitement and took hold of my arm.

"It was like this, Miss Innes," she said, "and say you was the man. When he said that, I screamed and ducked under his arm like this. He caught at the basket and I dropped it. I ran as fast as I could, and he came after as far as the trees. Then he stopped. Oh, Miss Innes, it must have been the man that killed that Mr. Armstrong!"

"Don't be foolish," I said. "Whoever killed Mr. Armstrong would put as much space between himself and this house as he could. Go up to bed now; and mind, if I hear of this story being repeated to the other maids, I shall deduct from your wages for every broken dish I find in the drive."

I could fancy Liddy's face when she missed the extra pieces of china—she had opposed Rosie from the start. If Liddy once finds a prophecy fulfilled, especially an unpleasant one, she never allows me to forget it. It seemed to me that it was absurd to leave that china dotted along the road for her to spy the next morning; so with a sudden resolution, I opened the door again and stepped out into the darkness. As the door closed behind me I half regretted my impulse; then I shut my teeth and went on.

I have never been a nervous woman, as I said before. Moreover, a minute or two in the darkness enabled me to see things fairly well. Beulah gave me rather a start by rubbing unexpectedly against my feet; then we two, side by side, went down the drive.

There were no fragments of china, but where the grove began I picked up a silver spoon. So far Rosie's story was borne out; I began to wonder if it were not indiscreet, to say the least, this midnight prowling in a neighborhood with such a deservedly bad reputation. Then I saw something gleaming, which proved to be the handle of a cup, and a step or two farther on I found a V-shaped bit of plate. But the most surprising thing of all was to find the basket sitting comfortably beside the road, with the rest of the broken crockery piled neatly within, and a handful of small silver, spoons, forks and the like, on top! I could only stand and stare. Then Rosie's story was true. But where had Rosie carried her basket? And why had the thief, if he were a thief, picked up the broken china out of the road and left it, with his booty?

It was with my nearest approach to

a nervous collapse that I heard the familiar throbbing of an automobile engine. As it came closer I recognized the outline of the Dragon Fly, and knew that Halsey had come back.

Strange enough it must have seemed to Halsey, too, to come across me in the middle of the night, with the skirt of my gray silk gown over my shoulders to keep off the dew, holding a red and green basket under one arm and a black cat under the other. What with relief and joy, I began to cry, right there, and very nearly wiped my eyes on Beulah in the excitement.

CHAPTER IX.

Just Like a Girl.

"Aunt Ray!" Halsey said from the gloom behind the lamps. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Taking a walk," I said, trying to be composed. I don't think the answer struck either of us as being ridiculous at the time. "Oh, Halsey, where have you been?"

"Let me take you up to the house." He was in the road, and had Beulah and the basket out of my arms in a moment. I could see the car plainly now, and Warner was at the wheel—Warner in an ulster and a pair of slippers, over heaven knows what. Jack Bailey was not there. I got in, and we went slowly and painfully up to the house.

We did not talk. What we had to say was too important to commence there, and, besides, it took all kinds of coaxing from both men to get the Dragon Fly up the last grade. Only when we had closed the front door and stood facing each other in the hall did Halsey say anything. He slipped his strong young arm around my shoulders and turned me so I faced the light.

"Poor Aunt Ray!" he said gently. And I nearly wept again. "I—I must see Gertrude, too; we will have a three-cornered talk."

And then Gertrude herself came down the stairs. She had not been to bed evidently; she still wore the white negligee she had worn earlier in the evening, and she limped somewhat. During her slow progress down the stairs I had time to notice one thing: Mr. Jamieson had said the woman who escaped from the cellar had worn no shoe on her right foot. Gertrude's right ankle was the one she had sprained!

The meeting between brother and sister was tense, but without tears. Halsey kissed her tenderly, and I noticed evidences of strain and anxiety in both young faces.

"Is everything—right?" she asked. "Right as can be," with forced cheerfulness.

I lighted the living room and we went in there. Only a half-hour before I had sat with Mr. Jamieson in that very room, listening while he overtly accused both Gertrude and Halsey of at least a knowledge of the death of Arnold Armstrong. Now Halsey was here to speak for himself; I should learn everything that had puzzled me.

"I saw it in the paper to-night for the first time," he was saying. "It knocked me dumb. When I think of this houseful of women, and a thing like that occurring!"

Gertrude's face was still set and white. "That isn't all, Halsey," she



said. "You and—Jack left almost at the time it happened. The detective here thinks that you—that we—know something about it."

"The devil he does!" Halsey's eyes were fairly starting from his head. "I beg your pardon, Aunt Ray, but—the fellow's a lunatic."

"Tell me everything, won't you, Halsey?" I begged. "Tell me where you went that night, or rather morning, and why you went as you did. This has been a terrible 48 hours for all of us."

He stood staring at me, and I could see the horror of the situation dawning in his face.

"I can't tell you where I went, Aunt Ray," he said after a moment. "As to why, you will learn that soon enough. But Gertrude knows that Jack and I left the house before this thing—this horrible murder—occurred."

"Mr. Jamieson does not believe," Gertrude said drearily. "Halsey, if the worst comes, if they should arrest you, you must—tell."

"I shall tell nothing," he said with a new sternness in his voice. "Aunt Ray, it was necessary for Jack and me to leave that night. I cannot tell you why—just yet. As to where we went, if I have to depend on that as an alibi, I shall not tell. The whole thing is an absurdity, a trumped-up charge that cannot possibly be serious."

"Has Mr. Bailey gone back to the city," I demanded, "or to the club?"

"Neither," he said; "at the present moment I do not know where he is."

"Halsey," I asked gravely, leaning forward, "have you the slightest suspicion who killed Arnold Armstrong? The police think he was admitted from within, and that he was shot down from above, by some one on the circular staircase."

"I know nothing of it," he maintained; but I fancied I caught a sudden glance at Gertrude, a flash of something that died as it came.

As quietly, as calmly as I could, I went over the whole story, from the night Liddy and I had been alone up to the strange experience of Rosie and her pursuer. The basket still stood on the table, a mute witness to this last mysterious occurrence.

"There is something else," I said hesitatingly, at the last. "Halsey, I have never told this even to Gertrude, but the morning after the crime I found, in a tulip bed, a revolver. It—it was yours, Halsey."

For an appreciable moment Halsey stared at me. Then he turned to Gertrude.

"My revolver, Trude!" he exclaimed. "Why, Jack took my revolver with him, didn't he?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't say that," I implored. "The detective thinks possibly Jack Bailey came back, and—and the thing happened then."

"He didn't come back," Halsey said sternly. "Gertrude, when you brought down a revolver that night for Jack to take with him, what one did you bring? Mine?"

Gertrude was defiant now.

"No. Yours was loaded, and I was afraid of what Jack—might do. I gave him one I have had for a year or two. It was empty."

Halsey threw up both hands despairingly.

"If that isn't like a girl!" he said. "Why didn't you do what I asked you to, Gertrude? You send Bailey off with an empty gun, and throw mine in a tulip bed, of all places on earth! Mine was a 38 caliber. The inquest will show, of course, that the bullet that killed Armstrong was a 38. Then where shall I be?"

"You forget," I broke in, "that I have the revolver, and that no one knows about it."

But Gertrude had risen angrily.

"I cannot stand it; it is always with me," she cried. "Halsey, I did not throw your revolver into the tulip bed. I—think—you—did—it—yourself!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Burglar's Text Book.

The police of New York found upon a burglar, arrested by them, a treatise on safe-cracking that is said to be the most remarkable document that has ever fallen into their hands. The contents are so well compiled that the police unhesitatingly declare the author a past grand master in his profession, and, according to Popular Mechanics, are somewhat anxious to find out just how many copies are in circulation throughout the country.

For the most part the manuscript is in the yegg code, a lingo freely used by thieves the country over. It describes the two kinds of safes recognized by the profession, namely, the fireproof and the burglar-proof, asserting, however, that there is no genuine burglar-proof safe, and that kind that are drill-proof are only called so by courtesy. Minute directions for cracking a safe are given, together with diagrams to illustrate the treatise.

Guilt Revealed.

"Johnny, do you smoke cigarettes?" "I d-d-do a l-little, sir," stammered Johnny, peering beneath the tan of the baseball field.

The boss fixed him with his eagle eyes.

"Then gimme me one," he said. "I left mine on the bureau."

RIGHT TO CRITICIZE

IRRITABLE MAN NOT THE BUTTER IN HE SEEMED.

However, the Passengers Were Ready to Squelch the Man Who Objected to Baby's Crying, but He Got Off the Car.

The patient-looking mother seemed unable to do anything with the child. It hollered and yelled and carried on worse than a fan after a three-base hit by a member of the home team at the opening game.

Other passengers on the car fidgeted in their seats and looked greatly distressed, but said nothing, for the mother was apparently doing all she could to restore quiet.

The heavy chinned man right across the aisle from the woman seemed to be getting more and more annoyed by the racket—even more so than the rest of the people. After a time he was unable to restrain himself any longer.

"It seems to me," says he, turning to the woman, "that it's about time you were doing something to stop that baby's crying. I've sat here and put up with it just as long as I could, but I think it's up to you to see that there's a let up in it now pretty quick."

The patient mother cuddled the walling youngster to her a trifle closer and gave the irritable male passenger a hurt look, but venturing no retort.

There was no cessation in the noise, but nearly everybody else in the car was in full sympathy with the woman now. Several able-bodied men turned around and glared at the square-chinned passenger who dared to speak his mind.

The latter, however, continued to express himself. "When a kid hollers like that," he opined, "there's some good reason for it. Children don't yell 'emself hoarse because they've heard that their lungs need the exercise. If it hasn't been getting the right sort of food and feels crabbed and mean on that account, I hope you switch to some other kind of dope, that's all."

It is not improbable that two or three of the more muscular passengers would have spoken severely to the grouchy male complainant after the last outburst if he hadn't risen just then to get off the car. As he started toward the rear platform, the patient-looking little woman got up and followed him. When they had both reached the street, the man turned, took the child in his own arms—he still looking crabbed and it still reciting the lyrics to a war dance—and the trio went on up street.

The man was the child's father, and he had a perfect right to say whatever he wanted to about the manner of its bringing up.—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

A Vacuum Explanation.

Bishop Sanford Olmsted, at a dinner in Denver, said in the course of an argument:

"That explanation not only fails to explain, but it reveals the commentator's ignorance. Thus it reminds me of a talk in a smoking car."

"Two men in a smoking car wrangled over the working of the vacuum brake."

"The tubal inflation is what pulls up the train," declared the first.

"Rubbish! You're wrong," the other insisted. "It's the vent of the exhaust that does the business."

The brakeman just then passed. The two men halted him. They laid their argument before him for discussion. The brakeman, at the end, laughed heartily and shook his head.

"Boys," he said, "you're wrong about the working of the vacuum brake. It's much simpler than you think. To stop the train we just turn the tap, and that fills the pipe with vacuum."

Chicken's Long Fast.

Here is the story of the feat in the fasting line performed by a Grand Saline chicken. On Easter Sunday W. M. Loid placed a Rhode Island red and black Minorca chicken in his hen house along with other chickens. The next day these chickens were nowhere to be found, and it was believed they had strayed off or had met death. Twenty-eight days after the chickens were placed in the hen house they were found behind some nest boxes, wedged tightly in a crack, where they had probably fallen in an attempt to fly out of the house.

The Rhode Island red was dead, but the black Minorca was still alive, though very weak. After being cared for and fed it began to improve and is still alive with every prospect of becoming as spry as ever.—Grand Saline Journal.

Golf With an Expert.

A story is told of two old antagonists who met on a Scotch golf course every Saturday afternoon.

On one occasion, when they were all "square" at the seventeenth and the loser of the previous week had just played his third in the shape of a nice approach to the green, last week's winner came up to his ball with grim purpose. He had an easy pitch to the green, but a number of young sheep were unconcernedly browsing along the edge.

"Run forward, laddie," said last week's winner to his caddie, "and drive awa' the lambs!"

"Na, na!" vigorously protested his opponent. "Bide where ye be, laddie! Ye canna move any growin' thing! That's the rule o' gowf!"—Lippincott's Magazine.

An Almost Universal Prayer.

"Among the late Bishop Poser's anecdotes about prayer," said a Philadelphia Methodist, "there was one concerning a very original Norristown preacher.

"This preacher, in the course of a long prayer one Sunday night, recounted the many misfortunes and evils that had befallen him in the course of his long life. Then, sighing heavily, he prayed:

"Thou hast tried me with affliction, with bereavement, and with sorrow of many kinds. If thou are obliged to try me again, Lord, try me with the burden of wealth."

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Search others for their virtues, and thyself for thy vices.—Pulver.

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I Was Conscious That Some One Was Running Up the Drive.