

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROY 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 cut-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 cut-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 escaped down a laundry chute. Gertrude was suspected. A negro found the other half of what proved to be Jack Bailey's cut-button. Halsey reappears 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. Cashier Bailey of Paul 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 lodge. 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. A prowler was heard 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. Something brushed past her on the stairway and she fainted.

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 Mme. Sweeney 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 at 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 snifed.

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

"Well, something did," I retorted.



There Was Something Baffling in the Girl's Eyes.

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 person 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 to-night."

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.

with me, although I think her affection never wavered. At the time I laid the change to the fact that I had forbidden all communication with John Bailey, and had refused to acknowledge any engagement between the two. Gertrude spent much of her time wandering through the grounds, or taking long cross-country walks. Halsey played golf at the Country club day after day, and after Louise left, as she did the following week, Mr. Jamieson and I were much together. He played a fair game of cribbage, but he cheated at solitaire.

The night the detective arrived, Saturday, I had a talk with him. I told him of the experiences Louise Armstrong had had the night before on the circular staircase, and about the man who had so frightened Rosie on the drive. I saw that the information was important, and to my suggestion that we put an additional lock on the east wing door he opposed a strong negative.

"I think it probable," he said, "that our visitor will be back again, and the thing to do is to leave things exactly as they are, to avoid rousing suspicion. Then I can watch for at least a part of each night and probably Mr. Innes will help us out. I would say as little to Thomas as possible. The old man knows more than he is willing to admit."

I suggested that Alex, the gardener, would probably be willing to help, and Mr. Jamieson undertook to make the arrangement. For one night, however, Mr. Jamieson preferred to watch alone. Apparently nothing occurred. The detective sat in absolute darkness on the lower step of the stairs, dozing, he said afterwards, now and then. Nothing could pass him in either direction, and the door in the morning remained as securely fastened as it had been the night before. And yet one of the most inexplicable occurrences of the whole affair took place that very night.

Liddy came to my room on Sunday morning with a face as long as the moral law. She laid out my things as usual, but I missed her customary garrulousness. I was not regaled with the new cook's extravagance as to eggs, and she even forbore to mention "that Jamieson," on whose arrival she had looked with silent disfavor.

"What's the matter, Liddy?" I asked, at last. "Didn't you sleep last night?"

"No, ma'am," she said stiffly.

"Did you have two cups of coffee at your dinner?" I inquired.

"No, ma'am," indignantly.

I sat up and almost upset my hot water—I always take a cup of hot water with a pinch of salt, before I get up. It tenses the stomach.

"Liddy Allen," I said, "stop combing that switch and tell me what is wrong with you."

he put the new cook's trunk there last night the wall was as smooth as this. This morning it's dug out, and there's plaster on the cook's trunk. Miss Rachel, you can get a dozen detectives and put one on every stair in the house, and you'll never catch anything. There's some things you can't handcuff."

Liddy was right. As soon as I could, I went up to the trunkroom, which was directly over my bedroom. The plan of the upper story of the house was like that of the second floor, in the main. One end, however, over the east wing, had been left only roughly finished, the intention having been to convert it into a ballroom at some future time. The maids' rooms, trunkroom, and various storerooms, including a large airy linen room, opened from a long corridor, like that on the second floor. And in the trunkroom, as Liddy had said, was a fresh break in the plaster.

Not only in the plaster, but through the lathing, the aperture extended. I reached into the opening, and three feet away, perhaps, I could touch the bricks of the partition wall. For some reason the architect in building the house had left a space there that struck me, even in the surprise of the discovery, as an excellent place for a conflagration to gain headway.

"You are sure the hole was not here yesterday?" I asked Liddy, whose expression was a mixture of satisfaction and alarm. In answer she pointed to the new cook's trunk—that necessary adjunct of the migratory domestic. The top was covered with fine white plaster, no bits of lathing. When I mentioned this to Liddy she merely raised her eyebrows. Being quite confident that the gap was of wholly origin, she did not concern herself with such trifles as a bit of mortar and lath. No doubt they were even then heaped neatly on a gravestone in the Casanova churchyard!

I brought Mr. Jamieson up to see the hole in the wall, directly after breakfast. His expression was very odd when he looked at it, and the first thing he did was to try to discover what object, if any, such a hole could have. He got a piece of candle, and by enlarging the aperture a little was able to examine what lay beyond. The result was nil. The trunkroom, although heated by steam heat, like the rest of the house, boasted of a fireplace and mantel as well. The opening had been made between the fire and the outer wall of the house. There was revealed, however, on inspection, only the brick of the chimney on one side and the outer wall of the house on the other; in depth the space extended only to the flooring. The breach had been made about four feet

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

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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 transpire. 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! I tended only to the flooring. The breach had been made about four feet

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These preparations are sold at all drug stores.

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Different Sort of Hair.

"Deceiver!" she hissed. "I hate you!"

"Hate me!" he gasped. "Why, it was only yesterday you said you loved every hair on my head."

"Yes, but not every hair on your shoulder!" she retorted, as she held up a bit of golden evidence.—Stray Stories.

NO HEALTHY SKIN LEFT

"My little son, a boy of five, broke out with an itching rash. Three doctors prescribed for him, but he kept getting worse until we could not dress him any more. They finally advised me to try a certain medical college, but its treatment did no good. At the time I was induced to try Cuticura he was so bad that I had to cut his hair off and put the Cuticura Ointment on him on bandages, as it was impossible to touch him with the bare hand. There was not one square inch of skin on his whole body that was not affected. He was one mass of sores. The bandages used to stick to his skin and in removing them it used to take the skin off with them, and the screams from the poor child were heartbreaking. I began to think that he would never get well, but after the second application of Cuticura Ointment I began to see signs of improvement, and with the third and fourth applications the sores commenced to dry up. His skin peeled off twenty times, but it finally yielded to the treatment. Now I can say that he is entirely cured, and a stronger and healthier boy you never saw than he is to-day, twelve years or more since the cure was effected. Robert Wattam, 1148 Forty-eighth St., Chicago, Ill., Oct. 9, 1909."

The Part of It.

"I wonder if that sour Miss Oldgirl ever had any salad days?"

"I am sure she had the vinegar and peppery part of them."

The Silver Question.

When you see silverware scratched and tarnished with black stains and streaks in the interstices of the ornamental patterns, that is dirt, left there by common, cheap rosin soaps. It is better to use a soap that is antiseptic as well as a perfect cleansing agent. "Easy Task Soap," the hard, white laundry soap, will clean your silverware surely and quickly. It will get out the dirt the other soaps have left. Your grocer will sell you two cakes for ten cents, and if it doesn't satisfy you the makers will give back your dime.

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Truth is a structure reared on the battlefield of contending forces.—Dr. Winchell.

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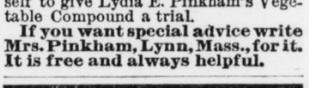


Brookville, Ohio.—"I was irregular and extremely nervous. A neighbor recommended Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound to me and I have become regular and my nerves are much better."—Mrs. K. KINNISON, Brookville, Ohio.

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