THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

BY MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

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 fiance, Jack Bailey, had conversed in the billiard room shortly before the murder. Detective Jamieson accused Miss Innes of holding back evidence. Cashier Bailey of Paul Armstrong's bank, defunct, was arrested for embezzlement. Paul Armstrong's death was announced. Halsey's fiancee, 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 Armstrong's murder. Thomas, the lodgekeeper, was found dead with a note in his pocket bearing the name "Lucien Wallace." A ladder found out of place deepens the mystery. The stables were burned, and in the dark Miss Innes shot an intruder. Halsey mysteriously disappeared. His auto was found wrecked by a freight train. It developed Halsey had an argument in the library with a woman before his disappearance. New cook disappears. 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. Gertrude was missing. Hunting for her, Miss Innes ran into a man and fainted. A confederate of Dr. Walker confessed his part in the mystery. He stated that the Carrington woman had been killed, that Walker feared her, and that he believed that Paul Armstrong had been killed by a hand guided by Walker. Halsey was found in a distant hospital. Paul Armstrong was not dead. Miss Innes discovered secret rooms in which the Traders' bank treasure was believed to be. Mrs. Watson, dying, said she killed Arnold Armstrong, who years before had married her sister under the alias of Wallace. Lucien Wallace was born of the marriage.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

At the Foot of the Stairs.

As I drove rapidly up to the house from Casanova station in the hack, I saw the detective Burns loitering across the street from the Walker place. So Jamieson was putting the screws on—lightly now, but ready to give them a twist or two, I felt certain, very soon.

The house was quiet. Two steps of the circular staircase had been pried off without result, and beyond a second message from Gertrude that Halsey insisted on coming home and they would arrive that night there was nothing new. Mr. Jamieson, having failed to locate the secret room, had gone to the village. I learned afterwards that he called at Dr. Walker's, under pretense of an attack of acute indigestion, and before he left had inquired about the evening trains to the city. He said he had wasted a lot of time on the case, and a good bit of the mystery was in my imagination! The doctor was under the impression that the house was guarded day and night. Well, give a place a reputation like that, and you don't need a guard at all—thus Jamieson. And sure enough, late in the afternoon, the two private detectives, accompanied by Mr. Jamieson, walked down the main street of Casanova and took a city-bound train.

That they got off at the next station and walked back again to Sunnyside at dusk was not known at the time. Personally, I knew nothing of either move; I had other things to absorb me at that time.

Liddy brought me some tea while I rested after my trip, and on the tray was a small book from the Casanova library. It was called "The Unseen World", and had a cheerful cover, on which a half-dozen sheeted figures linked hands around a headstone.

At this point in my story, Halsey always says: "Trust a woman to add two and two together, and make six." To which I retort that if two and two plus X makes six, then to discover the unknown quantity is the simplest thing in the world. That a houseful of detectives missed it entirely was because they were busy trying to prove that two and two make four.

The depression due to my visit to the hospital left me at the prospect of seeing Halsey again that night. It was about five o'clock when Liddy left me for a nap before dinner, having put me into a gray silk dressing-gown and a pair of slippers. I listened to her retreating footsteps, and as soon as she was safely below stairs I went up to the trunkroom. The place had not been disturbed, and I proceeded at once to try to discover the entrance to the hidden room. The openings on either side, as I have said, showed nothing but perhaps three feet of brick wall. There was no sign of an entrance—no levers, no hinges, to give a hint. Either the mantel or the roof, I decided, and after a half-hour at the mantel, productive of absolutely no result, I decided to try the roof.

I am not fond of a height. The few occasions on which I have climbed a step-ladder have always left me dizzy and weak in the knees. The top of the Washington monument is as impossible to me as the elevation to the presidential chair. And yet—I climbed out on the Sunnyside roof without a second's hesitation. Like a dog on a scent, like my bear-skin progenitor, with his spear and his wild boar, to me now there was the lust of the chase, the frenzy of pursuit, the dust of battle. I got quite a little of the latter on me as I climbed from the unfinished ballroom out through a window to the roof of the east wing of the building, which was only two stories in height.

Once out there, access to the top of the main building was rendered easy—at least it looked easy—by a small vertical iron ladder, fastened to the wall outside of the ballroom, and perhaps 12 feet high. The 12 feet looked short from below, but they were difficult to climb. I gathered my silk gown around me, and succeeded finally in making the top of the ladder. Once there, however, I was completely out of breath. I sat down, my feet on the top rung, and put my hair-pins in more securely, while the wind bellowed my dressing-gown out like a sail. I had torn a great strip of the silk loose, and now I ruthlessly finished the destruction of my gown by jerking it free and tying it around my head.

Luckily, the roof was flat, and I was able to go over every inch of it. But the result was disappointing; no trap-door revealed itself, no glass window; nothing but a couple of pipes two inches across, and standing perhaps 18 inches high and three feet apart, with a cap to prevent rain from entering and raised to permit the passage of air. I picked up a pebble from the roof and dropped it down, listening with my ear at one of the pipes. I could hear it strike on something with a sharp, metallic sound, but it was impossible for me to tell how far it had gone.

I gave up finally and went down the ladder again, getting in through the ballroom window without being observed. I went back at once to the trunkroom, and, sitting down on a box, gave my mind, as consistently as I could, to the problem before me. If the pipes in the roof were ventilators to the secret room, and there was no trap-door above, the entrance was probably in one of the two rooms between which it lay—unless, indeed, the room had been built, and the opening closed with a brick and mortar wall.

The mantel fascinated me. Made of wood and carved, the more I looked the more I wondered that I had not noticed before the absurdity of such a mantel in such a place. It was covered with scrolls and panels, and finally, by the merest accident, I pushed one of the panels at the side. It moved easily, revealing a small brass knob.

It is not necessary to detail the fluctuations of hope and despair, and not a little fear of what lay beyond, with which I twisted and turned the knob. It moved, but nothing seemed to happen, and then I discovered the trouble. I pushed the knob vigorously to one side, and the whole mantel swung loose from the wall almost a foot, revealing a cavernous space beyond.

I took a long breath, closed the door from the trunkroom into the hall—thank heaven, I did not lock it—and pulling the mantel-door wide open, I stepped into the chimney-room. I had time to get a hazy view of a small portable safe, a common wooden table and a chair—then the mantel door swung to, and clicked behind me. I stood quite still for a moment, in the darkness, unable to comprehend what had happened. Then I turned and beat furiously at the door with my fists. It was closed and locked again, and my fingers in the darkness slid over a smooth wooden surface without a sign of a knob.

I was furiously angry—at myself, at the mantel-door, at everything. I did not fear suffocation; before the thought had come to me I had already seen a gleam of light from the two small ventilating pipes in the roof. They supplied air, but nothing else. The room itself was shrouded in blackness.

I must have dozed off. I am sure I did not faint. I was never more composed in my life. I remember planning, if I were not discovered, who would have my things. I knew Liddy would want my heliotrope poplin, and she's a fright in lavender. Once or twice I heard mice in the partitions, and so I sat on the table, with my feet on the chair. I imagined I could hear the search going on through the house, and once some one came into the trunkroom; I could distinctly hear footsteps.

"In the chimney! In the chimney!" I called with all my might, and was rewarded by a piercing shriek from Liddy and the slam of the trunkroom door.

I felt easier after that, although the room was oppressively hot and enervating. I had no doubt the search for me would now come in the right direction, and after a little, I dropped into a doze. How long I slept I do not know.

It must have been several hours, for I had been tired from a busy day, and I waked stiff from my awkward position. I could not remember where I was for a few minutes, and my head felt heavy and congested. Gradually I roused to my surroundings, and to the fact that in spite of ventilators, the air was bad and growing worse. I was breathing long, gasping respirations, and my face was damp and clammy. I must have been there a long time, and the searchers were probably hunting outside the house, dredging the creek, or beating the woodland. I knew that another hour or two would find me unconscious, and with my inability to cry out would go my only chance of rescue. It was the combination of bad air and heat, probably, for some inadequate ventilation was coming through the pipes. I tried to retain my consciousness by walking the length of the room and back, over and over, but I had not the strength to keep it up, so I sat down on the table again, my back against the wall.

The house was very still. Once my straining ears seemed to catch a footfall beneath me, possibly in my own room. I groped for the chair from the table, and pounded with it frantically on the floor. But nothing happened; I realized bitterly that if the sound was heard at all, no doubt it was classed with the other rappings that had so alarmed us recently.

And then—I heard sounds from below me, in the house. There was a peculiar throbbing, vibrating noise that I felt rather than heard, much like the pulsing beat of fire engines in the city. For one awful moment I thought the house was on fire, and every drop of blood in my body gathered around my heart; then I knew. It was the engine of the automobile, and Halsey had come back. Hope sprang up afresh. Halsey's clear head and Gertrude's intuition might do what Liddy's hysteria and three detectives had failed in.

After a time I thought I had been right. There was certainly something going on down below; doors were slamming, people were hurrying through the halls, and certain high notes of excited voices penetrated to me shrilly. I hoped they were coming closer, but after a time the sounds died away below, and I was left to the silence and heat, to the weight of the darkness, to the oppression of walls that seemed to close in on me and stifle me.

The first warning I had was a stealthy fumbling at the lock of the mantel-door. With my mouth open to scream, I stopped. Perhaps the situation had rendered me acute, perhaps it was instinctive. Whatever it was, I sat without moving, and some one outside, in absolute stillness, ran his fingers over the carving of the

mantel and—found the panel.

Now the sounds below redoubled; from the clatter and jarring I knew that several people were running up the stairs, and as the sounds approached, I could even hear what they said.

"Watch the end staircases!" Jamieson shouted. "Damnation—there's no light here!" And then a second later. "All together now. One — two — three—"

The door into the trunkroom had been locked from the inside. At the second that it gave, opening against the wall with a crash and evidently tumbling somebody into the room, the stealthy fingers beyond the mantel-door gave the knob the proper impetus, and—the door swung open, and closed again. Only—and Liddy always screams and puts her fingers in her ears at this point—only now I was not alone in the chimney room. There was some one else in the darkness, some one who breathed hard, and who was so close I could have touched him with my hand.

I was in a paralysis of terror. Outside there were excited voices and incredulous oaths. The trunks were being jerked around in a frantic search, the windows were thrown open, only to show a sheer drop of 40 feet. And the man in the room with me leaned against the mantel-door and listened. His pursuers were plainly baffled; I heard him draw a long breath, and turn to grope his way through the blackness. Then—he touched my hand, cold, clammy, death-like.

A hand in an empty room! He drew in his breath, the sharp intaking of horror that fills lungs suddenly collapsed. Beyond jerking his hand away instantly, he made no movement. I think absolute terror had him by the throat. Then he stepped back, without turning, retreating foot by foot from The Dread in the corner, and I do not think he breathed.

Then, with the relief of space between us, I screamed, ear-splittingly, madly, and they heard me outside.

"In the chimney!" I shrieked. "Behind the mantel! The mantel!"

With an oath the figure hurled itself across the room at me, and I screamed again. In his blind fury he had missed me; I heard him strike the wall. That one time I eluded him; I was across the room, and I had got the chair. He stood for a second, listening, then—he made another rush and I struck out with my weapon. I think it stunned him, for I had a second's respite when I could hear him breathing, and some one shouted outside:

"We—can't—get—in. How—does—it open?"

But the man in the room had changed his tactics. I knew he was creeping on me, inch by inch, and I could not tell from where. And then—he caught me. He held his hand over my mouth, and I bit him. I was helpless, strangling—and some one was trying to break in the mantel from outside. It began to yield somewhere, for a thin wedge of yellowish light was reflected on the opposite wall. When he saw that, my assailant dropped me with a curse; then—the opposite wall swung open noiselessly, closed again without a sound, and I was alone. The intruder was gone.

"In the next room!" I called wildly. "The next room!" But the sound of blows on the mantel drowned my voice. By the time I had made them understand, a couple of minutes had elapsed. The pursuit was taken up then, by all except Alex, who was determined to liberate me. When I stepped out into the trunkroom a free woman again I could hear the chase far below.

I must say, for all Alex's anxiety to set me free, he paid little enough attention to my plight. He jumped through the opening into the secret room and picked up the portable safe.

"I am going to put this in Mr. Halsey's room, Miss Innes," he said, "and I shall send one of the detectives to guard it."

I hardly heard him. I wanted to laugh and cry in the same breath—to crawl into bed and have a cup of tea, and scold Liddy, and do any of the thousand natural things that I had never expected to do again. And the air! The touch of the cool night air on my face!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

No Trap-Door Revealed Itself.

Worried Over His Trousers.

The humors and tragedies of New York East side life are delineated by Frank Marshall White in an article in Harper's Weekly. Master Jacob Rosenberg, eleven or twelve years of age, was suffering from a broken leg. "His supreme agony came, however, when Dr. M. ripped up one side of the juvenile trousers with a pair of scissors to make room for bandages. 'My new pants! My new pants! He's cutting my new pants!' Jacob shrieked, and almost wriggled himself out of the grasp of the policeman and the driver in his efforts to prevent the mutilation of his raiment. All the way to his home in the ambulance the boy bewailed his mangled trousers more than he did his broken leg.

We think that preachers ought to say more about hell fire and brimstone; people are feeling altogether too easy about themselves.

REAL MEAN

Hoax—My wife is going to wait for me at the gates of heaven, if she's the first to go.

Joax—You shouldn't be so mean as to make her wait through all eternity, just because she made you wait occasionally.

BELIEVES IN DREAMS

Pat—Do yez belave in dreams, Moike?

Moike—Sure I do; wasn't it jist last week thot I dreamed that Oi lost some money and the next day the judge fined me foive dollars.

NOW AND THE FUTURE

Jack—I could follow your footsteps all my life long, dearest.

Grace—Oh! yes, you say that, but when we are married no doubt you'll walk about ten feet ahead of me, just like all other husbands.

AGAINST HER PRINCIPLES.

"Mrs. Alimony contemplates another divorce."

"I'm not surprised. She won't let any husband become permanently identified with her."

A GOOD SOLID REASON

"Why don't you believe in the spelling reform?"

"It is too much trouble to learn another dialect."

The KITCHEN CABINET

THE heart should give charity when the hand cannot.

Both oil and truth will get uppermost at last.

An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy.

—Joseph Parker.

Small Cakes for Various Occasions.

The following recipes are appropriate to serve with frozen dishes or with tea or chocolate. Many delicious little cakes and cookies may be bought; but no matter how attractive they are, one likes the touch of individuality which is shown in cakes of home manufacture:

Chocolate Nut Cake.—Cream three-fourths of a cupful of butter, add one and a half cupfuls of sugar gradually, then alternate a half cupful of milk with two and a quarter cups of flour sifted with three teaspoonfuls of baking powder several times to insure a thorough mixing, then add three squares of grated chocolate, a cupful of broken pecan meats, a teaspoonful of vanilla and the whites of eight eggs beaten stiff. A little salt is an improvement. Bake in gem pans about twenty minutes.

Bachelor's Buttons.—Rub together four tablespoonfuls of butter and ten tablespoonfuls of flour. Add five tablespoonfuls of sugar to the flour mixture and five to two well-beaten eggs, flavor with anise and combine the two mixtures. Make in small balls and bake. Dip in melted fondant and sprinkle with nuts.

Fondant.—This is the foundation for French candies and is used for cake frostings. Use four cupfuls of sugar, one cup of water and a tablespoonful of glucose. Boil until a little dropped in water will make a soft, waxy ball. Cool and stir until white and creamy. It will keep for weeks and always be fresh for use by heating over hot water. Keep the fondant in a dish covered with a waxed paper and tightly covered, or it will dry and crumble.

Orange Cakes.—Cream a quarter of a cupful of butter, add a half cupful of sugar gradually, the grated rind of an orange and a tablespoonful of the juice, the yolks of two eggs well beaten. Sift one and two-thirds cups of flour and half a teaspoonful of cream of tartar and a quarter of a teaspoonful of soda, a pinch of salt. Fold in the whites of two eggs beaten stiff. Bake in patty tins and ice with frosting flavored with orange juice.

Wafers.—Cream a half cup of butter, add a cup of powdered sugar and a cup and three-fourths of flour, a little salt and a teaspoonful of vanilla and a half cup of milk. Bake on a baking sheet and cut in squares. Roll immediately, before they harden.

"IT IS bad enough for an attractive young miss to be unable to make a loaf of bread, or broil a steak, or use a needle; but the limit is passed when a college makes her such a little idiot as to think it smart to boast of it."

Similar remarks we hear every day, blaming the college education for the foolishness of a few. When we are looking for results from college training let us take the average girl, to be fair. A man who is selling apples does not show the worst he has in stock, but the best.

It is true we meet women occasionally who consider a lack of knowledge of household affairs something to boast of, but let us be thankful that they are rare, and they make themselves a laughing stock among good people.

It takes brains to run a house and provide for a family and the woman who does the former is as much a business partner of the one who does the latter as the business partner down town.

Egg Plant.

Egg plant is such a pretty vegetable to look at, that it always attracts the eye in the market windows. It is not as commonly used as it should be, nor is it widely grown in our climate. Here are a few good ways to serve the plant:

Egg Plant With Potatoes.—Peel a raw egg plant and cut it up in cubes about an inch in size. Cut an equal portion of raw potatoes in similar cubes. Put the two together in a saucepan in which two tablespoonfuls of butter have been melted, add a pinch of ginger, cloves, nutmeg, allspice, turmeric, cinnamon, half a teaspoonful of red pepper and salt to taste. Cover the pan closely and let the vegetables cook in the water generated from their own steam. If all the moisture is evaporated before they are quite done turn in a half cupful of boiling water and finish cooking.

Egg plant is good sliced and put under a weight to remove the juice then dipped in batter and fried. Stuffed egg plant is also another favorite dish.

Egg Plant Salad.—Take a good sized, firm egg plant and cut in thick slices, lay them in cold water, with a tablespoon of salt and a piece of ice; leave for ten minutes; then put over the fire with boiling water and a half tablespoonful of vinegar, boil for ten minutes, drain, chill and cut in dice. Mix with this an equal quantity of finely cut celery and two hard cooked eggs chopped fine. Pour over this a quarter of a cupful of French dressing. Serve garnished with green pepper rings.

Nellie Maxwell.