

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
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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. 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.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"Liddy," I called, "go through the house at once and see who is missing, or if any one is. We'll have to clear this thing at once. Mr. Jamieson, if you will watch here I will go to the lodge and find Warner. Thomas would be of no use. Together you may be able to force the door."

"A good idea," he assented. "But—there are windows, of course, and there is nothing to prevent whoever is in from getting out that way."

"Then lock the door at the top of the basement stairs," I suggested, "and patrol the house from the outside."

We agreed to this, and I had a feeling that the mystery of Sunnyside was about to be solved. I ran down the steps and along the drive. Just at the corner I ran full tilt into somebody who seemed to be as much alarmed as I was. It was not until I had recoiled a step or two that I recognized Gertrude, and she me.

"Good gracious, Aunt Ray," she exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

"There's somebody locked in the laundry," I panted. "That is—unless—you didn't see any one crossing the lawn or skulking around the house, did you?"

"I think we have mystery on the brain," Gertrude said wearily. "No, I haven't seen any one, except old Thomas, who looked for all the world as if he had been ransacking the pantry. What have you locked in the laundry?"

"I can't wait to explain," I replied. "I must get Warner from the lodge. If you came out for air, you'd better put on your overshoes." And then I noticed that Gertrude was limping—not much, but sufficiently to make her progress very slow, and seemingly painful.

"You have hurt yourself," I said sharply.

"I fell over the carriage block," she explained. "I thought perhaps I might see Halsey coming home. He—he ought to be here."

"I hastened to the lodge."

"Where is Warner?" I asked.

"I—I think he's in bed, ma'am."

"Get him up," I said, "and for goodness sake open the door, Thomas. I'll wait for Warner."

"It's kind o' close in here, ma'am," he said, obeying gingerly, and disclosing a cool and comfortable-looking interior. "Perhaps you'd keer to set on the porch an' rest yourself."

It was so evident that Thomas did not want me inside that I went in.

"Tell Warner he is needed in a hurry," I repeated, and turned into the little sitting room. I could hear Thomas going up the stairs, could hear him rouse Warner, and the steps of the chauffeur as he hurriedly dressed. But my attention was busy with the room below.

en; the door to the basement stairs was double-barred, and had a table pushed against it; and beside her on the table was most of the kitchen paraphernalia.

"Did you see if there was any one missing in the house?" I asked, ignoring the array of sauce pans, rolling pins and the poker of the range.

"Rosie is missing," Liddy said with unctious. She had objected to Rosie, the parlor maid, from the start. "Mrs. Watson went into her room, and found she had gone without her hat. People that trust themselves a dozen miles from the city, in strange houses, with servants they don't know, needn't be surprised if they wake up some morning and find their throats cut."

After which carefully veiled sarcasm Liddy relapsed into gloom. Warner came in then with a handful of small tools, and Mr. Jamieson went with him to the basement. Oddly enough, I was not alarmed. With all my heart I wished for Halsey, but I was not frightened. At the door he was to force Warner put down his tools and looked at it. Then he turned the handle. Without the slightest difficulty the door opened, revealing the blackness of the drying room beyond!

Mr. Jamieson gave an exclamation of disgust. "Gone!" he said. "Confound such careless work! I might have known."

It was true enough. We got the lights on finally and looked all through the three rooms that constituted this wing of the basement. Everything was quiet and empty. An explanation of how the fugitive had escaped injury was found in a heaped-up basket of clothes under the chute. The basket had been overturned, but that was all. Mr. Jamieson examined the



"But Before We Go On, I Want to Say This." windows; one was unlocked, and offered an easy escape. The window or the door? Which way had the fugitive escaped? The door seemed most probable, and I hoped it had been so. I could not have borne, just then, to think that it was my poor Gertrude we had been bounding through the darkness, and yet—I had met Gertrude not far from that very window. I went upstairs at last, tired and depressed. Mrs. Watson and Liddy were making tea in the kitchen. In certain walks of life the tea pot is the refuge in times of stress, trouble or sickness; they give tea to the dying and they put it in the baby's nursing bottle. Mrs. Watson was fixing a tray to be sent in to me, and when I asked her about Rosie she confirmed her absence.

"She's not here," she said; "but I would not think much of that, Miss Innes. Rosie is a pretty young girl, and perhaps she has a sweetheart. It will be a good thing if she has. The maids stay much better when they have something like that to hold them here."

Gertrude had gone back to her room, and while I was drinking my cup of hot tea, Mr. Jamieson came in.

"We might take up the conversation where we left off an hour and a half ago," he said. "But before we go on, I want to say this: The person who escaped from the laundry was a woman with a foot of moderate size and well arched. She wore nothing but a stocking on her right foot, and, in spite of the unlocked door, she escaped by the window."

And again I thought of Gertrude's sprained ankle. Was it the right or the left?

CHAPTER VIII.

The Other Half of the Link.

"Miss Innes," the detective began, "what is your opinion of the figure you saw on the east veranda the night you and your maid were in the house alone?"

"It was a woman," I said positively. "And yet your maid affirms with equal positiveness that it was a man."

"Nonsense," I broke in. "Liddy had her eyes shut—she always shuts them when she's frightened."

"And you never thought then that the intruder who came later that night might be a woman—the woman in fact, whom you saw on the veranda?"

"I had reasons for thinking it was a man," I said, remembering the pearl cuff-link.

"Now we are getting down to business. What were your reasons for thinking that?"

"If you have any reason for believing that your midnight guest was Mr. Armstrong, other than his visit here the next night, you ought to tell me, Miss Innes. We can take nothing for granted. If, for instance, the intruder who dropped the bar and scratched the staircase—you see, I know about that—if this visitor was a woman, why should not the same woman have come back the following night, met Mr. Armstrong on the circular staircase, and in alarm shot him?"

"It was a man," I reiterated. And then, because I could think of no other reason for my statement, I told him about the pearl cuff-link. He was intensely interested.

"Will you give me the link," he said when I finished, "or, at least, let me



"Not quite that," he said with his friendly smile. "In fact, Miss Innes, I am quite certain she did not. But as long as I learn only parts of the truth, from both you and her, what can I do? I know you picked up something in the flower bed; you refuse to tell me what it was. I know Miss Gertrude went back to the billiard room to get something, she refuses to say what. You suspect what happened to the cuff-link, but you won't tell me. So far, all I am sure of is this: I do not believe Arnold Armstrong was the midnight visitor who so alarmed you by dropping—shall we say, a golf-stick? And I believe that when he did come he was admitted by some one in the house. Who knows—it may have been—Liddy!"

I stirred my tea angrily.

"I have always heard," I said dryly, "that undertakers' assistants are jovial young men. A man's sense of humor seems to be in inverse proportion to the gravity of his profession."

"A man's sense of humor is a barbarous and a cruel thing, Miss Innes," he admitted. "It is to the feminine as the hug of a bear is to the scratch of a well, anything with claws. Is that you, Thomas?" Come in.

Thomas Johnson stood in the doorway. He looked alarmed and apprehensive, and suddenly I remembered the seal-skin dressing bag in the lodge. Thomas came just inside the door and stood with his head drooping, his eyes, under his shaggy gray brows, fixed on Mr. Jamieson.

"Thomas," said the detective, not unkindly, "I sent for you to tell us what you told Sam Bohannon at the club, the day before Mr. Arnold was found here, dead. Let me see. You came here Friday night to see Miss Innes, didn't you? And came to work here Saturday morning?"

For some unexplained reason Thomas looked relieved.

"Yes, sah," he said. "You see it were like this: When Mistah Armstrong and the family went away, Miss Watson an' me, we was left in charge till the place was rented. Miss Watson, she've bin here a good while, an' she warn't skeery. So she slep' in the house. I'd bin havin' tokens—I tol' Miss Innes some of 'em—an' I slep' in the lodge. Then one day Miss Watson, she came to me an' she sez, sez she: 'Thomas, you'll hev to sleep up in the big house. I'm too nervous to do it any more.' But I jes' reckon to myself that of it's too skeery fer her, it's too skeery fer me. We had it, then, sho' nuff, and it ended up with Miss Watson stayin' in the lodge nights an' me lookin' fer work at de club."

"Did Mrs. Watson say that anything had happened to alarm her?"

"No, sah. She was jes' natchally skeered. Well, that was all, far's I know, until the night I come over to see Miss Innes. I come across the valley, along the path from the club house, and I goes home that way. Down in the creek bottom I almost run into a man. He wuz standin' with his back to me, an' he was workin' with one of these yere electric light things that fit in yer pocket. He was havin' trouble—one minute it'd flash out, an' the nex' it'd be gone. I had a view of 'is white dress shirt an' tie, as I passed. I didn't see his face. But I know it warn't Mr. Arnold. It was a taller man than Mr. Arnold. Besides that, Mr. Arnold was playin' cards when I got to the club house, same's he'd been doin' all day."

"And the next morning you came back along the path," pursued Mr. Jamieson relentlessly.

"The nex' mornin' I come back along the path an' down where I dun see the man night befoh, I picked up this here." The old man held out a tiny object and Mr. Jamieson took it. Then he held it on his extended palm for me to see. It was the other half of the pearl cuff-link!

But Mr. Jamieson was not quite through questioning him.

"And so you showed it to Sam, at the club, and asked him if he knew any one who owned such a link, and Sam said—what?"

"Wal, Sam, he lowed he'd seen such a pair of cuff-buttons in a shirt belongin' to Mr. Bailey—Mr. Jack Bailey, sah."

"I'll keep this link, Thomas, for a while," the detective said. "That's all I wanted to know. Good-night."

As Thomas shuffled out, Mr. Jamieson watched me sharply.

"You see, Miss Innes," he said, "Mr. Bailey insists on mixing himself with this thing. If Mr. Bailey came here that Friday night expecting to meet Arnold Armstrong, and missed him—if, as I say, he had done this, might he not, seeing him enter the following night, have struck him down, as he had intended before?"

"But the motive?" I gasped.

"There could be motive proved, I think Arnold Armstrong and John Bailey have been enemies since the latter, a cashier of the Traders' bank, brought Arnold almost into the clutches of the law. Also, you forget that both men have been paying attention to Miss Gertrude. Bailey's light looks bad, too."

"And you think Halsey helped him to escape?"

"(TO BE CONTINUED.)"

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