

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 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. Unusually 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. Gertrude and Halsey 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 First National bank, defunct, was arrested for embezzlement. Halsey said Armstrong wrecked his own bank and could clear himself. Paul Armstrong's death was announced. Halsey's business, Louise Armstrong, was found at the lodge. The lodgekeeper said Louise and Arnold had a long talk the night of the murder. Louise was promoted. Louise told Halsey that while she still loved him she was marrying another, and that he would displease her when he learned the whole story.

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

Gertrude and Halsey went for a long walk that afternoon and Louise slept. Time hung heavy on my hands, and I did as I had fallen into a habit of doing lately—I sat down and thought things over. One result of my meditations was that I got up suddenly and went to the telephone. I had taken the most intense dislike to this Dr. Walker, whom I had never seen, and who was being talked of in the countryside as the fiancé of Louise Armstrong.

I knew Sam Huston well. There had been a time, when Sam was a good deal younger than he is now, before he had married Anne Endicott, when I knew him even better. So now I felt no hesitation in calling him over the telephone. But when his office boy had given way to his confidential clerk, and that functionary had descended to connect his employer's desk telephone, I was somewhat at a loss as to how to begin.

"Why, how are you, Rachel?" Sam said sonorously. "Going to build that house at Rock View?" It was a 20-year-old joke of his.

"Sometime, perhaps," I said. "Just now I want to ask you a question about something which is none of my business."

"I see you haven't changed a iota in a quarter of a century, Rachel." This was intended to be another jest. "Ask ahead; everything but my domestic affairs is at your service."

"Try to be serious," I said. "And tell me this: Has your firm made any plans for a house recently for a Dr. Walker at Casanova?"

"Yes, we have."

"Where was it to be built? I have a reason for asking."

"It was to be, I believe, on the Armstrong place. Mr. Armstrong himself consulted me, and the inference was—in fact, I am quite certain—the house was to be occupied by Mr. Armstrong's daughter, who was engaged to marry Dr. Walker."

When the architect had inquired for the different members of my family, and had finally rung off, I was certain of one thing. Louise Armstrong was in love with Halsey, and the man she was going to marry was Dr. Walker. Moreover, this decision was not new; marriage had been contemplated for some time. There must certainly be some explanation—but what was it?

That day I repeated to Louise the telegram Mr. Harton had opened. She seemed to understand, but an unhappy face I have never seen. She looked like a criminal whose reprieve is over, and the day of execution approaching.

CHAPTER XV.

Liddy Gives the Alarm.

The next day, Friday, Gertrude broke the news of her stepfather's death to Louise. She did it as gently as she could, telling her first that he was very ill, and finally that he was dead. Louise received the news in the most unexpected manner, and when Gertrude came out to tell me how she had stood it, I think she was almost shocked.

"She just lay and stared at me, Aunt Ray," she said. "Do you know, I believe she is glad, glad! And she is too honest to pretend anything else. What sort of a man was Mr. Paul Armstrong, anyhow?"

"He was a bully as well as a rascal, Gertrude," I said. "But I am convinced of one thing; Louise will send for Halsey now, and they will make it all up."

For Louise had steadily refused to see Halsey all that day, and the boy was frantic.

We had a quiet hour, Halsey and I, that evening, and I told him several things; about the request that we give up the lease to Sunnyside, about the rumors of an approaching marriage between the girl and Dr. Walker, and, last of all, my own interview with her the day before.

He sat back in a big chair, with his

face in the shadow, and my heart fairly ached for him. He was so big and boyish! When I had finished he drew a long breath.

"Whatever Louise does," he said, "nothing will convince me, Aunt Ray, that she doesn't care for me. And up to two months ago, when she and her mother went west, I was the happiest fellow on earth. Then something made a difference; she wrote me that her people were opposed to the marriage; that her feeling for me was what it had always been, but that something had happened which had changed her ideas as to the future. I was not to write until she wrote me, and whatever occurred, I was to think the best I could of her. It sounded like a puzzle. When I saw her yesterday, it was the same thing, only, perhaps, worse."

"Halsey," I asked, "have you any idea of the nature of the interview between Louise Armstrong and Arnold the night he was murdered?"

"It was stormy. Thomas says once or twice he almost broke into the room, he was so alarmed for Louise."

"Another thing, Halsey," I said, "have you ever heard Louise mention a woman named Carrington, Nina Carrington?"

"Never," he said positively.

For try as we would, our thoughts always came back to that fatal Saturday night, and the murder. Every conversational path led to it, and we all felt that Jamieson was tightening the threads of evidence around John Bailey. The detective's absence was hardly reassuring; he must have had something to work on in town or he would have returned.

to me to have a sinister appearance, but we kept that well lighted, and until the lights went out at midnight it was really cheerful, if one did not know its history.

On Friday night, then, I had gone to bed, resolved to go at once to sleep. Thoughts that insisted on obtruding themselves I pushed resolutely to the back of my mind, and I systematically relaxed every muscle. I fell asleep soon, and was dreaming that Dr. Walker was building his new house immediately in front of my windows; I could hear the thump-thump of the hammers, and then I waked to a knowledge that somebody was pounding on my door.

I was up at once, and with the sound of my footstep on the floor the low knocking ceased, to be followed immediately by sibilant whispering through the keyhole.

"Miss Rachel! Miss Rachel!" somebody was saying, over and over.

"Is that you, Liddy?" I asked, my hand on the knob.

"For the love of mercy, let me in!" she said in a low tone.

She was leaning against the door, for when I opened it, she fell in. She was greenish-white, and she had a red and black barred flannel petticoat over her shoulders.

"Listen," she said, standing in the middle of the floor and holding on to me. "Oh, Miss Rachel, it's the ghost of that dead man hammering to get in!"

Sure enough, there was a dull thud—thud—thud—it came apparently from the wall.

"It's not a ghost," I said decidedly. "If it was a ghost it wouldn't rap; it



found in the tulip bed—and gave it to him. He saw Liddy there and divined at once that Louise was alone.

"You let me attend to this fellow, whoever it is, Aunt Ray, and go to Louise, will you? She may be awake and alarmed."

So in spite of her protests, I left Liddy alone and went back to the east wing. Perhaps I went a little faster past the yawning blackness of the circular staircase; and I could hear Halsey creaking cautiously down the main staircase. The rapping, or pounding, had ceased, and the silence was almost painful. And then suddenly, from apparently under my very feet, there rose a woman's scream, a cry of terror that broke off as suddenly as it came. I stood frozen and still. Every drop of blood in my body seemed to leave the surface and gather around my heart. In the dead silence that followed it throbbed as if it would burst. More dead than alive, I stumbled into Louise's bedroom. She was not there!

CHAPTER XVI.

In the Early Morning.

I stood looking at the empty bed. The coverings had been thrown back, and Louise's pink silk dressing-gown was gone from the foot, where it had lain. The night lamp burned dimly, revealing the emptiness of the place. I picked it up, but my hand shook so that I put it down again, and got somehow to the door.

There were voices in the hall and Gertrude came running toward me.

"What is it?" she cried. "What was that sound? Where is Louise?"

"She is not in her room," I said stupidly. "I think—it was she—who screamed."

Liddy had joined us now, carrying a light. We stood huddled together at the head of the circular staircase, looking down into its shadows. There was nothing to be seen, and it was absolutely quiet down there. Then we heard Halsey running up the main staircase. He came quickly down the hall to where we were standing.

"There's no one trying to get in. I thought I heard some one shriek. Who was it?"

Our stricken faces told him the truth.

"Some one screamed down there," I said. "And—and Louise is not in her room."

With a jerk Halsey took the light from Liddy and ran down the circular staircase. I followed him, more slowly. My nerves seemed to be in a state of paralysis; I could scarcely step. At the foot of the stairs Halsey gave an exclamation and put down the light.

"Aunt Ray," he called sharply.

At the foot of the staircase, huddled in a heap, her head on the lower stair, was Louise Armstrong. She lay limp and white, her dressing-gown dragging loose from one sleeve or her night-dress, and the heavy braid of her dark hair stretching its length a couple of steps above her head, as if she had slipped down.

She was not dead; Halsey put her down on the floor and began to rub her cold hands, while Gertrude and Liddy ran for stimulants. As for me, I sat there at the foot of that ghostly staircase—sat, because my knees wouldn't hold me—and wondered where it would all end. Louise was still unconscious, but she was breathing better, and I suggested that we get her back to bed before she came to. There was something grisly and horrible to me, seeing her there in almost the same attitude and in the same place where we had found her brother's body. And to add to the similarity, just then the hall clock, far off, struck faintly three o'clock.

It was four before Louise was able to talk, and the first rays of dawn were coming through her windows.

"Wake up, Halsey," I said, shaking him.

He stirred a little. Liddy was half in and half out of the door, afraid as usual to be left alone, and not quite daring to enter. Her scruples seemed to fade, however, all at once. She gave a suppressed yell, bolted into the room and stood tightly clutching the foot-board of the bed. Halsey was gradually waking.

"I've seen it," Liddy wailed. "A woman in white down the hall!"

I paid no attention.

"Halsey," I persevered, "some one is breaking into the house. Get up, won't you?"

"It isn't our house," he said sleepily. And then he roused to the exigency of the occasion. "All right, Aunt Ray," he said, still yawning. "If you'll let me get into something—"

It was all I could do to get Liddy out of the room. The demands of the occasion had no influence on her; she had seen the ghost, she persisted, and she wasn't going into the hall. But I got her over to my room at last, more dead than alive, and made her lie down on the bed.

The tappings, which seemed to have ceased for a while, had commenced again, but they were fainter. Halsey came over in a few minutes, and stood listening and trying to locate the sound.

"Give me my revolver, Aunt Ray," he said; and I got it—the one I had

A LESSON ON FORGIVENESS

Sunday School Lesson for July 31, 1910

Specialty Arranged for This Paper

LESSON TEXT.—Matthew 18:21-35. MEMORY VERSE 21, 22. GOLDEN TEXT.—"If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you."—Matt. 6:14. TIME.—Autumn of A. D. 29. PLACE.—Capernaum, near the Sea of Galilee.

Suggestion and Practical Thought.

The Occasion of Peter's Question.—Matt. 18:1-20. After the return from the Transfiguration scene, when Jesus with his disciples were together in a house in Capernaum, Jesus gave them some practical teaching and training on how they should feel and act in a time of growing opposition from ungodly men among whom they must live and work.

First of all they must cease ambitious striving for place and honor. They must "fling away ambition, by that sin fell the angels." This self-seeking spirit was exactly opposite to the kingdom of heaven, and if they did not overcome it, their lives would be failures. It also tended to awaken hard feelings between brethren. Cut off your foot; pluck out your eye, if you must, but hold on to the spirit of the kingdom.

The second lesson was from their Heavenly Father's seeking not to destroy those who hate and revile and disobey him, but to give himself to seeking and saving the lost.

The third lesson was upon the way they should carry out this divine spirit toward those who sinned against them.

Peter's Question and Jesus' Answer. Concerning the Duty of Forgiving Enemies.—V. 21, 22. "The Rabbin, who had been the disciples' teachers hitherto, required an offender to go to the injured party and obtain forgiveness by owing his fault; but Jesus told them that among his disciples the person wronged was to go to the wrongdoer, that such humility and love might strengthen his own graces, and win the guilty one to contrition."—Maclaren.

This was a hard saying, but by united prayer this spirit, as well as every other blessing, could be obtained. But wrongs to others, real or fancied, are very common, and Peter naturally asks how long one must carry out this instruction toward those who keep on sinning and apparently repenting.

Jesus Illustrates His Teaching by a Parable.—V. 23-34. Contrasting the debt sinful man owes to God with what any man wronging his fellow man owes to the one he has injured. If therefore God forgives freely the great debt, forgiven man certainly should forgive the little debt.

The Two Methods of Treating the Debtors. 25. "Commanded him to be sold . . . and all that he had." So in Syria now, when the debt grows till it equals in value the entire property of the debtors, the creditor seizes all they possess.

"The same servant went out." From his king's presence. He acted in the very heat of his own experience of release. "And found one of his fellow-servants." An inferior officer. "Owed him an hundred pence." When the common translation of the Bible was made the pennies were all silver, copper pennies not being coined till 1797. "Took him by the throat." Literally, went to choking him. "Thus Livy (IV, 53) relates how, a difficulty having arisen between the consul Valerius and one Menenius, the tribunes put an end to the contest, and the consul ordered into prison (collum torsisset, twisted the neck) the few who appealed. And Cicero (Pro Cluentio, XXI): 'Lead him to the judgment-seat with twisted neck (collum oborto).' Compare Cicero in C. Verrem, IV, 10."—Vincent.

"Fell down at his feet. . . I will pay thee all." The very act and words he himself had so lately employed to his creditor. "And he would not; but went (went away) 'and cast him into prison.'"

He had reasons in his own mind, as (1) that the man deserved the punishment; (2) it was his own fault that he was in debt; (3) it was not good for the community that such men go unpunished. But not one of these did he want applied to himself.

The Lesson in Daily Life.—V. 35. 1. The Punishment of Those Who Refuse to Forgive Those Who Injure Them. "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you." The torments must follow to you "if ye from your hearts," really and not merely in words, "forgive not every one his brother their trespasses." Every such person is going in the straight road to the torments.

There is no greater torment than those conscience and the working out of the laws of nature and of spirit produce in order to make the way of transgressors so hard that they may be persuaded to turn, and repent and obey and be saved.

SENTENCE SERMONS. "Forgiveness is man's deepest need and highest achievement."—Bushnell. "Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children." An unforgiving Christian is, therefore, a moral monster.

"An old Spanish writer says, 'To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; but to return good for evil is Godlike.'"—Archbishop Whately.

"I have known a man nurse the tiny cockatrice egg of unforgiveness till it has burst into the fiery serpent of crime."—Farrar.



She Lay Limp and White.

which faced the east, before she could tell us coherently what had occurred. I give it as she told it. She lay propped in bed, and Halsey sat beside her, unrebuffed, and held her hand while she talked.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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DESERVED IT.

Rastus—Playin' poker hands las' night I accidentally threw five aces.

Sambo—What did de odders do?

Rastus—Threw me outer de window.

Silenced the Critic.

Charles Sumner, when in London, gave a ready reply. At a dinner given in his honor, he spoke of "the ashes" of some dead hero. "Ashes! What American English!" rudely broke in an Englishman; "dust you mean, Mr. Sumner. We don't burn our dead in this country." "Yet," instantly replied Mr. Sumner, with a courteous smile, "your poet Gray tells us that 'Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.'" The American was not criticized again that evening.

She's a Free Lance.

"Would you have a pickpocket arrested if you detected one in the act of going through your pockets?"

"With one exception."

"What's that?"

"Not if it was my wife."

Aromatic Effects.

"What you ought to do," said the physician, "is to take the air in an automobile or a motor boat."

"Can't I stay home and open a can of gasoline?"

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