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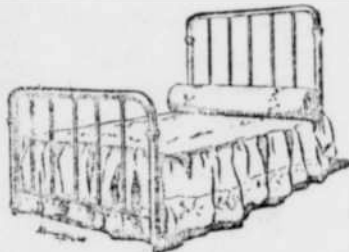
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The Case of Jennie Brice

By

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Continued from last issue

I felt queer and creepy. The street door was open, of course, and the lights going beyond. It gave me a strange feeling to sit there in the darkness on the stairs, with the arch of the front door like the entrance to a cavern, and see now and then a chunk of ice slide into view, turn around in the eddy and pass on. It was bitter cold, too, and the wind was rising.

"I'll go through the house," said Mr. Reynolds. "There's likely nothing worse the matter than some drunken mill hand on a vacation while the mills are under water. But I'd better look."

He left me, and I sat there alone in the darkness. I had a presentiment of something wrong, but I tried to think it was only discomfort and the cold. The water, driven in by the wind, swirled at my feet. And something dark floated in and lodged on the step below. I reached down and touched it. It was a dead kitten. I had never known a dead cat to bring me anything but bad luck, and here was one washed in at my very feet.

CHAPTER II.

MR. REYNOLDS came back soon and reported the house quiet and in order.

"But I found Peter shut up in one of the third floor rooms," he said. "Did you put him there?"

I had not and said so, but as the dog went everywhere and the door might have blown shut we did not attach much importance to that at the time.

Well, the skiff was gone, and there was no use worrying about it until morning. I went back to the sofa to keep warm, but I left my candle lighted and my door open. I did not sleep. The dead cat was on my mind, and as if it were not bad enough to have it washed in at my feet about 4 in the morning Peter, prowling unthinkingly, discovered it and brought it in and put it on my couch, wet and stiff, poor little thing!

I looked at the clock. It was a quarter after 4, and except for the occasional crunch of one ice cake hitting another in the yard, everything was quiet. And then I heard the stealthy sound of oars in the lower hall.

I am not a brave woman. I lay there, hoping Mr. Reynolds would hear and open his door. But he was sleeping soundly. Peter snarled and ran out into the hall, and the next moment I heard Mr. Ladley speaking. "Down, Peter," he said. "Down, go and lie down."

I took my candle and went out into the hall. Mr. Ladley was stooping over the boat, trying to tie it to the staircase. The rope was short, having been cut, and he was having trouble. Perhaps it was the candle light, but he looked ghost white and haggard.

"I borrowed your boat, Mrs. Pitman," he said, civilly enough. "Mrs. Ladley was not well, and I—I went to the drug store."

"You've been more than two hours going to the drug store," I said.

He muttered something about not finding any open at first and went into his room. He closed and locked the door behind him and, although Peter whined and scratched, he did not let him in.

He looked so agitated that I thought I had been harsh and perhaps she was really ill. I knocked at the door and asked if I could do anything. But he



"I borrowed your boat, Mrs. Pitman," only called "No," currying through the door and asked me to take that infernal dog away.

I went back to bed and tried to sleep, for the water had dropped an inch or so on the stairs, and I knew the danger was over. Peter came, shivering, at dawn and got on to the sofa with me. I put an end of the quilt over him, and he stopped shivering after a time and went to sleep.

The dog was company. I lay there, wide awake, thinking about Mr. Pitman's death, and how I had come by degrees to be keeping a cheap boarding house in the flood district and to having to take impudence from everybody who chose to rent a room from me and to being called a she devil. From that I got to thinking again about the Ladleys and how she had said he was a fiend and to doubting about his having gone out for medicine for her. I dozed off again at daylight, and being worn out I slept heavily.

At 7 o'clock Mr. Reynolds came to the door, dressed for the store. He was a tall man of about fifty, neat and orderly in his habits, and he always remembered that I had seen better days and treated me as a lady.

"Never mind about breakfast for me this morning, Mrs. Pitman," he said. "I'll get a cup of coffee at the other end of the bridge. I'll take the boat and send it back with Terry."

He turned and went along the hall and down to the boat. I heard him push off from the stairs with an oar and row out into the street. Peter followed him to the stairs.

At a quarter after 7 Mr. Ladley came out and called to me: "Just bring in a cup of coffee and some toast," he said. "Enough for one."

He went back and slammed his door, and I made his coffee. I steeped a cup of tea for Mrs. Ladley at the same time. He opened the door just wide enough for the tray and took it without so much as a "thank you." He had a cigarette in his mouth as usual and I could see a fire in the grate and smell something like scorching cloth.

"I hope Mrs. Ladley is better," I said, getting my foot in the crack of the door so he could not quite close it. It smelled to me as if he had accidentally set fire to something with his cigarette and I tried to see into the room.

"What about Mrs. Ladley?" he snapped.

"You said she was ill last night." "Oh, yes! Well, she wasn't very sick. She's better."

"Shall I bring her some tea?"

"Take your foot away!" he ordered. "No. She doesn't want tea. She's not here."

"Not here!"

"Good heavens!" he snarled. "Is her going away anything to make such a fuss about? The Lord knows I'd be glad to get out of this infernal pig wallow myself."

"If you mean my house"—I began.

But he had pulled himself together and was more polite when he answered: "I mean the neighborhood. Your house is all that could be desired for the money. If we do not have linen sheets and double cream we are paying muslin and milk prices."

Either my nose was growing accustomed to the odor or it was dying away. I took my foot away from the door. "When did Mrs. Ladley leave?" I asked.

"This morning, very early. I rowed her to Federal street."

"You couldn't have had much sleep," I said dryly, for he looked horrible. There were lines around his eyes, which were red, and his lips looked dry and cracked.

"She's not in the piece this week at the theater," he said, licking his lips and looking past me, not at me. "She'll be back by Saturday."

I did not believe him. I do not think he imagined that I did. He shut the door in my face, and it caught poor Peter by the nose. The dog ran off howling, but although Mr. Ladley had been as fond of the animal as it was in his nature to be fond of anything, he paid no attention. As I started down the hall after him I saw what Peter had been carrying—a slipper of Mrs. Ladley's. It was soaked with water. Evidently Peter had found it floating at the foot of the stairs.

Although the idea of murder had not entered my head at that time, the slipper gave me a turn. I picked it up and looked at it, a black one with a beaded toe, short in the vamp and high heeled, the sort most actresses wear. Then I went back and knocked at the door of the front room again.

"What the devil do you want now?" he called from beyond the door.

"Here's a slipper of Mrs. Ladley's," I said. "Peter found it floating in the lower hall."

He opened the door wide and let me in. The room was in tolerable order, much better than when Mrs. Ladley was about. He looked at the slipper, but he did not touch it. "I don't think that is hers," he said.

"I've seen her wear it a hundred times."

"Well, she'll never wear it again." And then, seeing me stare, he added: "It's ruined with the water. Throw it out. And, by the way, I'm sorry, but I set fire to one of the pillow slips; dropped asleep, and my cigarette did the rest. Just put it on the bill."

He pointed to the bed. One of the pillows had no slip, and the ticking cover had a scorch or two on it. I went over and looked at it.

"The pillow will have to be paid for, too, Mr. Ladley," I said. "And there's a sign nailed on the door that forbids smoking in bed. If you are going to set fire to things I shall have to charge extra."

"Really?" he jeered, looking at me with his cold, fishy eyes. "Is there any sign on the door saying that boarders are charged extra for seven feet of filthy river in the bedrooms?"

I was never a match for him, and I make it a principle never to bandy words with my boarders. I took the pillow and the slipper and went out. The telephone was ringing on the stair landing. It was the theater, asking for Miss Brice.

"She has gone away," I said.

"What do you mean? Moved away?"

"Gone for a few days' vacation," I replied. "She isn't playing this week, is she?"

"Wait a moment," said the voice.

There was a hum of conversation from the other end, and then another man came to the telephone.

"Can you find out where Miss Brice has gone?"

"I'll see."

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