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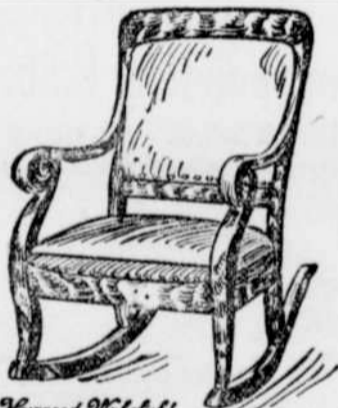
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The Case of Jennie Brice

By

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Continued from last issue

out of his pocket and glanced at it. "Forty-eight! Forty-eight, madam! And ninety-three cuts! I have found them marooned in trees, clinging to fences, floating on barrels, and I have found them in comfortable houses where there was no excuse for their neglect. Well, I must be moving on. I have the report of a cut with a new litter in the loft of a stable near here."

He wiped his hands carefully on a fresh paper napkin, of which also a heap rested on one of the seats of the boat, and picked up an oat, smiling benevolently at Peter. Then suddenly he bent over and looked at the stained rope end tied to the stair rail. "What's that?" he said.

"That's what I'm going to find out," I replied. I glanced up at the Ladleys' door, but it was closed.

The little man dropped his oar and, fumbling in his pockets, pulled out a small magnifying glass. He bent over, holding to the rail, and inspected the stains with the glass. I had taken a fancy to him at once, and in spite of my excitement I had to smile a little.

"Humph," he said and looked up at me; "that's blood! Why did you cut the boat loose?"

"I didn't," I said. "If that is blood I want to know how it got there. That was a new rope last night." I glanced at the Ladleys' door again, and he followed my eyes.

"I wonder," he said, raising his voice a little. "If I come into your kitchen if you will allow me to fry a little of that liver. There's a wretched Maltese in a tree at the corner of Fourth street that won't touch it raw."

I saw that he wanted to talk to me, so I turned around and led the way to the temporary kitchen I had made.

"Now," he said briskly when he had closed the door, "there's something wrong here. Perhaps if you will tell me I can help. If I can't it will do you good to talk about it. My name's Holcombe, retired merchant. Apply to First National bank for references."

"I'm not sure there is anything wrong," I began. "I guess I'm only nervous and thinking little things are big ones. There's nothing to tell."

"Nonsense. I come down the street in my boat. A white faced gentleman, with a cigarette, looks out from a window when I stop at the door and ducks back when I glance up. I come in and find a pet dog, obviously overfed at ordinary times, whining with hunger on the stairs. As I prepare to feed him a pale woman comes down, trying to put a right hand glove on her left hand and with her jacket wrong side out. What am I to think?"

I started and looked at my coat. He was right. And when as I tried to take it off he helped me and even patted me on the shoulder—what with his kindness and the long morning alone, worrying, and the sleepless night, I began to cry. He had a clean handkerchief in my hand before I had time to think of one.

"That's it," he said. "It will do you good, only don't make a noise about it. If it's a husband on the annual flood spree don't worry, madam. They always come around in time to white-wash the cellars."

"It isn't a husband," I smiled. "Tell me about it," he said. There was something so kindly in his face and it was so long since I had had a bit of human sympathy that I almost broke down again.

CHAPTER III.

ISAT there, with a crowd of children paddling on a raft outside the window, and Molly Maguire, next door, hauling the morning's milk up in a pail fastened to a rope, her doorway being too narrow to admit the milkman's boat, and I told him the whole story.

"Humph!" he exclaimed, when I had finished. "It's curious, but—you can't prove a murder unless you can produce a body."

"When the river goes down we'll find the body," said I, shivering. "It's in the parlor."

"Then why doesn't he try to get away?"

"He is ready to go now. He only went back when your boat came in."

Mr. Holcombe ran to the door and, flinging it open, peered into the lower hall. He was too late. His boat was gone, tub of liver, pile of wooden platters and all!

We hurried to the room the Ladleys had occupied. It was empty. From the window, as we looked out, we could see the boat, almost a square away. It had stopped where the street being higher, a doorstep rose above the flood. On the step was sitting a forlorn yellow puppy. As we stared Mr. Ladley stopped the boat, looked back at us, bent over, placed a piece of liver on a platter and reached it over to the dog. Then, rising in the boat, he bowed, with his hat over his heart, in our direction, sat down calmly and rowed around the corner out of sight.

Mr. Holcombe was in a frenzy of rage. He jumped up and down, shaking his fist out of the window after the retreating boat. He ran down the staircase, only to come back and look out the window again. The police boat was not in sight, but the Maguire children had worked their raft around to the street and were under the window. He leaned out and called to them:

"A quarter each, boys," he said, "if you'll take me on that raft to the nearest pavement."

"Money first," said the oldest boy, holding his cap.

But Mr. Holcombe did not wait. He swung out over the window sill, holding by his hands, and lit fairly in the center of the raft.



"Don't touch anything in that room."

"Don't touch anything in that room until I come back!" he called to me, and, jerking the pole from one of the boys, propelled the raft with amazing speed down the street.

The liver on the stove was burning. There was a smell of scorching through the rooms and a sort of bluish haze of smoke. I hurried back and took it off. By the time I had cleaned the pan Mr. Holcombe was back again in his own boat. He had found it at the end of the next street, where the flood ceased, but no sign of Ladley anywhere. He had not seen the police boat.

"Perhaps that is just as well," he said philosophically. "We can't go to the police with a wet slipper and a blood stained rope and accuse a man of murder. We have to have a body."

"He killed her," I said obstinately. "She told me yesterday he was a fiend. He killed her and threw the body in the water."

"Very likely. But he didn't throw it here."

But in spite of that he went over all the lower hall with his boat, feeling

every foot of the floor with an oar, and finally, at the back end, he looked up at me as I stood on the stairs.

"There's something here," he said.

I went cold all over and had to clutch the railing. But when Terry had come and the two of them brought the thing to the surface it was only the dining room rug, which I had rolled up and forgotten to carry upstairs!

At 1:30 Mr. Holcombe wrote a note and sent it off with Terry and, borrowing my boots, which had been Mr. Pitman's, investigated the dining room and kitchen from a floating plank; the doors were too narrow to admit the boat. But he found nothing more important than a rolling pin. He was not at all depressed by his failure. He came back, drenched to the skin, about 3 and asked permission to search the Ladleys' bedroom.

"I have a friend coming pretty soon, Mrs. Pitman," he said, "a young newspaper man named Howell. He's a nice boy, and if there is anything to this I'd like him to have it for his paper. He and I have been having some arguments about circumstantial evidence, too, and I know he'd like to work on this."

I gave him a pair of Mr. Pitman's socks, for his own were saturated and while he was changing them the telephone rang. It was the theater again, asking for Jennie Brice.

"You are certain she is out of the city?" some one asked, the same voice as in the morning.

"Her husband says so."

"Ask him to come to the phone."

"He is not here."

"When do you expect him back?"

"I'm not sure he is coming back."

"Look here," said the voice angrily, "can't you give me any satisfaction? Or don't you care to?"

"I've told you all I know."

"You don't know where she is?"

"No, sir."

"She didn't say she was coming back to rehearse for next week's piece?"

"Her husband said she went away for a few days' rest. He went away about noon and hasn't come back. That's all I know, except that they owe me three weeks' rent that I'd like to get hold of."

The owner of the voice hung up the receiver with a snap and left me pondering. It seemed to me that Mr. Ladley had been very reckless. Did he expect any one to believe that Jennie Brice had gone for a vacation without notifying the theater? Especially when she was to rehearse that week? I thought it curious, to say the least. I went back and told Mr. Holcombe, who put it down in his notebook, and together we went to the Ladleys' room.

The room was in better order than usual, as I have said. The bed was made—which was out of the ordinary, for Jennie Brice never made a bed—but made the way a man makes one, with the blankets wrinkled and crooked beneath and the white counterpane pulled smoothly over the top, showing every

Continued on page 4