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The Case of Jennie Brice

By

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Continued from last issue

morning, however, this Reynolds came to the room and said he had heard some one in a boat in the lower hall. He and Mrs. Pitman investigated. The boat, which Mrs. Pitman uses during a flood and which she had tied to the stair rail was gone, having been cut loose, not untied. Everything else was quiet, except that Mrs. Ladley's dog had been shut in a third story room.

"At a quarter after 4 that morning Mrs. Pitman, thoroughly awake, heard the boat returning and, going to the stairs, met Ladley coming in. He muttered something about having gone for medicine for his wife and went to his room, shutting the dog out. This is worth attention, for the dog ordinarily slept in their room."

"What sort of a dog?" asked Mr. Howell. He had been listening attentively.

"A water spaniel. The rest of the night or early morning was quiet. At a quarter after 7 Ladley asked for coffee and toast for one, and on Mrs. Pitman remarking this said that his wife was not playing this week and had gone for a few days' vacation, having left early in the morning. Remember, during the night he had been out for medicine for her. Now she was able to travel and, in fact, had started."

Mr. Howell was frowning at the floor. "If he was doing anything wrong, he was doing it very badly," he said.

"This is where I entered the case," said Mr. Holcombe. "I rowed into the lower hall this morning to feed the dog Peter, who was whining on the staircase. Mrs. Pitman was coming down, pale and agitated over the fact that the dog shortly before had found floating in the parlor downstairs a slipper belonging to Mrs. Ladley and later a knife with a broken blade. She maintains that she had the knife last night upstairs, that it was not broken and that it was taken from a shelf in her room while she dozed. The question is, then, Why was the knife taken? Who took it and why? Has this man made away with his wife or has he not?"

Mr. Howell looked at me and smiled. "Mr. Holcombe and I are old enemies," he said. "Mr. Holcombe believes that circumstantial evidence may probably hang a man; I do not." And to Mr. Holcombe, "So, having found a wet slipper and a broken knife, you are prepared for murder and sudden death?"

"I have more evidence," Mr. Holcombe said eagerly, and proceeded to tell what we had found in the room. Mr. Howell listened, smiling to himself, but at the mention of the onyx clock he got up and went to the mantel.

"By Jove!" he said and stood looking at the mark in the dust. "Are you sure the clock was here yesterday?"

"I wound it night before last and put the key underneath. Yesterday, before they moved up, I wound it again."

"The key is gone also. Well, what of it, Holcombe? Did he brain her with the clock or choke her with the key?"

Mr. Holcombe was looking at his notebook. "To summarize," he said, "we have here as clues indicating a crime, the rope, the broken knife, the slipper, the towel and the clock. Be-

sides, this scrap of paper may contain some information." He opened it and sat gazing at it in his pain. Then, "Is this Ladley's writing?" he asked me in a curious voice.

"Yes."

I glanced at the slip. Mr. Holcombe had just read from his notebook: "Rope, knife, slipper, towel, clock."

The slip I had found behind the washstand said "Rope, knife, shoe, towel Horn"—The rest of the last word was torn off.

Mr. Howell was staring at the mantel. "Clock!" he repeated.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was after four when Mr. Holcombe had finished going over the room. I offered to make both the gentlemen some tea, for Mr. Pitman had been an Englishman, and I had got into the habit of having a cupful in the afternoon, with a cracker or a bit of bread. But they refused. Mr. Howell said he had promised to meet a lady, and to bring her through the flooded district in a boat. He shook hands with me and smiled at Mr. Holcombe.

"You will have to restrain his enthusiasm, Mrs. Pitman," he said. "He is a bloodhound on the scent. If his buying gets on your nerves just send for me." He went down the stairs and stepped into the boat. Remember, Holcombe, he yelled, "every well-constituted murder has two things—a motive and a corpse. You haven't either, only a mass of piling details."

"If everybody waited until he saw flames instead of relying on the testimony of the smoke," Mr. Holcombe snapped, "what would the fire loss be?"

Mr. Howell poled his boat to the front door and, sitting down, prepared to row out.

"You are warned, Mrs. Pitman," he called to me. "If he doesn't find a body to fit the clues he's quite capable of making one to fill the demand."

"Horn," said Mr. Holcombe, looking at the slip again. "The tail of the 'n' is torn off—evidently only part of a word. Hornet, Horning, Horner—Mrs. Pitman, will you go with me to the police station?"

I was more than anxious to go. In fact, I could not bear the idea of staying alone in the house, with heaven only knows what concealed in the depths of that muddy flood. I got on my wraps again, and Mr. Holcombe rowed me out. Peter plunged into the water to follow and had to be sent back. He sat on the lower step and whined. Mr. Holcombe threw him another piece of liver, but he did not touch it.

We rowed to the corner of Robinson street and Federal—it was before Federal street was raised above the flood level—and left the boat in charge of a boy there. And we walked to the police station. On the way Mr. Holcombe questioned me closely about the events of the morning, and I recalled the incident of the burned pillow slip. He made a note of it at once and grew very thoughtful.

He left me, however, at the police station. "I'd rather not appear in this, Mrs. Pitman," he said apologetically, "and I think better along my own lines—not that I have anything against the police; they've done some splendid work. But this case takes imagination, and the police department deals with facts. We have no facts yet. What we need, of course, is to have the man detained until we are sure of our case."

He lifted his hat and turned away, and I went slowly up the steps to the police station. Living, as I had, in a neighborhood where the police, like the poor, are always with us, and where the visits of the patrol wagon are one of those familiar sights that no amount of repetition enabled any of us to treat with contempt, I was uncomfortable until I remembered that my grandfather had been one of the first mayors of the city and that, if the patrol had been at my house more than once, the entire neighborhood would testify that my boarders were usually orderly.

At the door some one touched me on the arm. It was Mr. Holcombe again.

"I have been thinking it over," he said, "and I believe you'd better not mention the piece of paper that you found behind the washstand. They might say the whole thing is a hoax."

"Very well," I agreed, and went in. The police sergeant in charge knew me at once, having stopped at my house more than once in flood time for a cup of hot coffee.

"Sit down, Mrs. Pitman," he said. "I suppose you are still making the best coffee and doughnuts in the city of Allegheny? Well, what's the trouble in your district? Want an injunction against the river for trespass?"

"The river has brought me a good bit of trouble," I said. "I'm—I'm worried, Mr. Sergeant. I think a woman from my house has been murdered, but I don't know."

"Murdered!" he said, and drew up his chair. "Tell me about it."

I told him everything, while he sat back with his eyes half closed and his fingers beating a tattoo on the arm of his chair.

When I finished he got up and went into an inner room. He came back in a moment.

"I want you to come in and tell that to the chief," he said, and led the way.

All told, I repeated my story three times that afternoon—to the sergeant, to the chief of police and the third time to both the others and two detectives.

The second time the chief made notes of what I said.

"Know this man Ladley?" he asked the others. None of them did, but they all knew of Jennie Brice and some of them had seen her in the theater.

"Get the theater, Tom," the chief said to one of the detectives.

Luckily what he learned over the telephone from the theater corroborated my story. Jennie Brice was not in the cast that week, but should have reported that morning (Monday) to re-



I Told Him Everything.

hearse the next week's piece. No message had been received from her and a substitute had been put in her place.

The chief hung up the receiver and turned to me. "You are sure about the clock, Mrs. Pitman?" he asked. "It was there when they moved upstairs to the room?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are certain you will not find it on the parlor mantel when the water goes down?"

"The mantels are uncovered now. It is not there."

"You think Ladley has gone for good?"

"Yes, sir."

Continued on page 4