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THE REXALL STORE

The Case of Jennie Brice

By
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
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Continued from last issue

with what I suppose he meant to be a reproachful look. But he could no more put an expression of that sort in his eyes than a fish could. "I suppose, then, there is no use asking if I may have my old room—the front room. I won't need two."

"I didn't want him, and he must have seen it. But I took him. "You may have it, as far as I'm concerned," I said. "But you'll have to let the paper hanger in tomorrow."

"Assuredly." He came into the hall and stood looking around him, and I fancied he drew a breath of relief. "It isn't much yet," he said, "but it's better to look at than six feet of muddy water."

"Or than stone walls," I said. He looked at me and smiled. "Or than stone walls," he repeated, bowing, and went into his room.

So I had him again, and if I gave him only the dull knives and locked up the breadknife the moment I had finished with it, who can blame me? I took all the precaution I could think of—had Terry put an extra bolt on every door and hid the rat poison and the carbolic acid in the cellar.

Peter would not go near him. He hobbled around on his three legs, with the splint beating a sort of tattoo on the floor, but he stayed back in the kitchen with me or in the yard.

It was Sunday night or early Monday morning that Jennie Brice disappeared. On Thursday evening her husband came back. On Friday the body of a woman was washed ashore at Beaver, but turned out to be that of a stewardess who had fallen overboard from one of the Cincinnati packets. Mr. Ladley himself showed me the article in the morning paper when I took in his breakfast.

"Public hysteria has killed a man before this," he said when I had read it. "Suppose that woman had been mangled or the screw of the steamer had cut her head off! How many people do you suppose would have been willing to swear that it was my—was Mrs. Ladley?"

"Even without a head I should know Mrs. Ladley," I retorted.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Let's trust she's still alive, for my sake," he said. "But I'm glad, anyhow, that this woman had a head. You'll allow me to be glad, won't you?"

"You can be anything you want as far as I'm concerned," I snapped and went out.

Mr. Holcombe still retained the second story front room, I think, although he said nothing more about it, that he was still "playing horse." He wrote a good bit at the washstand, and, from the loose sheets of manuscript he left, I believe actually tried to begin a play. But mostly he wandered along the water front or stood on one or another of the bridges, looking at the water and thinking. It is certain that he tried to keep in the part by smoking cigarettes, but he hated them, and usually ended by throwing the cigarette away and lighting an old pipe he carried.

On that Thursday evening he came home and sat down to supper with Mr. Reynolds. He ate little and seemed much excited. The talk ran on crime, as it always did when he was around, and Mr. Holcombe quoted Spencer a

great deal—Herbert Spencer. Mr. Reynolds was impressed, not knowing much beyond silks and the National league.

"Spencer," Mr. Holcombe would say—"Spencer shows that every occurrence is the inevitable result of what has gone before and carries in its train an equally inevitable series of results. Try to interrupt this chain in the smallest degree and what follows? Chaos, my dear sir, chaos."

"We see that at the store," Mr. Reynolds would say. "Accustom a lot of women to a silk sale on Fridays and then make it tooth brushes. That's chaos, ad right."

Well Mr. Holcombe came in that night about 10 o'clock, and I told him Ladley was back. He was almost wild with excitement, wanted to have the back parlor so he could watch him through the keyhole, and was terribly upset when I told him there was no keyhole, that the door fastened with a thumb bolt. On learning that the room was to be papered the next morning he grew calmer, however, and got the paperhanger's address from me. He went out just after that.

Friday, as I say, was very quiet. Mr. Ladley moved to the back parlor to let the paperhanger in the front room, smoked and fussed with his papers all day, and Mr. Holcombe stayed in his room, which was unusual. In the afternoon Molly Maguire put on the striped fur coat and went out, going slowly past the house so that I would be sure to see her. Beyond banging the window down, I gave her no satisfaction.

At 4 o'clock Mr. Holcombe came to my kitchen, rubbing his hands together. He had a pasteboard tube in his hand about a foot long, with an arrangement of small mirrors in it. He said it was modeled after the something or other that is used on a submarine, and that he and the paperhanger had fixed a place for it between his floor and the ceiling of Mr. Ladley's room, so that the chandelier would hide it from below. He thought he could watch Mr. Ladley through it, and as it turned out he could.

"I want to find his weak moment," he said excitedly. "I want to know what he does when the door is closed and he can take off his mask. And I want to know if he sleeps with a light."

"If he does," I replied, "I hope you'll let me know, Mr. Holcombe. The gas bills are a horror to me as it is. I think he kept it on all last night. I turned off all the other lights and went to the cellar. The meter was going around."

"Fine?" he said. "Every murderer fears the dark, and our friend of the parlor bedroom is a murderer, Mrs. Pittman. Whether he hangs or not, he's a murderer."

The mirror affair, which Mr. Holcombe called a periscope, was put in that day and worked amazingly well. I went with him to try it out, and I distinctly saw the paperhanger take a cigarette from Mr. Ladley's case and put it in his pocket. Just after that, Mr. Ladley sauntered into the room and looked at the new paper. I could both see and hear him. It was rather weird.

"Gee, what a wall paper!" he said.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT was Friday afternoon. All that evening and most of Saturday and Sunday Mr. Holcombe sat on the floor with his eye to the reflecting mirror and his notebook beside him. I have it before me.

On the first page is the "dog meat-\$2" entry. On the next, the description of what occurred on Sunday night, March 4, and Monday morning, the 5th. Following that came a sketch, made with a carbon sheet of the torn paper found behind the washstand:

And then came the entries for Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Friday evening:

6:30—Eating hearty supper.
7—Lights cigarette and paces floor.



Notice that when Mrs. P. knocks he goes to desk and pretends to be writing.

8—Is examining book. Looks like a railway guide.

8:30—It is a steamship guide.

8:45—Tailor's boy brings box. Gives boy 50 cents. Query: Where does he get money now that J. B. is gone?

9—Tries on new suit (brown)

9:30—Has been spending a quarter of an hour on his knees looking behind furniture and examining baseboard.

10—He has the key to the onyx clock. Has hidden it twice—once up the chimney flue, once behind baseboard.

10:15—He has just thrown key or similar small article outside window into yard.

11—Has gone to bed. Light burning. Should sleep here on floor.

11:30—He cannot sleep. Is up walking the floor and smoking.

7 a. m.—Saturday. Disturbance below. He had nightmare and was calling "Jennie!" He got up, took a drink and is now reading.

8 a. m. Must have slept. He is shaving.

12 m.—Nothing this morning. He wrote for four hours, sometimes reading aloud what he had written.

2 p. m.—He has a visitor, a man Cannot hear all word now and then "Llewellyn is the very man. "Devil of a risk." "We'll see you through." "Lost the slip." "Didn't go to the hotel. She went to a private house. "Eliza Shaeffer."

Who went to a private house? Jennie Brice?

2:30—Cannot hear. Are whispering. The visitor has given Ladley roll of bills.

4—Followed the visitor, a tall man with a pointed beard. He went to the Liberty theater. Found it was Bronson, business manager there. Who is Llewellyn, and who is Eliza Shaeffer?

4:15—Had Mrs. P. bring telephone book; six Llewellyns in the book; no Eliza Shaeffer. Ladley appears more cheerful since Bronson's visit. He has bought all the evening papers and is searching for something. Has not found it.

7—Ate well. Have asked Mrs. P. to take my place here while I interview the six Llewellyns.

11 Mrs. P. reports a quiet evening. He read and smoked. Has gone to bed. Light burning. Saw five Llewellyns. None of them knew Bronson or Ladley. Sixth—a lawyer—out at revival meeting. Went to the church and walked home with him. He knows something. Acknowledged he knew Bronson. Had met Ladley. Did not believe Mrs. Ladley dead. Regretted I had not been to the meeting. Good sermon. Asked me for a dollar for missions.

9 a. m.—Sunday. Ladley in bad shape. Apparently been drinking all night. Cannot eat. Sent out early for papers and has searched them all. Found entry on second page, stared at it; then flung the paper away. Have sent for same paper.

10 a. m.—Paper says: "Body of woman washed ashore yesterday at Sewickley. Much mutilated by flood debris." Ladley in bed, staring at ceiling. Wonder if he sees tube? He is ghastly.

That is the last entry in the notebook for that day. Mr. Holcombe called me in great excitement shortly after 10 and showed me the item. Neither of us doubted for a moment that it was Jennie Brice who had been found. He started for Sewickley that same afternoon, and he probably communicated with the police before he left, for once or twice I saw Mr. Graves, the detective, sauntering past the house.

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