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THE REXALL STORE

The Case of Jennie Brice

By

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Continued from last issue

"Where did you see him first?"

"By the Ninth street bridge."

"Did you call him?"

"He saw my light and hailed me. I was making fast to a coal barge after one of my ropes had busted."

"You threw the line to him there?"

"No, sir. He tried to work in to shore. I ran along River avenue to below the Sixth street bridge. He got pretty close in there and I threw him a rope. He was about done up."

"Would you know him again?"

"Yes, sir. He gave me \$5 and said to say nothing about it. He didn't want anybody to know he had been such a fool."

They took him quietly upstairs then and let him look through the periscope. He identified Mr. Ladley absolutely.

When Tim and Mr. Graves had gone Mr. Holcombe and I were left alone in the kitchen. Mr. Holcombe leaned over and patted Peter as he lay in his basket.

"We've got him, old boy," he said. "The chain is just about complete. He'll never kick you again."

But Mr. Holcombe was wrong—not about kicking Peter, although I don't believe Mr. Ladley ever did that again, but in thinking we had him.

I washed that next morning, Monday, but all the time I was rubbing and starching and hanging out my mind was with Jennie Brice. The sight of Molly Maguire next door at the window rubbing and brushing at the fur coat only made things worse.

At noon when the Maguire youngsters came home from school I bribed Tommy, the youngest, into the kitchen with the promise of a doughnut.

"I see your mother has a new fur coat," I said, with the plate of doughnuts just beyond his reach.

"Yes'm."

"She didn't buy it?"

"She didn't buy it. Say, Mrs. Pitman, gimme that doughnut."

"Oh, so the coat washed in?"

"No'm. Pap found it down by the point on a cake of ice. He thought it was a dog, and rowed out for it."

Well, I hadn't wanted the coat, as far as that goes; I'd managed well enough without furs for twenty years or more. But it was a satisfaction to know that it had not floated into Mrs. Maguire's kitchen and spread itself at her feet, as one may say. However, that was not the question after all. The real issue was that if it was Jennie Brice's coat and was found across the river on a cake of ice, then one of two things was certain: Either Jennie Brice's body wrapped in the coat had been thrown into the water out in the current, or she herself, hoping to incriminate her husband, had flung her coat into the river.

I told Mr. Holcombe, and he interviewed Joe Maguire that afternoon. The upshot of it was that Tommy had been correctly informed. Joe had witnesses who had lined up to see him rescue a dog, and had beheld his return in triumph with a wet and soggy fur coat. At 3 o'clock Mrs. Maguire, instructed by Mr. Graves, brought the coat, to me for identification, turning it about for my inspection, but refusing to take her hands off it.

"If her husband says to me that he wants it back, well and good," she said, "but I don't give it up to nobody but

him. Some folks I know of would be glad enough to have it."

I was certain it was Jennie Brice's coat, but the maker's name had been ripped out. With Molly holding one arm and I the other we took it to Mr. Ladley's door and knocked. He opened it, grumbling.

"I have asked you not to interrupt me," he said, with his pen in his hand. His eyes fell on the coat. "What's that?" he asked, changing color.

"I think it's Mrs. Ladley's fur coat," I said.

He stood there looking at it and thinking. Then: "It can't be hers," he said. "She wore hers when she went away."

"Perhaps she dropped it in the water."

He looked at me and smiled. "And why would she do that?" he asked mockingly. "Was it out of fashion?"

"That's Mrs. Ladley's coat," I persisted, but Molly Maguire jerked it from me and started away. He stood there looking at me and smiling in his nasty way.

"This excitement is telling on you, Mrs. Pitman," he said coolly. "You're too emotional for detective work." Then he went in and shut the door.

When I went downstairs Molly Maguire was waiting in the kitchen and had the audacity to ask me if I thought the coat needed a new lining!

It was on Monday evening that the strangest event in years happened to me. I went to my sister's house! And the fact that I was admitted at a side entrance made it even stranger. It happened this way:

Supper was over, and I was cleaning up, when an automobile came to the door. It was Alma's car. The chauffeur gave me a note:

Dear Mrs. Pitman—I am not at all well and very anxious. Will you come to see me at once? My mother is out to dinner, and I am alone. The car will bring you Cordially,
LIDA HARVEY

I put on my best dress at once and got into the limousine. Half the neighborhood was out watching. I leaned back in the upholstered seat, fairly quivering with excitement. This was Alma's car; that was Alma's card case; the little clock had her monogram on it. Even the flowers in the flower holder, yellow tulips, reminded me of Alma, a trifle showy, but good to look at. And I was going to her house.

I was not taken to the main entrance, but to a side door. The queer dreamlike feeling was still there. In this back hall, relegated from the more conspicuous part of the house, there were even pieces of furniture from the old home, and my father's picture in an oval gilt frame hung over my head. I had not seen a picture of him for twenty years. I went over and touched it gently.

"Father, father!" I said.

Under it was the tall hall chair that I had climbed over as a child and had stood on many times to see myself in the mirror above. The chair was newly finished and looked the better for its age. I glanced in the old glass. The chair had stood time better than I. I was a middle aged woman, lined with poverty and care, shabby, prematurely gray, a little hard. I had thought my father an old man when that picture was taken, and now I was even older. "Father!" I whispered again and fell to crying in the dimly lighted hall.

Lida sent for me at once. I had only time to dry my eyes and straighten my hat. Had I met Alma on the stairs I would have passed her without a word. She would not have known me. But I saw no one.

Lida was in bed. She was lying there with a rose shaded lamp beside her and a great bowl of spring flowers on a little stand at her elbow. She sat up when I went in and had a maid place a chair for me beside the bed. She looked very childish with her hair in a braid on the pillow, and her slim young arms and throat bare.

"I'm so glad you came!" she said, and would not be satisfied until the light was just right for my eyes and my coat unfastened and thrown open.

"I'm not really ill," she informed me. "I'm—I'm just tired and nervous, and—and unhappy, Mrs. Pitman."

"I am sorry," I said. I wanted to lean over and pat her hand, to draw the covers around her and mother her a little—I had had no one to mother for so long—but I could not. She would have thought it queer and presumptuous—or no, not that. She was too sweet to have thought that.

"Mrs. Pitman," she said suddenly, "who was this Jennie Brice?"

"She was an actress. She and her husband lived at my house."

"Was she—was she beautiful?"

"Well," I said slowly, "I never thought of that. She was handsome, in a large way."

"Was she young?"

"Yes. Twenty-eight or so."

"That isn't very young," she said, looking relieved. "But I don't think men like very young women. Do you?"

"I know one who does," I said, smiling. "But she sat up in bed suddenly and looked at me with her clear, childish eyes."

"I don't want him to like me," she flashed. "I—I want him to hate me."

"Tut, tut! You want nothing of the sort."

"Mrs. Pitman," she said, "I sent for you because I'm nearly crazy. Mr. Howell was a friend of that woman. He has acted like a maniac since she disappeared. He doesn't come to see me, he has given up his work on the paper, and I saw him today on the street—he looks like a ghost."

That put me to thinking.

"He might have been a friend," I admitted, "although as far as I know he was never at the house but once, and then he saw both of them."

"When was that?"

"Sunday morning, the day before she disappeared. They were arguing something."

CHAPTER VIII.

HE looked at me attentively. "You know more than you are telling me, Mrs. Pitman," she said. "You—do you think Jennie Brice is dead and that Mr. Howell knows—who did it?"

"I think she is dead, and I think possibly Mr. Howell suspects who did it. He does not know, or he would have told the police."

"You do not think he was—was in love with Jennie Brice, do you?"

"I'm certain of that," I said. "He is very much in love with a foolish girl, who ought to have more faith in him than she has."

She colored a little and smiled at that, but the next moment she was sitting forward, tense and questioning again.

"If that is true, Mrs. Pitman," she said, "who was the veiled woman he met that Monday morning at daylight and took across the bridge to Pittsburgh? I believe it was Jennie Brice. If it was not, who was it?"

"I don't believe he took any woman across the bridge at that hour. Who says he did?"

"Uncle Jim saw him. He had been playing cards all night at one of the clubs and was walking home. He says he met Mr. Howell face to face and spoke to him. The woman was tall and veiled. Uncle Jim sent for him a day or two later, and he refused to explain. Then they forbade him the house. Mamma objected to him anyhow, and he only came on sufferance. He is a college man of good family, but without any money at all save what he earns. And now?"

I had had some young newspaper men with me, and I knew what they got. They were nice boys, but they made \$15 a week. I'm afraid I smiled a little as I looked around the room, with its gray grass cloth walls, its toilet table spread with ivory and gold and the maid in attendance in her black dress and white apron, collar and cuffs. Even the little nightgown Lida was wearing would have taken a week's salary or more. She saw my smile.

"It was to be his chance," she said. "If he made good he was to have something better. My Uncle Jim owns the paper, and he promised me to help him. But"—

To be continued.