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THE REXALL STORE

The Case of Jennie Brice

By
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Continued from last issue
attention, but not motive, which is different. They had opportunity, and they had a lot of straggling links of clues, which in the total made a fair chain of circumstantial evidence. But that was all.

That is the way the case stood on Tuesday night, March 13.

Mr. Ladley was taken away at 9 o'clock. He was perfectly cool, asked me to help him pack a suit case and whistled while it was being done. He requested to be allowed to walk to the jail and went quietly, with a detective on one side and a sheriff's officer on the other.

Just before he left he asked for a word or two with me, and when he paid his bill up to date and gave me an extra dollar for taking care of Peter I was almost overcome. He took the manuscript of his play with him, and I remember his asking if he could have any typing done in the jail. I had never seen a man arrested for murder before, but I think he was probably the coolest suspect the officers had ever seen. They hardly knew what to make of it.

Mr. Reynolds and I had a cup of tea after all the excitement and were sitting at the dining room table drinking it when the bell rang. It was Mr. Howell. He had staggered into the hall when I opened the door and was for going into the parlor bedroom without a word.

"Mr. Ladley's gone, if you want him," I said. I thought his face cleared.

"Gone!" he said. "Where?"

"To jail."

He did not reply at once. He stood there, tapping the palm of one hand with the forefinger of the other. He was dirty and unshaven. His clothes looked as if he had been sleeping in them.

"So they've got him!" he muttered faintly, and turning, was about to go out the front door without another word, but I caught his arm.

"You're sick, Mr. Howell," I said.

"You'd better not go out just yet."

"Oh, I'm all right." He shook his handkerchief out and wiped his face. I saw that his hands were shaking.

"Come back and have a cup of tea and a slice of homemade bread."

He hesitated and looked at his watch.

"I'll do it, Mrs. Pitman," he said. "I suppose I'd better throw a little fuel into this engine of mine. It's been going hard for several days."

He ate like a wolf. I cut half a loaf into slices for him, and he drank the rest of the tea. Mr. Reynolds creaked up to bed and left him still eating, and me still cutting and spreading. Now that I had a chance to see him I was shocked. The rims of his eyes were red, his collar black and his hair hung over his forehead. But when he finally sat back and looked at me his color was better.

"So they've canned him!" he said.

"Time enough, too," said I.

He leaned forward and put both his elbows on the table. "Mrs. Pitman," he said earnestly, "I don't like him any more than you do. But he never killed that woman."

"Somebody killed her."

"How do you know? How do you know she's dead?"

Well, I didn't, of course—I only felt it.

"The police haven't even proved a crime. They can't hold a man for a

suppositious murder."

"Perhaps they can't, but they're doing it," I retorted. "If the woman's alive she won't let him hang."

"I'm not so sure of that," he said heavily and got up. He looked in the little mirror over the sideboard and brushed back his hair. "I look bad enough," he said, "but I feel worse. Well, you've saved my life, Mrs. Pitman. Thank you."

"How is my—how is Miss Harvey?"

I asked, as we started out. He turned and smiled at me in his boyish way.

"The best ever!" he said. "I haven't seen her for days, and it seems like centuries. She—she is the only girl in the world for me, Mrs. Pitman, although I"—He stopped and drew a long breath. "She is beautiful, isn't she?"

"Very beautiful," I answered. "Her mother was always—"

"Her mother!" He looked at me curiously.

"I knew her mother years ago," I said, putting the best face on my mistake that I could.

"Then I'll remember you to her, if she ever allows me to see her again. Just now I'm persona non grata."

"If you'll do the kindly thing, Mr. Howell," I said, "you'll forget me to her."

He looked into my eyes and then thrust out his hand.

"All right," he said. "I'll not ask any questions. I guess there are some curious stories hidden in these old houses."

Peter hobbled to the front door with him. He had not gone so far as the parlor once while Mr. Ladley was in the house.

They had had a sale of spring flowers at the store that day, and Mr. Reynolds had brought me a pot of white tulips. That night I hung my mother's picture over the mantel in the dining room and put the tulips beneath it. It gave me a feeling of comfort; I had never seen my mother's grave or put flowers on it.

CHAPTER IX.

I HAVE said before that I do not know anything about the law.

I believe that the Ladley case was unusual in several ways.

Mr. Ladley had once been well known in New York among the people who frequent the theaters, and Jennie Brice was even better known. A good many lawyers, I believe, said that the police had not a leg to stand on, and I know the case was watched with much interest by the legal profession. People wrote letters to the newspapers protesting against Mr. Ladley being held. And I believe that the district attorney in taking him before the grand jury hardly hoped to make a case.

But he did, to his own surprise I fancy, and the trial was set for May. But in the meantime many curious things had happened.

In the first place, the week following Mr. Ladley's arrest my house was filled up with eight or ten members of a company from the Gaiety theater, very cheerful and jolly and well behaved. Three men, I think, and the rest girls. One of the men was named Bellows, John Bellows, and it turned out that he had known Jennie Brice very well.

From the moment he learned that Mr. Holcombe had left him, he talked to the theater with him and waited to walk home again. He took him out to restaurants and for long street car rides in the mornings, and on the last night of their stay, Saturday, they got gloriously drunk together—Mr. Holcombe, no doubt, in his character of Ladley—and came reeling in at 3 in the morning, singing. Mr. Holcombe was very sick the next day, but by Monday he was all right, and he called me into the room.

"We've got him, Mrs. Pitman," he said, looking mottled, but cheerful. "As sure as God made little fishes, we've got him." That was all he would say, however. It seemed he was going to New York and might be gone for a month. "I've no family," he said, "and I need money to keep me. If I find any relaxation in hunting down criminals, it's a harmless and cheap amusement, and—it's my own business."

He went away that night, and I must admit I missed him. I rented the parlor bedroom the next day to a school teacher, and I found the periscope affair very handy. I could see just how much gas she used, and although the notice on each door forbids cooking and washing in rooms, I found she was doing both; making coffee and boiling an egg in the morning, and rubbing out stockings and handkerchiefs in her washbowl. I'd much rather have men as boarders than women. The women are always lighting alcohol lamps on the bureau and wanting the bed turned into a cozy corner so they can see their gentlemen friends in their rooms.

Well, with Mr. Holcombe gone and Mr. Reynolds busy all day and half the night getting out the summer silks and preparing for re-arranging day, and with Mr. Ladley in jail and Lida out of the city—for I saw in the papers that she was not well, and her mother had taken her to Bermuda—I had a



"I believe I know something about Jennie Brice."

good bit of time on my hands. And so I got in the habit of thinking things over and trying to draw conclusions, as I had seen Mr. Holcombe do. I would sit down and write things out as they had happened and study them over, and especially I worried over how we could have found a slip of paper in Mr. Ladley's room with a list, almost exact, of the things we had discovered there. I used to read it over, "rope, knife, shoe, towel, Horn"—and get more and more bewildered. "Horn"—might have been a town, or it might not have been. There was such a town, according to Mr. Graves, but apparently he had made nothing of it. Was it a town that was meant?

The dictionary gave only a few words, beginning with "horn"—hornet, hornblende, hornpipe and horny—none of which was of any assistance. And then one morning I happened to see in the personal column of one of the newspapers that a woman named Eliza Shaeffer of Horner had dry old Buff Orpington and Plymouth Rock chicks for sale, and it started me to puzzling again. Perhaps it had been Horner and possibly this very Eliza Shaeffer—

I suppose my lack of experience was in my favor, for, after all, Eliza Shaeffer is a common enough name, and the "Horn" might have stood for "hornswoggle" for all I knew. The story of the man who thought of what he would do if he were a horse came back to me, and for an hour or so I tried to think I was Jennie Brice trying to get away and hide from my rascal of a husband. But I made no headway. I would never have gone to Horner or to

To be continued.