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THE REXALL STORE

The Case of Jennie Brice

By
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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Continued from last issue

The defense was visibly shaken. They had not expected this, and I thought even Mr. Ladley, whose calm had continued unbroken, paled.

No far all had gone well for the prosecution. They had proved a crime, as nearly as circumstantial evidence could prove a crime, and they had established a motive. But in the identification of the body so far they had failed. The prosecution "rested," as they say, although they didn't rest much on the afternoon of the third day.

The defense called, first of all, Eliza Shaeffer. She told of a woman answering the general description of Jennie Brice having spent two days at the Shaeffer farm at Horner. Being shown photographs of Jennie Brice, she said she thought it was the same woman, but was not certain. She told further of the woman leaving unexpectedly on Wednesday of that week from Thornville. On cross examination being shown the small photograph which Mr. Graves had shown me, she identified the woman in the group as being the woman in question. As the face was in shadow, knew it more by the dress and hat. She described the black and white dress and the hat with red trimming.

The defense then called me. I had to admit that the dress and hat as described were almost certainly the ones I had seen on the bed in Jennie Brice's room the day before she disappeared. I could not say definitely whether the woman in the photograph was Jennie Brice or not; under a magnifying glass thought it might be.

Defense called Jonathan Alexander,

a druggist who testified that on the night in question he had been roused at half past 3 by the prisoner, who had said his wife was ill, and had purchased a bottle of proprietary remedy from him. His identification was absolute.

The defense called Jennie Brice's sister, and endeavored to prove that Jennie Brice had had no such scar. It was shown that she was on intimate terms with her family and would hardly have concealed an operation of any gravity from them.

The defense scored that day. They had shown that the prisoner had told the truth when he said he had gone to a pharmacy for medicine that night for his wife, and they had shown that a woman, answering the description of Jennie Brice, spent two days in a town called Horner, and had gone from there on Wednesday after the crime. And they had shown that this woman was attired as Jennie Brice had been.

That was the way things stood on the afternoon of the fourth day when court adjourned.

Mr. Reynolds was at home when I got there. He had been very much subdued since the developments of that first day of the trial, sat mostly in his own room and had twice brought me a bunch of jonquils as a peace offering. He had the kettle boiling when I got home.

"You have had a number of visitors," he said. "Our young friend Howell has been here, and Mr. Holcombe has arrived and has a man in his room."

Mr. Holcombe came down a moment after, with his face beaming.



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"That's curious!" he said.

"I think we've got him, Mrs. Pitman," he said. "The jury won't even go out of the box."

But further than that he would not explain. He said he had a witness locked in his room, and he'd be glad of supper for him, as they'd both come a long way. And he went out and bought some oysters and a bottle or two of beer. But as far as I know he kept him locked up all that night in the second story front room. I don't think the man knew he was a prisoner. I went in to turn down the bed, and he was sitting by the window, reading the evening paper's account of the trial—an elderly gentleman, rather professional looking.

Mr. Holcombe slept on the upper landing of the hall that night, rolled in a blanket—not that I think his witness even thought of escaping, but the little man was taking no chances.

At 8 o'clock that night the bell rang. It was Mr. Howell. I admitted him myself, and he followed me back to the dining room. I had not seen him for several weeks, and the change in him startled me. He was dressed carefully, but his eyes were sunken in his head, and he looked as if he had not slept for days.

Mr. Reynolds had gone upstairs, not finding me socially inclined.

"You haven't been sick, Mr. Howell, have you?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I'm well enough. I've been traveling about. Those infernal sleeping cars—"

His voice trailed off, and I saw him looking at my mother's picture, with the jonquils beneath.

"That's curious," he said, going closer. "It looks almost like Lida Harvey."

"My mother," I said simply.

"Have you seen her lately?"

"My mother?" I asked, startled.

"No, Lida."

"I saw her a few days ago."

"Here?"

"Yes; she came here, Mr. Howell, two weeks ago. She looks badly—as if she is worrying."

"Not—about me?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, about you. What possessed you to go away as you did? When my bro—when her uncle accused you of something you ran away instead of facing things like a man."

"I was trying to find the one person who could clear me, Mrs. Pitman."

He sat back, with his eyes closed. He looked ill enough to be in bed.

"And you succeeded?"

"No."

I thought perhaps he had not been eating, and I offered him food, as I had once before. But he refused it with the ghost of his boyish smile.

"I'm hungry, but it's not food I want. I want to see her," he said.

I sat down across from him and tried to mend a tablecloth, but I could not sew. I kept seeing those two

young things, each sick for a sight of the other, and from wishing they would have a minute together, I got to planning it for them.

"Perhaps," I said finally, "if you want it very much"—

"Very much!"

"And if you will sit quiet and stop tapping your fingers together until you drive me crazy I might contrive it for you. For five minutes," I said. "Not a second longer."

He came right over and put his arms around me.

"Who are you, anyhow?" he said.

"You who turn to the world the frozen mask of a Union street boarding house landlady, who are a gentlewoman by every instinct and training and a girl at heart? Who are you?"

"I'll tell you what I am," I said.

"I'm a romantic old fool, and you'd better let me do this quickly before I change my mind."

He freed me at that, but he followed to the telephone and stood by while I got Lida. He was in a perfect frenzy of anxiety, turning red and white by turns, and in the middle of the conversation taking the receiver bodily from me and holding it to his own ear.

She said she thought she could get away; she spoke guardedly as if Alma were near, but I gathered that she would come as soon as she could, and from the way her voice broke, I knew she was as excited as the boy beside me.

She came, heavily coated and veiled, at a quarter after 10 that night, and I took her back to the dining room, where he was waiting. He did not make a move toward her, but stood there with his very lips white, looking at her. And at first she did not make a move either, but stood and gazed at him, thin and white, a wreck of himself. Then

"Ell!" she cried, and ran around the table to him as he held out his arms.

The schoolteacher was out. I went into the parlor bedroom and sat in the cozy corner in the dark. I had done a wrong thing, and I was glad of it. And, sitting there in the darkness, I went over my life again. After all, it had been my own life; I had lived it; no one else had shaped it for me. And if it was cheerless and colorless now it had had its big moments. Life is measured by big moments.

If I let the two children in the dining room have fifteen big moments instead of five who can blame me?

The next day was the sensational one of the trial. We went through every phase of conviction; Jennie Brice was living, Jennie Brice was dead. The body found at Sewickley could not be Jennie Brice's. The body found at Sewickley was Jennie Brice's. And so it went on.

The defense did an unexpected thing in putting Mr. Ladley on the stand. That day, for the first time, he showed the wear and tear of the ordeal. He had no flower in his buttonhole, and the rims of his eyes were red. But he was quite cool. His stage training had taught him not only to endure the eyes of the crowd, but to find in its gaze a sort of stimulant. He made a good witness I must admit.

He replied to the usual questions easily. After five minutes or so Mr. Llewellyn got down to work.

CHAPTER XII.

"M. LADLEY, you have said that your wife was ill the night of March 4?"

"Yes."

"What was the nature of her illness?"

"She had a functional heart trouble, not serious."

"Will you tell us fully the events of that night?"

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