

THE CASE OF JENNIE BRICE

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The Case of Jennie Brice by Mary Roberts Rinehart & M. Leone Bracker

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MARY ROBERTS RINEHART & M. LEONE BRACKER

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THE CASE *of* JENNIE BRICE

1871

1941

1942

1943

1944



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CHAPTER I

WE HAVE just had another flood, bad enough, but only a foot or two of water on the first floor. Yesterday we got the mud shoveled out of the cellar and found Peter, the spaniel that Mr. Ladley left when he "went away". The flood, and the fact that it was Mr. Ladley's dog whose body was found half buried in the basement fruit closet, brought back to me the strange events of the other flood five years ago, when the water reached more than half-way to the second story, and brought with it, to some, mystery and sudden death, and to me the worst case of "shingles" I have ever seen.

My name is Pitman—in this narrative. It

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is not really Pitman, but that does well enough. I belong to an old Pittsburgh family. I was born on Penn Avenue, when that was the best part of town, and I lived, until I was fifteen, very close to what is now the Pittsburgh Club. It was a dwelling then; I have forgotten who lived there.

I was a girl in seventy-seven, during the railroad riots, and I recall our driving in the family carriage over to one of the Allegheny hills, and seeing the yards burning, and a great noise of shooting from across the river. It was the next year that I ran away from school to marry Mr. Pitman, and I have not known my family since. We were never reconciled, although I came back to Pittsburgh after twenty years of wandering. Mr. Pitman was dead; the old city called me, and I came. I had a hundred dollars or so, and I took a house in lower Allegheny, where, because they are partly inundated every spring, rents are cheap, and I kept boarders. My house was always

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orderly and clean, and although the neighborhood had a bad name, a good many theatrical people stopped with me. Five minutes across the bridge, and they were in the theater district. Allegheny at that time, I believe, was still an independent city. But since then it has allied itself with Pittsburgh; it is now the North Side.

I was glad to get back. I worked hard, but I made my rent and my living, and a little over. Now and then on summer evenings I went to one of the parks, and sitting on a bench, watched the children playing around, and looked at my sister's house, closed for the summer. It is a very large house: her butler once had his wife boarding with me—a nice little woman.

It is curious to recall that, at that time, five years ago, I had never seen my niece, Lida Harvey, and then to think that only the day before yesterday she came in her automobile as far as she dared, and then sat there, waving

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to me, while the police patrol brought across in a skiff a basket of provisions she had sent me.

I wonder what she would have thought had she known that the elderly woman in a calico wrapper with an old overcoat over it, and a pair of rubber boots, was her full aunt!

The flood and the sight of Lida both brought back the case of Jennie Brice. For even then, Lida and Mr. Howell were interested in each other.

This is April. The flood of 1907 was earlier, in March. It had been a long hard winter, with ice gorges in all the upper valley. Then, in early March, there came a thaw. The gorges broke up and began to come down, filling the rivers with crushing grinding ice.

There are three rivers at Pittsburgh, the Allegheny and the Monongahela uniting there at the Point to form the Ohio. And all three were covered with broken ice, logs, and all sorts of débris from the upper valleys.

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A warning was sent out from the weather bureau, and I got my carpets ready to lift that morning. That was on the fourth of March, a Sunday. Mr. Ladley and his wife, Jennie Brice, had the parlor bedroom and the room behind it. Mrs. Ladley, or Miss Brice, as she preferred to be known, had a small part at a local theater that kept a permanent company. Her husband was in that business, too, but he had nothing to do. It was the wife who paid the bills, and a lot of quarreling they did about it.

I knocked at the door at ten o'clock, and Mr. Ladley opened it. He was a short man, rather stout and getting bald, and he always had a cigarette. Even yet, the parlor carpet smells of them.

"What do you want?" he asked sharply, holding the door open about an inch.

"The water's coming up very fast, Mr. Ladley," I said. "It's up to the swinging-shelf in