

The Bat

A Novel From the Play

by MARY ROBERTS RINEHART and AVERY HOPWOOD

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THIS greatest of thrilling mystery plays has been most skillfully resolved into a superb novel. It maintains at high pitch all the qualities of mystery, comedy and romance so characteristic of the work of Mary Roberts Rinehart.

CHAPTER I.

The Shadow of the Bat

"You've got to get him, boys—get him or bust!" said a tired police chief pounding a heavy fist on a table. The detectives he bellowed the words at looked at the floor. They had done their best and failed. Failure meant "resignation" for the police chief—return to the hated work of pounding the pavements for them—they knew it, and, knowing it, could summon no gesture of bravado to answer the chief's. Gunmen, thugs, hijackers, box-robbers, murderers, they could get them all in time—but they could not get the man he wanted.

"Get him—to h—l with the expense—I'll give you carte blanche—but get him!" said a haggard millionaire in the sedate inner offices of the best private detective firm in the country. The man on the other side of the desk, man-hunter extraordinary, old servant of government and state, sleuth-hound without a peer, threw up his hands in a gesture of odd hopelessness. "It isn't the money, Mr. de Courcy—I'd give every cent I've made to get the man you want—but I can't promise you results—for the first time in my life." The conversation was ended.

"Get him? Huh! I'll get him—watch my smoke!" It was young ambition speaking in a certain set of rooms in Washington. Three days later young ambition lay in a New York gutter with a bullet in his heart and a look of such horror and surprise on his dead face that even the ambulance doctor who found him felt shaken. "We've lost the most promising man I've had in ten years," said his chief, when the news came in. He swore helplessly, "D—n the luck!"

"Get him—get him—get him—get him!" From a thousand sources now the clamor arose—press, police and public alike crying out for the capture of the master-criminal of a century—lost voices hounding a specter down the alleyways of the wind. And still the meshes broke and the quarry slipped away before the hounds were well on the scent—leaving behind a trail of shattered safes and rifled jewel cases—while ever the clamor rose higher to "Get him—get him—get—"

Get whom, in God's name—get what? Beast, man or devil? A specter—a flying shadow—the shadow of a Bat.

From thieves' hangout to thieves' hangout the word passed along stirring the underworld like the passage of an electric spark. There were bright stars and flashing comets in the world of crime—but this new planet rose with the portent of an evil moon.

The Bat—they called him the Bat. Like a bat he chose the night hours for his work of rapine—like a bat he struck and vanished, pouncingly, noiselessly—like a bat he never showed himself to the face of the day. He'd never been in stir—the bulls had never mugged him—he didn't run with a mob—he played a lone hand and fenced his stuff so that even Ikey the Fence couldn't swear he knew his face. Most lone wolves had a moll, at any rate—women were their ruin—but if the Bat had a moll, not even the grapevine telegraph could locate her.

Rat-faced gunmen in the dingy back rooms of sneak-easies muttered over his exploits with bated breath. In tawdrily gorgeous apartments, where gathered the larger figures, the proconsuls of the world of crime, cold, conscienceless brains dissected the work of a colder and swifter brain than theirs, with suave and bitter envy. Evil's Four Hundred chattered, discussed, debated—sent out a thousand invisible tentacles to clutch at a shadow—to turn this shadow and its distorted genius to their own ends. The tentacles recoiled, baffled—the Bat worked alone—not even Evil's Four Hundred could bend him into a willing instrument to execute another's plan.

Where official trailer and private sleuth had failed, the newspapers might succeed—or so thought the disillusioned young men of the Fourth Estate—the tireless foxes, nose-down on the trail of news—the trackers who never gave up till that news was run to earth. Star-reporter, leg-man, cub, veteran gray in the trade—one and all they tried to pin the Bat like a caught butterfly to the front page of their respective journals—soon or late each gave up, beaten. He was news—bigger news each week—a thousand ticking typewriters clicked his adventures—the brief, staccato recital of his career in the "morgues" of the great dailies grew longer and more incredible scoop of the century—the yearned-for headline, "Bat Nabbed Red-Handed," "Bat Slain in Gun-Duel With Police"—still eluded the ravenous maw of the linotypes. And meanwhile the red-scored list of his felonies lengthened, and the rewards offered from various sources for any clue which might lead to his apprehension mounted and mounted till they totaled a small fortune.

Columnists took him up—played with the name and the terror—used the name and the terror as a starting-point from which to exhibit their own particular opinions on everything from the immortality of the soul to the merits of the Lucy Stone league. Ministers mentioned him in sermons—cranks wrote fanatic letters denouncing him as one of the seven-headed beasts of the Apocalypse and a forerunner of the end of the world—a popular revue put on a special Bat number wherein eighteen beautiful chorus-girls appeared masked and black-winged in costume of Brazilian bat-fur—there were Bat club sandwiches; Bat cigarettes and a new shade of silk hosiery called simply and succinctly "Bat." He became a fad—a catchword—a national figure. And yet—he was walking Death—cold, remorseless. But death itself has become a toy of Publicity in these days of limelight and Jazz.

A city editor, at lunch with a colleague, pulled at his cigarette and talked. "See that Sunday story we had on the Bat?" he said. "Pretty tidy—huh—and yet we didn't have to play it up. It's an amazing list—the Marshall jewels—the Allison murder—the mail-truck thing—two hundred thousand he got out of that, all negotiable, and two men dead. I wonder how many people he's really killed—we made it six murders and nearly a million in loot—didn't even have room for the small stuff—but there must be more—"

His companion whistled.

"And when is the Universe's Finest Newspaper going to burst forth with 'Bat Captured by Blade Reporter'?" he inquired, sardonically.

"Oh, for—lay off of it, will you?" said the city editor, peevishly. "The Old Man's been hopping around about it for two months till everybody's plumb cuckoo. Even offered a bonus—a big one—and that shows how crazy he is—he doesn't love a nickel any better than his right eye—for any sort of exclusive story. Bonus—huh!" and he crushed out his cigarette. "It won't be a Blade reporter that gets that bonus—or any reporter. It'll be Sherlock Holmes from the spirit world."

"But look here, Bill—you don't mean to tell me he'll keep on getting away with it indefinitely?"

The editor frowned. "Confidentially—I don't know," he said with a chuckle. "The situation's this: for the first time the super-crook—the super-crook of fiction—the kind that never makes a mistake—has come to life—real life. And it'll take a cleverer man than any Central Office dick I've ever met to catch him!"

"Then you don't think he's just an ordinary crook with a lot of luck?"

"I do not." The editor was emphatic. "He's the Chapman type—but he's brainier than Chapman. Got a ghastly sense of humor, too—look at the way he leaves his calling card after every job—a black-paper bat inside the Marshall safe—a bat drawn on the wall with a burnt match where he'd jimmied the Cedarburg bank—a real bat, dead, tacked to the mantelpiece over poor old Allison's body. Oh, he's in a class by himself—and I very much doubt if he was a crook at all for most of his life."

"You mean?"

"I mean this. The police have been combing the underworld for him—I don't think he comes from there. I think they've got to look higher—up in our world—for a brilliant man with a kink in the brain. He may be a doctor, a lawyer, a merchant, honored in his community by day—good line that, I'll use it some time—and at night, a bloodthirsty assassin. Well—that's our man."

"But, Bill—"

"I know. I've been going around the last month, looking at everybody I knew and thinking—are you the Bat? Try it for a while—you'll want to sleep with a light in your room after a few days of it. Look around the University club—that white-haired man over there—dignified—respectable—is he the Bat? Your own lawyer—your own doctor—your own best friend. Can happen, you know—look at those Chicago boys—the thrill-killers. Just brilliant students—likable boys—to the people that taught them—and cold-blooded murderers, all the same."

His companion laughed uncertainly.

"How about you, Bill—are you the Bat?"

The editor smiled. "See," he said, "it's got you already. No—I can prove an alibi—the Bat's been laying off the city, recently—taking a fling at some of the swell suburbs. Besides—I haven't the brains—I'm free to admit it." He struggled into his coat. "Well—let's talk about something else—I'm sick of the Bat and his murders."

His companion rose as well, but it was evident that the editor's theory had taken firm hold on his mind. As they went out the door together he recurred to the subject.

"Honestly, though, Bill—were you serious—really serious—when you said you didn't know of a single detective with brains enough to trap this devil?"

The editor paused in the doorway. "Serious enough," he said. "And yet there's one man—I don't know him myself—but from what I've heard of him, he might be able—but what's the use of speculating?"

"I'd like to know, all the same," said the other, and laughed nervously. "We're moving out to the country next week ourselves—right in the Bat's new territory."

"We-ell," said the editor, "you won't let it go any further? Of course it's just an idea of mine—but if the Bat ever came prowling around our place, the detective I'd try to get in touch with would be—" He put his lips close to his companion's ear and whispered a name.

The man whose name he whispered, oddly enough, was at that moment standing before his official superior in a quiet room not far away. Tall, reticently good-looking and well, if inconspicuously clothed and groomed, he by no means seemed the typical detective that the editor had spoken of so scornfully. He looked something like a college athlete who had kept up his training—something like a pillar of one of the more sedate financial houses—he could assume and discard a dozen manners in as many minutes, but, to the casual observer, the one thing certain about him would probably seem his utter lack of connection with the seamier side of existence. The key to his real secret of life, however, lay in his eyes. When in repose, as now, they were veiled and without

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