The Bat

A Novel From the Play

by MARY ROBERTS RINEHART and AVERY HOPWOOD

THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Defying all efforts to capture him, after a long series of murders and robberies, a super-crook known to the police only as "The Bat" has brought about a veritable reign of terror. At his wits' end, and at the man's own request, the chief of police assigns his best operative, Anderson, to get on the trail of the Bat.

CHAPTER II—With her niece, Dale Ogden, Miss Cornelia Van Gorder is living in the country home of the late Courtleigh Fleming, who until his recent death had been president of the Union bank, wrecked because of the theft of a large sum in currency. The cook and housemaid deserted the Van Gorder household, leaving only the Japanese butler, Billy. Miss Van Gorder receives a note warning her to vacate the place at once on pain of death. She feels the warning is from the dreaded Bat, but determines to ignore it. Dale returns from the city, where she had been to hire a gardener.

CHAPTER III—Miss Cornelia tells Lizzie Allen, her faithful Irish maid, who is decidedly nervous, that a detective is coming that night. The gardener arrives, giving his name as Brooks. Miss Van Gorder leads him into a trap and he admits he is not a gardener but needs work. She allows him to stay. Dale comes from the Country club with a friend, Doctor Wells. Miss Cornelia tells them of the threatening note. They are interrupted by the smashing of a window in the house.

CHAPTER IV—They find a stone has been thrown through a glass door, weighting another missive warning them to leave. Doctor Wells urges Miss Van Gorder to obey, but she firmly refuses. The detective, Anderson, arrives, is told of the situation, and announces he will stay on watch that night.

CHAPTER V

Cross-Questions and Crooked Answers.

All unconscious of the slur just cast upon her forty years of single-minded devotion to the Van Gorder family, Lizzie chose that particular moment to open the door and make a little bob at her mistress and the detective.

"The gentleman's room is ready," she said.

Miss Cornelia, obedient to the detective's instructions, promptly told the whitest of fibs for Lizzie's benefit.

"The maid will show you to your room now and you can make yourself comfortable for the night." There—that would mislead Lizzie, without being quite a lie.

"My toilet is made for an occasion like this when I've got my gun loaded," answered Anderson carelessly. The allusian to the gun made Lizzie start nervously, unhappily for her, for it drew his attention to her and he now transfixed her with a stare.

"This is the maid you referred to?" he inquired. Miss Cornelia assented. He drew nearer to the unhappy Lizzie.

"What's your name?" he asked, turning to her.

"E-Elizabeth Allen," stammered Lizzie, feeling like a small and distrustful sparrow in the toils of an officious python.

Anderson seemed to run through a mental rogues' gallery of other criminals named Elizabeth Allen that he had known.

"How old are you?" he proceeded.

Lizzie braced herself. "Thirty-two," she said, with an arch toss of her head.

The detective looked surprised and slightly amused.

"She's fifty if she's a day," said Miss Cornelia, treacherously, in spite of a look from Lizzie that would have melted a stone.

The trace of a smile appeared and vanished on the detective's face.

"Now, Lizzie," he said sternly, "do you ever walk in your sleep?"

"I do not," said Lizzie indignantly.

"Don't care for the country, I suppose?"

"I do not!"

"Or detectives?" Anderson deigned to be facetious.

"I do not!" There could be no doubt as to the sincerity of Lizzie's answer.

"All right, Lizzie. Be calm. I can stand it," said the detective with treacherous suavity. But he favored her with a long and careful scrutiny before he moved to the table and picked up the note that had been thrown through the window. Quietly he extended it beneath Lizzie's nose.

"Ever see this before?" he said crisply, watching her face.

Lizzie read the note with bulging eyes, her face horror-stricken. When she had finished, she made a gesture of wild disclaimer that nearly removed a portion of Anderson's left ear.

"Mercy on us!" she moaned, mentally invoking not only her patron-saint but all the rosary of Heaven to protect herself and her mistress.

But the detective still kept his eye on her.

"Didn't write it yourself, did you?" he queried curtly.

"I did not!" said Lizzie angrily. "I did not!" and she flounced out of the room in high dudgeon, her pompadour bristling, before he had time to interrogate her further.

He replaced the note on the table and turned back to Miss Cornelia. If he had found any clew to the mystery in Lizzie's demeanor, she could not read it in his manner.

"Now, what about the butler?" he said.

"How Old Are You?" He Proceeded.

"Nothing about him—except that he was Courtleigh Fleming's servant."

Anderson paused. "Do you consider that significant?"

A shadow appeared behind him deep in the alcove—a vague, listening figure—Dale, on tiptoe, conspiratorial, taking pains not to draw the attention of the others to her presence. But both Miss Cornelia and Anderson were too engrossed in their conversation to notice her.

Miss Cornelia hesitated.

"Isn't it possible that there is a connection between the colossal theft at the Union bank and these disturbances?" she said.

Anderson seemed to think over the question.

"What do you mean?" he asked, as Dale slowly moved into the room from the alcove, silently closing the alcove doors behind her, and still unobserved.

"Suppose," said Miss Cornelia slowly, "that Courtleigh Fleming took that money from his own bank and concealed it in this house?" The eavesdropper grew rigid.

"That's the theory you gave headquarters, isn't it?" said Anderson. "But I'll tell you how headquarters figures it out. In the first place, the cashier is missing. In the second place, if Courtleigh Fleming did it and got as far as Colorado, he had it with him when he died, and the facts apparently don't bear that out. In the third place, suppose he had hidden the money in or around this house. Why did he rent it to you?"

"But he didn't," said Miss Cornelia, obstinately, "I leased this house from his nephew—his heir."

The detective smiled tolerantly.

"Well, I wouldn't struggle like that for a theory," he said, the professional note coming back to his voice. "The cashier's missing—that's the answer."

"Then you don't think there's a chance that the money from the Union bank is in this house?" persisted Miss Cornelia.

"I think it very unlikely."

Miss Cornelia put her knitting away and rose. She still clung tenaciously to her own theories—but her belief in them had been badly shaken.

"If you'll come with me, I'll show you to your room," she said, a little stiffly. The detective stepped back to let her pass.

"Sorry to spoil your little theory," he said, and followed her to the door. If either had noticed the unobtrusive listener to their conversation, neither made a sign.

The moment the door had closed on them, Dale sprang into action. She seemed a different girl from the one who had left the room so inconspicuously such a short time before—there were two bright spots of color in her cheeks and she was obviously laboring under great excitement. She went quickly to the alcove doors—they opened softly—disclosing the young man who had said that he was Brooks the new gardener—and yet not the same young man—for his assumed air of servitude had dropped from him like a cloak, revealing him as a young fellow at least of the same general social class as Dale's if not a fellow-inhabitant of the select circle where Van Gorders revolved about Van Gorders, and a man's great-grandfather was more important than the man himself.

Dale cautioned him with a warning finger as he advanced into the room.

"Sh! Sh!" she whispered. "Be careful! That man's a detective!"

Brooks gave a hunted glance at the door into the hall.

"Then they've traced me here," he said in a dejected voice.

"I don't think so."

He made a gesture of helplessness.

"I couldn't get back to my rooms," he said in a whisper. "If they've searched them," he paused, "as they're sure to—they'll find your letters to me." He paused again.

"Your aunt doesn't suspect anything?"

"No, I told her I'd engaged a gardener—and that's all there was about it."

He came nearer to her. "Dale!" he murmured in a tense voice. "You know I didn't take that money!" he said, with boyish simplicity.

All the loyalty of first-love was in her answer.

"Of course! I believe in you absolutely!" she said. He caught her in his arms and kissed her—gratefully—passionately. Then the galling memory of the predicament in which he stood—the hunt already on his trail—came back to him. He released her gently, still holding one of her hands.

"But—the police here!" he stammered, turning away. "What does that mean?"

Dale swiftly informed him of the situation.

"Aunt Cornelia says people have been trying to break into this house for days—at night."

Brooks ran his hand through his hair in a gesture of bewilderment. Then he seemed to catch at a hope.

"What sort of people?" he queried sharply.

Dale was puzzled. "She doesn't know."

The excitement in her lover's manner came to a head. "That proves exactly what I've contended right along," he said, thudding one fist softly in the palm of the other. "Through some underneath channel old Fleming has been selling those securities for months, turning them into cash. And somebody knows about it, and knows that that money is hidden here. Don't you see? Your Aunt Cornelia has crabbed the game by coming here."

"Why didn't you tell the police that? Now they think, because you ran away—"

"Ran away! The only chance I had was a few hours to myself to try to prove what actually happened."

"Why don't you tell the detective what you think?" said Dale at her wits' end. "That Courtleigh Fleming took the money and that it is still here?"

Her lover's face grew somber.

"He'd take me into custody at once—and I'd have no chance to search."

He was searching now—his eyes roved about the living-room—walls—ceiling—hopefully—desperately—looking for a clew—the tiniest clew to support his theory.

"Why are you so sure it is here?" queried Dale.

"Brooks explained. "You must remember—Fleming was no ordinary defaulter—and he had no intention of being exiled to a foreign country. He wanted to come back here and take

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