THE BAT

(Continued from Preceding Page)

his place in the community while I was in the pen."

"But even then—"

He interrupted her. "Listen, dear—" He crossed to the billiard room door, closed it firmly, returned.

"The architect that built this house was an old friend of mine," he said in hushed accents. "We were together in France and you know the way fellows get to talking when they're far away and cut off—" He paused, seeing the cruel gleam of a star-shell—two figures huddled in a trench, whiling away the terrible hours of waiting by muttered talk.

"Just an hour or two before—a shell got this friend of mine," he resumed, "he told me he had built a hidden room in this house."

"Where?" gasped Dale.

Brooks shook his head. "I don't know. We never got to finish that conversation. But I remember what he said. He said, 'You watch old Fleming. If I get mine over here it won't break his heart. He didn't want any living being to know about that room.'"

Now Dale was as excited as he.

"Then you think the money is in this hidden room?"

"I do," said Brooks decidedly. "I don't think Fleming took it away with him. He was too shrewd for that. No, he meant to come back all right, the minute he got the word the bank had been looted. And he'd fixed things so I'd be railroaded to prison—you wouldn't understand, but it was pretty neat. And then the fool nephew rents this house the minute he's dead, and whoever knows bout the money—"

"Jack! Why isn't it the nephew who is trying to break in?"

"He wouldn't have to break in. He could make an excuse and come in any time."

He clenched his hands despairingly.

"If I could only get hold of a blueprint of this place!" he muttered.

Dale's face fell. It was sickening to be so close to the secret—and yet not find it. "Oh, Jack, I'm so confused and worried!" she confessed, with a little sob.

Brooks put his hands on her shoulders, in an effort to cheer her spirits.

"Now, listen, dear," he said firmly, "this isn't as hard as it sounds. I've got a clear night to work in—and as true as I'm standing here, that money's in this house. Listen, honey—it's like this." He pantomimed the old nursery rhyme of the house that Jack built. "Here's the house that Courtleigh Fleming built—here, somewhere, is the hidden room in the house that Courtleigh Fleming built—and here—somewhere—pray heaven—is the money—in the hidden room—in the house that Courtleigh Fleming built. When you're low in your mind, just say that over!"

She managed a faint smile. "I've forgotten it already," she said, drooping.

He still strove for an offhand gaiety that he did not feel.

"Why, look here!" and she followed the play of his hands obediently, like a tired child, "it's a sort of game, dearest. 'Money, money—who's got the money? You know!" For the dozenth time he stared at the unrevealing walls of the room. "For that matter," he added, "the hidden room may be behind these very walls."

He looked about for a tool—a poker—anything that would sound the walls and test them for hollow spaces. Ah! he had it—that driver in the bag of golf clubs over in the corner. He got the driver and stood wondering where he had best begin. That blank wall above the fireplace looked as promising as any. He tapped it gently with the golf club—afraid to make too much noise and yet anxious to test the wall as thoroughly as possible. A dull, heavy reverberation answered his stroke—nothing, hollow there, apparently.

As he tried another spot, again thunder beat the long roll on its iron drum outside, in the night. The lights blinked—wavered—recovered.

"The lights are going out again," said Dale dully, her excitement sunk into a stupefied calm.

"Let them go! The less light the better for me. The only thing to do is to go over this house room by room." He pointed to the billiard room door. "What's in there?"

"The billiard room." She was thinking hard. "Jack! Perhaps Courtleigh Fleming's nephew would know where the blue-prints are!"

He looked dubious. "It's a chance, but not a very good one," he said. "Well—" He led the way into the billiard room—and began to rap at random upon its walls while Dale listened intently for any echo that might betray the presence of a hidden chamber or sliding panel.

Thus it happened that Lizzie received the first real thrill of what was to prove to her—and to others—a sensational and hideous night. For, coming into the living room to lay a cloth for Mr. Anderson's night supper, not only did the lights blink threateningly and the thunder roll, but a series of spirit raps was certainly to be heard coming from the region of the billiard room.

"Oh, my God!" she wailed, and the next instant the lights went out, leaving her in inky darkness. With a loud shriek she bolted out of the room.

Thunder — lightning — dashing of rain on the streaming glass of the windows—the storm hallooing its hounds. Dale huddled close to her lover as they groped their way back to the living room, cautiously, doing their best to keep from stumbling against some heavy piece of furniture whose fall would arouse the house.

"There's a candle on the table, Jack, if I can find the table." Her outstretched hands touched a familiar object. "Here it is." She fumbled for a moment. "Have you any matches?"

"Yes." He struck one—another—lit the candle—set it down on the table. In the weak glow of the little taper, whose tiny flame illuminated but a portion of the living room, his face looked tense and strained.

"It's pretty near hopeless," he said, "if all the walls are paneled like that."

As if in mockery of his words and his quest, a muffled knocking that seemed to come from the ceiling of the very room he stood in answered his despair.

"What's that?" asked Dale.

They listened. The knocking was repeated — knock — knock—knock — knock.

"Some one else is looking for the hidden room!" muttered Brooks, [illegible] ing up at the ceiling intently, a[illegible] he could tear from it the secret of [illegible] new mystery by sheer strength of [illegible]

"It's upstairs!" Dale took a [illegible] toward the alcove stairs. Brooks [illegible] ed her.

"Who's in this house besides o[illegible] selves?" he queried.

"Only the detective—Aunt Cornelia—Lizzie—and Billy."

"Billy's the Jap?"

"Yes."

Brooks paused an instant. "Does he belong to your aunt?"

"No. He was Courtleigh Fleming's butler."

Knock — knock—knock—knock—the dull, methodical rapping on the ceiling of the living room began again.

"Courtleigh Fleming's butler, eh?" muttered Brooks. He put down his candle and stole noiselessly into the alcove. "It may be the Jap!" he whispered.

Knock — knock — knock — knock! This time the mysterious rapping seemed to come from the upper hall.

"If it is the Jap, I'll get him!" Brooks' voice was tense with resolution. He hesitated—made for the hall door—tiptoed out into the darkness around the main staircase, leaving Dale alone in the living room, beset by shadowy terrors.

Utter silence succeeded his noiseless departure. Even the storm lulled for a moment. Dale stood thinking—wondering—searching desperately for some way to help her lover.

At last a resolution formed in her mind. She went to the city telephone.

"Hello," she said in a low voice, glancing over her shoulder now and then to make sure she was not overheard, "1—2—4—please—yes, that's right. Hello—is that the Country club? Is Mr. Richard Fleming there? Yes, I'll hold the wire."

She looked about nervously. Had something moved in that corner of blackness where her candle did not pierce? No! How silly of her!

Buzz-buzz on the telephone. She picked up the receiver again.

"Hello—is this Mr. Fleming? This is Miss Ogden—Dale Ogden. I know it must seem odd my calling you this

She Looked About Nervously.

late, but—I wonder if you could come over here for a few minutes. Yes—tonight." Her voice grew stronger. "I wouldn't trouble you but—it's awfully important. Hold the wire a moment." She put down the phone and made another swift survey of the room, listened furtively at the door—all clear! She returned to the phone.

"Hello—Mr. Fleming—I'll wait outside the house on the drive. It—it's a confidential matter. Thank you so much."

She hung up the phone, relieved—not an instant too soon, for, as she crossed toward the fireplace to add a a new log to the dying glow of the fire, the hall door opened and Anderson, the detective, came softly in with an unlighted candle in his hand.

"Spooky sort of place in the dark, isn't it?" he said casually.

"Yes—rather." If he would only go away before Brooks came back or Richard Fleming arrived! But he seemed in a distressingly chatty frame of mind.

"Left me upstairs without a match," continued Anderson. "I found my way down by walking part of the way and falling the rest. Don't suppose I'll ever find the room I left my toothbrush in!" He laughed, lighted the candle in his hand from the candle on the table.

"You're not going to stay up all night, are you?" said Dale, nervously, hoping he would take the hint. But he seemed entirely oblivious of such minor considerations as sleep. He took out a cigar.

"Oh, I may doze a bit," he said. He eyed her with a certain approval. She was a darned pretty girl and she looked intelligent. "I suppose you have a theory of your own about these intrusions you've been having here? Or apparently having."

"I knew nothing about them until tonight."

"Still," he persisted conversationally, "you know about them now." But when she remained silent, "Is Miss Van Garder usually—of a nervous temperament? Imagine she sees things, and all that?"

"I don't think so." Dale's voice was strained. Where was Brooks? What had happened to him?

Anderson puffed on his cigar, pondering. "Know the Flemings?" he asked.

"I've met Mr. Richard Fleming—once or twice."

Something in her tone caused him to glance at her. "Nice fellow?"

"I don't know him at all well."

"Know the cashier of the Union bank?" he shot at her suddenly.

"No!" She strove desperately to make the denial convincing but she could not hide the little tremor in her voice.

The detective mused.

"Fellow of good family, I understand," he said, eyeing her. "Very popular. That's what's behind most of these bank embezzlements—men getting into society and spending more than they make."

Dale hailed the tinkle of the city telephone with an inward sigh of relief. The detective moved to answer the house phone on the wall by the alcove—mistaking the direction of the ring.

Dale corrected him quickly.

"No, the other one—that's the house phone."

Anderson looked the apparatus over.

"No connection with the outside, eh?"

"No," said Dale, absent-mindedly. "Just from room to room in the house."

He accepted her explanation and answered the other telephone.

"Hello—hello — what the —" He moved the receiver hook up and down, without result, and gave it up. "This line sounds dead," he said.

"It was all right a few minutes ago," said Dale, without thinking.

"You were using it a few minutes ago?"

She hesitated—what use to deny what she had already admitted, for all practical purposes.

"Yes."

The city telephone rang again. The detective pounced upon it.

"Hello—yes—yes—this is Anderson—go ahead." He paused, while the tiny voice in the receiver buzzed for some seconds. Then he interrupted it impatiently.

"You're sure of that, are you? I see. All right. 'By."

He hung up the receiver and turned swiftly on Dale.

"That was headquarters, Miss Ogden. They have found some letters in Bailey's room which seem to indicate that you were not telling the entire truth just now."

He paused, waiting for her answer. "What letters?" she said wearily.

"From you to Jack Bailey—showing that you had recently became engaged to him."

Dale decided to make a clean breast of it—or as clean a one as she dared.

"Very well," she said in an uneven voice, "that's true."

"Why didn't you say so before?" There was menace beneath his suavity. He came closer to Dale, fixing her with his eyes. "Do you know where Bailey is now?" He spoke slowly and menacingly.

She did not flinch.

"No."

The detective paused.

"Miss Ogden," he said, still with that hidden threat in his voice, "in the last minute or so the Union bank case and certain things in this house have begun to tie up pretty close together. Bailey disappeared this morning. Have you heard from him since?"

Her eyes met his without weakening—her voice was cool and composed.

"No."

The detective did not comment on her answer—she could not tell from his face whether he thought she had told the truth or lied. He turned away from her brusquely.

"I'll ask you to bring Miss Van Gorder here," he said in his professional voice. "This case is taking on a new phase."

"You don't think I know anything about that money?" she said, a little wildly, hoping that a display of sham anger might throw him off the trail he seemed to be following.

He seemed to accept her words, cynically, at their face value.

"No," he said, "but you know somebody who does."

Dale hesitated—sought for a biting retort—found none. It did not matter—any respite, no matter how momentary, from these probing questions, would be a relief. She silently took one of the lighted candles and left the living room to search for her aunt.

Left alone, the detective reflected for a moment, then picking up the one lighted candle that remained, commenced a systematic examination of the living room. His methods were thorough, but if, when he came to the end of his quest, he had made any new discoveries, the reticent composure of his face did not betray the fact. When he had finished he turned patiently toward the billiard room—the little flame of his candle was swallowed up in its dark recesses—he closed the door of the living room be-

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