The Bat

A Novel from the Play

By Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood

(Continued from Preceding Page.)

hind him. The storm was dying away, now, but a few flashes of lightning still flickered, lighting up the darkness of the deserted living room now and then with a harsh, brief glare.

A lightning flash—a shadow cast abruptly on the shade of one of the French windows, to disappear as abruptly as the flash was blotted out—the shadow of a man—a prowler—feeling his way through the lightning-slashed darkness to the terrace door. The detective? Brooks? The Bat? The lightning flash was too brief for any observer to have recognized the stealing shape—if any observer had been there.

But the lack of an observer was promptly remedied. Just as the shadowy shape reached the terrace door and its shadow-fingers closed over the knob, Lizzie entered the deserted living room on stumbling feet. She was carrying a tray of dishes and food—a roll—a butter pat—and she walked slowly, with terror only one leap behind her, and blank darkness ahead.

She had only reached the table and was preparing to deposit her tray and beat a shameful retreat, when a sound behind her made her turn. The key in the door from the terrace to the alcove had clicked. Paralyzed with fright she stared and waited, and the next moment a formless thing, a blacker shadow in a world of shadows, passed swiftly in and up the small staircase.

But not only a shadow. To Lizzie's terrified eyes it bore an eye, a single gleaming eye, just above the level of the stair-rail, and this eye was turned on her.

It was too much. She dropped the tray on the table with a crash and gave vent to a piercing shriek that would have shamed the siren of a fire engine.

Miss Cornelia and Anderson, rushing in from the hall and the billiard room respectively, each with a lighted candle, found her gasping and clutching at the table for support.

"For the love of heaven, what's wrong?" cried Miss Cornelia irritatedly. The coffee pot she was carrying in her other hand spilled a portion of its boiling contents on Lizzie's shoe and Lizzie screamed anew and began to dance up and down on the uninjured foot.

"Oh, my foot—my foot!" she squealed, hysterically. "My foot!"

Miss Cornelia tried to shake her back to her senses.

"My patience! Did you yell like that because you stubbed your toe?"

"You scalded it!" cried Lizzie, wildly. "It went up the staircase!"

"Your toe went up the staircase?"

"No, no! An eye—an eye as big as a saucer! It ran right up that staircase—" She indicated the alcove with a trembling forefinger. Miss Cornelia put her coffee pot and her candle down on the table and opened her mouth to express her frank opinion of her factotum's sanity. But here the detective took charge.

"Now, see here," he said with some sternness to the quaking Lizzie, "stop this racket and tell me what you saw!"

"A ghost!" persisted Lizzie, still hopping around on one leg. "It came right through that door and ran up the stairs—oh—" and she seemed prepared to scream again as Dale, white-faced, came in from the hall, followed by Billy and Brooks, the latter holding still another candle.

"Who screamed?" said Dale, tensely.

"I did!" Lizzie wailed, "I saw a ghost!" She turned to Miss Cornelia, "I begged you not to come here," she vociferated, "I begged you on my bended knees. There's a graveyard not a quarter of a mile away."

"Yes, and one more scare like that, Lizzie Allen, and you'll have me lying in it," said her mistress unsympathetically. She moved up to examine the scene of Lizzie's ghostly misadventure, while Anderson began to interrogate its heroine.

"Now, Lizzie," he said, forcing himself to urbanity, "what did you really see?"

"I told you what I saw."

His manner grew somewhat threatening.

"You're not trying to frighten Miss Van Gorder into leaving this house and going back to the city?"

"Well, if I am," said Lizzie, with grim, unconscious humor, "I'm giving myself an awful good scare, too, ain't I?"

The two glared at each other, as Miss Cornelia returned from her survey of the alcove.

"Somebody who had a key could have got in here, Mr. Anderson," she said, annoyedly. "That terrace door's been unbolted from the inside."

The detective recovered his poise. "I think I see the answer to your puzzle, Miss Van Gorder," he said, with a scornful glance at Lizzie. "A hysterical and not very reliable woman, anxious to go back to the city and terrified over and over by the shutting off of the electric light."

Miss Van Gorder considered his theory. "I wonder," she said.

The detective rubbed his hands together more cheerfully.

"A good night's sleep and—" he began, but the irrepressible Lizzie interrupted him.

"My God, we're not going to bed, are we?" she said, with her eyes as big as saucers.

He gave her a kindly pat on the shoulder, which she obviously resented.

"You'll feel better in the morning," he said. "Lock your door and say your prayers, and leave the rest to me."

Lizzie muttered something inaudible and rebellious, but now Miss Cornelia added her protestations to his.

"That's very good advice," she said decisively. "You take her, Dale."

Reluctantly, with a dragging of feet and scared glances cast back over her shoulder, Lizzie allowed herself to be drawn toward the door and the main staircase by Dale. But she did not depart without one Parthian shot.

"I'm not going to bed!" she wailed, as Dale's strong young arm helped her out into the hall. "Do you think I want to wake up in the morning with my throat cut?" Then the creaking of the stairs, and Dale's soothing voice reassuring her as she painfully clambered toward the third floor, announced that Lizzie, for some time at least, had been removed as an active factor from the puzzling equation of Cedarcrest.

Anderson confronted Miss Cornelia with certain relief.

"There are certain things I want to discuss with you, Miss Van Gorder," he said. "But they can wait until tomorrow morning. You go upstairs and go to bed comfortably. I'll make a careful search of the house before I settle down, and if I find anything at all suspicious, I'll promise to let you know."

She agreed to that, and after sending the Jap out for more coffee, prepared to go upstairs.

Never had the thought of her own comfortable bed appealed to her so much. But, in spite of her weariness, she could not quite resign herself to take Lizzie's story as lightly as the detective seemed to.

"If what Lizzie says is true," she said, taking her candle, "the upper floors of the house are even less safe than this one."

"I imagine Lizzie's account just now is about as reliable as her previous one as to her age," Anderson assured her. "I'm certain you need not worry. Just go on up and get your beauty sleep; I'm sure you need it."

On which ambiguous remark Miss Van Gorder took her leave, rather grimly smiling.

If was after she had gone that Anderson's glance fell on Brooks, standing warily in the doorway.

"What are you? The gardener?"

But Brooks was prepared for him.

"Ordinarily I drive a car," he said. "Just now I'm working on the place here."

Anderson was observing him closely, with the eyes of a man ransacking his memory for a name—a picture. "I've seen you somewhere—" he went on slowly. "And I'll—place you before long." There was a little threat in his shrewd scrutiny. He took a step towards Brooks.

"Not in the portrait gallery at headquarters, are you?"

"Not yet," Brooks' voice was resentful. Then he remembered his pose and his back grew supple—his whole attitude that of the respectful servant.

"Well, we slip up now and then," said the detective, slowly. Then, apparently, he gave up his search for the name—the pictured face. But his manner was still suspicious.

"All right, Brooks," he said tersely, "if you're needed in the night, you'll be called!"

Brooks bowed. "Very well, sir." He closed the door softly behind him, glad to have escaped as well as he had.

But that he had not entirely lulled the detective's watchfulness to rest was evident as soon as he had gone. Anderson waited a few seconds, then moved noiselessly over to the hall door—listened—opened it suddenly—closed it again. Then he proceeded to examine the alcove—the stairs, where the gleaming eye had wavered like a corpse-candle before Lizzie's affrighted vision. He tested the terrace door and bolted it. How much truth had there been in her story? He could not decide—but he drew out his revolver nevertheless and gave it a quick inspection to see if it were in working order. A smile crept over his face—the smile of a man who has dangerous work to do, and does not shrink from the prospect. He put the revolver back in his pocket, and, taking the one lighted candle remaining, went out by the hall door, as the storm burst forth in fresh fury and the window panes of the living room rattled before a new reverberation of thunder.

For a moment, in the living room, expect for the thunder, all was silence. Then the creak of surreptitious footsteps broke the stillness—light footsteps descending the alcove stairs where the gleaming eye had passed.

It was Dale, slipping out of the house to keep her appointment with Richard Fleming. She carried a raincoat over her arm and a pair of rubbers in one hand. Her other hand held a candle. By the terrace door she paused, unbolted it, glanced out into the streaming night with a shiver. Then she came into the living room and sat down to put on her rubbers.

Hardly had she begun to do so when she started up again. A muffled knocking sounded at the terrace door. It was ominous and determined, and in a panic of terror she rose to her feet. If it was the law, come after Jack, what would she do? Or again, suppose it was the Unknown who had threatened them with death? Not coherent thoughts these, but chaotic, bringing panic with them. Almost unconscious of what she was doing, she reached into the drawer beside her, secured the revolver there and leveled it at the door.

(Continued Next Week)

Slants on Life

By J. A. WALDRON

The Unexpected

"YOU here? Well! This surprise is joyous!" He beamed upon her.

"Joyous!"

"Perfectly rapturous!"

"What enthusiasm! When did you arrive?"

"An hour ago. But was I not always enthusiastic where you were concerned?"

"You were enthusiastic, I remember, when you suddenly disappeared from New York." She cast down her eyes, but she still wore a smile. "Where have you been?"

"Just got back from South America. But my enthusiasm has returned with me." He looked at her ardently.

"Do you imagine you are the only man in whom I have seen enthusiasm?"

"Naturally not. Men have eyes and other senses. You are more attractive than ever."

They had met at Redondo Beach, on the Pacific. She looked at him and still smiled, but with a certain air of reservation. "And yet you went away without a word to me, and for a year I have not heard from you, Mr. Henderson."

"Plain mister, eh?"

"Quite proper, isn't it? Things have happened since I saw you." She fingered a miniature pendant upon a chain at her throat. He peered at it.

"A man's portrait. Whose?"

"My husband's. Let me introduce you to Mrs. Hickett. Delighted to meet you, Mr. Henderson, in my new character. I know you are pleased to see me again, for you have said it with lovely adjectives."

"Miriam!"

Her name was shouted from the verge of the sea below them. Henderson looked for the source of the call and saw a bullet-headed, athletic male looking up at them. Miriam did not seem to hear.

"I think that person down there called you," suggested Henderson, who had lost a phase of his smile.

"Mr. Hickett."

"Why," and Henderson again peered at the miniature, "he doesn't look exactly like this."

"No man looks the same in a bathing costume."

"You certainly didn't marry this man for his physical harmony and grace."

"You think that a shrewd conclusion, I suppose. He is worth ten millions."

"Well, that sum, even with his name, is passable. It would be passable to most women."

"It didn't pass me. You remember, don't you, that you disappeared suddenly? And I don't believe you have one million."

"But I have some other advantages. I believe he is calling you again." Mr. Hickett was calling again.

Mrs. Hickett turned and waved a hand at Mr. Hickett. "Yes, I heard him this time."

"But why didn't you hear him before?"

"Just a notion. I sometimes pretend I'm hard of hearing and that my sight is poor. If I didn't pretend my sight was poor I should see a lot of things that hurt a woman's vanity, even if she is not madly in love with her husband. Now Mr. Hickett, as you can see with half an eye, is fond of other pretty women. There are two with him at the moment. I don't care to go into the water with him, for he is ungallant enough to pay more attention to others than he does to me. And at the dances he always ignores me as long as there is another sightly woman to be had. Perhaps these aberrations, as I may call them, are because he is married to me. Besides, if he sees me even talking to a good-looking fellow like you—especially to a bachelor, for bachelors, he says, have neither obligations nor consciences—he rages. But let's go down and I'll introduce you."

As Mrs. Hickett and Mr. Henderson walked slowly to the shore he spoke rapidly in low tones to her, but she simply laughed. Mr. Hickett apparently misconstrued her joyousness, for he frowned as they approached.

"I'll introduce you first," said Mrs. Hickett, "to a woman I'm sure you'll be delighted to meet. She tells me she has traveled far within a year looking for a husband."

And thus Henderson unexpectedly met Mrs. Henderson, from whom he had spent a year in flight.

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