

# THE BAT

A Novel From the Play  
By Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood

STORY FROM THE START

Defying all efforts to capture him, after a long series of murders and robberies, a super-crook known only as "The Bat" has brought about a veritable reign of terror. The chief of police assigns his best operative, Anderson, to get on the trail of The Bat. With her niece, Dale Ogden, Miss Cornelia Van Gorder is living in the country home of the late Courleigh Fleming, who until his recent death had been president of the Union bank, wrecked because of the theft of a large sum of currency. Miss Van Gorder receives a note warning her to vacate the place at once on pain of death. Dale returns from the city, where she had been to hire a gardener. The gardener arrives, giving his name as Brooks. He admits he is not a gardener, but needs work. Miss Cornelia tells Doctor Wells of the threatening note. They are interrupted by the smashing of a window in the house. They find another warning note. The detective, Anderson, arrives, is told of the situation, and announces he will stay on watch that night. Miss Van Gorder tells Anderson she has an idea. Courleigh Fleming robbed his own bank and concealed the money in the house, but the detective believes the bank's cashier, Bailey, who is missing, is the guilty one. Brooks (who is really Bailey, the sought-for cashier, and Dale's fiance) tells the girl he knows there is a hidden room in the house. Dale telephones Richard Fleming, Courleigh's nephew, asking him to come over. Dale tells Richard Fleming of her knowledge of the hidden room. He gets rid of her while he seeks and finds blue-prints of the house.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

Dick Fleming's lips set in a thin line. "Just a moment," he said, putting the table between them with a swift movement. Once more he stole a glance at the scrap of paper in his hand by the flickering light of the candle. Then he faced Dale boldly.

"Do you suppose, if that money is actually here, that I can simply turn this over to you and let you give it to Bailey?" he said. "Every man has his price—how do I know that Bailey's isn't a million dollars?"

Dale felt as if he had dashed cold water in her face.

"What do you mean to do with it, then?" she said.

Fleming turned the blue-print over in his hand.

"I don't know," he said, tentatively. "What is it you want me to do?"

But by now Dale's vague distrust in him had grown very definite.

"Aren't you going to give it to me?" he put her off. "I'll have to think about that." He looked at the blue-print again. "So the missing cashier is in this house, posing as a gardener?" he said, with a sneer in his tones.

Dale's temper was rising.

"If you won't give it to me—there's a detective in this house," she said, with a stamp of her foot. She made a movement as if to call Anderson—then, remembering Jack, turned back to Fleming.

"Give it to the detective—and let him search," she pleaded.

"A detective?" said Fleming, startled. "What's a detective doing here?"

"People have been trying to break in."

"What people?"

"I don't know."

Fleming stared out beyond Dale, into the night.

"Then it is here," he muttered to himself.

Behind his back—was it a gust of air that moved them?—the double doors of the alcove swung open just a crack. Was a listener crouched behind those doors—or was it only a trick of carpentry—a gesture of chance?

The mask of the clubman dropped from Fleming completely. His lips drew back from his teeth in the snarl of a predatory animal that clings to its prey at the cost of life or death.

Before Dale could stop him, he picked up the discarded blue-prints and threw them on the fire—retaining only the precious scrap in his hand. The roll blackened and burst into flame. He watched it, smiling.

"I'm not going to give this to any detective," he said quietly, tapping the piece of paper in his hand.

Dale's heart pounded sickeningly, but she kept her courage up.

"What do you mean?" she said fiercely. "What are you going to do?"

He faced her across the fireplace, his airy manner come back to him just enough to add an additional touch of the sinister to the cold self-revelation of his words.

"Let us suppose a few things, Miss Ogden," he said. "Suppose my price is a million dollars. Suppose I need money very badly and my uncle has left me a house containing that amount in cash. Suppose I choose to consider that that money is mine—then it wouldn't be hard to suppose, would it, that I'd make a pretty sincere attempt to get away with it?"

Dale summoned all her fortitude.

"If you go out of this room with that paper I'll scream for help!" she said defiantly.

Fleming made a little mock-bow of courtesy. He smiled.

"To carry on our little game of supposing," he said easily. "Suppose there is a detective in this house—and that, if I were cornered, I should tell him where to lay his hands on

Jack Bailey. Do you suppose you would scream?"

Dale's hands dropped, powerless, at her sides. If only she hadn't told him—too late!—she was helpless. She could not call the detective without ruining Jack—and yet, if Fleming escaped with the money—how could Jack ever prove his innocence?

Fleming watched her for an instant, smiling. Then, seeing she made no move, he darted hastily toward the double doors of the alcove, flung them open, seemed about to dash up the alcove stairs. The sight of him escaping with the only existing clue to the hidden room galvanized Dale into action. She followed him, hurriedly snatching up Miss Cornelia's revolver from the table as she did so, in a last gesture of desperation.

"No! No! Give it to me! Give it to me!" and she sprang after him, clutching the revolver. He waited for her on the bottom step of the stairs, the slight smile still on his face.

Panting breaths in the darkness of the alcove—a short, furious scuffle—he had wrested the revolver away from her, but in doing so had unguarded the precious blue-print—she snatched at it, desperately, tearing most of it away, leaving only a corner in his hand. He swore—tried to get it back—she jerked away.

Then suddenly a bright shaft of light split the darkness of the alcove stairs like a sword—a spot of brilliance centered on Fleming's face like the glare of a flashlight focused from above by an invisible hand. For an instant it revealed him—his features distorted with fury—about to rush down the stairs again and attack the trembling girl at her foot.

A single shot rang out. For a second the fury on Fleming's face seemed to change to a strange look of bewilderment and surprise.

Then the shaft of light was extinguished as suddenly as the snuffing of a candle, and he crumpled forward to the foot of the stairs—struck—lay on his face, in the darkness, just inside the double doors.

Dale gave a little whimpering cry of horror.

"Oh, no, no, no," she whispered from a dry throat, automatically stuffing her portion of the precious scrap of blue-print into the bosom of her dress. She stood frozen, not daring to move, not daring even to reach down with her hand and touch the body of Fleming to see if he were dead or alive.

A murmur of excited voices sounded from the hall. The door flew open—set stumbled through the darkness—"The noise came from this room!" that was Anderson's voice—"Holy Virgin!" that must be Lizzie—

Even as Dale turned to face the assembled household, the house lights, extinguished since the storm, came on in full brilliance—revealing her to them, standing beside Fleming's body with Miss Cornelia's revolver between them.

She shuddered, seeing Fleming's arm flung out awkwardly by his side. No living man could lie in such a posture.

"I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" she stammered, after a tense silence that followed the sudden reillumining of the lights. Her eyes wandered

from figure to figure idly, noting unimportant details. Billy was still in his white coat and his face, impassive as ever, showed not the slightest surprise. Brooks and Anderson were likewise completely dressed—but Miss Cornelia had evidently begun to retire for the night when she had heard the shot—her transformation was askew and she wore a dressing-gown. As for Lizzie, that worthy shivered in a gaudy wrapper adorned with incredible orange flowers, with her hair done up in curl-papers. Dale saw it all, and was never after to forget one single detail of it.

The detective was beside her now, examining Fleming's body with pro-

fessional thoroughness. At last he rose.

"He's dead," he said quietly. A shiver ran through the watching group. Dale felt a stifling hand constrict about her heart.

There was a pause. Anderson picked up the revolver beside Fleming's body and examined it swiftly, careful not to confuse his own fingerprints with any that might already be on the polished steel. Then he looked at Dale.

"Who is he?" he said, bluntly.

Dale fought hysteria for some seconds before she could speak.

"Richard Fleming—somebody shot him!" she managed to whisper at last.

Anderson took a step toward her.

"What do you mean by somebody?" he said.

The world to Dale turned into a crowd of threatening, accusing eyes—a multitude of shadowy voices, shouting "Guilty! Guilty! Prove that you're innocent—you can't!"

"I don't know," she said wildly. "Somebody on the staircase."

"Did you see anybody?" Anderson's voice was as passionless and cold as a bar of steel.

"No—but there was a light from somewhere—like a pocket-flash—" She could not go on. She saw Fleming's face before her—furious at first—then changing to that strange look of bewildered surprise—she put her hand over her eyes to shut the vision out.

Lizzie made a welcome interruption.

"I told you I saw a man go up that staircase!" she wailed, jabbing her forefinger in the direction of the alcove stairs.

Miss Cornelia, now recovered from the first shock of the discovery, supported her gallantly.

"That's the only explanation, Mr. Anderson," she said decidedly.

The detective looked at the stairs—at the terrace door. His eyes made a circuit of the room and came back to Fleming's body.

"I've been all over the house," he said. "There's nobody there."

A pause followed. Dale found herself helplessly looking toward her lover for comfort—comfort he could not give without revealing his own secret.

Eerily, through the tense silence, a sudden tinkling sounded—the sharp, persistent ringing of a telephone bell.

Miss Cornelia rose to answer it automatically. "The house phone!" she said. Then she stopped. "But we're all here."

They looked at each other aghast. It was true. And yet—somehow—on the circuit was calling the living room.

Miss Cornelia summoned every ounce of inherited Van Gorder pride she possessed and went to the phone. She took off the receiver. The ringing stopped.

"Hello—hello—" she said, while the others stood rigid, listening. Then she gasped. An expression of wonder derling horror came over her face.

"Somebody groaning!" gasped Miss Cornelia. "It's horrible!"

The detective stepped up and took the receiver from her. He listened anxiously for a moment.

"I don't hear anything," he said.

"I heard it! I couldn't imagine such a dreadful sound! I tell you—somebody in this house is in terrible distress."

"Where does this phone connect?" queried Anderson practically.

Miss Cornelia made a hopeless little gesture. "Practically every room in this house!"

The detective put the receiver to his ear again.

"Just what did you hear?" he said, stolidly.

Miss Cornelia's voice shook.

"Dreadful groans—and what seemed to be an inarticulate effort to speak!"

Lizzie drew her gaudy wrapper closer about her shuddering form.

"I'd go somewhere," she wailed in the voice of a lost soul, "if I only had somewhere to go!"

Miss Cornelia quelled her with a glare and turned back to the detective.

"Won't you send these men to investigate—or go yourself?" she said, indicating Brooks and Billy.

The detective thought swiftly.

"My place is here," he said. "You two men, Brooks and Billy, moved forward to take his orders, 'take another look through the house—don't leave the building—I'll want you pretty soon.'"

Brooks—or Jack Bailey, as we may as well call him through the remainder of this narrative—started to obey. Then his eye fell on Miss Cornelia's revolver, which Anderson had taken from beside Fleming's body and still held clasped in his hand.

"If you'll give me that revolver—" he began in an offhand tone, hoping little ruse. Once wiped clean of fingerprints, the revolver would not be such telling evidence against Dale Ogden.

But Anderson was not to be caught napping.

"That revolver will stay where it is," he said with a grim smile.

Jack Bailey knew better than to try and argue the point. He followed Billy reluctantly out of the door, giving Dale a surreptitious glance of encouragement and faith as he did so. The Japanese and he mounted to the second floor, as stealthily as possible, prying into dark corners and searching unused rooms for any clue that might betray the source of the startling phone call from nowhere. But Bailey's heart was not in the search. His mind kept going back to the figure of Dale—nervous—shaken—undegroing the terrors of the third degree at Anderson's hands. She couldn't have shot Fleming, of course—and yet—unless he and Billy found something to substantiate her story of how the killing had happened—it was her own, unsupported word against a damning mass of circumstantial evidence. He plunged with renewed vigor into his quest.

Back in the living room, as he had feared, Anderson was subjecting Dale to a merciless interrogation.

"Now I want the real story!" he began, with calculated brutality. "You lied before!"

"That's no tone to use! You'll terrify her," cried Miss Cornelia indignantly. The detective paid no attention—his face had hardened—he seemed every inch the remorseless sleuth-hound of the law. He turned on Miss Cornelia for a moment.

"Where were you when this happened?" he said.

"Upstairs in my room," Miss Cornelia's tones were icy.

"And you?" badgeringly, to Lizzie.

"In my room," said the latter pertly, "brushing Miss Cornelia's hair."

Anderson broke open the revolver and gave a swift glance at the bullet-chambers.

"One shot has been fired from this revolver."

Miss Cornelia sprang to her niece's defense.

"I fired it myself, this afternoon," she said.

The detective regarded her with grudging admiration.

"You're a quick thinker," he said—with obvious unbelief in his voice. He put the revolver down on the table.

Miss Cornelia followed up her advantage.

"I demand that you get the coroner here!"

"I've been all over the house," he said. "There's nobody there."

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"He had a key."

"Key to what door?"

"The door over there," Dale indicated the terrace door of the alcove.

The detective was about to ask another question—then he paused. Miss Cornelia was talking on the phone.

"Hello—is that Mr. Johnson's residence? Is Doctor Wells there? No?" Her expression was puzzled. "Oh—all right—thank you—good night—" She rang off, and hung up the phone.

Meanwhile Anderson had been listening—but thinking as well. Dale saw his sharp glance travel over to the terrace—rest for a moment, with an air of discovery, on the fragments of the roll of blue-prints that remained unburned under the ashes—return. She shut her eyes for a moment, trying tensely to summon every atom of shrewdness she possessed to aid her.

He was hammering at her with questions again.

"When did you take that revolver out of the table drawer?"

"When I heard him outside on the terrace," said Dale promptly and truthfully. "I was frightened."

Lizzie tiptoed over to Miss Cornelia. "You wanted a detective?" she said in an ironic whisper. "I hope you're happy now you've got one!"

Miss Cornelia gave her a look that sent her scuttling back to her former

post by the door. But nevertheless, internally, she felt thoroughly in accord with Lizzie.

Again Anderson's questions pounded at the rigid Dale—striving to pierce her armor of mingled truth and falsehood.

"When Fleming came in, what did he say to you?"

"Just—something about the weather," said Dale weakly. The whole scene was still too horribly vivid before her eyes for her to furnish a more convincing alibi.

"You haven't had any quarrels with him?"

Dale hesitated.

"No."

"He just came in that door—said something about the weather—and was shot from that staircase. Is that it?" said the detective in tones of utter incredulity.

Dale hesitated again. Thus baldly put her story seemed too flimsy for work—she could not even blame Anderson for disbelieving it. And yet—what other story could she tell that would not bring ruin on Jack?

Her face whitened. She put her hand on the back of a chair for support.

"Yes—that's it," she said, at last, and swayed where she stood.

Again Miss Cornelia tried to come to the rescue.

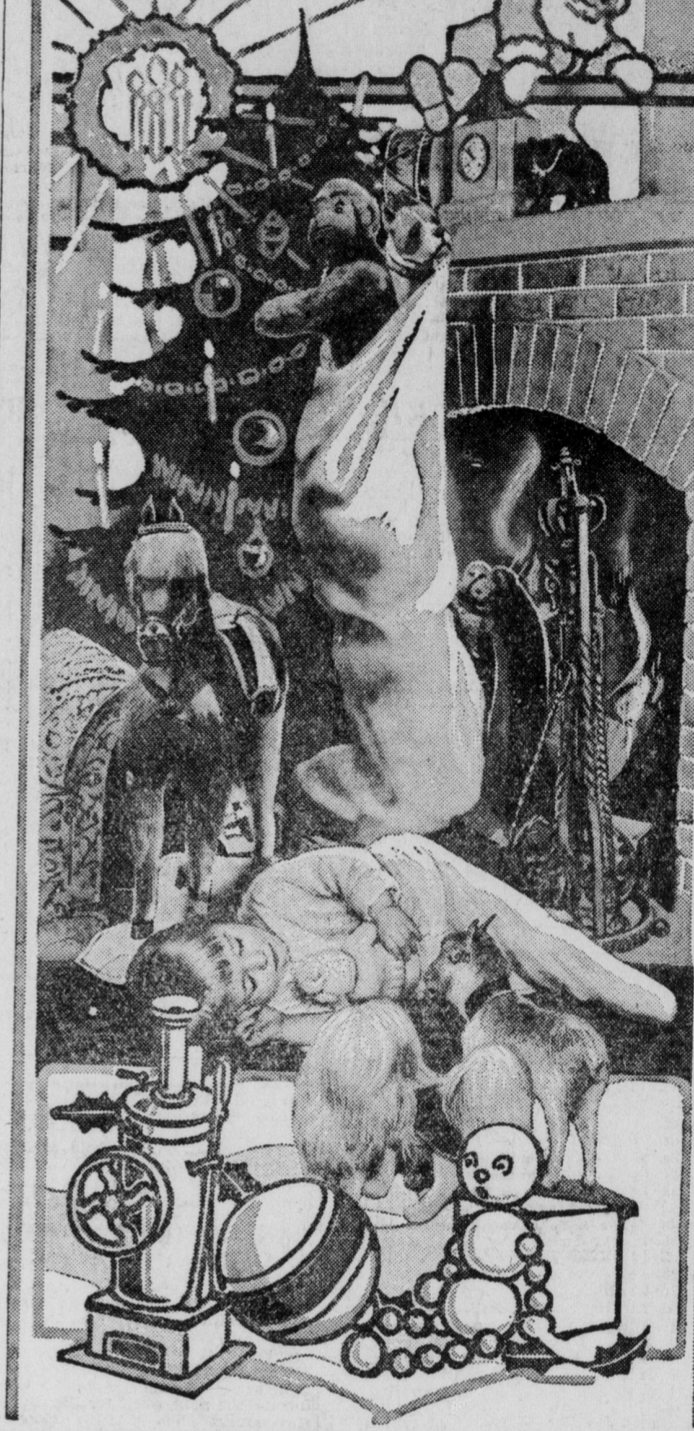
"Are all these questions necessary?" she queried sharply. "You can't for a moment believe that Miss Ogden shot that man?" But by now, though she did not show it, she, too, began to realize the strength of the appalling net of circumstances that drew with each minute tighter around the unhappy girl. Dale gratefully seized the momentary respite and sank into a chair.

The detective looked at her.

"I think she knows more than she's telling. She's concealing something," he said, with deadly intentness. "The nephew of the president of the Union bank—shot in his own house at the bank has failed—that's queer enough." Now he turned back to Miss Cornelia. "But when the only person present at his murder is the girl who's engaged to the guilty cashier," he continued, watching Miss Cornelia's face as the full force of his words sank into her mind, "I want to know more about it!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

## Willie's Dream of Christmas



"I Think She Knows More Than She's Telling."

### The First Christmas

NIGHT had descended upon the hills of Judea. All was hushed and still; the earth and heavens seemed resting in a great, deep calm. No sound came to break the stillness. Even the humble shepherd men who watched their flocks were silent—they, too, felt the deep thrill and mystery of the night. Humble and uneducated as they were, they could not fathom what it all meant, but in their hearts was a sense of awe and wonderment that kept them silent.

Then on the darkness of the night there came out of the heavens a dazzling light and the shepherds were frightened. But an angel of the Lord was standing beside them and in a voice that found its way to their very hearts told them to fear not, rather to rejoice instead, for he was bringing them tidings of great joy, that the long-looked-for Savior had been born that night in Bethlehem of Judea. And when this angel had finished speaking the glory of heaven shone brighter all about them, and looking up they beheld a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and singing the song that has echoed since through all the ages: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will."

After the angels had departed and the dazzling light had vanished from the hillsides the shepherds whispered among themselves, and they decided to leave their flocks and go to the little town of Bethlehem, as the angel had told them. Over the hills and valleys they went, never pausing until they came to the humble stable where the Savior lay. There they prostrated themselves at His feet, praising God for the thing that had come to pass, and telling Mary, His mother, and Joseph of what they had seen and heard that night.

Then they departed from His presence and went their way, telling all whom they met of the Savior's coming.

So was it at the first Christmas—Fatherine Edelman.

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Christmas in Spain

In Spain the children seek secret places among the shrubs and bushes in which to hide their shoes and on Christmas morning they go out to find them filled with fruits and candies.

Faru and Ranch.

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### Christmas Greens

MARGARET BRUCE

HERE is one haunt I hope never to deprive my youngsters of," said a business man the other day, "and that is the annual trip to the woods after Christmas greens for the house. Every year since we were married, my wife and I have bundled ourselves up in warm togas and gone out a day or two before Christmas and gathered armfuls of spruce and hemlock branches, sprays of ground pine, and occasionally some mistletoe, though this is rare in our part of the country."

"After the children came, this excursion into the woods became as much a part of Christmas as the tree, the stockings, and the dinner. When we were living out in the suburbs, near the open woods, we used to go out and chop down our own Christmas tree and bring it home on a low sledge."

"Then the time came when we had to move into town, because of my

having a good deal of night work, and it took too long to get way out into the country late at night. We couldn't bring home our own Christmas tree any more, of course, but we could, and did, take a whole day to go out and get our Christmas greens, and we do it every year. If the weather is open and there isn't too much snow, we take the car and drive out to the woods.

"If there is a great deal of snow and it is impossible to take the car out, we go on the train to a convenient country station, get off and tramp through the woods, and collect our Christmas decorations. If we have too large a load to take into the coach, I find that the baggage car will bring it in to town for a half-dollar or so. The spirit of Christmas comes back with us from the woods, and the twining of our own greens in wreaths and festoons means a hundred times more than if we bought them out of a wooden packing box at the florist's."

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