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THE RATS

by Agatha Christie

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CHARACTERS

SANDRA GREY

JENNIFER BRICE

DAVID FORRESTER

ALEC HANBURY

THE RATS was first presented by Peter Saunders at the Duchess Theatre, London on December 20, 1962. The performance was directed by Hubert Gregg, with sets by Peter Rice. The cast was as follows:

SANDRA GREY Betty McDowall
JENNIFER BRICE Mercy Haystead
DAVID FORRESTER David Langton
ALEC HANBURY Raymond Bowers

(Michael Torrance's flat in Hampstead. A fine summer evening, about 6:30 p.m. The flat is a studio. There is a door leading on to a small balcony and a long window running across the back showing a view over the rooftops. Inside there is the front door and a hallway leading to the bathroom and kitchenette. Below the window is a very big chest, known as a Damascus bridal chest, dark wood and studded with ornamental brass nails. Prominent is a line of Baghdad coffee pots with large beaked spouts. There are also one or two pieces of Persian or Islamic pottery and a Kurdish knife held in a sheaf. Otherwise the furnishings of the flat are severely modern. There is a big double divan covered with cushions and a low table with modern armchairs on either side of it. On the table is a tray with drinks and a few glasses. There is also a budgerigar in a cage. The entrance buzzer and knocker sound. This is repeated impatiently then SANDRA's voice is heard offstage.)

SANDRA. *(Offstage.)* Anyone there? Anyone at home?

(She knocks on the door and gives a surprised exclamation as it opens. SANDRA enters. She is a smart and very attractive woman of thirty.)

Pat – Michael?

(She looks around then crosses to the hallway, exits, re-enters, then moves to the balcony door and looks out. Puzzled, she removes her wrap, puts it over the back of an armchair

then sits. She reaches for a cigarette box on the coffee table but finds it empty. Taking one from her handbag she lights it then gets up and walks about, puffing with increasing irritability.)

SANDRA. How extraordinary!

(She glances at her watch.)

Nice manners, I must say.

(She goes out on to the balcony. There is the sound of a key in the lock.)

JENNIFER. *(Offstage.)* Oh, it's open!

(JENNIFER pushes the door and enters. She is a vacant-faced young woman of thirty-odd, a bit of a cat and not so silly as she seems. She has rather an affected manner. Seeing the wrap, she stops and turns towards the balcony.)

Hello, Sandra.

(SANDRA enters.)

SANDRA. Jennifer – haven't seen you for ages.

JENNIFER. What are you doing here?

SANDRA. I'm like you – too early for the party. It's always so shaming to be early, isn't it?

JENNIFER. What's this about a party? Whose party?

SANDRA. Well, not a party exactly. The Torrances just said come in for drinks.

JENNIFER. *(Surprised.)* They asked you in for drinks *today*?

SANDRA. Why not? *(Sharply.)* Isn't that why you're here?

JENNIFER. Not exactly.

(She turns away, amused.)

SANDRA. Why shouldn't the Torrances ask me in for drinks?

JENNIFER. No reason at all –

(She pauses.)

– if they'd been in England.

SANDRA. Do you mean they're not in England?

JENNIFER. (*Nodding.*) They're at Juan.

SANDRA. But Pat Torrance rang me up on Tuesday, the day before yesterday.

JENNIFER. (*Mockingly.*) Did she?

SANDRA. (*Sharply.*) Yes.

JENNIFER. (*Coolly.*) Oh, really, darling! You must do better than that. It's never any good sticking to a story that won't gel.

SANDRA. Really, Jennifer!

JENNIFER. (*Laughing.*) I suppose you got Pat Torrance to lend you the key of the flat.

(She eyes her keenly.)

And you're meeting someone here! Who is it? You might tell me. Or shall I try and guess?

SANDRA. You're talking absolute nonsense. I told you, Pat Torrance rang me and asked me to come –

JENNIFER. Oh, darling! Not all over again! Think of something better.

(She looks at the cage.)

Perhaps she asked you to come in and feed the budgerigar?

SANDRA. (*Doubtfully.*) As a matter of fact – she – she did mention –

JENNIFER. (*Laughing.*) But I'd already agreed to feed the little brute for her.

(She takes a packet out of her bag and reads the label.)

“Lov-a-bud Budgie Food. Your Budgie will simply love it.”

(She looks mockingly at SANDRA.)

How forgetful of Pat to ask two of us to do the same thing.

SANDRA. (*Angrily.*) Oh, really, Jennifer...

JENNIFER. Oh, don't be cross. I'm only teasing. It's so lovely, catching one's friends out. But you might just tell me who he is. I swear I'll be as silent as the grave.

SANDRA. That'll be the day!

JENNIFER. Now, don't lose your temper, sweetie. What really surprises me is that the Torrances should aid and abet. I've always found them rather straight-laced. I put it down to living abroad so much in remote outposts of what used to be Empire. (*Coaxingly.*) Sweetie, do tell me who it is you're having an affair with.

SANDRA. I'm not having an affair with anyone.

JENNIFER. Then why are you here in the Torrance's flat when they're in the South of France – telling silly fibs about a cocktail party?

SANDRA. There must have been some mix-up or other. You know how things are on the telephone. Perhaps Pat meant next week. But I can tell you that I came here expecting to find a party and that's all there is to it.

JENNIFER. (*Disappointed.*) And you're really and truly not expecting to meet anyone here?

SANDRA. The only person I'm actually expecting to meet here is John.

JENNIFER. Your husband?

SANDRA. Yes. He said he'd join me here as soon as he could get away from the office.

JENNIFER. Dear John. Such a pet, isn't he?

SANDRA. (*Smiling.*) Naturally I think so.

JENNIFER. Such a nice, simple, *trusting* man! He simply worships you, doesn't he?

SANDRA. He doesn't actually dislike me.

JENNIFER. What splendid understatement! Men don't usually dislike you, do they? Quite the contrary.

SANDRA. (*Coldly.*) Hadn't you better feed the budgerigar if that's really what you've come for?

JENNIFER. Sandra! Are you suggesting that I came here to meet someone?

SANDRA. Certainly not! I should never dream of such a thing.

JENNIFER. Well, that really is a bitchy thing to say!

(She moves to the cage, takes the feeding tray out and begins to fill it.)

Tweet, tweet, tweet, here you are, then! Luv-a-bud for the budgie. You know, there's something rather non-U about a budgie, don't you agree? But then there's something terribly non-U about the Torrances. All this travelling about to strange places and bringing back souvenirs. I stole an ashtray from the Carlton in Cannes once, but I never forgave myself.

(She puts the filled seed tray back in the cage.)

And why only one bird, why not two? Look at the poor little mite, all shut up in one room and simply pining for a mate.

(She looks at SANDRA.)

But then, if there were two of you, you'd have to be faithful, wouldn't you? Such a bore. My God, he's drunk his own weight in water since this morning. Never mind, Mother will get you some more. Or do you suppose he'd rather have gin? If it is a he! How do you tell?

(She removes the water dish then exits down the hallway to the kitchen. SANDRA goes out on to the balcony. JENNIFER re-enters and replaces the water dish in the cage.)

What are you doing out there, darling? No good looking for the Torrances. I tell you they're abroad. Or perhaps you weren't looking for the Torrances. Well, that's my chore done for the day and I'm going. Goodbye, Sandra.

(SANDRA re-enters.)

SANDRA. I'll come with you. No point in my staying, obviously.

JENNIFER. But what about John? He'll be coming.

SANDRA. Oh, John – well, he can –

(The buzzer sounds.)

JENNIFER. I expect that's him now.

(She crosses and opens the front door. DAVID FORRESTER enters. He is a good-looking man in his late thirties. Behind his charm and manner you sense a certain ruthlessness. An ambitious man. On seeing the women he looks taken aback but quickly masks his surprise. SANDRA on the other hand, displays real astonishment.)

DAVID. Hullo, Sandra.

SANDRA. David!

JENNIFER. Hullo!

DAVID. Hullo.

SANDRA. Er – Mr. Forrester – Mrs. Brice.

(JENNIFER offers her hand. DAVID takes it.)

JENNIFER. How do you do?

DAVID. How do you do?

SANDRA. *(Quickly.)* You seem to have come on the wrong day David, like me. Jennifer has just been telling me the Torrances are abroad.

DAVID. Really.

(He smiles at JENNIFER.)

That seems to make three of us.

JENNIFER. Oh, I just came in to feed the budgerigar.

(DAVID looks at the bird.)

DAVID. *(Vaguely.)* Oh, I see. Nice little fellow. Does he talk?

JENNIFER. Only Swahili.

DAVID. Very expressive language, I've always understood.

JENNIFER. Well, I must fly. So nice to have seen you.

(She looks towards SANDRA maliciously.)

Goodbye, darling.

(**JENNIFER** exits through the front door. There is a pause. **DAVID** and **SANDRA** look awkward. **JENNIFER** re-enters.)

JENNIFER. Give my love to John, won't you? It's all been the greatest fun.

(*She exits again, closing the door.*)

DAVID. Who the devil was that?

SANDRA. Jennifer Brice.

DAVID. Friend of yours?

SANDRA. I wouldn't say so.

DAVID. What was she doing here?

SANDRA. You heard her. She came to feed the budgerigar. Whatever are you doing here?

DAVID. Darling, I came to see you.

SANDRA. Me?

(**DAVID** looks around the flat.)

DAVID. By the way, whose flat are we in?

SANDRA. The Torrances.

DAVID. (*Enlightened.*) Oh, I see. Well, it's very nice and suitable.

(*He looks at the divan.*)

Do both the Torrances sleep on this? Surely not.

SANDRA. I think it opens into a double.

DAVID. That's kind of it.

(*There is an awkward pause.*)

Sandra...

(*He moves to her, they kiss passionately.*)

SANDRA. David.

DAVID. It's been quite a while.

SANDRA. Too long!

(*They kiss again.*)

DAVID. All of a week!

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