JIMMIE DALE AND THE BLUE ENVELOPE MURDER



FRANK L. PACKARD

PIPCUB EDITIONS

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THE AUTHOR



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1877–1942

An original vignette inspired by the author's work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frank L. Packard

Frank Lucius Packard was a Canadian novelist born in Montreal in 1877. His early career as a civil engineer and his experience of railway work supplied the settings and practical detail of his first stories.

He became widely known for The Miracle Man and for the adventures of Jimmie Dale, a wealthy New Yorker who secretly operates as the Gray Seal. Packard built these mysteries around disguises, hidden identities and a dangerous criminal underworld.

First published in 1930, Jimmie Dale and the Blue Envelope Murder returns his resourceful hero to a world of suspicion and deception. Packard's fiction combines fast-moving adventure with an interest in courage, loyalty and the possibility of redemption. He died in 1942.

TO
BIG AND LITTLE M. P. P.

CHAPTER I

ALIAS THE GRAY SEAL

The lounge windows of the St. James Club, that club of clubs, looked out on Fifth Avenue. Jimmie Dale, ensconced in a deep armchair, turned slightly away from his two companions, and stared out introspectively at the lighted thoroughfare, now comparatively deserted in the late evening hour. He was suddenly conscious that once upon a time he had lived and taken part in the same scene, or one whose similarity was so marked as to make it almost identical, that was being enacted around him now. He had had experiences of this sort before at rare and unexpected intervals—just as most people had, he supposed—but there always seemed to be something portending, something almost eerie and supernatural about such happenings which affected him unpleasantly.

Herman Carruthers, the managing editor of the *Morning News-Argus*, had begun reminiscing about the Gray Seal, and had just made the statement that, since the Gray Seal had not been heard of for so long, the Gray Seal was therefore indubitably dead. It was precisely the same statement Carruthers had made one evening in this same club years ago in the early days of the Gray Seal's career. There had been only two present on that occasion, Carruthers and himself; to-night there was a third, Ray Thorne—and out of Thorne's mouth, startlingly, in instant reply, had come to all intents and purposes the very words that he, Jimmie Dale, had used on that other night.

"Why not give him the benefit of the doubt and say that he has reformed?" Thorne had asked.

Jimmie Dale drew deep on his cigarette. The sequel to that other occasion had been the sudden reappearance of the Gray Seal. And to-night? Ridiculous, of course! Impossible! So far as anybody in this world would ever know, with the one exception of the Tocsin, the Gray Seal *was* dead. Why, then, should there be any sense of portent? To-

night was staging a rather curious coincidence, of course—but that was all. He swung around in his chair again with a quizzical smile as Carruthers addressed him:

"What do you say about it, Jimmie?"

"Good Lord," complained Jimmie Dale whimsically, "how should I know?"

"Well, I'll tell you then," reiterated Carruthers stubbornly. "He's dead!"

Jimmie Dale laughed slyly.

"You know, really, Carruthers, old chap, you rather amuse me. I have just recalled that we were on the same topic here in this same club some years ago and you made the same statement. And you were wrong—oh, quite wrong! If the Gray Seal had ever been dead, he certainly came to life again that night with a wallop!"

"Yes, I was wrong in an actual sense," Carruthers admitted; "but I was right in another—and that's why I am so positive that he has now passed on to the great beyond. You will also remember that, at the time, I said he couldn't stop being a crook—and live? Well, he couldn't—and didn't. But that period of inactivity to which we are referring had endured only about a year; whereas now it is quite a different proposition, so different that I repeat without hesitation that it is a certainty he is dead. You know that since the beginning of the war down to to-night, a year after the war is over, nothing during all that time has ever been heard of him and his filthy, murderous tricks."

"Filthy, murderous tricks!" Jimmie Dale whistled plaintively. "Oh, Carruthers! What apostasy! It somehow sticks in my memory that you used to call him the most puzzling, bewildering, delightful crook in the annals of crime."

"So I did," said Carruthers a little gruffly. "And so he was—up to a certain point in his career. Teasing the public and the police with his diamond-shaped gray-paper seals every time he pulled one of his apparently purposeless breaks, was one thing; but when it came to the brutal and cold-blooded murders that he committed afterward—more than one of them, mind you—that was quite another. It is my firm conviction that if he had ever been caught, the mob would have taken

justice into its own hands and torn him to pieces—and he Would have deserved it! He became a blood-drunk monster with no single thing to be said in his favor."

Jimmie Dale chuckled.

"Ingrate!" he murmured accusingly. "Have you forgotten what he was worth to you as front-page copy? Didn't you tell me once that he used to sell out the whole edition of your beastly sheet every time he broke loose?"

Thorne, joining in the conversation, laughed outright.

"And I guess that's right, too!" he said. "I wasn't living in New York then, but if even the papers abroad featured him, I can imagine the gold mine he must have been to the press here. However, I don't suppose Carruthers has any regrets to-day over the loss of his one-time headliner. Eh, Carruthers—in these piping days of joyous crime? Plenty of stuff, continuous performance—what? How many gang murders on the menu in to-morrow morning's edition?"

"Yes; it's pretty fierce!" Carruthers nodded. "New York is about as safe to-day as a front-line trench was in the war. The days when we ran the Gray Seal in red ink were zephyr-like compared with these—but there was never but one Gray Seal, and there'll never be anything like him again. He'd still own the 'desk.'"

"Which gives me a thought," observed Thorne. "Suppose, granting he's dead, that he got ferried back across the Styx and came to life again here, he'd get an awful jolt, wouldn't he? Crime is Big Business to-day. Things have changed."

Carruthers growled grimly.

"Yes, things have changed with a vengeance," he said; "but I wouldn't care to turn him loose under the *improved* conditions—he'd only have a wider field to work. He'd find the saloons gone, but he'd find thirty-two thousand speakeasies and then some in their place. He probably wouldn't recognize the Bowery. The old deadline that popularly marked the confines of the Bad Lands is no more; to-day the underworld extends from the Bloody Angle in Chinatown up to Harlem, and from the East River to the Hudson—and I'm not saying anything about Brooklyn! The dance halls have become night clubs.

The gang leaders have become millionaires. And besides all this, of course, there still remain some of the old dens and dives that he knew so well as Larry the Bat. No, I wouldn't care to see *him* back again—God knows it's bad enough as it is! You agree, Jimmie?"

"Heaven forbid!" breathed Jimmie Dale piously.

"Well, that's that—*requiescat*, you know," said Thorne with a cheery grin. "And I've got to be going! When's Marie coming back, Jimmie?"

"She's leaving Paris to-morrow, and sailing from Liverpool on Saturday," Jimmie Dale answered.

"And the Big Event scarcely a month off!" Thorne's grin broadened. "Who's writing your speech for you, Jimmie? Carruthers, the scribe?"

"I am not!" declared Carruthers sternly. "That is always the duty of the best man."

"Wow!" grimaced Thorne. "I'm sorry I spoke! I leave it to you, Jimmie—that wasn't specified when I graciously consented to take on the job!" He rose to his feet. "Are you fellows sticking around?"

"No," said Carruthers; "I'm on my way, too."

"I've got a letter to write," said Jimmie Dale, "and I might as well do it here. Good-night, you chaps!"

"Good-night," they answered—and left the room.

Jimmie Dale looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. He turned and frowned out of the window. Queer business! What the devil had started Carruthers harping on the Gray Seal? It didn't matter, of course, not in the slightest; but nevertheless he couldn't get out of his mind the startling analogy between to-night and that night when, after that little affair in Isaac Brolsky's second-hand store on West Broadway, Carruthers had excitedly telephoned him that the Gray Seal had come to life again. But Carruthers wasn't going to telephone any such similar message again to-night, was he? Absurd! A call to arms? One of those old notes again? Still more absurd! Why, Marie, the Tocsin, wasn't even on this side of the water! The Tocsin! Memory flooded back upon him. The night he had found her gold signet ring in the finger of her glove, which latter, in her haste to escape unseen, she had inadvertently dropped in his car![1] He had not known who she

was then, but from that night he had called her the Tocsin because, on examining the ring, the motto in the scroll had seemed so strangely apt: *Sonnez le Tocsin*. Ring the Tocsin! Sound the alarm! He had never, up to that time, received a communication from her that had not sounded a new alarm—that had not been another "call to arms" for the Gray Seal! Singular that all this should come crowding back on him to-night!

Still frowning, he strolled into the writing room and wrote his letter—but it was mechanically written, his mind refusing to concentrate on the matter in hand. Then he left the club—and fifteen minutes later, having ridden uptown on the top of a bus, he was mounting the steps of his home on Riverside Drive.

But halfway up the steps Jimmie Dale stood suddenly still. Intuitively he knew what was coming. The impossible was about to happen. To-night *was* going to duplicate that other night. Faithful old Jason, who always insisted on sitting up for him—and usually went to sleep in the hall chair—wasn't nodding over his self-imposed vigil to-night. Jason already had the door open, and the old man's face in the light from the vestibule lamp was white and strained.

Jimmie Dale took the remaining steps at a bound.

"Yes, Jason?" he asked quickly. "What is it?"

"Master Jim," quavered the old butler, who had been in the household even before Jimmie Dale was born, "I—I am afraid, sir, it's one of those—those strange——"

"Letters," supplied Jimmie Dale, a sudden quiet in his voice. "It's utterly and wholly impossible, of course—but so none the less, eh? Where is it?"

Jason closed the door, and picking up a silver tray from the hall stand, extended it to his master.

Wonderful fingers were those slim, tapering fingers of Jimmie Dale, and now, as he took a plain, sealed envelope from the tray, their supersensitive tips were telegraphing to his brain the message that the paper was unquestionably of the same texture as of old.

"Who brought this, Jason?" he demanded.

"I don't know, Master Jim," Jason answered heavily. "I—I am afraid I was nodding in the chair there, sir, when I became aware that the doorbell was ringing; but when I opened the door nobody was there. There was only that envelope, Master Jim, lying on the doorstep; but the bell was still ringing—you see, sir, whoever it was had wedged a little sliver of wood, a piece of a match, sir, I should say, into the bell-push."

"How long ago was this?" queried Jimmie Dale tersely.

"Not more than ten minutes ago, sir," Jason replied. "I at once rang up the club, Master Jim, but you had already left."

"I see," said Jimmie Dale slowly; then briskly: "All right, Jason, there's nothing else you could have done. I'm home now, anyhow, so lock up, will you, and get away to bed? Good-night, Jason!" He turned to go upstairs—only to pause abruptly and lay his hand in kindly reassurance on the old man's shoulder. Jason was twisting his hands nervously together, and there were sudden tears in the old, dim eyes. "What is it, Jason?" he questioned cheerily.

"Master Jim, sir," said the old man tremulously. "I am afraid—not for myself, sir, but for you, Master Jim, that, as I've taken the liberty of saying many times, I dandled on my knee when you were a baby, and afterwards too, sir, when you were a bit of a lad after your mother died. I was frightened, sir, when I saw that letter on the doorstep. There haven't been any for years now—letters coming in a strange way like this. I never knew what it all meant when they used to come frequently, and it wasn't for me to ask; but, Master Jim, I haven't forgotten the time you took Benson and me enough into your confidence to tell us that the telephone wires were tapped and the house here watched, and that it meant life and death to you, Master Jim, to get away from the house without it being known. And I remember the night, too, sir, when you were shot, and just managed to get home, and pitched to the floor unconscious right where you're standing now, Master Jim."

"Jason," said Jimmie Dale with mock severity, "you go to bed! You are supposed to have forgotten those little episodes—everybody else has long ago. But just to ease your mind, I'll assure you now that in

spite of this"—he held up the envelope—"shall we call it ghostly visitation?—nothing such as happened in the past can ever happen again. That is all over with definitely and finally."

"Thank God for that, then!" said the old man fervently. "It's a relief to hear you say so, sir. I'll sleep the sounder for it."

"All right," said Jimmie Dale, "away with you, then! And, Jason——"

"Yes, sir?"

Jimmie Dale's hand had found the old man's shoulder again.

"Thank you for what you said. Good-night, Jason."

"God bless you, Master Jim, sir, good-night," the old man answered.

CHAPTER II

THE ONLY WAY

Jimmie Dale mounted the stairs, opened a door on the first landing, switched on the lights and closed the door behind him. Outwardly calm, his brain was seething. Almost down to the most minute details, to-night was becoming more and more the counterpart of that "other night." It was here in his "den" even that he had then read the Tocsin's sudden call to arms which had again set the Gray Seal to work. Everything was the same—except, of course, that the old Crime Club was no more; and that, instead of the Tocsin being a mystery to him any longer, he and Marie were to be married next month after her return from Europe where she now was.

He was quick, decisive now in his movements as he crossed the room and dropped into a chair before the flat-topped rosewood desk; but his brain outraced his physical actions. In Europe? In Paris? The texture of this envelope! Impossible! She couldn't have got this envelope there. There was no mistake about the texture. There was only one place where she could have got it, and that was where she had procured the same kind of envelopes and paper in the years gone by when she was living under cover in the underworld—somewhere here in New York. She was *here* then, and almost certainly in hiding—and in danger. Danger! It seemed as though the clutch of icy fingers was suddenly upon his heart.

Tight-lipped, his dark eyes narrowed, Jimmie Dale tore open the envelope, and, extracting a letter in the Tocsin's handwriting, began to read:

Dear philanthropic crook:

It seems incredible that I should write those three words. I never thought I should call you that again except in just the same dear intimate way that you still so often call me the Tocsin. But to-night it is in the old way, with all its old meaning, that those words are written, and I am afraid I am going to shock and alarm you with a statement that will seem almost unbelievable. *Ray Thorne's life is in grave danger.*

The story, even what little I know of it, is too long to tell you here, and I would hardly know where to begin anyway. But, at least, and before I say anything further about Ray, I must not let the receipt of one of these old-time letters bring added anxiety to you because of me.

I am supposed by my friends in Paris to have changed my plans slightly and to have gone to England earlier than I had arranged. They believe I am there now, and that I will sail for home as I originally intended on Saturday. I am, however, as I am sure you have already surmised, in New York at the present moment. But not as Marie LaSalle, for—but, oh, if I start to explain, I shall never end, and you would be little the wiser, for I myself do not know just what it all means, except that there is some miserable and cowardly criminal work afoot, the scene of which has recently shifted from Paris to New York. I know just enough to make me feel absolutely confident that in three or four days—and Jimmie, you must not shake your head and frown so, for I am not going to be in the slightest danger—that in three or four days I will be able to verify certain suspicions which will enable me to supply the police with enough information to put an end to the whole affair. By the time the ship on which I am supposed to be sailing arrives, everything will be all over, you can meet me at the pier as though I really *had* just arrived, and no one will ever know the difference.

But meanwhile, as I have said, I could not act as Marie LaSalle, for, besides the necessity of remaining unknown for my own sake, I dared not, as the fiancée of Ray Thorne's closest friend, risk the remotest chance of Marie LaSalle being suspected of knowing anything, for then you too would naturally be suspected as well, and would be in equal peril.

I know you do not understand. How could you? I understand so little myself! But when you meet me at the pier next week I will be able to tell you everything.

And now, Jimmie, I come to to-night. Enclosed in a letter, Ray received a plain, blue envelope to-day, and at the present moment that blue envelope is in his safe at his home. I do not know what the envelope contains. I do not know how Ray ever came to be involved in this affair or what his connection with it is, but I do know that so long as he is in possession of the blue envelope he is in constant danger of his life. He would not give it up of his own accord—therefore it must be *stolen* from him. But it must be stolen in such a way that the theft not only becomes quickly and widely known, but, above all, in such a way that there could be no question that it was anything other than a *bona-fide* theft; so that, in other words, it will be instantly apparent, even to those concerned in the affair, that Ray has not so much as a suspicion of the "thief's" identity, and hence is obviously ignorant of what has become of the blue envelope itself. In that way he is safe. Otherwise it might be construed as a theft engineered by himself, a trick on Ray's own part—and that would only hasten his death. And there is only one way to accomplish this end, isn't there, Jimmie? You understand what I mean. I know that this will create a furor; I know what the result will be; I know that every newspaper in New York will flare with vicious headlines—but it is that very furor which will stamp the theft as genuine, and it is

the only way I know to save Ray. You will do it, of course; I am sure that long before you have read this far your mind has already been made up—but you must act at once, to-night, Jimmie. And when you have secured the blue envelope, oh, be very sure, be very careful that it does not under any circumstances pass out of your hands until you have heard from me.

That is everything, Jimmie—except all, *all* my love.

THE TOCSIN.

P. S. Oh, I want to see you so much, Jimmie—and I will in a few days now. And then, just think of it, Jimmie, our wedding is next month! M.

Jimmie Dale read the letter over again; then, rising from his chair, began to pace up and down the length of that rather unique but luxuriously furnished den of his, which, with its matched panels, its cozy fireplace, its queer little curtained alcove, ran the entire depth of the house. His footsteps made no sound on the rich velvet rug, and, as he walked, the old habit mechanically asserting itself, he began to tear the letter into fragments, and the fragments into smaller pieces.

Confusion, perplexity, and anxiety were in his mind; the past, the years that were gone, came crowding upon him with their myriad memories. The Call to Arms again! Another "crime" for the Gray Seal to commit! Crime! Not one in the decalogue but was already charged to the Gray Seal. Crime! Where there had been no crime! And he had thought those days were over forever. But that was what she meant by "the only way." She was right, of course. No one would ever for an instant imagine that it was anything but a *bona-fide* theft if the Gray Seal committed it. Ray's life! Ray—who was to be his best man! She never wrote idle words. Obviously he would go.

He paced up and down, tearing the paper into bits.

That old slogan of police and underworld alike was suddenly ringing in his ears once more to-night: "Death to the Gray Seal!" He could already see to-morrow's papers—the virulent diatribes, the

hectic denunciations. Anathema! He could hear the blasphemous whispers of the underworld. He could see the furtive looks, the glances cast askance at one another by those who lived outside the law and preyed upon society. Who was the Gray Seal? Larry the Bat! Yes, they knew that—but they had never been able to find Larry the Bat since the day when the old Sanctuary had burned down, and when like ravening wolves they had watched the fire and howled for the Gray Seal's death. Under what other guise had Larry the Bat hidden himself? Who was the traitor amongst them? Whose turn would it be next to make, through the instrumentality of the Gray Seal, a trip to the Big House—and perhaps to the chair?

Fury on the part of the police and populace—fear-goaded fury on the part of the underworld!

The past was back again—to be lived again, to be reenacted. If he were ever caught! A murderous roar of voices hoarse with blood lust was in his ears. Headlines blazed before his eyes:

CRIME MONSTER CAUGHT AT LAST

MILLIONAIRE CLUBMAN
LEADS DOUBLE LIFE

JIMMIE DALE UNMASKED AS THE
GRAY SEAL

He passed his hand across his eyes. This sudden resurrection of the buried past, this change in the twinkling of an eye from the security of years to the ever-present menace of exposure again had left him a little jumpy, hadn't it? Well, why shouldn't it? He was no superman.

What time was it? He glanced at his watch. Not quite midnight. Too early yet to go to Ray's. Jason would hardly have got to bed; and Ray's household would not likely have settled down for the night.

Halting abruptly he placed the shreds of paper in the fireplace, touched a match to them, and watched them burn—and was immediately conscious that this, too, was precisely what he had done on that "other night." He forced a short laugh. It *was* a bit eerie—and almost as though it actually *were* that "other night." And presently

there would be other little things he already knew he was going to do which would strengthen that illusion. Well, did it make any difference? Let it carry through that way. If there was any significance attached to these constant little reminders, it was at least one of good omen. On that "other night" there had been two fellow humans who had been the happier for the Gray Seal's call to arms, and to-night—there was Ray!

He flung himself into a chair and lighted a cigarette. How had Marie become mixed up in the affair, the aspects of which, to say the least, were obviously sinister in the extreme? He did not know, of course—nor could he even guess. He could, on the other hand, perfectly understand that she would act exactly as she had done, for it was the way that, as "Silver Mag" and "Mother Margot," she had acted in the years gone by—but that only served to put a still more serious complexion on the whole matter. She was living under cover, playing some rôle, her identity hidden; and, in spite of her light words and the statement that it was merely a question of a few days, she certainly would not have gone to any such extreme had she not realized that every move she made would involve great danger. And, too, she was trying to protect *him*, Jimmie Dale—as she had so often done in the past. She had admitted that in her letter.

Jimmie Dale's lips firmed. Anxiety was growing upon him. Her danger was so great that she would not share it with him! Bluntly, that was what it meant.

He sank his chin in his hands. His mind went back over the years. Her love, her courage, her marvelous resourcefulness, her steadfastness, her sacrifice. And then, with the Crime Club destroyed and her normal life restored to her, they were to have been married—but the war had intervened. They had both gone. That had been like her. That was just what she would do, and nothing would have deterred her. She could not have been herself and have done anything else. She had gone as a nurse. Wisely or unwisely, selfishly or unselfishly, they had both agreed to postpone their marriage until after the war was over.

He wished now with all his soul they had not done so, for then she would not have made this recent trip alone to Paris to visit some of her wartime friends, and incidentally, womanlike, to buy her trousseau. He shook his head suddenly. He did not quite mean that, did he? She would in those circumstances never have been in a position to write that letter, which obviously had its genesis in something that had happened in Paris—and if she had not written it, what then of Ray? She would never have known that Ray's life was threatened, and the result would probably have been Ray's death.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes traveled unseeingly around the room. Fate indulged in strange vagaries, didn't it? And Ray! The same question in respect of Ray that he could neither answer nor guess at! How had Ray become involved in any such affair as this? She had said she did not know—and he, Jimmie Dale, certainly had no clue to the key of it.

He had come to know Ray in the war, and they had grown close to each other—as those men do who have linked arms together with death, not once but often; as men do when one, sore wounded himself, has crawled, dragging the other, worse wounded still, over bullet-sprayed terrain—to safety and life. One man's love for another—that was what Ray meant to him.

And yet he did not *know* Ray. There were things in Ray's life that Ray had, as it were, sidetracked, that were locked up within the man himself—a sort of closed book. He, Jimmie Dale, had sensed that; and, naturally, had never attempted to intrude or question where confidences were not volunteered. He knew that from childhood Ray had traveled far and wide, and had lived long in strange, out-of-the-way places. He knew practically nothing of Ray's family, except that Ray had a brother living in Sydney, Australia. He did know that Ray was a bachelor, and obviously a man of independent means.

More or less unsatisfactory in view of that letter! It left the field of supposition wide open. It was not at all improbable that out of Ray's wandering past had been laid the foundation of this present murderous attitude toward him. Not that Ray was in any way culpable—he would not believe that. Ray was too clean, too much the man, too much the straightforward, open-minded gentleman for that.

To dispossess Ray of that blue envelope! And merely by so doing to render Ray immune from all personal danger! That in itself was queer—very queer indeed. It invited so many questions. Who had brought or sent Ray that envelope? Through what single act, or through what chain of circumstances, had Ray become the necessary or logical recipient of it, and yet at the same time would have no further connection with it from the standpoint of the past if it were taken away from him?—and this in spite of the fact that the envelope contained something of so much value to someone that murder would unhesitatingly be resorted to, if necessary, to obtain it! The pieces did not fit! What did it mean?

Jimmie Dale sat almost immovable in his chair, lost to his surroundings, his mind groping and probing for some explanation of this cataclysmic situation that was now, suddenly and without warning, thrusting upon him the old dual life again. The quarters and the half-hours passed. When he looked at his watch again, it was after one o'clock. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically. His mental delvings had got him nowhere. But, after all, for the moment, that was not essential. He had been asked to do only one thing.

It was time to go.

CHAPTER III

THE BREAK

He rose from his chair, crossed the room, and, drawing aside the portière that hung before the alcove, disclosed the squat, barrel-shaped safe that he had designed himself in the days when he had been associated in business with his father—who had owned and operated one of the largest safe manufacturing plants in the United States until just prior to his death, when he had sold out to a combine. His fingers played for a moment deftly over the several knobs and dials that confronted him—and the door swung open. An inner door, no less complicated in its mechanism, followed suit. And then, from a secret compartment within, Jimmie Dale took out what looked like a little bundle of leather that was rolled up and tied with thongs; then he closed and locked the doors of the safe, and carried the bundle over to the desk. Here he unrolled it, laying it out at full length—and stood for a moment regarding it while a grim smile gathered in his eyes and played around his lips. It was the belt with its stout-sewn upright pockets containing those blued-steel, finely tempered tools, that compact, powerful burglar's kit, which had stood him so often in good stead in the days gone by—and which, until scarcely more than an hour ago, he had never dreamed he would use again.

He began to examine the tools critically, taking them one by one from their respective pockets, and, as he replaced them, nodded his head in approval of the condition in which he found them. There remained two pockets still uninspected. From one he took out a black silk mask, and from the other a thin, flat metal case much like a cigarette case. The mask after inspection went back into its pocket, and then he opened the metal case. On the top reposed a tiny pair of tweezers; and beneath, between sheets of oil-paper, lay row upon row of gray, diamond-shaped, adhesive-paper seals.

And now a minute passed, and still another, as Jimmie Dale stood there with the metal case still open in his hand while he stared at the little gray seals within—and the years seemed suddenly to come rushing back upon him out of the past. It had been in the spirit of fun and adventure that he had originally pitted his brains against the police, but in order that no one else by mischance should suffer or be accused of the apparent "crimes" he committed, he had adopted these gray paper seals as his insignia—and had thus launched the Gray Seal on his career. And he had gone unknown and unsuspected until that night when, having opened a safe in a jewelry establishment in Maiden Lane, he had just barely managed to make his escape from the police—and the next morning had received a letter in a woman's handwriting informing him that *she* knew who had opened Marx's safe even if the police did not. The letter had taken the form of an ultimatum. He could choose between her and the police. Thereafter she would plan the coups and the Gray Seal would execute them, or else Jimmie Dale would be exposed. He was to answer "yes" or "no" through the personal column of the *News-Argus*. He had had no choice. He had answered "yes"—but with the mental reservation that he would always in some way speciously manage to render abortive, rather than perpetrate, any crime in which she endeavored to make him an accomplice. How little he had known! How little need there had been for any mental reservation of that sort! There was many a man and many a woman to-day who was the happier because of the "crimes" that she, as the Tocsin, or Silver Mag, or Mother Margot, and he, as the Gray Seal, or Larry the Bat, or Smarlinghue,[2] had committed—and no man or woman who had suffered save those who had outraged the law and had richly merited their punishment.

And he had thought those days over forever!

He closed the metal case abruptly, returned it to its pocket, and, taking off his coat and vest, put on the belt, making use of the thongs as shoulder straps. Then he got into his coat and vest again; but now his eyes were suddenly wistful. Where was the Tocsin to-night? Here

in New York—yes! But where? *Was* she safe? Was this really to be like those other days, or would to-night, if he were successful in the task she had set him, bring the end in sight as she believed?

Who knew? Jimmie Dale shook his head. Speculation would get him nowhere. It was a question of action now. From a drawer in his desk he transferred to his pockets a flashlight and an automatic; then, switching off the light, he left the room, descended the stairs—and the front door closed noiselessly behind him.

At that hour in the morning the streets in his neighborhood were empty and deserted. Jimmie Dale walked swiftly, and some fifteen minutes later, no more than a blotch in the darkness, he was crouched beneath the stoop at the basement entrance of Ray Thorne's home.

And now the Gray Seal was at work. From a pocket in the belt around his waist he took out and slipped over his face his black silk mask; while from another pocket came a delicate little steel instrument which he inserted in the doorlock.

But for once the Gray Seal's deft sureness seemed to have deserted him. A minute passed, perhaps two—fruitlessly.

"I am afraid I am a little out of practice," explained Jimmie Dale to himself whimsically, "and—ah, that's better!"

The door opened and shut behind him—without a sound. For a moment he stood listening; and then, with that tread of almost uncanny silence acquired through long practice as a defense against the rickety stairs of the old Sanctuary, he stepped swiftly forward. It was inky black, but he had no need of light, and his flashlight for the moment was an unnecessary risk. He knew Ray Thorne's home almost as well as he knew his own. He moved unerringly.

The safe was in a small room on the first floor off the living room that Ray called his sanctum. Jimmie Dale made his way through the silent house to the room he sought, and dropped upon his knees in front of the safe.

And then for the first time the round, white ray of his flashlight cut through the darkness, playing long and inquisitively on the polished nickel dial that glistened responsively now in front of him.

And under the mask Jimmie Dale's brows grew wrinkled.

He had never paid any particular attention to Ray's safe before; but having designed and built so many himself, Jimmie Dale knew safes as few men knew them, and what he saw now he did not like. It would take all he knew, take all that was in him, to open this one; and besides, as he had said a few minutes ago, he was out of practice.

"But anyway," he muttered optimistically, "it's a type that hasn't got an inner door."

The light went out.

Jimmie Dale's ear was pressed against the face of the safe; the slim sensitive fingers, that in their tips seemed to embody all the human senses, crept to the dial knob.

A long time passed with no sound at first save a faint musical tinkle as the dial whirled. And then there came another sound—the sound of labored breathing, of a man panting almost, as though in distress.

Beneath the mask the sweat was pouring now down Jimmie Dale's face. Again and again he frictioned his moist finger tips on the rug upon which he knelt; again and again he returned to the attack, giving, as he had known he would have to give, all that was in him to the task.

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale whispered out into the darkness.

"Thank God!" he breathed fervently.

The safe stood open.

The flashlight's ray bored into the interior. The safe contained what appeared to be a number of account books, and an innumerable number of documents and papers. He began to remove these from the safe and toss them quite callously on the floor around him. Why not? A thief would have little regard for another's property, and less for what did not interest the thief himself!

Jimmie Dale's lips twitched in grim humor. The blue envelope was all the time in that little locked drawer, of course. But one must do one's job as artistically as one could!

A blued-steel instrument was at work. A ratchet gnawed. The drawer came open—and the blue envelope lay in Jimmie Dale's hand. He examined it curiously under the flashlight's ray. It was just slightly larger than the ordinary size of commercial envelope; and was so far from being bulky that one might almost imagine that it contained nothing at all. It was sealed and bore neither address nor mark of any kind upon it.

With a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders Jimmie Dale placed the envelope in his inside coat pocket, and from his belt took out the thin metal case. Propping the flashlight against the edge of the safe, he opened the case, and with the tweezers lifted out one of the diamond-shaped gray paper seals. He moistened the adhesive side of this with his tongue, took his handkerchief from his pocket, placed the gray seal upon it—and pressed it against the face of the safe. Headquarters had yet to discover the trace of a fingerprint on the insignia of the Gray Seal! Or anywhere else for that matter!

He wiped the dial and knob of the safe carefully with his handkerchief, picked up the flashlight, stood for a moment surveying his handiwork critically—then the room was in darkness, and, as silently as he had entered, Jimmie Dale left the house.

As he reëntered his own house, he consulted his watch. It was twenty minutes after two. He smiled a little cryptically as he mounted the staircase, entered his den, and, divesting himself of his belt, rolled it up and locked it away with the blue envelope in his safe. This new début of the Gray Seal had been without any misadventure and had taken approximately only an hour and twenty minutes—but what of the afterwards? The repercussion was still to come! To-morrow's papers!

He crossed the hall, entered his dressing room, began to remove his clothes—and suddenly, as his eyes lighted on the telephone on the table, a sense of the analogy between this night and that "other night" which had once in the long ago witnessed the reappearance of the Gray Seal intruded itself forcibly again upon him. So far, in detail after detail, to-night had run true to form. All that was needed to put the

finishing touch upon it was to have Carruthers call up at some such ungodly hour as this and bombshell his news about the Gray Seal's return!

Jimmie Dale shook his head as he got into bed. Even to contemplate such a possibility was to verge on the fantastic! He certainly need have no fear that his slumbers would be disturbed, for on this occasion he had had no run-in with the police to bring the consequent inevitable newspaper man immediately on the job; so, until Ray's household awoke in the morning, nothing obviously would be known about the "break."

For a time Jimmie Dale lay staring into the darkness, his mind too active to permit of sleep—anxiety on the Tocsin's account, this unexplained connection of Ray with the affair, and the intriguing nature of the blue envelope itself, all conspired to keep him wakeful. But finally he drowsed off into restless slumber.

He was awakened by the ringing of a bell near at hand. He sat bolt upright in bed and for a moment listened incredulously. It *was* the telephone!

"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale heavily.

He got out of bed, switched on the light, and lifted the receiver from the hook.

Carruthers' voice came instantly and tensely over the wire:

"Hello! Hello! Jimmie, is that you?"

"Look here, Carruthers," complained Jimmie Dale, "if this is your idea of a brilliant joke, I must say it's not mine! It's a bit stiff to yank a chap out of bed at this hour with the perverted hope of getting a rise out of him, just because of what I said about an analogy at the club. I suppose you're going to tell me, as you did once before, that the Gray Seal has come to life again!"

"Joke!" cried Carruthers wildly. "My God, Jimmie, he has just killed Ray Thorne."

CHAPTER IV

DRAWN BLINDS

White-faced, as rigid as a figure carved in stone, and as silent, Jimmie Dale stood there while the seconds passed. Mentally stunned, he was unconscious of his surroundings, unconscious that he was still holding the telephone receiver to his ear. Then slowly his brain began to emerge from torpor, and grief came—and then horror and fury swept in a surge upon him. Dead! Ray Thorne murdered—*by the Gray Seal*! There was something of abysmal mockery in that accusation which racked him to the soul. His best friend! The man he had tried to save—and, instead, had but furnished the murderer with an alias that practically defied detection!

A voice came to him as though from some outside world:

"Jimmie! Jimmie! Are you there?"

Of course! It was Carruthers calling frantically over the wire.

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale mechanically; and then, with a strange hush in his voice: "I've been taking the count, Carruthers. Now tell me about it."

"I'm speaking from Ray's house"—Carruthers' tones were jerky and shaken. "He was found on the floor of that little room he called his sanctum—shot through the heart. The safe was open, with a gray seal plastered on it, and the contents scattered all over the place—but you'd better come over here yourself. I'm a bit in pieces, Jimmie. I telephoned at once to Sergeant Waud of the Homicide Bureau, a friend of mine, and he's on his way now. He'll be here by the time you arrive. You won't be long, Jimmie?"

"Ten minutes," said Jimmie Dale tersely.

He hung up the receiver, and called Benson, his chauffeur of many years, on the house telephone. After a moment Benson answered him.

"Benson," he said, an ominous quiet in his voice now, "this is an emergency. Get into your clothes as quickly as you can. I want the light car without an instant's loss of time."

"Right, sir!"

Jimmie Dale dressed hurriedly. In less than five minutes he was standing on the sidewalk in front of his house. A minute later the car came out of the drive—and Benson was holding the door open.

"I hope nothing is very seriously wrong, and that I haven't kept you waiting, Mr. Dale," said Benson anxiously.

It was like Benson to say that. Benson was a second Jason, and in spite of the mental strain under which he, Jimmie Dale, was laboring, the thought of how rich he was in the service of these two men flashed through his mind.

"Yes, Benson," he said in a low voice as he stepped into the car, "something *is* very seriously wrong. Mr. Thorne has been murdered in his home. Drive there as fast as you can."

Benson, in the act of closing the door, drew back with a startled cry.

"Murdered, sir? Mr. Thorne!" He was stumbling out his words. "How, sir? When?"

"I have no details," replied Jimmie Dale, "except that Mr. Carruthers said it was the Gray Seal who committed the crime."

Benson closed the door—but red rage had flamed suddenly into his face.

"That swine! At work again! Damn him to the pit!" he burst out impulsively; then, hoarsely: "I beg your pardon, Mr. Dale, but I—I liked Mr. Thorne. He was a great gentleman."

Jimmie Dale made no answer. Benson expected none. The car leaped forward from the curb.

There was a wan smile on Jimmie Dale's lips as he leaned back in his seat. Benson had but voiced the popular sentiment. "That swine!" The words repeated themselves. They were ugly words. "That swine!" Suppose Benson ever came to *know*? What would even Benson, despite his years of loyalty, do?

Jimmie Dale brushed his hand across his eyes. His brain seemed fogged to-night, his thoughts running off at tangents. "That swine!" There was ample justification in the public mind for the superlative in opprobrious epithets. In the years gone by, to save the innocent, he had deliberately made it appear that the Gray Seal had been guilty of crimes without number—even the crime of murder. And, save for the warning they conveyed, he had accepted in a sort of grim complacence the invectives hurled against him. But to-night it was different. To-night those words of Benson were like rapier thrusts. To-night there was cruel and bitter irony in it all. To-night Ray Thorne was dead. And by morning the world would proclaim the Gray Seal the murderer!

His hands clenched. He looked out of the window. Benson was covering the few blocks that separated the two houses at a pace that ignored all speed laws. They were nearly there.

Jimmie Dale's lips moved silently.

"If I live," he said under his breath, "I'll get the man or men who did this! I promise you that, Ray! And I promise myself that, for once, the Gray Seal shall be proven innocent!"

Benson drew up to the curb, and, as Jimmie Dale stepped out, he saw, though the blinds were drawn, that the windows were everywhere alight, and that there were already a number of cars standing in front of the house, amongst them one that he recognized as belonging to Carruthers. He nodded his head in understanding. There had been smart work here. He knew fairly well the routine that had been followed. Carruthers had said nothing about notifying anyone except his friend at the Homicide Bureau, but someone must have notified Carruthers himself prior to that, and it was a fair presumption, since it would be the most natural and obvious thing to do, that Carruthers' informant would have sent in the first alarm to police headquarters. That, at any rate, would account for the several cars that were gathered here. Police headquarters would have at once communicated with the precinct station, who would have flashed the signal-box light to the patrolman on post and would also have sent over one or two uniformed men, at the same time notifying the

district detective headquarters, who likewise would have sent men. And meanwhile, quite irrespective of anything Carruthers might have done, police headquarters would have notified the Homicide Bureau. There would be quite a few men inside there—with probably a uniformed man at the door, and, certainly, in accordance with the regulations, a uniformed man would be on guard over the body until it had been viewed by the medical examiner. And that little group of men there by the steps were probably police headquarters reporters, who, for some reason or other, had not yet been admitted to the house.

Something rose suddenly choking hot in Jimmie Dale's throat. All this machinery was in motion because it was, not the murder of some previously unheard-of person of whom one read daily and without personal interest in the papers, but because it was Ray. Ray was in there—dead. He turned abruptly to Benson.

"Wait for me, Benson," he directed tersely—and, crossing the sidewalk, mounted the steps.

As he had expected, the door was opened by a policeman, who barred the way—but Carruthers' voice came almost instantly from the lighted hall within.

"That's all right, officer," he said. "This is Mr. Dale. Detective Sergeant Waud is expecting him."

The man stood aside, and Jimmie Dale, stepping forward, clasped Carruthers' outstretched hand in a long, hard grip, as, with set faces, they stared into each other's eyes.

It was Carruthers who broke the pregnant silence.

"Jimmie, I"—his voice broke a little—"I can't believe it yet. It—it's fierce!"

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale hoarsely; then quietly: "I'd like to see him."

"He's lying just where he was," Carruthers answered. "The medical examiner hasn't come yet, and nothing has been disturbed. Sergeant Waud brought a photographer along from headquarters and they're going to take some photographs, but I think we can go in first. I'll

introduce you to Waud. I don't know any of the others—and there must be four or five of them, some from district detective headquarters. They're combing the house now."

They stepped from the hall into the living room, and instinctively Jimmie Dale's first glance went to the open doorway at the far end of the room that led into Ray Thorne's "sanctum"; then his eyes traveled around the living room and rested on the figure of a man, the sole occupant of the room for the moment apart from Carruthers and himself, who was slumped down in a dejected attitude in a chair, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. He recognized Beaton, Thorne's valet. The man made no attempt to rise, nor did he even lift his head. Also, added to this rather strange behavior, Jimmie Dale noted that the man presented a decidedly bedraggled appearance.

Jimmie Dale looked inquiringly at Carruthers.

Carruthers shook his head.

"I don't know," he said in an undertone, "except that he has been drinking heavily. There's something queer about it. It was Beaton who found Ray and telephoned the police and me. Waud's going to question the household presently. The maids have been told to stay in their rooms until they are wanted. There's Waud now—standing in the doorway of the 'sanctum.' Come along."

Jimmie Dale, as Carruthers introduced him to the Homicide Bureau man, found himself looking into a pair of steel-gray eyes and a face that was dominated by an almost abnormally square chin and aggressive jaw.

"Sorry to meet you under these circumstances, Mr. Dale," Sergeant Waud said brusquely. "I understand from Mr. Carruthers that you and he were Mr. Thorne's closest friends."

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale simply. "May I go in?"

"Sure! Go ahead," Sergeant Waud nodded; "but I'll want to talk to you and Mr. Carruthers as well as everybody else here presently. As far as is known, you and Mr. Carruthers were the last ones to see him alive."

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I'm afraid that won't help much," he said. "That was fairly early last evening at the St. James Club."

"There's more than that to it," replied Sergeant Waud crisply. "You know who pulled this job, don't you?"

"Carruthers told me over the phone that it was the Gray Seal."

"Yes! We thought we were through with that God..."—Detective Sergeant Waud burst into fervent profanity—"forever. Hell will crack loose for this, and if we don't get him this time there'll be some heads falling—and mine'll probably be one of them. But I'm hoping that you and Mr. Carruthers, being so intimate with the murdered man, may be able to hand us a line on something that will give us a lead." He smiled grimly. "We know who killed Thorne; and the only little question we have to answer is the question we've been asking for years: *Who* is the Gray Seal?"

Again Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't help you there, either," he said.

Sergeant Waud shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll see," he grunted—and motioned Jimmie Dale through the doorway.

"I'll wait for you here with the sergeant, Jimmie," said Carruthers huskily. "I—I've been in, you know."

Without answer, Jimmie Dale stepped over the threshold—and stood still. Across the room near a second door that led into the hall, a crumpled form lay upon the floor. Ray! A minute passed, and another—and then, wet-eyed, Jimmie Dale looked around the room. The photographer was setting up his camera, a uniformed man leaned against the wall, while strewn all over the floor, as he, Jimmie Dale, had strewn them, were the littered contents of the safe—and on the face of the safe itself that diamond-shaped, gray paper seal. He stared at this as though he had never seen it in his life before. For the first time in all the years since he had adopted the gray seal as his insignia it assumed a malignant and inimical aspect. There was something almost diabolical about it now. It jeered at him and mocked him. Not a muscle of his face moved, and yet upon him swept torrentially again

that surge of mingled emotions which finally resolved themselves into one of bitterest fury. It had been bad enough before when Carruthers had telephoned; it was immeasurably worse now in the presence of his murdered friend with that thing on the safe flaunting him in the face. Ray lay here dead on the floor just a few feet away from him, shot down in cold blood—and he, Jimmie Dale, had thrown an impenetrable cloak over the murderer's shoulders!

The police photographer, without pausing in his preparations, volunteered a remark.

"It's the genuine goods, all right!" he stated. "It ain't the first time I've seen it. I've photographed it before, too—the night he bumped off Slimmy Jack at Malay John's; only that time he stuck his damned advertisement on the dead man's sleeve. Some guy! But, sure as God, the hot seat's waiting for him sooner or later up at the Big House!"

Jimmie Dale made no comment other than to nod mechanically. Then he turned abruptly, and, crossing the room, dropped down on his knees beside the still form on the floor—causing the uniformed man to make a hurried forward movement.

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I know," he said quietly.

His eyes were dry and hard now. Minutely, critically, they searched over the body of his pajama-clad friend, noting its position, imprinting on his mind and memory the details of the scene around him. And then for the second time that night his lips moved silently, and he spoke below his breath.

"I promise, Ray," he said.

He rose to his feet, and turned away.

It was another Jimmie Dale now, a man implacable, the keen, virile brain awake and on the alert. A clue to the actual murderer? Yes, if he could find one in what was transpiring here; but there was also *danger*! There was the *bona-fide* Gray Seal to think of, too!

CHAPTER V

DETECTIVE SERGEANT WAUD

As Jimmie Dale reëntered the living room, he saw that Beaton had lifted a drawn face and was listening intently to the conversation that was taking place between the little knot of men near him, consisting of Carruthers, Sergeant Waud, and another plainclothesman. It was the latter who was speaking as Jimmie Dale joined the group:

"Sure! That's the way he got in—the front basement window under the stoop. Jimmied it. That let him into a sort of storeroom. So far there's nothing to show that he went anywhere else except right to the safe—but the boys are still digging around. Thorne was either lying awake or else he was wakened by some noise the maids didn't hear—though, of course, they were on the floor above him. Anyway he was in bed, for, besides being found in pajamas, the bedclothes are flung back as though he had jumped up in a hurry. Then he came downstairs—and got plugged. But what gets me is why, if he was alarmed about anything, he didn't take his service revolver with him. We found one loaded in the drawer of his highboy up there."

Jimmie Dale's brows were suddenly knotted as the recollection of a wartime incident flashed upon him. It might, or might not, be worth investigation; but, certainly, it could in no wise put the Gray Seal in jeopardy—and furthermost from his desires and intentions was the thought of keeping anything from the police that he could possibly avoid.

"Look here," he said quickly, "I hope you won't mind my interrupting, but there is something in connection with what has just been said that I think perhaps I should mention. I was at the front with Mr. Thorne, you know, and I remember that one night we found him walking around our billet—in his sleep."

"The hell you say!" ejaculated Sergeant Waud sharply.

"I am not suggesting that this is what has happened here," Jimmie Dale hastened to add, "for it would seem almost too fortuitous that he should be sleep-walking at exactly the psychological moment when the robbery was being committed; but it would at least explain why the maids heard nothing, as I understand from what this officer said was the case, and why Mr. Thorne not only came downstairs, but came down unarmed."

Sergeant Waud swung abruptly around toward the valet in the chair.

"You, Beaton," he demanded curtly, "since you have been with Mr. Thorne, have you ever known him to walk in his sleep?"

Beaton dragged his hand heavily across his eyes.

"No, sir," he answered; "I haven't."

"H'm!" grunted Sergeant Waud; then to the detective beside him: "All right, Donnelly, bring the maids downstairs and put them in a room on the other side of the hall there. I'll be ready to talk to them in a few minutes. Is there anyone else connected with the household?"

"No," replied the other. "Just this man here and the two women. They're mother and daughter—the mother's the cook, and the daughter's the housemaid."

Sergeant Waud jerked his head toward the door in dismissal, and, as the plainclothesman left the room, waved Carruthers and Jimmie Dale to chairs.

"You might as well sit down, gentlemen," he said. "I've got a few questions to ask you all, and I'll begin with you, Mr. Dale. When and where did you last see Mr. Thorne alive?"

"Last night at the St. James Club," said Jimmie Dale, as he seated himself. "Mr. Carruthers, Mr. Thorne, and I spent the evening there together until about eleven; then Mr. Carruthers and Mr. Thorne left the club together, and I stayed on for a few minutes to write a letter. Then I went home. The first I knew of anything having happened to Mr. Thorne was when Mr. Carruthers' telephone call woke me up."

"What time was that?"

Jimmie Dale took out his watch.

"I couldn't say exactly," he said. "Naturally, being in pajamas and having just got out of bed, I didn't have my watch; but I think we can check up with fair accuracy. I don't believe I was more than ten minutes dressing and getting here. I suppose I have been here fifteen minutes. That makes twenty-five. It is nearly half-past four now. I should say it was just around four o'clock when Mr. Carruthers telephoned me."

"Perhaps Mr. Carruthers can place the hour exactly?" suggested Sergeant Waud.

Carruthers shook his head.

"I'm sorry, if it's important," he said, "but, like Mr. Dale, I didn't look at my watch. I agree with him, though, that it must have been just about four o'clock; however, the police ought to be able to confirm that, as I telephoned from here in their presence."

"So that, allowing you time to get over here, it was some fifteen or twenty minutes after you telephoned me before you telephoned Mr. Dale?"

"Yes; I should say so," Carruthers agreed.

Sergeant Waud studied the toe of his boot attentively for an instant.

"Well, no matter," he said finally. "Now, last evening, Mr. Dale, did you notice anything out of the ordinary in Mr. Thorne's behavior? Did he seem to be worried or to be laboring under any excitement?"

"On the contrary," Jimmie Dale declared emphatically. "I had never seen him in better spirits."

"Quite!" chimed in Carruthers.

Sergeant Waud nodded fretfully.

"I see!" he said. "Well, apart from just exactly *what* this Gray Seal killer was after in that safe, is there anything you know about Thorne's family and private life that would help any? What did you know about him in an intimate way?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid, in the sense you mean," said Jimmie Dale frankly. "He rarely, if ever, talked about himself. I know that he had traveled a great deal and had lived in all sorts of queer spots. I would describe him as a man of a distinctly adventurous spirit. As a

matter of fact, travel off the beaten track and in out-of-the-way places was his hobby. He was not in business. He had independent means—inherited, I always understood. So far as I am aware, his only relative is a brother, John, living in Sydney, Australia. That's about all I know, and I doubt if Mr. Carruthers can add anything to it."

"No," said Carruthers; "that covers everything I know, too."

"All right!" Sergeant Waud frowned. "Now, your story, Mr. Carruthers."

"I left Mr. Thorne at the door of the club," stated Carruthers. "It was then, as Mr. Dale has said, about eleven o'clock. Mr. Thorne took a taxi, and I heard him give the driver this address, so I presume he went directly home. I went down to the newspaper office. I got home about two and went to bed. The telephone woke me up. It was Beaton there who told me that Mr. Thorne had been murdered. Beaton said he had telephoned the police. I immediately telephoned you and then I came right over here. The police had already arrived. I telephoned Mr. Dale from here, as I have already said. That's all."

As Carruthers ended the terse recital of his movements, Jimmie Dale shifted his chair slightly. Unostentatiously, he had been watching Beaton, and now Sergeant Waud had stepped almost between them. The valet wasn't a pleasant sight. His hair was disheveled, and his bloodshot eyes kept searching about the room now like a hunted animal's; also the man's hands shook and his lips twitched perceptibly—probably as the result of his recent debauch. And now, as Sergeant Waud addressed him, he circled his lips feverishly with the tip of his tongue.

"You, now, Beaton!" said Sergeant Waud, all trace of smoothness gone suddenly from his voice. "I understand you've been painting the town."

"It was my night out," muttered Beaton sullenly.

"Yes!" agreed Sergeant Waud caustically. "It looks like it! Where'd you spend it?"

"In a night club. The White Caldron, if you want to know."

"Nice dump! Where else?"

"Nowhere else. I—I got soused there. I was pretty drunk—damned drunk, if you want the truth. I had to be brought home."

"Yeh?" Sergeant Waud's jaw shot out truculently. "Well, you don't seem so damned drunk now! For a jag like that, you've got over it quick! Some fast worker, ain't you?"

Beaton's hand went shakily through his hair.

"Maybe if you'd seen what I saw here, and come on it suddenly, you'd have sobered up too," he answered.

"Yeh?" inquired Sergeant Waud, with a chilly smile. "Well, we'll hear about that in a minute. Who brought you home?"

"Two of the girls in a taxi. They opened the door for me."

"Which door?"

"The basement door under the stoop. I don't use the front door."

"Right alongside the window that was jimmied!" Sergeant Waud was purring his words now. "But, of course, you were too drunk to notice it. And the two dames didn't, neither! Ain't that too bad!"

"It's the truth anyhow," declared Beaton, as his hand went through his hair again. "I don't know what you're driving at. You—you don't suspect me, do you?"

"You bet your life I do!" snapped Sergeant Waud. "I suspect every man in New York—except myself. I'm the only one I know that *ain't* this Gray Seal guy! So you didn't see anything wrong with the window?"

"No, I didn't," replied Beaton. "And what's more, if the window was jimmied, that lets me out. I had a key. What would I want to force the window for?"

Sergeant Waud's eyes narrowed and held on the man in the chair.

"Well, it wouldn't have been a bad idea, would it?" he asked softly.

Beaton came suddenly up from his chair, his face working, his fists clenched.

"Damn you!" he burst out hoarsely. "You're riding me good and hard, aren't you? You've all of you had it in for me ever since you got here. You and your bright-eyed detectives don't know where you're at! That's what's the matter. You're running around in circles like a lot of

puppy dogs chasing their tails. Only you've got to justify your jobs, eh? But I'm not going to be the goat just because I was full! I won't stand for——"

"Close your map!" Sergeant Waud took a step forward and pushed Beaton unceremoniously back into his chair. "You spill any more of that sort of stuff and I'll ride you plenty! You've got a lot of explaining yet to do, my bucko! Did those two dolls come into the house with you?"

Beaton was still defiant.

"No," he said sourly.

"What did they do?"

"They drove off in the taxi."

"All right. Now tell us what *you* did."

"I came upstairs, and"—Beaton nodded jerkily in the direction of the smaller room—"and found him in there, and——"

"Wait a minute!" interposed Sergeant Waud gruffly. "I want to get this straight. You mean that when you got up here the door of that room leading into the hall was open, the room was lighted, and you could see Mr. Thorne lying on the floor?"

"No; I don't!" exclaimed Beaton viciously. "What are you trying to put words into my mouth for? There wasn't any light, and I didn't see in. If there had been a light, I'd have thought Mr. Thorne was in there reading or something, and I would have steered clear so that he wouldn't see me in the condition I was in. I had enough of my senses left for that."

"So, then, when you got up on this floor everything was in darkness."

"Yes."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No."

"What made you think anything was wrong?"

"I didn't think anything was wrong."

"Perhaps you'll tell us, then"—Sergeant Waud's voice grew suddenly silky again—"why you went into that room?"

Beaton swallowed hard.

"I'm not proud of it," he said. "I wanted another drink. Mr. Thorne's got a liqueur stand in there as you've probably seen. That's why."

"I'm thinking of getting a valet myself, and I'd like to hire you," said Sergeant Waud evenly. "Go on! What happened then?"

"I went into the room, and"—Beaton was twisting his hands nervously together once more—"and I stumbled over something soft on the floor in the dark. I couldn't see, but, drunk as I was, the *feel* of it gave me a scare. I turned on the light, and the shock of what I saw drove the booze out of me. I was as weak as a kitten. I remember hanging onto the desk. I saw what you've seen. The room was just like it is now."

"What did you do then?" demanded Sergeant Waud.

"I telephoned police headquarters, then I telephoned Mr. Carruthers, and then I went upstairs and told Mrs. Caton and her daughter to get dressed, that Mr. Thorne had been killed."

"Any reason why you telephoned Mr. Carruthers rather than Mr. Dale?"

"Yes. I knew there'd be a lot of publicity, and, Mr. Carruthers being a newspaperman, I thought he'd know what ought to be done about it better than Mr. Dale would. I didn't call up Mr. Dale because I knew Mr. Carruthers would do that."

"How long was it after you turned on the light in that room before you telephoned headquarters?"

Beaton shook his head.

"I don't know. It might have been one minute or it might have been twenty for all I knew. I was hanging onto the desk there as I told you. It was like I'd been stunned. I couldn't think straight at first. I couldn't think at all."

"Got any idea what time all this happened?"

"Yes," said Beaton slowly, "I can answer that. At least, I know what time it was when I got here in the taxi."

"Oh, you do!" Sergeant Waud eyed the other in cold speculation. "Drunk and all, eh? And what time was that?"

"I don't like you!" snarled Beaton defiantly. "Yes, drunk and all, I know that, and that's the only reason I do know it. It was twenty-five minutes of four."

"Tell us how?" invited Sergeant Waud icily.

"Oh, all right," said Beaton, after an instant's morose silence. "When the taxi stopped in front of the door, I was fumbling around in my pockets to give the girls some money to pay for the taxi after it had taken them home. I was so drunk that every time I'd coughed up at the night club I'd been putting whatever cash I got back all over the lot. I found some bills crammed into my watch pocket. When I pulled them out, the watch came with them and dangled down on the end of my chain. One of the girls lifted it up to put it back in my pocket, and I asked her what time it was. She took her cigarette lighter so as to see. She said it was twenty-five minutes to four."

Sergeant Waud turned abruptly to one of two other plainclothesmen who had entered the room a few minutes previously.

"Logan," he said curtly, "ring up police headquarters and find out what time Beaton's call came in."

The man nodded and left the room.

Sergeant Waud turned to Beaton again.

"Now let's see," he said almost suavely. "How long have you been in Mr. Thorne's employ?"

"Nearly a year."

"You were pretty well acquainted with his habits, then?"

"I suppose so."

"Sure! Well, now, about that safe? You've seen him open it a good many times, haven't you?"

"Yes. Often."

"Was it his habit to keep, say, a large sum of money there?"

"No, it wasn't," said Beaton decisively. "I'm sure he didn't, because I know he never kept much money about him at any time. And the reason I know that is because he used to draw checks in small amounts quite frequently and send me to the bank to cash them."

"Anything else, then, of particular value, that he kept there?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, *somebody* was after *something*. Ever hear Mr. Thorne say anything that would give you an idea as to what it might be?"

"No."

"That's too bad! It's going to be pretty hard to check up what's missing," mused Sergeant Waud regretfully; then blandly: "How long were you with Mr. Thorne, Beaton, before he trusted you with the combination?"

Beaton smiled pityingly.

"Try next door," he suggested. "You draw a blank!"

"Oh, that's all right," returned Sergeant Waud composedly. "Bound to miss sometimes, you know. The safe was opened on the combination, but the key of that little drawer evidently wasn't handy. Do you know where Mr. Thorne kept the key?"

"I can't say—unless it was on his key chain."

"And, of course, Mr. Thorne couldn't be asked for it in the dead of night," observed Sergeant Waud pleasantly. "I'd very much like to know what was in that drawer. You said you've often seen the safe open, but have you ever seen inside that drawer? Did Mr. Thorne ever open it in your presence?"

Outwardly unmoved, inwardly Jimmie Dale smiled grimly as Beaton sat for a moment in silence with his brows pulled together. He, Jimmie Dale, couldn't volunteer the information, could he, that there had been a certain blue envelope in the drawer, which envelope at the present moment was reposing in *his* safe?

"*Well*?" Sergeant Waud's voice sharpened, the single word was brittle and imperative.

"Damn it!" exploded Beaton. "Cut it out, can't you? I'm doing my best to answer you. I was trying to think. I certainly never saw inside that drawer, and I'm positive now that Mr. Thorne never opened it when I was around."

"Keep your temper," growled Sergeant Waud; "I'm keeping mine, and—ah, Logan!"—as the plainclothesman came back into the room. "What do they say down at headquarters?"

"Beaton's call was received there at three thirty-nine," Logan replied.

"H'm!" Sergeant Waud pulled at his lower lip. "That's four minutes after Beaton got here in the taxi. H'm!" he muttered again; then suddenly: "Let's see your watch, Beaton!"

Beaton, without comment, handed his watch to Sergeant Waud.

Sergeant Waud took his own watch from his pocket and compared the two.

"Well, I guess this lets you out all right," he said with a note of gruff friendliness in his voice as he returned the watch. "No man, drunk or sober, could have entered the house, cut the lock out of that steel drawer, shot Thorne, and telephoned police headquarters all inside of four minutes. I've been a bit rough with you, Beaton, but that's what you get for booze-fighting. You're not going to show up any too well over to-night's work as it is, but you're lucky to get off so easily. No bad feelings, eh?"

Beaton's hands clenched.

"You go to hell!" he said relentlessly.

Sergeant Waud shrugged his shoulders.

"Atta boy! Nurse it!" he grinned; then to Logan: "Ask Donnelly to bring the two maids in—and you can take Beaton along with you and get the names of those two dolls he was with. Then get hold of them and see if the stories fit. I guess it's all right, for he wouldn't have been fool enough to spill it if it wasn't—but check it up anyway. See?"

"Sure!" said Logan—and, followed by Beaton, left the room.

A moment later the two maids entered. Jimmie Dale nodded to them sympathetically. He knew them both through his frequent visits to the house, and liked them. Both had been crying, both were frightened and in an obviously overwrought state of nerves.

"I want to ask you a few questions," said Sergeant Waud reassuringly. "What are your names?"

"I am Mrs. Caton," the elder answered; "and this is my daughter. Her name is Netta."

"Well, Mrs. Caton, did you or your daughter go out last evening?"

"No, sir; neither of us did."

"So you were both in the house when Mr. Thorne returned?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time was it when he got in?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I didn't hear him come in, and Netta says she didn't either. You see, we both sleep in the same room and had gone to bed before he came in. We went to bed about half-past ten."

"And I understand that neither of you heard anything that would account for Mr. Thorne getting out of bed and going downstairs?"

"No, sir; not a thing."

"Did you know that Mr. Thorne walked in his sleep?"

Mrs. Caton gave a gasp of surprise.

"Did he, sir?" she asked incredulously.

Sergeant Waud frowned.

"That's what I want to know. I'm asking you whether or not you ever knew him to do such a thing?"

Mrs. Caton shook her head unequivocally.

"Good Lord, sir, no, never to my knowledge!" she exclaimed. "And I've been with him ever since he got back from the war—and so's Netta."

"H'm!" grunted Sergeant Waud. "Well, then, when did you first know that anything had happened here?"

"When Mr. Beaton knocked on the door of our room and told us Mr. Thorne had been killed."

"And up to that time you say you did not hear a sound of any description?"

"No, sir; not a sound."

Again Sergeant Waud frowned.

"That's very strange!" he said a little sharply. "There was a shot fired in that room—the shot that killed Mr. Thorne. You should have heard that."

Mrs. Caton bridled slightly.

"Well, if you say I should, sir, maybe I should," she answered. "Only I didn't! And Netta says——"

"Never mind telling me what Netta says!" Sergeant Waud interrupted in sudden impatience. "Netta can speak for herself. Well, Netta?"

Netta, evidently under the impression that her mother's veracity was being impugned, tossed her head.

"It's just as Mother says," she replied tartly. "I didn't hear anything at all until Mr. Beaton woke us up."

"All right!" said Sergeant Waud gruffly; then to Mrs. Caton again: "What did you do after Beaton woke you up?"

"We got dressed and I came downstairs—I wouldn't let Netta come. I came in here. Mr. Beaton had turned on the lights, and he told me that he had sent for the police. I didn't go into that other room. I—I couldn't. I just looked in. Then I went back upstairs to our room and stayed with Netta until the police came."

Sergeant Waud rubbed his chin reflectively with his thumb and forefinger for a moment; then he lunged swiftly:

"Mrs. Caton, what was it Mr. Thorne kept in his safe that the thief was after?"

Mrs. Caton flushed angrily.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said stiffly. "I've no more idea what he kept there than you have—far less, indeed, as I suppose you've been rummaging around in it ever since you got here!"

"Sorry!" Sergeant Waud smiled disarmingly. "No offense meant. I only thought that as one of the household you might at one time or another have heard Mr. Thorne drop a word or two, say, or have seen something yourself that would give us a lead."

Mrs. Caton was not altogether appeased.

"Well, I didn't!" she said thinly.

"And I didn't, either," asserted Netta combatively; "so you needn't ask me!"

"All right," said Sergeant Waud—and waved his hand in dismissal toward the door. "That'll be all for now. You can go back to your room." And then, as the two women left the room, he faced Carruthers and Jimmie Dale with a grim smile. "Well, gentlemen," he said, "that's the end of the first round. What do you think of it?"

It was Carruthers who answered.

"It's all the Gray Seal's as usual," he flung out bitterly; "but the bout isn't ended yet—and this time it's going to end in a different way than it has ever ended before! This is going to be the Gray Seal's last fight!"

Jimmie Dale made no comment.

Sergeant Waud thrust out his jaw pugnaciously.

"You said it!" he growled.

Daylight had broken when Jimmie Dale returned to his home. He dismissed Benson, let himself into the house, and, going immediately to his den, locked the door behind him.

All that had transpired, all of Sergeant Waud's questionings, except that perhaps by the process of elimination they had established certain negative facts, had been futile. A queer, grim smile crept to the corners of Jimmie Dale's mouth. Necessarily so! The clue to the crime wasn't at the scene of the crime, it wasn't at Ray's house—it was here in this room, in that barrel-shaped safe in the alcove.

The blue envelope!

He stepped swiftly over to the safe, opened it, took out the envelope, and, crossing the room, sat down at his desk. Here was the answer, here was the solution of the crime; and, since he could not turn it over to the police, the very possession of the envelope laid him under an irrepudiable moral obligation to go through to the end with it all himself. The Gray Seal was doubly launched into the old life again! What made him think of that? He pushed his hand through his hair. What did that matter? It didn't bring any added or needed urge. He had seen Ray dead there on the floor of that little room! And the world was saying now that the Gray Seal was the murderer!

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes narrowed and his lips drew into a thin, straight line. Well, they wouldn't say it long! Nor, with the key to the mystery here in his hand, would the task he had set himself prove very hard!

He picked up a paper knife from the desk and carefully slit open the end of the sealed and unaddressed envelope. From within he removed a folded sheet of thin, blue, foreign notepaper—and then for a long time Jimmie Dale sat there with a stunned look upon his face.

All that the envelope had contained was a blank piece of paper.

CHAPTER VI

SMARLINGHUE

There was a thin drizzle of rain, and a mist that was near to fog. Jimmie Dale paused under a street light and consulted his watch. It was half-past nine. Still plenty of time! There were only about another three blocks to go.

He smiled grimly. It was a strange rendezvous that he was about to keep—with his dual self of other days! He was on his way back into the underworld. The Sanctuary again—and Smarlinghue! This was where the trail of the blue envelope was leading him!

Under the wet brim of his hat he pushed his hand across his eyes. His mind was in disquiet—restless. It was full of too many variant things that insisted on intruding themselves one upon the other. Nor could he dismiss or lay them aside. It had been that way all day since early morning when he had opened the blue envelope on which he had counted so much, and had found—nothing!

The blue envelope! That apparently blank piece of paper! A hoax? He shook his head impatiently. How many times must he tell himself that such a premise was absurd and untenable? One did not commit murder for blank pieces of paper! He had never seriously considered that as a solution. There was something too deadly, too far-reaching here to permit of any such theory being entertained for a moment. True, it kept on recurring in his mind in an insistent sort of way as at least a bare possibility—but he would not admit it to be even that! That envelope and that piece of paper meant something, contained some hidden message, which, if discovered, would not only lay bare the motive for Ray Thorne's murder, but would almost to a certainty disclose the identity of the murderer himself. He was convinced of that.

But what was that message? How was it hidden? He had been unable to find the trace of even a mark on either the envelope or the paper. What, then? The obvious answer was almost too obvious; so much so, in fact, that he had but little faith in it. But what else could it be?

Invisible ink! Faith in it or not, it was the only lead he had, and it had to be probed to a sure conclusion one way or the other. And there at the outset an ironic difficulty had faced him. He dared trust no one to make the tests, for suppose the writing *did* show up—then what? Unless the wording proved to be meaningless to an outsider, how was he to account for the possession of the envelope and paper?—to obtain which would then obviously be known to have been the purpose of Ray Thorne's murderer! He dared not risk the chance that it might prove to be meaningless. But, on the other hand, those tests must be made, and his own knowledge of chemistry was of the most meagre description, just the ragged, remnant memories of college days. Still, the difficulty wasn't quite so insurmountable as it had appeared to be at first glance. There were books at the public library.

He had spent several hours there; and then, to Jason's disturbed amazement, the den had taken on somewhat the aspect of an embryonic chemical laboratory. All, however, that he had been able to do so far had been to make a few simple experiments with the most common reagents, and the results had been nil. But he was only on the fringe of his experiments—to-morrow he would go on with them.

He had been interrupted in his work by a telephone call from Carruthers. Carruthers had had little if anything new to report. With every newspaper in New York dressed with blatant headlines, and the editorial columns seething with the Gray Seal's reappearance, the police heads, according to Carruthers, fearful for their jobs in the face of the storm of denunciation hurled against them, were throwing every available man into the fray. Exactly! He, Jimmie Dale, had expected no more nor less. He had read a few of the papers. They were all alike—except that perhaps Carruthers' own sheet had been, if that were possible, more venomous than the rest. Carruthers over the

phone had also stated that Beaton's story, as had been expected, had been corroborated in every detail by the two girls who had been with him in the taxi. That was about all Carruthers had had to say.

And then, later on in the afternoon, there had come another interruption—but this time one that had immediately caused him to lock away his bottles and phials and turn his energies into quite another channel. Smarlinghue could not be rehabilitated on the spur of the moment without at least *some* preparation!

All day he had been anxiously expecting and waiting for a message from the Tocsin, but when at last it had come its tenor had been of a nature drastically afield from anything he had even anticipated. It had come in the shape of a note, left, Jason had said, by a messenger boy. It had been very brief, but for that very reason, perhaps, its effect upon him had been all the more dynamic. The words had danced before his eyes as he had read them. They danced before his mental vision now as he walked here along the murky street:

> This is terrible! This changes everything! My hope to have kept you from any further participation in the affair is no longer of any avail, for I know now that nothing will hold you back. Mother Margot has arranged that Smarlinghue is to have his old quarters again, and will meet him there at ten o'clock to-night.

Smarlinghue, the Sanctuary, Mother Margot! Names and scenes of the years ago! His brain whirled with it all again. *She* was Mother Margot once more! He had suspected as much. And she had been quite right—nothing would have held him back! Not even if Ray had not been murdered. That she was again living under cover in the underworld would have been enough. But whether he would have gone back as Smarlinghue or not, he had not then decided, for he had hoped before making any definite move in that direction that he would have wrung its secret from the blue envelope. She had made the decision for him. Smarlinghue! The Sanctuary was waiting for him! How had she managed to accomplish that?

But that wasn't all. There was Marie herself—the Tocsin! In a little while now, in just a few minutes, he would be with her again. His pulse quickened at the thought. Did it matter that she would be in the guise of an old hag, and he in that of the down-at-the-heels, drug-wrecked artist who had had the freedom of every dive in the underworld? Whatever happened this time they would be together. There would not be the days and weeks of ceaseless search for her, when he was constantly tortured with fears for her safety, as there had been in the past!

And then unconsciously Jimmie Dale spoke aloud.

"Thank God for that!" he said.

He flung a swift glance around him. He had come abreast of a tenement of the poorer class. The Sanctuary! The Sanctuary of Smarlinghue's day—replacing the original one that had been burned down over Larry the Bat's head! And here was the narrow, black lane that flanked it. It was not a night for pedestrians. No one was in sight. Jimmie Dale vanished from the street.

How many times in the past had this well-remembered lane stood him in the same good stead! He could not enter the tenement as Jimmie Dale, could he?—*Smarlinghue* lived here!

He moved swiftly—without a sound. It was the Gray Seal of old at work now. Was that board in the fence that bordered the rubbish-littered courtyard at the rear of the tenement still loose? He reached the spot—and smiled queerly to himself in the darkness. There was scarcely *any* fence left at all. Repairs were not an outstanding feature of the neighborhood! Well, so much the better, perhaps!

He slipped through one of the gaping holes, and, hugging the shadows of the tenement, reached the familiar little French window that gave on the courtyard.

And now he stood for an instant listening intently. The clang of a trolley bell came faintly from the Bowery a block away—there was no other sound. He tried the window. It was unlocked, and opened without effort under his hand. Perhaps it was the Tocsin who had arranged that! In any case it saved him the delay of forcing it.

He stepped inside, stood for another instant listening, his eyes searching through the blackness; then he closed and locked the French window behind him. The French window, in the days of Smarlinghue's former occupancy, was always equipped with a roller shade, a dilapidated affair, so old even then that it was almost falling to pieces. *That* certainly could not have lasted out the years! He felt out with his hand. No—but it had been replaced by another! A miracle!

It was utterly dark. There were no stars, no moon, and the top light over the French window was not even discernible. He stepped silently across the room. The door now! He reached it and again felt out with his hand. It was unlocked, and the key was in the lock on the inside. Whoever it was who had vacated the premises in favor of Smarlinghue had been very decent and considerate about it! Or was it the Tocsin? He locked the door.

He was safe now from any sudden interruption. He could risk a light. It was only a question now of that movable section of the baseboard here near the door, though he had little or no concern about it. The chances were not one in many thousand that the secret had been discovered; and, besides, the Tocsin would have made sure of that before she brought him back here, and would not have failed to warn him if it had been tampered with. He had left "Smarlinghue" there when, as he then believed, he had severed his ties with the underworld forever on that night so long ago now when the Tocsin and he had made their escape from Blind Peter's unholy dive. He had never come back; but his rent had been paid in advance, so Smarlinghue, as a memory, was not in bad odor with the landlord, who, being a crook of no mean order himself, was accustomed to tenants of far less financial responsibility! The landlord would merely have pinched the few belongings left around the place before renting the room again! He wondered if the present landlord was the same smug Isaacs of yore, and——

But the baseboard! His flashlight traced a line of light along the lower edge of the wall close to where he stood—and stopped—and went out. Jimmie Dale dropped down on his knees, and a moment

later grunted in satisfaction. He thrust his hand into the opening he had made. It was quite all right—Smarlinghue's wardrobe and make-up were still there.

He rose to his feet, crossed the room again, and, striking a match, lighted the gas. It was the same wheezy, air-choked gas jet of old that sputtered asthmatically into a blue and yellow flame which only a confirmed optimist would have called illumination, for, except in its immediate neighborhood, it did little more than throw the room into shadowy relief. Jimmie Dale's eyes swept his surroundings swiftly, critically. There in one corner was the same cheap cot bed, and in another the rickety washstand; here in the center was the deal table, and, flanking it, he recognized the two familiar crippled chairs; while, on the floor, the strip of carpet, already but a disreputable rag when he had left it, was now frayed almost to strings. It was the same old Sanctuary—just a little the worse for wear, that was all! Except, of course, that the battered old easel, and the dirty canvases with their appalling daubs, which were Smarlinghue's contribution to art, were missing. He smiled whimsically, wondering how much old Isaacs had got for them! Well, they would have to be replaced if Smarlinghue took up his abode here for long!

The survey had taken but a second. Jimmie Dale was working quickly now. In a few minutes—at ten o'clock—Mother Margot would be knocking at the door, and she would expect that Smarlinghue would open it. Furthermore, she had certainly not resurrected Smarlinghue without some definite purpose in mind, and quite possibly one that would even call for action in that rôle before the night was out.

He took a small parcel from his pocket and hurriedly began to remove his clothing. What the years had done to Smarlinghue's wardrobe in there behind the baseboard, he could readily guess. The garments would probably be moldy and wholly disreputable. But Smarlinghue had never been anything else but disreputable. That did not matter—the clothes in there would still be clothes. The contents of the make-up box, however, would not have stood so well the ravages of time! The make-up box would need to be replenished with certain

accessories. That little parcel he had just placed on the table, though it had taken him several hours to make the purchases, was still not wholly complete—but it contained the essentials.

From behind the baseboard now Jimmie Dale took out Smarlinghue's clothes. They *were* pretty bad; but at least they had held together, and that was the one vital thing. He began to put them on. The patched boots were dried and cracked. They made him wince. The shabby, faded coat, spotted with grease and paint stains, and always a size too small for him, seemed to have shrunk a little, causing the soiled and frayed wristbands of his shirt to protrude more blatantly than ever. He felt carefully over the back of his coat to satisfy himself that the leather girdle which he had donned before leaving home left no telltale bulge. He shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps he would have no need for those little blued-steel instruments to-night. Who knew? He could tell better when he had talked with Mother Margot. Perhaps all he would need would be, if anything, his automatic, his flashlight—and *this*! He had thrust his hand into the pocket of the tattered coat. Smarlinghue, the drug addict, without his hypodermic syringe might as well not exist at all!

And now the make-up box, augmented by the contents of the parcel he had brought with him, absorbed his attention. He sat down with it in front of the cracked and streaked mirror that the washstand boasted. He worked swiftly, deftly now—and with masterly touch the unhealthy pallor that was Smarlinghue's chief characteristic overspread his face. His wrists received the same attention; his hands became artistically unkempt; with the aid of little distorting pieces of wax Smarlinghue's hollow cheeks, distended lips, and widened nostrils came into being—and then with a final, critical survey of himself in the mirror, he stood up. Down to the last minute detail, the Smarlinghue known of old to the élite of Crimeland and welcomed everywhere in the Bad Lands lived again.

The gas jet sputtered vociferously. Jimmie Dale bowed to it facetiously.

"I take that as applause!" he said.

He carefully folded the fashionably tailored tweeds of Jimmie Dale, the millionaire clubman, and placed them in the aperture behind the baseboard. The make-up box followed suit; but, as he replaced this latter, he suddenly paused. The clothes had taken up more space than the rags he had removed, and he had been obliged to reach further to one side to find room for the make-up box. His hand had come into contact with a paper-wrapped bundle.

For a moment he frowned—then a little twisted smile crossed his lips. He had quite forgotten! Larry the Bat's clothes! He recalled now the night that he had rehabilitated Larry the Bat, whom the underworld had believed dead—the night that the Magpie had died unpleasantly. It had taken him a great deal of time, and he had had infinite trouble in matching the original clothing of Larry the Bat which had been destroyed. That was what was in the bundle. Well, let it remain there! He had not the slightest expectation of ever bringing Larry the Bat to life again—but, up to less than twenty-four hours ago, he had never thought that Smarlinghue would ever live again, either! One never knew!

He replaced the movable section of the baseboard, and, lighting a cigarette, straddled one of the woebegone chairs. It was almost ten o'clock.

Smarlinghue was "at home."

CHAPTER VII

CROOKS KNOWN OF OLD

Jimmie Dale had not long to wait. A footstep creaked on the bare boards of the hall without. A knock sounded on the door.

The Tocsin! A wistful light sprang suddenly into Jimmie Dale's dark eyes, but he was slow to the point of exaggeration in his movements as he rose from his chair and scuffled across the room. A whimsical smile came and vanished. The parts men play! This house that harbored the Sanctuary was a house of many eyes and straining ears!

"Who's there?" demanded Smarlinghue gruffly.

"Smarly, is dat youse?" came the answer in the voice he knew so well. "It's me, Smarly. It's Mother Margot."

He unlocked and opened the door. Mother Margot! Just an old hag who stood there! The old hag he had not seen since the night he had carried her unconscious from the gang fight at Blind Peter's before the war! She had not changed any! The years had been kind to Mother Margot—and Smarlinghue! Just the same bedraggled-looking creature that she had always been—the threadbare black shawl pulled hoodlike over her head and clasped tightly around her throat—the gray wisps of hair that straggled over her eyes—the heavy-lensed spectacles—the pinched face that was none too clean!

Smarlinghue became suddenly gracious.

"Hello, Mother! Come on in!" he invited.

He closed and locked the door behind her—and for a long minute, his hands on her shoulders, holding her at arm's length, his soul in his eyes, he stood looking at her—and then she was in his arms, held tightly there as though he would never let her go again.

"Marie!" he whispered passionately. "Even to have you here! Even to have you like this!"

She drew herself gently out of his arms, and shook her head at him through sudden tears.

"Jimmie," she smiled tremulously, "I shan't look much like Mother Margot, and you won't look much like Smarlinghue either, if you do that again! It—it rubs off, you know!"

"Yes," he admitted ruefully. "Well, then, I won't!"—but her hand was in his as he led her across the room to the chair he had just vacated at the table.

For a moment there was silence between them as she seated herself and his arm stole fondly around her shoulders—and then the Tocsin spoke brokenly out of a full heart.

"Jimmie, there—there aren't any words that mean anything, are there?" she asked piteously. "I—we tried to save him. Perhaps there *was* something else I might have done; perhaps there was another way. Oh, Jimmie, Ray is dead, and I—I——"

"Hush!" he said tenderly. "Ray knows. There is only one woman in the world who could have done so much. I am sure of that even before I have heard your story. What has happened was beyond your power or mine to prevent. You mustn't grieve on that score."

She turned her head away.

"It's awful!" she said beneath her breath. "And—and we've made it so almost *safe* for the real murderer! Oh, Jimmie, the Gray Seal! What cruel, cruel irony! The police will never find the man now!"

"That's why I'm Smarlinghue again, isn't it?" he returned meaningly.

She faced him, one small hand suddenly clenched.

"Yes!" she exclaimed almost fiercely; then hesitantly: "But even in suggesting that, in taking it on myself to get this horrible place back for you, I'm not sure I've——"

"Wait!" he smiled—and fetching the other chair, placed it opposite to her. "Now," he invited, as he reached out across the table and took both her hands in his, "tell me everything from the beginning—in Paris."

She nodded her head quickly.

"Yes, I will," she said. "Everything! That's what we are here for. But as I told you in my letter last night, there are so many things that I do not understand myself, and I think it would make it much clearer for both of us if I asked you a few questions first."

"All right," he agreed. "Go ahead!"

"Well," she said hurriedly, "the first news I had of—of—that Ray had been murdered was in the morning papers. The Gray Seal was accused of the crime, so I knew of course that you had gone to the house for the blue envelope, and that Ray must have been killed *afterwards* or else you would never have put that gray seal on the safe."

"Of course!" he said. "Also, I got the envelope, and took it away with me. Nothing had happened in the house up to that time. Ray was then, so far as I knew, asleep in his bedroom upstairs."

"Had the envelope been opened?"

"No," he replied, his brows knitting suddenly together; "and that's not without significance, either, is it? It's been more or less in my mind all day."

"Yes, perhaps; but"—she was plying her questions anxiously—"did you open it?"

"Yes," he answered; "but not at once—and I wouldn't have opened it at all under any other circumstances. Carruthers telephoned me what had happened. I went over to Ray's house, and Carruthers and I spent practically all the rest of the night there with the police. With the Gray Seal accused of the crime"—he smiled mirthlessly—"I couldn't very well say I had been there before and had taken a certain blue envelope from the safe, could I? And yet on the face of it that envelope appeared to be the key to the whole mystery. I do not need to tell you that long before your second note came I had made up my mind to see this through. I"—something seemed to rise up suddenly in Jimmie Dale's throat, and he swallowed hard—"I promised Ray I would. When I got back home at daylight this morning I opened the envelope."

"Then tell me, Jimmie"—she was leaning tensely across the table now—"what *was* in it?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?" she echoed faintly.

"A blank piece of paper."

"But—but, Jimmie," she faltered, "that is impossible!"

"It's the bald fact," he stated tersely.

"But it can't be!" she protested wildly. "I know it can't! I'm positive that envelope contained a message, and since you say it hadn't been opened, it must be there yet. I'm sure, Jimmie! I'm sure! I can't believe that paper is really blank!"

"I've started testing it for invisible ink," he observed quietly. "No luck so far."

"You mean," she said eagerly, "that you think——"

"As you do?" he broke in. "Yes! Even with the little I know, which is practically nothing of what has gone before, I could not logically think otherwise. And while we're on that point, do you know of anything that would lead you to believe there is any significance in the fact that the envelope and paper are blue?"

"No," she replied quickly, "nothing that I know of. In fact, I did not even know that the envelope *was* blue until just a few minutes before I wrote you that note last night. What made you think of that?"

Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders.

"No particular reason. It just occurred to me several times to-day, and I've wondered about it—that's all. Is there anything else you want to ask before we take up your end of it?"

"No"—she shook her head—"but I had counted so much on knowing what was in that envelope. And, as it is now, I'm almost as much in the dark as I was when I left Paris."

"Tell me about it," Jimmie Dale invited reassuringly, "and we'll see."

She remained for a little while thoughtful.

"I hardly know how to begin," she said at last. "You've heard me speak often of Pierre Vidon?"

"The Paris crook you nursed at the front? Yes!"

She nodded her head, smiling a little wanly.

"Yes, I'm afraid he was a crook," she said; "but the apaches did brave things in the war, you know. I liked him. He was all patience and all courage, and his sufferings were terrible. As you know, we came to be friends, and he told me a lot about his life, and where he lived in Paris. He was finally discharged, you will remember, with a leg and an arm gone, and went back to Paris to live."

"I remember," nodded Jimmie Dale. "And I rather imagine from what you are leading up to that he went back to the old apache life as well, eh?"

"I didn't ask him," she said; "but from the quarter in which he was living, which was one of the vilest in Paris, I do not think there is any doubt about it. Anyway, on my trip over this time, I looked him up and found him very ill and practically unattended in hopelessly squalid surroundings. I wanted to move him to a hospital, or some other place where he would be more comfortable and have better care, but he refused almost violently. He said he had 'reasons.' I thought I could guess what those reasons were, so I did not press my offer. After that I visited him several times, and it was on my last visit to him that —that all this happened."

She paused, toying absently with the heavy-lensed spectacles which she had removed from her eyes.

"Go on, dear!" prompted Jimmie Dale. "I think I'm beginning to see."

"No; I don't think you are." She shook her head. "Pierre Vidon was not personally mixed up in it at all. You are going to hear a lot of familiar names—names that we both knew well in the old Crime Club days—the names of those who knew us too: you, either as Larry the Bat, or Smarlinghue; and me, as either Silver Mag, or the Mother Margot of to-night. Do you remember Boston Bob and Pinky John?"

"Yes, *and* Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret!" Jimmie Dale appended grimly. "The star triumvirate of safe-workers! But Connie was the king-pin of the three!"

Again she nodded her head.

"And I need hardly ask you"—she smiled cheerlessly—"if you remember Daddy Ratzler, who was called Old Pockface behind his back?"

Jimmie Dale whistled low under his breath.

He had known the Ferret's gang in the more recent days of Smarlinghue; but his acquaintanceship with Old Pockface reached back into the years beyond that. He had known and was known to Daddy Ratzler as Larry the Bat. The man was little less than diabolical, and even in those days comparatively rich. The underworld held him in awe—both because he was fiendishly successful in his criminal activities and because they were afraid of him. He had never been caught. He had paid his followers well. Any rat in the Bad Lands would have snatched at any job he offered. Oh, yes, he, Jimmie Dale, in the rôle of Larry the Bat, yes, and in that of Smarlinghue too, for that matter, had known the man quite intimately! A musty and unpretentious real estate office just off the Bowery, which actually did a certain amount of legitimate business, had camouflaged Daddy Ratzler's worse than unscrupulous undertakings; and, whether or not the police had ever had any deep-seated suspicions concerning him, he had been too clever for them, and had got away with his double life unscathed. Daddy Ratzler! In those days the established price for bumping off anyone who, for whatever cause it might be, was in the way, was from twenty-five to fifty dollars according to the status and prominence of the victim—Daddy Ratzler always doubled the tariff!

Jimmie Dale's face under Smarlinghue's make-up was suddenly hard and set.

"Is *he* in this?" he demanded.

"There is no question about that," she asserted unhesitatingly; "though I do not think that he or any of his parasites killed Ray. But you will see in a minute. Let me get back to that last visit to Pierre Vidon. It wasn't a nice locality, as you can imagine, and I had never gone there before except in daylight; but this time I was delayed in starting out, and, although it was then almost dusk, I decided to go on since I had promised to see him that afternoon, and I did not want to disappoint him—a sick person counts so much on promises, you

know. When I got there it was quite dark outside; and inside, with the passages unlighted, I almost had to feel my way. Pierre's room was at the top of the house—the garret, in fact. I paid my visit to him and started to go downstairs again. I had almost reached the second floor when I heard a man's footsteps coming up the first flight of stairs. I couldn't see him in the darkness, but I didn't need to see him to know that he had been drinking. He was stumbling, and the stair rail creaked as he clutched at it. I very decidedly did not want to meet him, so I started to tiptoe back up the second flight of stairs on which I was standing, with the intention of going back to Pierre Vidon's room, if necessary, until the man was out of the way. But I didn't have to do that as the man only came as far as the second floor, and I stopped again as I heard him pounding on a door. And then I heard him say: 'Heh, Pinky, are youse dere? It's Boston Bob.'

"It came as a shock, Jimmie—I think you can well believe that. Boston Bob and Pinky John! For a moment it seemed as though I was back in some rat hole in New York and was living the old days over again as—well, as Mother Margot—just as I am really doing now. But at that moment I never dreamed that was what I actually would soon be doing once more, and that I would have made up my mind to it within the next few hours.

"I leaned over the stair rail and saw the door open, and in the lighted doorway I saw both men quite plainly for an instant. Boston Bob was a little unsteady on his feet, but he appeared to be far more excited than drunk.

"'Listen, big boy,' he told Pinky in a rush, 'I got somethin' dat'll make yer mouth water. Old Pockface is pullin' de biggest game of his life, an' he's got a high-hat guy named Ray Thorne workin' it wid him.'

"Jimmie, it seemed as though the whole staircase suddenly began to swirl around. Subconsciously I was aware that the two men had gone into the room, that the door had closed behind them, and that it was pitch black around me again; but it was fully a minute, I am sure, and perhaps longer, before I recovered my self-control. *Ray Thorne*, Jimmie! Ray Thorne and Old Pockface—Daddy Ratzler! I think that even you would have been thrown off your mental balance."

"I am now!" said Jimmie Dale through tight lips. "And then?"

"Then I crept down the stairs and listened at the door. Both because Boston Bob had a few drinks in him and because they were speaking English, which they probably thought wouldn't be understood even if they were overheard, they weren't as cautious as they might have been; but, even so, I couldn't hear everything, for every once in a while they would instinctively resort to whispers.

"Boston Bob was talking again when I got to the door.

"'Say,' he was saying, 'dat guy wot told us we could call him anythin' we liked so long as we didn't ask questions, de guy wot we did dat little job fer last week, is Daddy Ratzler's plentypotenshurary, or whatever youse calls it, to de Republic of France! Wot do youse knows about dat? His name's Keane—moniker Cokey—Cokey Keane, an' he's one of Old Pockface's gang! Sure! But dat ain't all—an' it ain't half! He got shot up by de police a few hours ago an' ducked into my dump. Say, he croaked dere in my arms. He was talkin' delirious before he cashed in, an' he spilled his name an' all de beans in Europe right into my mitt!'

"I lost what was said consecutively after that; the rest came mostly in snatches. I heard Boston Bob say: 'Sure, de dope's all in de letter dat Cokey mailed to New York dis afternoon before he got plugged.' Then, after a confused interchange of words between them: 'We'll have to duck our own nuts on account of dat guy doin' de stiff act in my dump.' And then I caught this from Pinky: 'Bo, dis is de swellest layout dat's ever bust loose, an' if de goods is straight we're rich; but we ain't in New York yet, an' mabbe Cokey being found in your dump'll slow us up some on our travels.' 'No, we ain't dere yet,' Boston Bob answered; 'but de Ferret is. All we got to do is wise him up to keep his eyes peeled while we're on de way. Dere's enough for three in dis, ain't dere?'

"Of course, there was a lot more, but nothing that gave me any inkling of what was in that letter, or what the nature of the scheme was that Daddy Ratzler was engineering. You can piece that end of it together as well as I can. I only knew that Daddy Ratzler was engaged in what was apparently, from its international aspect, the biggest

criminal operation of his career; and that Boston Bob had stated that Ray Thorne—*our* Ray Thorne, Jimmie, for there couldn't be any other Ray Thorne that Boston Bob would refer to as a 'high-hat guy', meaning a gentleman—was one of Daddy Ratzler's accomplices.

"Jimmie, when I left that house my brain was whirling, and I was nearly mad with anxiety and fear. What was I to do? What I knew was enough to make me a moral accomplice myself if I did nothing, but I could not communicate with the police because of Ray. I couldn't believe Ray was guilty; but then I began to think how little we knew about him, in spite of the fact that in the short time since you had first met him you had grown so close together. It was possible that he wasn't what he seemed—it was more than possible from what Boston Bob had said. I had to be sure. To have cabled you and cast suspicion on him, which might after all be unfounded, would have hurt you cruelly, and besides you were the last person in the world I wanted to bring into this, if I could possibly avoid it; and, as I said, my hands were tied in so far as the police were concerned. But I had to act. I do not know whether I meant to protect Ray if I found him guilty—I never quite got that far in my own mind. I only knew that I must just make sure, and meanwhile try my utmost to prevent the projected crime, whatever it was, from being carried out. If I could do that, then, even if he were criminally involved and we had to put him out of our lives, no harm would come to Ray. I was very fond of Ray, too—like you, Jimmie. I did not want any harm to come to him."

She paused and smiled a little wistfully. Jimmie Dale was frowning, and there was no responsive smile.

"Yes, I know, Jimmie," she said; "you would never have permitted it for a single instant. But then, you see, dear, you did not know. I think I did what one who had lived so long as Silver Mag and Mother Margot would naturally have done—and especially so since Mother Margot had personally known Daddy Ratzler well enough to make her feel sure she would not have much difficulty in renewing her acquaintanceship with him without arousing any suspicions on his part. Anyway, I did it. I looked up the sailings, made the specious excuses to my friends that I outlined to you in my letter, chose the

boat that would reach New York first, and sailed at once. There was even a good chance of beating that letter to New York, as it might easily have been routed some other way and on a slower boat—and I did beat it by two days! I traveled second class to avoid being mentioned amongst the 'notables arriving'"—she arched her eyebrows naïvely—"and I kept to my stateroom all the way over on the plea of illness as a precaution against meeting or being seen by anyone who knew me. I am sure I arrived in New York without anyone knowing anything about it."

"And became Mother Margot!" Jimmie Dale summed up a little severely—but the admiration in his dark eyes as they played critically over the haglike creature facing him belied the remonstrance in his voice. "Certainly I would never have sanctioned it if I had known, and I would never have let your courage and unselfishness expose you to any such peril again, if I could have prevented it; but it is done now—and, at least, please God, you will not face the risks and dangers alone this time. But, quite apart from that, I do not altogether understand. You knew, of course, that I had left Smarlinghue's togs hidden here; but you never told me that you still had those old rags of Mother Margot stowed away somewhere."

"And I didn't have them, either, Jimmie," she answered. "But it was much more simple for me to become Mother Margot again than for you to recreate Smarlinghue without anything to start with. An old black shawl and a shabby black skirt—what is there to that? The gray hairs and the make-up?—yes! But that was simple, too. I bought it all in Paris where I was unknown and where I *wasn't* going to use it. As soon as I had decided what I was going to do, it was only a question of half an hour's visit to a costumer—the pretext a fancy dress party. It was all in my trunk when I landed in New York. After that I had little or no difficulty. There are hundreds of rooms to be had, especially on the lower East Side, as we both know, where not too many questions are asked providing the rent is paid. After a little search I found just what I wanted, a room with easy access to the street that I could get in and out of, just as you can here, with little or no chance of being

observed. I moved in with my baggage and paid the rent a month in advance. An hour after that I slipped out of the house as Mother Margot without being seen."

"Where is this room?" Jimmie Dale demanded succinctly.

"You know Dink Moran's old place, don't you, where he combined a so-called 'family' hotel with a saloon that used to be called the Big Tent?"

"I do—very well!" said Jimmie Dale—and frowned again. "But Dink left there in our time and went out to Chicago because New York had got too hot for him."

"I know! Well, of course"—Mother Margot stuck her tongue in her cheek—"it hasn't got a saloon any longer, because there aren't any more saloons since prohibition came in and New York went dry; it's only used as a rooming house now."

"And tougher than ever, I suppose!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale unhappily. "I wish to God you were out of this, Marie!"

"Oh, it's all right, Jimmie," she said reassuringly. "You ought to know by this time that I am quite able to take care of myself. And the place is absolutely ideal for my purpose. Nobody would either know or care if I were away for days at a stretch. And what appealed to me particularly was that side entrance, for even if Mother Margot *were* seen going in there it wouldn't occasion any comment. Don't you see? My room's the first one on the right—ground floor—side entrance."

"What's the use!" Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Well, go on! What then?"

"Then I went down to see Daddy Ratzler."

Jimmie Dale showed sudden consternation.

"Daddy Ratzler!" he ejaculated. "Look here, Marie, wasn't that placing too many cards on the table? Wouldn't it have been——"

"Wait a minute, Jimmie," she intervened. "I had thought it all out on the way over. I crossed the ocean to get next to Daddy Ratzler, and this seemed the best way to do it——to work in with him if I could. You must remember that I was very much in the dark, and my best chance, I believed, was to connect myself with him in some way as

closely as I could. I depended on Mother Margot's shady reputation of the past to accomplish that—and it did, in the very luckiest kind of a way, Jimmie.

"That real estate office is in the same old dingy little house; and, I might as well tell you now, I soon discovered that he keeps the whole lower floor for himself, and sometimes sleeps there, though where he actually *lives* I haven't as yet found out. When I went in he was alone there at that dirty old desk of his. He knew me at once, and in that squeaky voice of his politely asked me what in hell had brought me there. I told him that I'd beat it out of New York just before the war and that I'd got into trouble out West—but that was all fixed up again, only I was stony broke. He asked me where I was living, and I said nowhere because I'd just blown into town that afternoon—but incidentally, Jimmie, Mother Margot has since hired a room, in case Daddy Ratzler got suspicious and started to check her up."

"Where?" inquired Jimmie Dale crisply.

She shook her head at him laughingly.

"You'll never have any occasion to go *there*, Jimmie, for it's only a blind, and you're not very likely ever to find Mother Margot at home. But I suppose you won't be satisfied until you know. It's the attic of that hovel where Silver Mag used to live."

"I congratulate you on your two establishments!" commented Jimmie Dale grimly.

"Now, Jimmie!" she chided. "You know that nothing could be better! But to go on with Daddy Ratzler. He asked me why I'd come to him. I told him that the whole layout had been changed so much since I was away that I didn't even recognize the Bowery any more, that I hadn't been able to find any of my old pals so far, and that he seemed to be the only one I knew who was in the same old place. Then he asked me again what I wanted, and I told him I wanted a job. He looked at me queerly for a minute. 'What do you mean—*job*?' he said. 'I haven't got any jobs.' 'Aw, say,' I answered, 'dat's all right, I'm even willin' to do some *work* so's to get a few bucks to keep me goin'. Look at dem windows'—the place was a pigsty, Jimmie, and I snatched at the idea—'it don't look like any woman had been around here since de

house was built. I'll clean 'em for youse, Daddy, an' wash de floors an' do all dat, an' den mabbe when dere's something wid a bit of a rake-off in it like dere uster to be youse won't forget to give old Mother Margot a chance.' Jimmie, he sat there for a minute or two without a word, just staring at me through squinted eyes. He made me think of an ugly old spider lurking in his web. I don't know what was passing in his mind, but I am quite sure it wasn't pure philanthropy on his part that made him fall in with my suggestion; in fact he intimated as much when he said: 'All right, go to it! You can clean the whole place up. That'll keep you going for a while, and after that perhaps you can make yourself useful some other way.'

"That was the day before yesterday in the afternoon, Jimmie. What I was hoping for, apart from what I might possibly overhear if he had any visitors, was that he would go out and I would get a chance to search the place, not only in the hope of unearthing something that would give me a clue to what was going on, but there was also that letter, which at that time I naturally supposed had been sent to Old Pockface, though, of course, I didn't know whether it had arrived yet or not.

"But nothing happened that afternoon, and he didn't go out until about six o'clock. He locked up the place and made me leave at the same time. He said he wouldn't be there next morning, and told me bluntly enough that he didn't want me hanging around there alone, so that I needn't come back until he did the following afternoon. That wasn't so good, Jimmie!

"The same thing happened yesterday afternoon. He made me leave when he did at six o'clock. But I *had* to get into the house alone just the same! I had noticed on the previous day that he did not go near the cellar when he locked up. I had been down with rubbish several times—for I really was house-cleaning, Jimmie!—and so I knew there was a small window there that opened on the back yard. During yesterday afternoon I loosened the catches on that window.

"I suppose it was nearly nine o'clock when I went back there last night. I did not know whether Daddy Ratzler intended to return or not, but the place was in darkness so I knew that, at least, he wasn't

there then. I crawled in through the cellar window and went at once to his desk. I had a small pencil flashlight which I shaded with my shawl. And then, Jimmie, before I had hardly had time to begin my search, something else happened."

CHAPTER VIII

THE COUNCIL ENDS

The Tocsin had paused for a moment as though debating how best to express what she had to say; but now she went on again almost hurriedly:

"I heard the back door creak, and for a moment my heart stood still. I thought it was Daddy Ratzler coming in secretively that way for some reason or other. There was no way of escape for me. I could only hide. In the hallway, just at the rear of the office and opposite the bedroom which was the next room to the office, was a small clothes closet. I darted into the clothes closet and closed the door. I heard someone pass by and go into the office. Then I opened the door a crack. I could just see about half the desk through the office doorway. A man was standing there—but it wasn't Daddy Ratzler.

"He was turning over the papers on the desk and carefully replacing them. He had a flashlight, but he was keeping the rays from flooding around the room with his coat just as I had done with my shawl. His back was toward me. I had been watching him for perhaps two or three minutes when he half turned around, stooped over to open a drawer, and the light fell full on his face. Jimmie, it was Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret!"

Jimmie Dale made a quick, impulsive motion with his hand.

"Yes?" he urged under his breath.

The Tocsin smiled mirthlessly.

"He was after the letter, of course," she said, "just as I was; but he didn't get it any more than I did, because, as we know now, it was never there at all. Jimmie, I think it was the Ferret who killed Ray."

"*What!*" Low-toned though it was, Jimmie Dale flung the exclamation tensely, incredulously, across the table.

"Wait, Jimmie! Listen! Just as the Ferret had interrupted me in my search, he was interrupted in turn. His flashlight went out suddenly. I couldn't see anything then, of course, but I could hear him. He came back into the hallway and stood for an instant just beside the clothes-closet door, evidently listening for something which I hadn't heard. Then he stepped into the bedroom. A moment after that the front door of the house opened and closed, and someone came into the office. Then the light went on. It was Daddy Ratzler.

"Jimmie, it was weird, the three of us in the house—I in the clothes closet, the Ferret across the hall in the bedroom, and Old Pockface sitting there at his desk! He seemed to be waiting for something and to be impatient, for he constantly consulted his watch. I don't know how long it was before the front door opened again, but I suppose it couldn't have been more than five or ten minutes though it seemed ages to me. I couldn't see who it was that came into the office then, for my field of vision was very narrow, and the man—I could tell that, of course, from his voice—did not go near the desk. I do not know yet who it was except that, from what was said, he was obviously an intimate member of Daddy Ratzler's gang.

"'I know I'm late,' the man said; 'but I only got your message a few minutes ago. What's up?'

"'Something I couldn't spill over the telephone,' Daddy Ratzler answered. 'The blue envelope's come!'

"I could hear the man sucking in his breath and swearing jubilantly.

"'So he got it off, then, before he croaked!' he exclaimed.

"'Sure!' said Daddy Ratzler.

"'Where is it now?' the man asked.

"'In Thorne's house-safe,' Daddy Ratzler replied. 'The Angel can doll up and get it in the morning.'

"'Well, that's all right,' the other said, 'so long as you're sure you can trust this bird Thorne.'

"'There's nothing to trust!' Daddy Ratzler snapped, 'Have you got to be told that again? He doesn't know any of us, and he never will. He won't even know who he delivers the envelope to. And even if he

opened the envelope, it wouldn't do any good, would it?'

"Jimmie, I——"

"Just a minute!" Jimmie Dale broke in, his voice suddenly buoyant and eager. "This clears old Ray! I told you I had been puzzling all day as to why Ray put that envelope in his safe unopened. The rather obvious answer was, of course, that the envelope wasn't for him, and that he was merely acting as an intermediary; but the serious question was whether he was a wholly *innocent* intermediary or not. This proves that he was, thank God!"

"Yes!" she said. "And that was why I told you in my letter I was sure I would be able to supply the police with enough information within two or three days to put an end to the whole affair, for up to that time, as I have explained to you, I had always the fear that Ray might be criminally involved. But I still do not know how he ever came to be mixed up in it at all."

Jimmie Dale's jaws clamped.

"That's one of many things Daddy Ratzler is going to explain!" he said evenly. "What happened after that?"

"You've heard all of the conversation that really counts," she said. "I won't detail the rest of it. They talked for another ten minutes. Daddy Ratzler said something that I didn't understand about being worried because there had been nothing in some newspaper and so he had telephoned; and then they arranged that the Angel, whoever he or she is, was to go to Ray for the letter next morning—that was this morning. Meanwhile the boys were to be tipped off to get together the next afternoon—that was this afternoon—to make the necessary plans to take care of whatever the message in the envelope called for. So, you see, in spite of that blank piece of paper, there *is* a message there somewhere. Of course, after what happened, the Angel never went to Ray; and I imagine that any meeting which took place was an emergency one held long before the time originally specified. I don't know where these meetings are held—but at some accustomed place undoubtedly, as no reference was made to any address. Anyway,

Daddy Ratzler was at his desk all this afternoon, and I can tell you, Jimmie, he's badly shaken up. He was in a state of fury bordering on frenzy, and I think, too, he is not a little frightened—of the Gray Seal."

"Perhaps he's right," said Jimmie Dale in a level voice. "There'll be a showdown anyway—winner take all! Go on about last night."

"Daddy Ratzler's visitor went away; but Daddy Ratzler stayed at his desk for another half-hour, sometimes writing, but poring mostly over what looked like an account book of some sort. Then, after turning out the light, he too left the house.

"There was still the Ferret, Jimmie. I heard him chuckling wickedly to himself as he stepped out of the bedroom into the hall. 'Juicy pickings, Daddy! Thanks for letting me know!' I heard him jeer. And then I heard him retreat along the hallway and go out by the back door. I waited until he was well away, then I got out of the house the way I had come in—by the cellar window.

"It was then about ten o'clock. I was terribly anxious, Jimmie; and terribly afraid—on Ray's account. Though I now knew him to be innocent and that he was merely being used as a cat's-paw, I had not expected that *he* would have the envelope; and so, then, I did not dare communicate with the police when I discovered it *was* actually in his possession, for I know Daddy Ratzler too well—nothing would have convinced Old Pockface that Ray had not betrayed the trust, as it were, that, even if it were wholly uninvited, had been thrust upon him. Who else but Ray could have known of the envelope, who else but Ray, even if the tip appeared to come from some outside source, could have put the police on the trail! I know Daddy Ratzler. You know him. Nothing would have prevented him from wreaking vengeance on Ray. But if I could not go to the police, I equally could not afford to wait. It was obvious that before morning the Ferret meant to steal the envelope. And there again Ray was in danger. As I said in my letter, Daddy Ratzler might construe it as a ruse on Ray's part. And, besides all this, it was imperative, in order to prevent the crime that was brewing, that the envelope must not be allowed to get into either Daddy Ratzler's or the Ferret's hands. Do you see?"

"I see," said Jimmie Dale quietly. "And so the only thing left was the old call to arms again—and have the Gray Seal 'steal' it."

"Yes," she said; "for that would safeguard Ray, and at the same time give us possession of the envelope. I couldn't see any other way. I hurried back to my room, wrote that letter, and then took it up to Riverside Drive. I"—she smiled reminiscently—"knew Jason's habits! Jason would give it to you in plenty of time, for the Ferret would certainly not make his attempt until well on in the early morning hours."

"Where did you get that paper and envelope?" demanded Jimmie Dale abruptly.

The color came mounting through Mother Margot's make-up into the Tocsin's cheeks.

"Yes," she said, a sudden shy confusion in her voice, "I knew you would recognize it. I have always kept a little of it in my writing case, but I never dreamed that I would ever use it under the same old circumstances again. I—I suppose you will call me a little goose. It—it was just a queer little conceit of mine. But this matter was of such infinite importance, and the use of that paper would make you understand at once how desperate the situation was! I—I had saved it to write a note, Jimmie, on our wedding day to 'Dear Philanthropic Crook' to tell him that he had all the—the Tocsin's love."

Jimmie Dale was across the table in an instant.

"The make-up, Jimmie! The make-up!" she warned.

"It still looks all right to me," pronounced Jimmie Dale with a critical grin as he finally released her from his arms; and then, instantly serious, as he perched himself on the table beside her: "Now let's see where we stand. First, how did you get this room back for me?"

"There was far less difficulty about it than I had thought there might be," she answered; "in fact, there really wasn't any at all. As I wrote you in my second note, I realized that Ray's murder changed everything, that nothing after that would hold you back; and under those circumstances I, too, changed all my ideas, for I knew I could no longer work alone, and that I could not hope to succeed without your

help, Jimmie. The first thing I thought of was the Sanctuary. I came here this morning as Mother Margot. The lodger was a very shabby old man, a musician, he called himself, who goes out fiddling on the streets for a living. I explained that I was an old friend of yours, that you used to have this room, that you had been away for a long time, but that you were coming back. I told him that you were an artist, and that the light here from that French window just suited you."

"Exquisite!" murmured Jimmie Dale modestly.

"Yes—wasn't it! I think he was already sadly behind in his rent, and on the verge of being ejected anyway. He couldn't get away too quickly when I offered to pay the rent and give him an extra ten dollars for himself. Then I saw old Isaacs—and he was delighted. But, of course, prior to all this and before Smarlinghue's name was mentioned, I had to make certain that the secret of the baseboard over there had never been discovered, as, otherwise, for you to come back as Smarlinghue would have meant exposure and the end of everything. I found, as I expected, that Smarlinghue's clothes were still there, and that nothing had ever been touched! That took only a few moments—while the old fellow was out of the room. I said I wanted to talk business with him, but maybe we could talk better over a bottle of beer—if he knew where to get it. He knew! So I gave him the money, and out he went. That's all there was to it."

Jimmie Dale nodded approvingly—and then his brows drew together.

"That cable you sent me giving the name of the ship and the date you would reach New York, and that I told all our friends about!" he said. "You are supposed to be back in a few days; but it's almost a negligible chance now that this will be cleared up in a few days! It's a case of explaining that I've received another cable saying that you have been unavoidably detained on the other side, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," she admitted reluctantly.

"All right!" Jimmie Dale's voice was quick, incisive now. "Let's sum up! First and foremost, in view of the fact that Ray apparently was voluntarily going to deliver that envelope to one of Daddy Ratzler's emissaries this morning, there is no reason why Daddy Ratzler or any

of his gang should have killed Ray, and they therefore would logically appear to be innocent of any participation in the actual murder. On the other hand, from what you saw and heard, we are morally certain that the Ferret intended to go to Ray's house last night to steal that envelope. That means he must have received a communication from those two precious pals of his in Paris, and it seems almost a certainty that he is the guilty man. That is what you said—and I have no more doubt about it than you have. I just want to get all the points into clear focus. Very well! We start with the assumption—more than the assumption: the belief—that the Ferret, being surprised in the house, killed Ray in order to escape—but it is another thing to *prove* it."

"Yes," she said a little faintly.

"That will be my job," Jimmie Dale stated in quiet tones.

"How are you going to do it?"

The corners of Jimmie Dale's lips drooped into a hard smile.

"The Ferret used to know Smarlinghue more or less casually in the old days," he answered; and then, with a whimsical lift of his shoulders: "I'll *cultivate* him! It's early yet, and if I can find him I'll begin to-night."

"And I?" she asked. "What am I to do?"

"You keep on cultivating Daddy Ratzler," he replied, with a short laugh. "The Ferret may be the murderer; but, even so, neither he nor his pals may ever have imagined that the blue envelope contained apparently only a blank sheet of paper, and it is quite a fair supposition that none of them may know how to dig the secret out of it. Daddy Ratzler does. *I* can't turn it over to the police—and the police might not be able to solve it anyway. That cursed thing is responsible for Ray's murder, and Daddy Ratzler and his crowd are as guilty as the man who fired the shot—and they are going to pay too! But to make them pay, we've got to know what game they're up to—and to know that we've got to know what the message is that the blue envelope contains. I'm not through with it myself; in fact, I've only begun the tests—but I'm neither an expert nor a chemist, and I'm not at all optimistic that I shall get anywhere along that line. Besides, I haven't got very much faith that there's any invisible writing about it at all!

But so far as that is concerned, I think we've got a little time in our favor. Daddy Ratzler and his brood were certainly waiting for that message—which they still haven't got!—before making a move; but, even after they knew it was in New York, it obviously did not demand immediate action or else they would not have been content to allow it to remain in Ray's safe overnight. I think that's worth something to us. Anyway, you stick to Daddy Ratzler."

"Yes," she said—and rose from her chair. "It must be close to eleven if not later, and if you're going to try to find the Ferret to-night, you'll need all the time there is. I'll go now."

He started with her toward the door—but as his arm went around her he felt her shiver suddenly.

"What is it? What's the matter, Marie?" he asked anxiously.

She turned her head away.

"I'm afraid," she admitted in a whisper.

He halted her, staring incredulously into her face.

"*You*—afraid!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Jimmie, sometimes," she answered. "You—you *will* be careful?"

He held her close to him.

"Afraid—for me, you mean!" he whispered back. "And yet, God knows, it is you who are in the greater danger."

"Oh, no!" she answered. "You must remember that Daddy Ratzler knows the Gray Seal has that blue envelope. It won't be the police alone who are trying to track you down. Daddy Ratzler and his pack won't leave a stone unturned to uncover the Gray Seal."

He laughed at her inspiritingly.

"Of course, they won't!" he said. "But hasn't it always been that way? Was there ever a time when the Gray Seal wasn't the one and only link that ever bound the police and underworld together in a common cause? You know that, Marie. Of course, there's danger—only fools would shut their eyes to that fact; but Daddy Ratzler isn't a bit more dangerous than any of the others have been. You are not to

worry, and you are not even to think about it from that angle. There!"—his arms tightened around her—"you are not frightened any more, are you?"

"I was just a little coward for a moment, Jimmie." She smiled up at him tremulously as she drew herself away. "Sometimes it comes like that—suddenly. It's all over now. Where are you going to look for the Ferret? Everything in the underworld we once knew is all changed now."

"Not everything," he said with a queer smile. "There are some of the old places that even prohibition, and the bootleggers, and the new breed of crooks in evening-clothes will never change. I'll find him. But about ourselves! How are we going to keep in touch with each other?"

"I know how to reach you, Jimmie," she said, as she moved on again toward the door; "and there's a telephone in my 'hotel'—ask for Agnes Watkins, and——" She had opened the door abruptly and stepped outside. "'Night, Smarly! See youse again!" she called huskily from the hall, as her footsteps scuffled hurriedly away.

He stood there a little dazed for a moment—and then mechanically he shut the door as understanding came. That sudden confession of fear—for him! She had been nearer to the breaking point than he had realized—and flight had been her one way of escape.

CHAPTER IX

TWISTY MUNN

For a moment Jimmie Dale stood there staring at the door which he had just closed, his mental vision following the disreputable figure of Mother Margot as she went scuffling along out there on the street—to God knew where, and to what ultimate fate! Fear! He, too, knew fear. The past was full of that fear. It was upon him now. He told himself in almost a panicky and frantic sort of way that he would give all he possessed if she were out of this. Then he smiled thinly. The statement was inane, futile, and the phrase was the most hackneyed in the English language. Except one. The die was cast!

His mind snapped back to the immediate present, and he swung abruptly away from the door. If he was to accomplish anything to-night there was no time to indulge in vain wishings that things were other than they were! Much more to the point was Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret!

Something implacable crept into Jimmie Dale's face. That it was the Ferret whose trail the Gray Seal had so ironically disguised, that it was the Ferret who had killed Ray, he, Jimmie Dale, had not the slightest doubt—though to prove it, as he had told the Tocsin, was another matter. But first he must find the man. After that, in some way or another, the proof would come—it might take days or weeks—he meant to get next to Connie Gowan—Smarlinghue would come to know the Ferret *intimately*!

Jimmie Dale suddenly took off his coat and vest, removed the leather girdle from around his waist, stored it away behind the baseboard, and put on his coat and vest again. There would be no need for any burglar's tools, or mask, or the gray seals in that little metal case to-night; and, if they were not a necessity, Smarlinghue was *safer* without them. The police, goaded into unusual activity, would be combing the underworld in their efforts to track down the

Gray Seal, and raids on dens and dives might very well be the feature of the night. He, Jimmie Dale, did not know where his hunt for the Ferret would lead him before morning, but quite probably into some of those selfsame dens and dives; and it would be a very unhappy moment for Smarlinghue if unluckily there were a raid and he was searched—and that girdle with its damning proof that the police had at last run their quarry to earth was found upon him! Decidedly, the Sanctuary was the place for it to-night!

True, upon his person he still had an automatic and a flashlight, but, by comparison, they were articles of a most innocuous character; and, besides, they could be quickly disposed of in an emergency. If they proved to be embarrassing, it would take much less time to pitch them away, into a corner, say, or under a table, or out of a window, than it would take the police, no matter how "strong-armed" the squad might be, to break down a door!—and then even if found who could prove their ownership?

Was there anything else? Jimmie Dale glanced sharply around him, answered his own question with a conclusive shake of his head, crossed over to the wheezy gas jet, turned out the light—and a minute later, with the Sanctuary door locked behind him, stepped out on the street.

Jimmie Dale traversed the intervening block quickly and reached the Bowery. But here he halted abruptly, staring up and down that one-time familiar thoroughfare in confusion and perplexity. He who had known it so well!

He had not been on the Bowery since before the war. Where he now stood had once been the very heart of it, swirling with life and activity—and now it was like a place of the dead. The Tocsin had told him he would not recognize it. He had expected changes. He had not expected a metamorphosis!

Back into his memory flashed the scenes of bygone days—the jostling crowds, the riotous noise, the glare of lights, the shouts of the pushcart vendors hawking their wares under the hiss of their gasoline banjo-torches, the squabbling of their customers; and here a "gape wagon" disgorging its occupants before the door of some "notorious"

joint, the cold shivers almost visible as they ran down the passengers' spines while the barker painted his epic picture of the "fearsome" sights soon to meet their gaze; the confusion of tongues; the mixture of races; rags and tatters; jewels and affluence. There had been no place like it in all the world. And now it was gone. Where there had been life, there was now almost desolation. Where there had been color, the only tints remaining were cold and drab and forbidding. Even the street itself was almost empty—there were very few pedestrians about.

Mechanically Jimmie Dale started forward along the Bowery, walking in a downtown direction. He was conscious of a curious rush of emotions; a sense of strange loneliness that was almost one of dejection, as though something acutely intimate had gone out of his life; a yet stranger sense of unreality, which still left him incredulous in spite of the evidence of his own eyes; and, too, a sense of misgiving—like one who walked in strange places and was not sure he could find his way.

And then Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders philosophically. Well, even so! The passing of the Bowery, whether it was a matter for rejoicing or regret, was of no vital moment in his search for Connie Gowan. He had not expected to find the Ferret on the Bowery. There were still the haunts that would never change, and to those Smarlinghue needed no guide!

Jimmie Dale paused suddenly. A man sidling past him, a man who was several degrees more disreputable in appearance than he, as Smarlinghue, was, had opened a door on the street level and had disappeared inside. Jimmie Dale whistled low under his breath. From the glimpse he had been able to obtain of the interior, he had recognized the nature of the place instantly—not that he had ever seen one of these establishments before, for they were a product of the new and not of the old Bowery, but Carruthers in his frequent dissertations on what he called the shifting sands of crime in New York had spoken about them more than once. Commonly known as shock joints, Carruthers had dubbed them the Clubs of the Down-and-Outers.

Jimmie Dale stared speculatively at the door. Such places were as free of access as the old-time saloons, Carruthers had said. There would be no questions asked. It might be worth while to go in. Even in the old days there had been plenty of down-and-outers amongst the lags and crooks, and there was always a chance that some of these were still eking out an existence in some such fashion as this. Who would be more ready to gossip about their own faded glories and the comings and goings of those who still were overlords in Crimeland's realm?—that is, to one they knew and recognized as a kindred soul—such as Smarlinghue!

Jimmie Dale pushed the door open and stepped inside. The place was none too well lighted and the tobacco smoke hung low; the atmosphere was fetid; the only ventilation seemed to be supplied by the occasional opening and closing of the street door. Smarlinghue coughed.

The room was long and narrow. On each side was a row of cheap chairs with table arms, the chairs much the worse for wear—like their occupants. There were perhaps twenty or twenty-five men seated or sprawled in the chairs in all stages of intoxication, from those relatively sober to those already in a comatose condition. At the far end of the room was a small bar, its shining foot-rail testifying to its constant patronage. On the floor was sawdust; everywhere was squalor.

"The passing of the Bowery," muttered Jimmie Dale to himself. "God save the mark!"

He scuffled up to the bar—noting that there was an empty chair or two from which presently he could unobtrusively scrutinize the faces around him. A hard-visaged individual in an unclean collarless shirt, and whose suspenders did duty for both coat and vest, confronted him from the other side of the bar.

"Hell of a night!" mumbled Smarlinghue, as he produced a one-dollar bill.

"It sure is!" agreed the bartender. He poured into a mug a drink of what Jimmie Dale remembered Carruthers had said was usually three ounces of raw, fifty-percent-proof alcohol, and pushed the mug across

the bar. "Want a chaser wid it?"

"Sure," said Smarlinghue, "that'll——"

"Hello, Smarly!"

Jimmie Dale swung around. Here, opposite the bar, the room made a sort of recess in which two small tables were installed. One of them was vacant; the other was occupied by an unshaven, gray-haired man of slovenly appearance whose face was now distorted by a maudlin grin. Jimmie Dale's mind pushed back the years. It was old Twisty Munn, the "fence," a one-time well known receiver of stolen goods—old even in those days, but infinitely older now and little more than a wreck of his former self. It was in Twisty Munn's room that Bunty Myers, the Phantom's unholy chief of staff, had shot and killed Kid Gregg in an attempt to appropriate unto himself some thirty thousand dollars' worth of jewels that Kid Gregg had stolen and was just then in the act of "placing" with Twisty Munn![3] Yes, he had good reason to remember Twisty Munn, for the Gray Seal had been present on that occasion and had narrowly escaped with his life—and the jewels! Also, Twisty Munn ought to prove a find!

"Hello, Twisty!" Smarlinghue grinned back.

"Come on over here!" invited the other.

"Gimme two!" Smarlinghue instructed the bartender—and with a mug in each hand crossed to the table and seated himself beside Twisty Munn.

"Atta boy!" applauded Twisty Munn, as he reached eagerly for one of the mugs. "Say, Smarly, youse're all right, an' youse always was! I'll tell de world! Say, I couldn't believe me eyes when I seen youse walk up to de soda fountain. Nobody ain't seen youse fer years. Where've youse been?"

Jimmie Dale closed one eye confidentially.

"I've been away—for my health, Twisty," he answered. "I just blew in to-day, but I'm still not sure I'm in the right town. The signs on the street out there say it's the Bowery, but is this New York or isn't it?"

Twisty Munn imbibed deeply.

"Ain't it hell!" he said in lacrimose tones. "Dere ain't nothin' on de Bowery now but dese joints an' de flop houses. De righteous has been tryin' to mop up de whole works."

Jimmie Dale looked around the room. White, pinched faces—those that were not hidden in stupor on outflung arms! Lusterless eyes—two rows of them! Emaciation! Ghosts of Lost Hopes! And yet some laughed—or, rather, the booze did!

"Well, they've made a bum job of it, then!" commented Smarlinghue gruffly. "There was nothing that was even a patch on this before—and it seems to run wide open. This is a new one on me. What's the big idea? I heard someone say these dumps were called shock joints. What's the answer to that?"

Twisty Munn pointed a shaky finger at Jimmie Dale's drink.

"Youse take a swig of dat, an' youse'll find out!" he grunted. "Dere oughter be a skull an' crossbones on every mug! It's all made around de corner."

"They should have used it in the war as a high explosive!" Smarlinghue grimaced after a mouthful. "But say, I'm asking you, what's the big idea? Don't the cops ever butt in?"

Twisty Munn shook his head.

"Nix!" he said. "Dere's more'n thirty of dese dumps on de Bowery all runnin' just de same as dis one, an' some of 'em bigger. Wot's de cops goin' to do wid us? Dey ain't buildin' no extensions on de coolers, an' we ain't no place to go unless we got de price of a flop house, an' de price of de flop houses has gone up too."

"I paid twenty cents apiece for these drinks," objected Smarlinghue, "and the price of a bed hasn't gone up over that, has it?"

Twisty Munn sniffed.

"Well, den, mabbe we ain't got de price of *both*," he said. "Youse ain't on yer uppers, Smarly! See?"

"No; I don't see," retorted Smarlinghue. "What do the cops do, and what do you do when these joints close up for the night and you get thrown out?"

"Smarly, youse've been a long time away!" said Twisty Munn pityingly. "Dese joints don't never close, an' youse can stay as long as youse likes—a week if youse wants to, an' youse don't have to buy nothin' neither. De guys dat runs 'em ain't so bad, bo! Say, take a look at dat"—he pointed to the half-open door of a small room that had been partitioned off between the end of the bar and the rear wall of the building. "Wot d'youse see?"

Jimmie Dale's eyes followed the direction indicated. The room, from what he could glimpse of the interior, contained a stove, on the top of which rested a huge metal boiler. He could also see a portion of a shelf on which a large number of white bowls were stacked—and which suddenly changed color as a swarm of cockroaches scurried across them.

"Mostly cockroaches," replied Smarlinghue facetiously.

"Sure!" said Twisty Munn. "Dat's wot some of us calls it—cockroach stew."

Smarlinghue shook his head.

"I don't get you," he said.

"Soup!" explained Twisty Munn. "I ain't sayin' de vegetables is fresh, or dat de bones ain't picked up in de discard, an' somebody slipped it to me dat it didn't cost more'n a dollar fer de whole tubful, but it's hot, an' dere ain't no charge for it. Twice a day, at noon an' five in de afternoon, it's handed out as long as it lasts, an' no questions asked. An', besides dat, every mornin' between five an' eight dere's a free drink handed out to anyone wot wants it. It ain't a big one, just an ounce, Smarly—a pick-up to start youse off on another day."

"Gawd!" said Smarlinghue. "How did you get down to this, Twisty?"

Twisty Munn shook his head dolefully.

"De toughest kind of luck," he said, "dat's wot! It wasn't my fault. Youse remember hearin' about Kid Gregg gettin' bumped off in my room, don't youse?"

"Everybody remembers that," nodded Smarlinghue.

Twisty Munn circled his lips with his tongue reminiscently.

"Well, dey never found out who handed de Kid de spot, but de cops rode me hard 'cause dey thought I knew. Y'understand?"

Again Smarlinghue nodded. He understood very well. It was quite true that Twisty Munn had never squealed, but that was because he had been very much more afraid of Bunty Myers than he had been of the police!

"Go on, Twisty," he invited. "What's the rest?"

"I lost me job—dat's de rest," said Twisty Munn mournfully. "Youse knows wot me line was, Smarly. Wid de cops nosin' all de time, dere wouldn't nobody take a chance on me shovin' anythin' fer dem any more. I went broke. I had ter do somethin'. I was de stall fer a wire on de shorts—ridin' de ozone, an' doin' de rattlers an' de hole, youse knows."

"Picking pockets in the subways, or street cars, or anywhere else, doesn't sound much in your line!" observed Smarlinghue in genuine surprise. "Where did you go to college?"

"Aw, say—not me!" protested Twisty Munn modestly. "Didn't I tell youse I was only de stall? But de wire was good. I ain't mentionin' any names, but he was good. I worked wid him for about a year, an' den I got pinched. I got sent up for two spaces, an'—well, I guess dat's all. Here I am, Smarly."

"Tough is right!" agreed Smarlinghue. "I'll say it was tough! Have another, Twisty?"

Twisty Munn's face brightened.

"Smarly, youse're a real friend," he said eagerly.

Jimmie Dale replenished the other's mug at the bar. He had let Twisty Munn talk, invited it, in fact, in order to probe now for the information he was really after without arousing any suspicions in the other's mind. He, Jimmie Dale, did not want it noised abroad that he was *particularly* interested in Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret. His inquiries regarding old haunts and old acquaintances were merely the casual and natural inquiries of a wanderer on his return! He went back to the table with Twisty Munn's mug.

"I ain't taking any more myself, Twisty," said Smarlinghue apologetically. "I feel now like I'd been kicked in the guts!"

"Dat's all right," said Twisty Munn graciously. "I guess youse've got to get used to it. Dat's de way it hit me at first. Here's how!"

"Drink hearty!" returned Smarlinghue; and then anxiously: "Say, Twisty, I'm glad I bumped into you. The way things have changed it looks like I'd got to buy a guidebook. Wise me up a bit. All the old joints like Malay John's, and Hoy Loo's, and Blind Peter's, and that sort, ain't out too, are they?"

"No; they ain't," replied Twisty Munn. "None of de *real* ones is. Dey're still doin' business at de old stands."

"Well, that's good news anyway!" exclaimed Smarlinghue in well-simulated relief. "I was afraid I was going to be lonely. Yours is the first face I've seen since I got back that I knew. So the old crowd's still at the same hangouts, eh?"

"Sure, as far as I knows; but"—Twisty Munn's voice grew suddenly bitter—"dey doesn't let me into any of dem dumps now. I'm only a bum."

"Aw, forget it!" said Smarlinghue brightly. "Don't let that get your goat! Tell us about some of the boys. Is Connie Gowan still around?"

"Youse means de Ferret? Sure, he's around—somewhere. But he ain't been seen fer de last few days!" Twisty Munn indulged in a chuckle. "Anyone wot wants to know where he is'd better go over to Nassau Joe's at de Jungle an' ask Tony de Wop about him. Youse remembers Tony, an' de Jungle, don't youse? Sure, youse does! Well, dat's where Tony hangs out now most of de time. De Jungle—see? Dat's where dey say he runs his fleet of booze wagons from."

"I don't know the answer to your riddle!" complained Smarlinghue. "I ain't anxious about Connie or the Wop any more than any of the rest of the boys that used to send me Christmas cards—but where does the laugh come in?"

"It ain't no riddle," replied Twisty Munn; "an' I'll tell youse wot I was laughin' at in a minute. Listen, Smarly. De racket's changed a lot around here—and so's de gangs. Dere's a lot of de boys has given up

dere old perfeshuns an' gone in fer de booze game; an' de Ferret an' de Wop is two of 'em."

"I'd hate to believe that!" There was pain in Smarlinghue's voice. "The Wop maybe, for he never got on the front page anyhow; but not Connie Gowan! Why, he was the slickest box-worker in the country, the best we ever had. Say, why don't you tell me he's dead? It wouldn't make me feel any worse!"

"Wot I'm tellin' youse is de straight goods," asserted Twisty Munn earnestly. "Dere's more money in it—dat's de answer. Some of de guys youse an' me uster know dat didn't have two nickels to rub together between pinches is millionaires to-day. Dat's right, Smarly; an' dat's de racket Connie an' de Wop is in now."

"Working together, you mean?"

Twisty Munn began to chuckle again.

"Nothin' like dat! An' dat's where de laugh comes in. I was laughin' because de Wop thinks he's got Connie scared an' has made him duck his nut, just because he's sayin' wot he's goin' to do to Connie. All de guys down here is talkin' about wot happened, an' dat's how I got next to it. Youse see, Smarly, de two of 'em gets into a row over a moll de other night at a dump called de Rose Garden, an' de shootin' starts, but nobody gets hurt 'cause de lights goes out an' everybody beats it wid de cops gettin' dere on de jump. Den de Wop says he's goin' to hand Connie de spot—an' Connie ain't been seen since. An' dat's why I says dat if anybody wants to get a line on de Ferret, de Wop's de best bet 'cause he's got his whole gang out lookin' fer Connie. But if youse asks me it'll be de Wop wot gets his! All de world knows dat Connie's workin' a booze run dat's got a secret to it dat nobody ain't found out, an' I'm shovin' in all de chips I got dat dat's wot he's doin' now. When he gets dat off his chest, de Wop'll get wot he's askin' fer. An' I ain't so sure about dat moll stuff neither. Mabbe it's only a stall dat Tony's pullin' as an excuse to get the low-down on Connie's layout. I dunno! But youse can take it from me dat Connie ain't duckin' 'cause he's scared. De Ferret'll just step around when he gets ready an' blow de Wop's block off!"

Jimmie Dale's mind was working quickly. He was not at all pleased with what he had heard. Connie Gowan wasn't going to be so easy to find after all. He quite agreed that the Ferret's disappearance was not due to any fears engendered by the threats of Tony the Wop; but he had a most excellent reason for disagreeing very emphatically with Twisty Munn's theory as to why Connie Gowan had taken cover. It was a certainty that something far different from bootlegging had engaged the Ferret's attention last night, as witness his spying on Daddy Ratzler; and it was almost equally a certainty that last night the Ferret had shot and killed Ray Thorne in Ray Thorne's home! And now—what? Tony the Wop and the Jungle? He did not like that, either. But it seemed the best lead.

Smarlinghue grinned at Twisty Munn. He had obtained all the information he could hope for from the other; but it was still not yet even midnight, and he had no intention of leaving Twisty Munn with even so much as a vague impression that the comings and goings of the Ferret mattered a whit to Smarlinghue above those of anyone else in Yeggland.

"I believe you, Twisty!" he said. "Connie's the boy I'd put my own money on every time. But there'll be something doing, that's sure, and I ain't shedding any tears that I'm out of it. Tell us about some of the rest of the bunch. Where's the Kitten?—no, I forgot, he got bumped off before I went away. What's Parson Pete doing?"

"In stir!" said Twisty Munn. "He's chummin' wid de P.K. up de river. He got ten spaces fer a bank job."

"Hell!" exclaimed Smarlinghue feelingly. "That's rough!" He got up abruptly, and once more stepped over to the bar on Twisty Munn's behalf. "Spill some more, Twisty," he urged as he returned to the table, "I'm beginning to feel like I was really home again!"

Twisty Munn's blear eyes brightened. He was effusively grateful for the re-replenished mug, and he was very glad to talk to a kindred soul—and so he talked. But Twisty Munn, hardened as he was by long usage to the shock joint's brew, was not superhuman. Articulation, as

time went on, became increasingly difficult, and at the end of another half hour Jimmie Dale rose from his chair and made his way out to the street. Twisty Munn was snoring raucously on the table.

"Poor devils—the lot of them!" muttered Jimmie Dale. "I can't say I think the Bowery has improved!"

The night had grown worse; the drizzle had turned to rain and the fog had thickened. Jimmie Dale turned up the collar of Smarlinghue's shabby coat, and, with a philosophical shrug of his shoulders, swung off the Bowery and headed into the East Side. Moralizing wouldn't find Connie Gowan!

His brows drew together and his face clouded. The Jungle! One of the worst and therefore one of the most carefully guarded dives in the Bad Lands! Smarlinghue could get in there, of course—it was one of the old haunts—but it did not sound very promising. What, after all, could he expect from a visit there?

And then Jimmie Dale shook his head impatiently. Who knew! He might pick up a word or two if Tony the Wop had learned anything new. Luck might break for him. Anything might happen. Anyway, it was the logical starting point and he was going there. Afterward, there were other places; and if he got no trace of Connie Gowan anywhere to-night, there was to-morrow night—and night after night thereafter! Tony the Wop would not be alone in his efforts to unearth the Ferret!

Jimmie Dale, in spite of Smarlinghue's characteristic slouch, covered the ground rapidly. He was in an uninviting neighborhood now, comprised of cheap stores and cheap tenements, with a sprinkling here and there of self-contained houses of woebegone appearance. The Jungle was one of the latter and was in the next block. The front of the house, by way of camouflaging the premises, presented itself to the eye of the passer-by in the innocent guise of a somewhat dingy little tobacco store.

But the entrance to the Jungle was not through the tobacco store. Between the house and the adjoining tenement there was an alleyway, and by means of the alleyway one might reach the back door of the house without attracting undue attention. Once there, if one had the entrée, one got in—otherwise one didn't! It was a sub-cellar dive of

unspeakable iniquity in which Nassau Joe, the proprietor of whom Twisty Munn had spoken, a West Indian of mixed parentage, catered rapaciously to every vicious taste.

Jimmie Dale passed the tobacco store—it was unlighted and obviously closed for the night—and turned into the alleyway. He had no fear of being observed. The street was never adequately lighted at best, and to-night with the fog and rain the visibility was reduced to the radius of a few yards. But the visibility in the alleyway was still less—it was so black here that he had to feel his way.

The house had a small backyard, he remembered, that opened off the alleyway. Yes, here it was! The back door was just a yard or so away, and——

He halted suddenly, and instinctively drew back against the wall of the house. Someone was not only coming from the street end of the alleyway, but was coming as though in frantic haste, running and stumbling through the darkness. And then whoever it was passed by so close that Jimmie Dale could almost have reached out his hand and touched the other, but in the blackness he could see no more than an indistinct blur. A moment more, and he heard the newcomer knock upon the back door.

Jimmie Dale's lips tightened. He had got Smarlinghue into a rather unenviable situation—if Smarlinghue were caught crouching here against the wall, and apparently in the act of spying!

The door opened.

"Who's there?" demanded a voice.

"It's de Mole," came the answer in hurried and excited tones. "Tony's here, ain't he?"

"Sure!"

"Is he alone?"

"What do you think he's doing—playing solitaire?"

"Well, I gotta see him alone, an' I gotta see him on de jump," stated the Mole even more excitedly than before. "Tell him to come out here, will youse?"

"Sure! I'll tell him."

The door closed. There was silence. Jimmie Dale's pulse quickened. The errand that had brought the Mole here might have nothing whatever to do with the Ferret, but a prescience that would not be denied told Jimmie Dale that it had—that the something he had hoped might happen, plus the luck that he had hoped might break, was happening for him now in unbounded measure. And he had no further fear of being discovered himself. All he could see of the Mole was a vague outline that would have been meaningless if he had not actually known that the man was standing there on the doorstep. A chance in a thousand, then, that he would be seen himself!

The door opened once more.

"Dat youse, Tony?" demanded the Mole.

"Yeh! Got anything?"

"Got anything!" ejaculated the Mole boastfully. "I got de whole dope from de cellar up! Say, shut dat door behind youse. Now, listen! I found out where de Ferret is an' all about de whole of his racket. Some nifty work, eh? I'll spill youse de story of how I done it when we has de time. Dat don't cut no ice now. Dere's an old guy named Bilwitz wot's got a wharf down on dis side of de East River. He's got a little lumber business, an' he's supposed to be on de level—only he ain't. Lumber barges ain't de only things dat's unloaded on dat wharf! Bilwitz an' de Ferret has been workin' de booze racket together on de quiet fer de last year. See?"

"Yeh!" Tony's voice was hoarse with excitement. "To hell with Bilwitz! Is that where the Ferret is?"

"Dat's where he is, an', wot's more, he's all alone down dere right now. An' dere's something else, too. De wharf's phoney. Dey got a big motor boat hidden dere dat's got a hundred cases an' mabbe more in her now dat dey didn't get no chance to unload—an' de Ferret's stayin' wid it. I ain't so sure he's been hidin'; he's just been stayin' wid de booze 'cause two or three nights ago, comin' in from Rum Row, old Bilwitz, who ain't no young chicken, caught a cold dat landed him up in de hospital wid noomonia or something, an' dat left de Ferret up in de air, an' all alone wid de booze to look after. See? I guess youse don't have to draw no cards to dat hand, eh?"

Tony the Wop began to laugh in ugly glee; then his voice, sharp and sibilant, cut through the darkness:

"A hundred cases—besides bumping the Ferret off! There's enough of the boys hanging out over at Skilly's to-night to do the job. You go get 'em! That won't take long. I'll be waiting for you outside here on the street. Bring a truck back with you to ride us over and ride the booze back. The Ferret'll get *his* ride in a glass wagon! Go on, beat it—quick!"

And now, too, the Mole laughed in ugly fashion.

"I won't be long!" he promised.

The door opened and closed again. The Mole's retreating footsteps died away—and, a minute later, Jimmie Dale had reached the street and was racing along it.

But his brain raced the faster. Where was this wharf? The Mole had said that Bilwitz carried on, or at least pretended to carry on, a legitimate business. The answer was simple—a drug store and a city directory! Luck! It was beyond anything he could have hoped for. Smarlinghue had had only a passing and casual acquaintance with the Ferret—and here, to hand, was the opening wedge that would lead to *intimacy*. The Ferret would be grateful to Smarlinghue for the warning to-night! He had no compunction in playing a double game with the Ferret, no pity and no mercy where the man who had shot down Ray Thorne was concerned. The fact that, in any case, he could not have stood idly by without doing anything to prevent the Ferret from being murdered was a secondary consideration. It was the proof of the Ferret's guilt he was after. It might take days or weeks or months to get it, but he was on the sure road to it now—if only he could reach the Ferret *in time* to-night!

CHAPTER X

THE FERRET

The fog had settled on the river like a weird, gray smudge; and, few as must be the passing craft at that hour, the unceasing discordance of their fog sirens, some screaming shrilly, some bellowing hoarsely, but all seized as though with a common panic which resulted in scarcely any pause between their individual blasts, was as if the water were alive with traffic.

But that was the only evidence of life!

Jimmie Dale experienced a growing feeling of uneasiness as he moved swiftly, though cautiously, along. Well as he had once known the locality he was now in he was not so sure of the landmarks—and the fog did not help any, either! It was a section of the water front a little away from the congested area. There were scarcely any lights—and these of little avail on a night like this. The few scattered warehouses and wharf sheds were black. It was not a neighborhood of dwellings, and he had met no one, seen no one. He peered anxiously about him. Bilwitz's wharf must be very near here now!

How much time had he left? Had he any? Or was he already too late? The questions harassed him. He had no means of answering them. He did not know where "Skilly's" was, and therefore how long it would have taken the Mole to bring Tony's gangsters back to the rendezvous at the Jungle. Both Tony and the Mole had said it wouldn't take long. But not every place, drug store or otherwise, where a directory might be consulted, was open after midnight! Had the Mole's errand taken longer than it had taken him, Jimmie Dale, to find the address of one Bilwitz who was supposed to be engaged in the lumber business? *That* was the vital point. Thereafter Tony and his murder crew would not take long in reaching their objective—with a

truck! But, against that, he, Jimmie Dale, had come as far as he had dared in a taxi. He had just dismissed the taxi three or four minutes ago.

Jimmie Dale came to a sudden halt and stood listening intently. Was this the place? It should be; and, if so, then he was still in time. There wasn't a sound from anywhere in the immediate vicinity; and however quickly Tony and his hi-jackers might have got here they could not have outdistanced him to such an extent that they could have completed their work and gone away again. It might not take them long to surprise and murder their victim, but a hundred cases of liquor could not be unloaded from a boat and reloaded on a truck quite so expeditiously!

He stepped from the road across a narrow open space, deep with wheel ruts, to where a small building loomed up before him, and beyond which, extending out into the river to lose itself in that gray wall of fog, he could just distinguish the outlines of a wharf. Like every other building in the vicinity it was unlighted and showed no signs of occupancy.

Jimmie Dale's flashlight played for an inquisitive second through the darkness, disclosing what was obviously no more than a one-story office shed; held for another instant on the lettering, scarcely discernible for dirt and neglect, that was painted on one of the two windows—and was extinguished again as he read the inscription:

H. BILWITZ & CO.,
LUMBER MERCHANTS.

A grim smile of relief pulled down the corners of Jimmie Dale's lips as he knocked upon the door. The luck was holding!

Was it? There was no answer. He knocked again, more loudly and insistently than before. There was still no answer. It was queer! Very strange! Anybody anywhere in a rickety structure like this must have heard the knocking unless he were stone deaf—and Connie Gowan was far from being deaf in any degree! It was possible, of course, that the Ferret was not here after all; that, like last night, for instance, prompted by affairs of more ugly moment, he had again left his cargo from Rum Row to take care of itself. And yet the Mole had been so

sure! Again Jimmie Dale began a tattoo with his knuckles on the panels—and suddenly a voice came snarling viciously at him out of the blackness from around the corner of the shed at the edge of the wharf.

"Cut out that row, curse you! What's the idea?"

"Is that you, Connie?" Smarlinghue called back eagerly.

"Who are you?" countered the other.

"I'm Smarlinghue," Jimmie Dale replied. "You remember Smarlinghue, don't you?"

"Smarly, eh? Yes, I remember Smarly—but he's been gone a long time! Come down here and let me get a look at your map—with your hands up!"

Jimmie Dale obeyed. He was quite well aware that the figure lurking there at the edge of the wharf had him covered. As he reached the corner of the shed, the ray of a flashlight, flung suddenly in his face, blinded him; and then, the flashlight pointing the way, he was pushed toward a side door in the shed.

"Yes; you're Smarly, all right!" growled the other. "Come on in, and tell us about it!"

"There ain't no time to go in," protested Smarlinghue. "Say, you're Connie Gowan, ain't you?"

"You've said a mouthful," admitted the other. "What about it?"

"Then there ain't no time to go in," reiterated Smarlinghue. "You've got to beat it, Connie—and beat it quick!"

"Is that so?" inquired the Ferret casually. "And why?"

"Because," Smarlinghue blurted out wildly, "Tony the Wop and his gang are on the way down here now to bump you off and pinch some booze that they say you've got here in a motor boat."

"Is *that* so!" repeated the Ferret—but this time in the form of a menacing exclamation. "Well, I guess there's time to chew this over a bit!" He pushed Jimmie Dale inside the shed and switched on a light, "I don't get chased away from here as easy as that! Now, what's the steer?"

"For Gawd's sake put out that light!" pleaded Smarlinghue. "It ain't any steer! It's on the level, Connie! I'm telling you, it's the straight goods!"

But the Ferret refused to switch off the light. His little black eyes were narrowed to slits, and the automatic in his hand still held a bead on Smarlinghue.

"That's all right, Smarly," he grinned unamiably; "but this sounds fishy to me. You and me ain't no blood relations, and you don't owe me nothing. Why this brotherly-love stuff?"

"It ain't that," urged Smarlinghue in desperation. "But you and me ain't never had anything against each other, either. If I was caught at this they'd cut my throat, but I knew you'd never spill the beans on me no matter what happened. I wasn't for seeing any man murdered—cold."

"That's all right!" The Ferret's tones were slightly mollified. "If you're telling the truth, Smarly, you're safe with me. But you got to show me first. See? How the hell did you know I was here? How did you get next to all this?"

Smarlinghue did not disguise his agitation. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. Were they going to be trapped in here? He was not sure, but he thought he had caught the rumble of a truck.

"One of Tony's gang, called the Mole, found out about it"—Smarlinghue was pouring out his words in frantic haste—"I don't know how. I heard Tony and the Mole talking about it outside the Jungle, and Tony sent the Mole for the rest of the gang—and I beat it for here to wise you up. But I'm telling you again there ain't any time for talking. They can't be more than a few minutes behind me, and——*Listen*! There's a truck just stopped out there. That's the way they were coming—on a truck!"

For the fraction of a second the Ferret listened—and then red anger flamed suddenly into his face.

"You're right, Smarly, I hear 'em!" he burst out hoarsely, and a string of vicious oaths purled from working lips. "But they've got a long way to come yet before they get me! The white-livered mongrels! And mabbe, just to sweeten up the pot, I'll get one or two of 'em

before they start drawing any cards! See that trapdoor over in the far corner at the back of the shed? Got it spotted? All right!" He switched off the light. "They could see us through the front windows. Feel your way to it and yank it up while I lock the side door here. I ain't going to let 'em *walk* in!"

"I get you!" It was Smarlinghue who spoke—but it was Jimmie Dale, lithe and agile as a panther, who leaped swiftly across the floor, and, locating the trapdoor, pulled it up.

The sense of touch told him that a flight of steep, ladderlike steps led downward; and from below he could hear the *lap* of water—but his ear caught other sounds now—stealthy footsteps from several points outside! The shed was being surrounded!

Jimmie Dale strained his eyes through the blackness. There was a dark shadow out there against one of the front windowpanes—several of them. And now someone was guardedly at work on the lock of the front door.

But Jimmie Dale was not alone in what he saw and heard, for the Ferret, who had crept silently across the shed, and now stood almost at Jimmie Dale's elbow, laughed suddenly, jeeringly—and the next instant the flame tongue of the Ferret's automatic cut through the black. A scream answered the shot from the other side of the shattered windowpane.

"I hope to Gawd it was the Wop!" gritted the Ferret—and fired again. "I'll ..." His words were drowned out by what was obviously a concerted rush upon the door, a crash, and the groan of sagging timbers.

Jimmie Dale's hand stole into the pocket of his coat and closed grimly upon his own automatic. With their failure to enter the shed by stealth and catch the Ferret unawares, the Wop and his followers had incontinently thrown all caution to the winds. Fury at their discomfiture would alone rule them now. The trapdoor led down under the wharf, of course. But after that—what? Was there a way out? If not, it became a question of the first law of nature, that was all—a fight to a finish. Caught here, it was death to Smarlinghue as

certainly as it was death to the Ferret. His lips twitched in a wry grimace. Not a nice place to die—with the murderer of Ray Thorne as his ally!

Another crash upon the door!

And then the Ferret spoke again—punctuating his words with the flashes of his automatic.

"Go on, Smarly—quick!" he barked. "Beat it down the steps! They'll have the door bust open in a minute!"

Jimmie Dale without answer swung himself through the trapdoor opening and got his footing on the steps beneath. He felt the Ferret come crowding after him.

"Look out for yourself!" warned the Ferret. "It ain't far! Stand still when you get to the bottom or you'll fall off."

It was pitch black. Feeling out with his foot, Jimmie Dale discovered that he had reached the bottom step. As the Ferret had said, he had not had far to go—only a matter of some seven or eight feet, he judged, below the level of the shed.

"I'm all right!" he answered.

Came again a crash upon the front door, louder than any that had gone before—and then the pound of feet overhead, the snarl of voices, oaths, a sudden succession of shots. The trapdoor above him banged shut, and the clang of metal told him that the Ferret had shot a heavy bolt or fastening of some kind into place. And now the Ferret, descending in turn, pushed past him.

"D'ye hear them last shots?" he flung out. "Well, I got another of 'em! There'll be some parking done in the morgue to-morrow! Yes, and some more yet, mabbe! Didn't I tell you they'd got a long way to go before they got the Ferret! Bump me off and pinch the booze, eh? They got a fat chance—not! But they've spoiled my racket, damn 'em! I'd give the whole boatload to get my claws into the neck of that greasy, knife-stabbing Wop! Wait! We've got to have a light. It won't help them none, 'cause they can't see us, and they couldn't fire through the planking anyway. You stay here for a minute and don't let them try any monkey-work with that trapdoor. I'll fix the rest."

There was the click of an electric-light switch—and Jimmie Dale stared around him, his eyes blinking in the sudden transition from utter darkness. A little string of incandescents disclosed the interior of the wharf. He was standing on a narrow platform that extended the wharf's entire length; and moored against the platform a few yards away was a big motor boat, deep in the water, and loaded with something, tarpaulin-covered, that was piled above the gunwales both fore and aft. He had no need to ask what that "something" was. If he were any judge, there were certainly many more than a hundred cases there. The Mole had been conservative in his estimate!

Footsteps sounded suddenly on the wharf above his head, then the sound of heavy blows, and the rending of wood—the Wop and his gang were wasting no time! Not being able to fire through the planking, as the Ferret had observed, they were now proceeding to tear it up! The Ferret, for some reason or other, had dashed to the far end of the platform and back again, and now, casting off the mooring lines, had jumped into the cockpit of the boat, and was leaning over the engine.

"Come on, Smarly!" he whispered. "You get the idea, don't you?"

The front end of the wharf was apparently as solidly enclosed as were the sides; but, as there was no other possible exit, the solution was not far from the obvious.

"It opens like a door, don't it?" hazarded Smarlinghue, as he joined the Ferret in the boat.

"You've said it!" nodded the Ferret. "From the outside it looks like the boards went all the way down with the piles—but they don't! They don't go down only just enough below low-water mark, so's nobody is wise to it. I just unfastened it. All there is to do is start the boat, and the boat pushes her own way out—easy! See?"

"Sure!" said Jimmie Dale readily—but his eyes were searching critically about him as he weighed the Ferret's plan in his mind.

It was obvious that the moment the Ferret started up the engine, the Wop's murder gang above there, who were ripping desperately at the planking with the only too apparent object of raking the interior of the wharf with a hail of bullets, would hear the roar of the exhaust and

have not the slightest misconception as to its meaning; and it was equally obvious that the moment the boat poked her nose out into the open they would be waiting at the end of the wharf to pour down into her at most unpleasant range all the lead that they possessed! The boat was an open one. He could quite understand why. Anything in the shape of a cabin would have been waste space for a boat of the size of this one, taking into consideration the purpose for which she was employed. She did not carry *passengers* from Rum Row! But, too, the protection of her crew from attack when running her illicit cargo had not been altogether overlooked. Just aft of the engine the cases had been piled in such a way as to form a small roofed space under which one might crouch in safety from any pursuing shots. The Ferret's plan was entirely feasible, and, furthermore, did not appear to involve much risk, for on top of everything else the dense fog out there would blanket the boat almost from the moment she was clear of the wharf.

His eyes traveled back to the Ferret. The Ferret's attention had been diverted from the engine to his automatic, which he was now in the act of reloading hurriedly.

"I guess you won't get a chance to use that any more, will you?" observed Smarlinghue mildly. "You'll have to lie pretty close going out."

The Ferret blazed into sudden rage.

"Mabbe I will and mabbe I won't!" he snarled. "Listen to 'em up there trying to get a hole to shoot through so's to plug a man in the back! What d'ye think! Didn't I tell you they'd put my racket on the rocks! The whole world'll know about this place to-morrow, and it's finished. Get that? It's finished! A couple of 'em won't pay for it, and that's all I got so far—just a couple of 'em! I'd hate to say good-night to 'em without getting another!"

"Don't be a fool, Connie," advised Smarlinghue earnestly. "They'll be lined up on the end of the wharf the minute they hear the engine start. You can't take a crack at 'em without showing yourself, can you? Well, then, if you do, the betting is that you'll get yours, and that'll help a lot—I don't think!"

The Ferret's jaw was hard-set.

"You're all to the good, Smarly," he said through thin lips, "and I ain't going to forget what you done to-night, but you mind your own damn business! I'll take care of myself, all right!" He stepped suddenly out on the platform, switched off the lights, and jumped into the boat again. "I ain't handing 'em any extra light to see by as we go out!" he explained savagely. "You get in there under them cases. There's room for us both, and I'll be with you as soon as I start the engine up. Are you ready?"

The attack on the planking overhead was not only being more vigorously pressed than ever, but was showing imminent promise of a successful issue. Something, a loosened piece of timber probably, fell with a splash into the water. Jimmie Dale crouched down beneath the barricade. However great or little the danger in running the gauntlet from the wharf end, it was obvious that the sooner they started away the better—they would be under fire here in the next minute or so.

"Let 'er go!" he said tersely.

The Ferret made no answer—but the next instant the enclosed space was reverberating with a deafening roar as the engine started. The boat, moving forward, gained momentum; and the Ferret, now taking cover too, crouched down beside Jimmie Dale. And then, a minute later, under the boat's weight and impetus, the hinged end of the wharf swung outward and the boat began to nose her way out into the open.

Oaths, exclamations, yells, a volley of shots greeted the boat's appearance—and to Jimmie Dale it seemed as though a battery of machine guns had opened upon them, so continuous was the fire as a hailstorm of lead spattered upon the cases above his head and splintered them. A grim smile flickered across his lips. Fate was indulging in quite a naïve sense of humor! Even the cargo was joining in the fusillade! Champagne! Some of the bullets made a target! Here and there, in a feeble, protesting outcry, muffled by its wrappings, a bottle popped! And then the boat cleared the end of the wharf.

"Hell!" shrieked the Ferret above the uproar. "I was hoping some of 'em would have jumped down on the boat as we came out! That was what I was loading my rod for—I'd have plugged 'em cold! But I might

have known they wouldn't have the nerve! Curse 'em! Mabbe, though, it ain't too late yet. They can't see the boat now; they're just firing like fools into the fog. A lucky shot at the flashes—get me? I'll——"

"Yes, and what about your own flashes?" snapped Jimmie Dale; and, too late to stop the other, thrust out a restraining hand—the Ferret had jumped suddenly back into the cockpit.

The man was mad, of course, in a berserk rage, foolhardy beyond words. He was standing up there now, and firing back over the top of the cases as fast as he could pull trigger. A burst of shots from the wharf and a patter of bullets on the cases answered him—and then, though it was too dark to see distinctly, the Ferret's shadowy form seemed to sway grotesquely, and what was manifestly the man's pistol made a queer little clattering sound as it fell on the boat's grating.

In an instant Jimmie Dale was beside the other—but only in time to catch the Ferret in his arms and lay a limp figure down on the bottom of the boat.

"How bad is it, Connie?" he asked solicitously.

The Ferret made no reply.

From his pocket Jimmie Dale wrenched out his flashlight, and, switching it on as he knelt over the other, tore open the Ferret's coat and vest. One glance was enough—there was death in the man's face. But he could not find the wound. Yes, here it was! In the left side—the stain was showing now, spreading. The bullet must have ricocheted from somewhere—it could not have been a direct hit, as otherwise, with almost breast-high protection, it would have been a head wound. Did it matter? The man at least was still breathing.

Jimmie Dale stared around him. Nothing but fog—he could not see even a boat's length ahead. Nothing but the discordant medley of the sirens—the firing from the wharf had ceased. And the boat was speeding now—he did not know in exactly what direction. There had been no effort made to steer the boat since they had left the wharf. He did not know whether she had veered to the right or the left, or was headed straight out into the river. *He* had not seen any of those flashes which would at least have told him where the wharf lay and from which he could have judged the present course. As it was, the

boat was now tearing blindly through the night to certain destruction—either by collision with some other craft or by finally bringing up with a headlong smash on one side of the river or the other. There was only one thing to do!

It had taken him but a second to reach his decision. It took him but another second to stop the engine. And then, back again at the Ferret's side, his flashlight restored to his pocket, he sat down on the bottom of the boat, and, raising the other's head, supported it on his knee. There was nothing else he could do for the man. He knew that. One did not have to be a medical practitioner to read the end that he had seen so plainly written in the Ferret's face. It was a question if the man would ever regain so much as momentary consciousness!

A strange mingling of emotions surged upon Jimmie Dale. The abysmal irony of it all! The utter futility of his efforts when he had been so sure of ultimate success! Here was the end—with the proof of the man's guilt dying with him! That promise to Ray unkept! The Gray Seal unvindicated! But he was conscious, too, of a sense of compassion in the presence of death that displaced, or at least mellowed, the bitterness in his heart toward the man who had murdered his friend.

The Ferret stirred—rolling his head uneasily on Jimmie Dale's knee.

"Better, Connie?" Jimmie Dale asked softly.

"It's—it's dark," said the Ferret feebly. "That you, Smarly?"

"Yes—sure!" said Jimmie Dale.

"Then, listen! There's something I want you to do, Smarly. I ain't fooling myself. I've got mine, all right."

"What's the use of talking like that?" said Jimmie Dale hearteningly. "Buck up, Connie! You haven't cashed in yet, have you?"

"Cut out the—the bunk!" rasped the Ferret. "I ain't any squealer! I got the spot, all right, like you said I would. Listen! I'm telling you there's something I want you to do. I—I got a couple of pals that ..." The Ferret's voice died to a murmur.

Jimmie Dale bent his head lower.

"I didn't get all that, Connie," he said gently.

The Ferret nodded weakly.

"Wait!" he said. "Give me time. It—it ain't easy to talk. Boston Bob and Pinky John."

Jimmie Dale grew suddenly tense—but Smarlinghue's tones were unaltered. Was the truth, a confession, coming after all!

"I used to know 'em," said Smarlinghue. "What is it you want?"

"They ain't here yet"—there were long pauses now between the Ferret's words—"they're coming from France. Got held up. Cabled me in code to get—to get——" The Ferret choked and stopped.

"Yes," prompted Smarlinghue, and fought to keep his voice in control, "to get—what?"

"That's none of your business!" There was an attempt at a snarl in the Ferret's broken tones. "Just something. See? I want 'em to know I didn't throw 'em down. I tried first chance I got—last night—only the Gray Seal beat me to it."

"The Gray Seal! Last night!" Jimmie Dale made no effort to curb Smarlinghue's very natural excitement. "Say, I read about that in the papers. Say, you aren't talking about a guy named Thorne that got bumped off, are you?"

"Yes—that's what. I was there." The Ferret was struggling to make his words audible. "I—I saw the Gray Seal bump him off."

Jimmie Dale's face in the darkness set suddenly as hard as chiseled marble. A queer pounding was in his ears. What was this the Ferret had said? The Ferret had been there—but it wasn't the Ferret who had killed Ray. The Ferret had witnessed the murder! That meant that besides himself, Jimmie Dale, and the Ferret, a *third* man, the actual murderer, had been in Ray Thorne's house last night. The Ferret was telling the truth, there was not the slightest doubt about that—the Ferret knew he was dying.

"Gawd!" gasped Smarlinghue. "You saw the Gray Seal? You saw the Gray Seal hand Thorne the spot?"

"Yes; but I—I didn't know it was the Gray Seal till the papers said so, and—and, Smarly, hold my hand—tight. Listen! I want my pals to know I played straight. I—I got in with a jimmy—basement window—

see? I didn't make any noise getting upstairs, but—but I had to duck behind a curtain that—that hung in front of one of the doors in the hall because somebody was coming downstairs, and ..."

Again the Ferret's voice trailed off into nothingness. When he spoke again it was in a hoarse, rattling whisper. Jimmie Dale strained to catch the faltering words:

"The—the guy that came downstairs was Thorne. He opened a door—across the hall, and—and stepped into a room. The room was—lighted. I—I could see from the edge of the curtain. Thorne—was—in—pajamas. The Gray Seal was kneeling in front of—of—a safe, and—and there was stuff from the inside of it all—all over the floor. The Gray Seal swung—around—on his knees when—when the door opened. Thorne said: 'My God—*you*!' And—and then the Gray Seal plugged him with—with a rod that—that had a silencer on it. That's all. I—I wasn't for getting mixed up in—in any murder. When—the—Gray—Seal—closed—the—door—again, I—I beat it."

The rôle of Smarlinghue vanished.

"What did the Gray Seal look like?" demanded Jimmie Dale tensely. "Had you ever seen him before? Would you know him again if you saw him?"

The Ferret made a futile effort to speak—and then his words came in a faint mumble:

"I—I don't know. Only saw side—side face. Never saw—saw him before. What d'you care—Smarly? Black hair. Lots of—of men with black hair. I—hell!" He raised himself up suddenly on his elbow. "Shut that trapdoor! Listen! I hear 'em! The Wop! Tony the Wop! Get another of 'em before——" He fell back on Jimmie Dale's knee with a long-drawn, fluttering sigh.

It was the end. The Ferret was dead.

Jimmie Dale rose to his feet, and with hands clenched stood staring into the fog. Only a crook! That would be the world's sorry encomium. Even so! Callousness was something foreign to Jimmie Dale. The Ferret's death had not left him unmoved. But that was not all. His

mind was in chaos—struggling to adjust itself to new viewpoints that were diametrically opposed to the old. Everything had assumed an entirely different aspect. He had to begin all over again—anew!

He drew his hand heavily across his eyes. "Black hair!" Who was this third man?—whom Ray *knew*! Was it possible, after all, that Ray was more than merely an innocent cat's-paw in the blue envelope mystery? How did Ray come to know *anyone* connected with an affair in which *everyone* was a shady character and worse? Why was Ray ever trusted with the blue envelope at all? Why Ray?—out of all New York! And yet the Tocsin had heard Daddy Ratzler say that Ray was not in the secret! But there were others who were very much in the secret that Daddy Ratzler hadn't known about either—the Ferret, for instance—and now obviously this third visitor to Ray's house last night. Well?

He bent suddenly down over the engine. He was only stumbling around in a mental *cul-de-sac*—and time was too precious now for that! There was the immediate present to claim his whole attention. He must get ashore—and not by drifting! That might mean hours—daylight—the lifting of the fog. Smarlinghue could very ill afford to be discovered here in this boat under existing conditions! He had not been seen either in the shed or in the boat, and what part he had taken in the affray could not possibly have disclosed his presence—therefore, so far as Tony the Wop and his jackals were concerned, there had been nothing to indicate that *anybody* had been with the Ferret. A twisted smile touched Jimmie Dale's lips. It would be well to leave them—and everybody else—under that impression!

The boat, with its engine throttled down, crept cautiously through the fog. It came to rest finally by striking the end of a wharf that loomed up suddenly out of nowhere—and thereafter it lay there bumping gently against the piling.

But Smarlinghue had gone.

CHAPTER XI

FRAYED THREADS

Jimmie Dale's face was lined, his dark eyes looked tired; the immaculate dinner clothes he wore seemed somehow to have lost their perfect fit—his shoulders were slightly slumped.

He had dined at the club with Carruthers—futilely. Carruthers had had nothing new to report from the police angle. Jimmie Dale sat now at the big, flat-topped rosewood desk in his den in Riverside Drive—futilely.

Before him was a little pile of blue envelopes and a little pile of blue note paper, all as nearly identical in texture with *the* blue envelope and its enclosure, which were at the present moment locked away in his safe, as he had been able to find amongst the wares displayed by the leading stores in New York that dealt in such commodities. There was a rack of test tubes in front of him, the contents variegated in color. Here and there on the desk were bits of blue paper that were stained and discolored. Was there any significance—the old question that was always at the back of his head—in the fact that the envelope and paper that had cost Ray Thorne his life, and which were so priceless in the eyes of Daddy Ratzler, the Ferret, and the *murderer*, were blue in color? What was the effect on blue paper of certain chemicals intimately associated with the making of various kinds of sympathetic ink? He had been making experiments with blue paper. Nothing! Nor had the original envelope and note paper yielded up so much as one jot or tittle of their secret.

His elbows went down on the desk; and, chin sunk in his hands, he stared unseeingly across the room. It was four nights ago now since Ray Thorne had been killed—and he, Jimmie Dale, had been balked at every turn. It was an impasse. Instead of making any progress, the days and nights had only been crowded with confusion and failure—

and a dread anxiety that had grown hourly more acute. Fear had come. It was torturing him now. The Tocsin had disappeared. There had been no word from her, no sign from her for three days.

His brows gathered in sudden furrows, his fingers biting into his cheeks. The one thing he had been so sure would not happen *had* happened. He had known terror on her account in the old days when he had searched fruitlessly and in vain for her; but in those days she had purposely eluded him. This time she would not *purposely* elude him; this time they were to have worked hand in hand together, to have kept constantly in touch with each other. But since that night in the Sanctuary, when later he had picked up the Ferret's trail, he had not been able to find a single trace of her. There could be only one reason for this—only one. She would know that he would be nearly mad with fear and anxiety on her account, and she would not voluntarily have made him suffer. Only one reason—just one! Stark, ugly logic! The reason she had not communicated with him was that she had been *physically* unable to do so. What had happened? Was it Daddy Ratzler? Had Daddy Ratzler caught her in a trap? What had he done to her? Murder meant nothing to Daddy Ratzler. He dealt in it—bought and paid for it without compunction. Jimmie Dale's fingers bit deeper into his cheeks. His store of courage was not inexhaustible, and now it was almost gone. Was she even—*alive*?

And Daddy Ratzler, too, had disappeared!

Jimmie Dale rose abruptly from his desk and began to pace up and down the room, his hands fiercely clenched—and then, as abruptly, he returned to his chair. To give way to agitation was the last thing he could afford to do. It would not only get him nowhere—it clouded the issue. He needed all his wits, and all the cool thinking of which he was capable now. Perhaps he was exaggerating the peril he believed the Tocsin to be in. In any case her disappearance and Ray Thorne's murder were indissolubly associated, and sprang from a common source—the blue envelope. That was obviously the only trail to follow. But he had lost the trail. How was he to pick it up again?

Where had he lost it? His mind was at work now, delving, searching, probing into the nooks and corners of the last three days. Somewhere surely there must be a lead that he had overlooked; somewhere, surely, there must be a signpost that he had missed!

The Ferret first, then! The Ferret had been an eye-witness to the murder. The murderer was a man with "black hair!" The Ferret, dying, had not meant to indulge in irony, but that was almost the sum total of the information Connie Gowan had supplied. Whether or not the Ferret knew the actual secret of the blue envelope it was impossible to say. The one question leading up to that point that he, Jimmie Dale, had been able to put had been savagely turned aside. This seemed to dismiss the Ferret from further consideration, except for the fact that it brought his two confederates, Boston Bob and Pinky John, into the picture. Boston Bob and Pinky John would undoubtedly prove well worth watching, but neither of the two had as yet reached New York. As Smarlinghue, he, Jimmie Dale, had that on unimpeachable authority—the authority of the underworld. The Ferret's body had been found in the boat. The papers had made a lot of it. And, in the underworld, this latest killing among the high-born of Crimeland had, during the past few days, almost rivalled the reappearance of the Gray Seal as a topic of conversation. It was unimportant that the police were at a loss in the affair and that Tony the Wop had not volunteered to enlighten them; but it was beyond cavil or question that, with the departed Ferret so fiercely in the limelight, the two men who had been most closely associated with him for years in his criminal activities could be in New York without that fact being known to the underworld. In the guise of Smarlinghue, he had searched for them himself through a dozen dens and dives without avail. He had heard mention of them often enough, for their names were almost invariably coupled with the Ferret's, but they had not been seen in New York for more than a year.

Jimmie Dale shook his head brusquely. Boston Bob and Pinky John offered him no help at the present moment. Some day, undoubtedly, they would show up here since they had cabled the Ferret they were coming—but they had already been a long time on the way. The

Tocsin had heard them express some fears that their movements would not be altogether without interest to the police. The Ferret had said that they had been "held up." They still might be a very long way from New York! He smiled wryly. There was no chance of "cultivating" *them* to-night!

What about Ray himself? Was Ray merely an innocent cat's-paw—or was he not? He, Jimmie Dale, did not want to believe the latter; but in view of the fact, established by the Ferret, that Ray had recognized the man who had murdered him, it was a possibility that must be taken into account. He did not know. Both before and after the funeral, which had taken place yesterday, he and Carruthers had spent a great deal of time in Ray's house—and so had the police. The police had gone through Ray's papers and effects again and again. Detective Sergeant Waud had been searching desperately for a clue that would lead to the discovery of *what* had been stolen from the safe; he, Jimmie Dale, had been searching for a clue of an entirely different nature. Detective Sergeant Waud, in spite of his efforts, was now only more at a loss than ever, if that were possible; and he, Jimmie Dale, had not found a scrap of evidence to indicate that Ray had ever had any queer or questionable associations before. With Ray's good name at stake, this was a distinct relief in the sense that it tended to swing the pendulum in Ray's favor and strengthen the theory that he had had no guilty knowledge of what was going on—but this negative fact afforded no clue to a new starting point! Nothing that had transpired at the house since the murder had thrown any new light on the crime. Acting on cabled authority from Ray's brother, who was now on his way out from Australia, Carruthers, so that the house might not be left vacant pending the former's arrival, had retained Mrs. Caton and her daughter in service—and at the same time had incontinently discharged Beaton, the dissolute valet, not only because his services were no longer required, but because the two women refused to remain alone in the house with the man since his unsavory character had been so thoroughly exposed. Perhaps Ray's brother, if not out of the present, then out of the past, might be able to forge together again some of the broken links. Again the wry smile crossed Jimmie Dale's lips. Ray's brother had not reached New York

yet, either! For the immediate present, then, unless something cropped up unexpectedly, nothing could be gained by centering further attention on the case from Ray's angle.

That left only Daddy Ratzler. But Daddy Ratzler had disappeared. He, Jimmie Dale, did not know at just what precise moment Old Pockface had gone away—he only knew that Daddy Ratzler had been gone now for at least two days, and that it was three days since there had been any sign of the Tocsin. Two days ago, in the afternoon, as Smarlinghue, he had strolled past Daddy Ratzler's office with the idea of having a back-door interview with Mother Margot if the coast were clear and the opportunity offered—and had found the place closed. There had been a notice on the street door to the effect that Daddy Ratzler had been unexpectedly called out of town—and the notice, rather significantly, from his, Jimmie Dale's standpoint, failed to state when Daddy Ratzler might be expected to return.

Jimmie Dale's lips drew suddenly now into a hard, straight line. This had alarmed him. If this were so, it should have left the Tocsin free, since Daddy Ratzler had very bluntly made it plain to her that he would not trust her in the house when he was absent; and if, then, she had been free, and knowing that he would soon discover that Daddy Ratzler had gone, why had she not communicated with him, Jimmie Dale? She had paid no visit to the Sanctuary; no note had been left in that secret recess behind the baseboard; and neither note nor telephone message had been received at Riverside Drive where Jason of late had had strict injunctions to permit no one but himself to answer the phone!

As Smarlinghue, he, Jimmie Dale, had gone to the attic lodging of Mother Margot. He had made no inquiries; he had not dared to arouse curiosity and set tongues wagging about Mother Margot—nor was it necessary to do so. He had surreptitiously unlocked her door and entered the squalid room. The room itself had answered his question for him. A glance almost was sufficient to satisfy him that she had never occupied it from the moment she had become a tenant there.

That was not so bad, for she had rented it only as a blind should Daddy Ratzler become inquisitive, and had herself said that she had not intended to occupy it except in case of necessity; but what *was* bad, and what had hourly increased his misgivings until those misgivings had culminated in the stark fear that possessed him now, was that "Agnes Watkins" had not occupied her room in her so-called hotel, either, for at least the last two days and nights. Her trunks and belongings were still there—but she was not! Her absence, let alone arousing any suspicions in the mind of the far-from-puritanical proprietor, had probably not even been noticed—one did one's own room work in such places as that—and, as she herself had stated, one of the reasons she had selected such a rooming house was because no one would either know or care if she were away for days at a stretch providing the rent were not overdue. He had set no inquiries afoot here either—for here, too, they were unnecessary. He had had no difficulty, thanks to that side entrance which had particularly influenced her in her selection of the place, in entering her room unobserved and at will—but he had entered it only twice. After his second visit he had resorted to a time-worn expedient, and had sealed the door on the outside—with a single hair stretched across the top corner. If this were broken it would only prove, of course, that *someone*, not necessarily the Tocsin, had unlocked the door—which in itself would be a vital piece of information. But the hair had not been broken. It had been still intact only a few hours ago. For two days, at least, then, *no one* had opened that door! The Tocsin had disappeared.

Where else was he to look for her? Daddy Ratzler's empty office and house? He *had* looked there—with the fear at first in his heart that she had come to harm behind those closed doors. But that fear had been soon dispelled—even the cellar was bare of any evidence of foul play. Daddy Ratzler would never have been such a fool anyway—he did not kill his victims on his own premises! But Daddy Ratzler's office and house had presented other possibilities—a clue perhaps to where Daddy Ratzler had gone; a clue perhaps to the personnel of Daddy Ratzler's immediate followers, the identity of the members of the gang

who, like their chief, set such unhallowed store by the blue envelope. There were Daddy Ratzler's safe and desk and papers! Well, he had already opened Daddy Ratzler's safe and desk, and——

Jimmie Dale abruptly pulled open one of the drawers of his own rosewood desk, and, taking out a slip of paper, laid it down on the blotting pad before him. It was a very small slip of paper, perhaps an inch in width by five in length, that might have been scissored from the bottom of a pad, and it was faded almost to a yellow color. He scowled in puzzlement at the one line that was ink-scrawled upon it:

"Who killed Blotz? Five grand."

"Five grand," of course, meant five thousand dollars. But that did not help very much.

What did it mean? It could hardly have any bearing on the present case, for, from its faded condition, the slip of paper appeared to be at least several years old; but, nevertheless, it intrigued him. It was the only thing he had found at Daddy Ratzler's that had aroused more than his passing interest—and he had found this adhering to the frame of the desk where it had evidently slipped through a crevice at the back of one of the top drawers. Daddy Ratzler, if the paper had any significance or value, must have presumed it lost. But who was Blotz? He had never heard of any one by that name who had been murdered—and neither had the underworld so far as he could discover, for casual mention of the name had everywhere missed fire. And yet, somehow, he would like to know more of—Blotz!

He replaced the slip of paper in his desk and rose briskly to his feet. His mind was suddenly made up. He was not entirely satisfied but that it *was* at Daddy Ratzler's he had lost the trail. Another search there might be productive. It was worth trying. There was plenty of time; there was still an hour or so before Smarlinghue would set out on his usual pilgrimage through the underworld in the hope of—what? A chance word that would disclose Daddy Ratzler's whereabouts? The chance that Boston Bob and Pinky John had suddenly appeared upon the scene? The chance that he would discover the rendezvous of Daddy Ratzler's gang? The chance that he would be able to "place" even one member of that gang?

He had been doing that night after night—without reward! He laughed a little bitterly—and then his shoulders squared. Well, suppose he had! There was no other way, no other chance of success. To find the Tocsin, he must find Daddy Ratzler. He was sure of that—but in any case inaction would have been intolerable.

He cleared away the débris from his desk, took from his safe the leather girdle that he had brought back with him from his last visit to the Sanctuary—and ten minutes later, having changed into tweeds, was standing in the lower hall, and Jason, plainly nervous and anxious, was handing him his hat.

"I'm going out, Jason," he said.

"Yes, Master Jim, sir." said the old man tremulously, "so I see."

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale—and made a rather poor fist at infusing stern displeasure into his voice. "And look here, Jason, I've something to say to you!"

"Yes, sir?" inquired Jason.

"I've told you this sitting up for me until daylight, and sometimes long after, has got to stop. For the last three nights you've deliberately disobeyed me."

"Not deliberately, Master Jim, sir!" Jason's face was white, the tears not far from the dim old eyes. "Don't say that, sir! You see, sir, it's sitting in that big chair there, and dozing a bit, and you coming in, sir, when I'd meant to have gone to bed long ago."

"H'm!" coughed Jimmie Dale to hide a catch in his voice. "I wish I had your gift, Jason!"

"Gift, sir?"

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale, with his hand suddenly on the old man's shoulder. "Of lying gallantly, Jason—out of loyalty."

And then the front door closed on Jimmie Dale.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECOND VISITOR

A shadow bulked in the darkness against the back door of Daddy Ratzler's domicile—and while a minute passed, like any other shadow, it made no sound.

Jimmie Dale was not toying with chance. His ear was pressed against the panel of the door and he was listening intently. The front room that served for office had been dark as he had passed by on the street a few moments ago, and so, too, had been the side windows as he had made his way into the back yard. The presumption was that the house was still empty and deserted—but presumptions sometimes had a treacherous habit of playing disquieting pranks. Someone might be in there, despite appearances to the contrary. Daddy Ratzler was tricky. Also, Jimmie Dale remembered that the Tocsin had said the back door creaked.

Satisfied at last that there was no sound from within, but still wary of presumption, Jimmie Dale slipped over his face the black silk mask which he took from one of the little upright pockets of his leather girdle; and then from another pocket in the girdle he took out a delicate little blued-steel instrument which he inserted in the door lock. Under the mask he smiled whimsically. He might have crawled in through the cellar window, of course! He was quite well aware from his last visit here that the cellar window was still unfastened just as the Tocsin had left it, but a cellar window was not always an unmixed blessing—in an emergency. A door, even if it creaked, provided a much surer and swifter means of retreat in case of necessity!

There was a series of faint *snipping* sounds—and then, as though it were being gently coaxed to join in the conspiracy, only a subdued protest as the door opened inch by inch under Jimmie Dale's hand.

And now there was no further sound. Jimmie Dale was moving with that uncanny silent tread of the old Sanctuary days. But at each door along the passageway he stopped to listen—and once again as he reached the end of the passage and the threshold of Daddy Ratzler's office. The house was empty.

The small flashlight in Jimmie Dale's hand suddenly penciled a timid little ray of light across the office—too timid to penetrate the window shades that he had noted from the street were still as closely drawn as they had been on his first visit here. But the ray pointed neither toward the desk nor toward the safe—*they* would receive attention in due course—it pointed toward the small vestibule that gave on the street door. The street door had a mail slot, and clamped on the inside of the door was Daddy Ratzler's mail box.

He was very curious about Daddy Ratzler's mail box! It was what had first engaged his attention when he had come here before; it was what first engaged his attention now. On the former occasion it had been empty, but the postman would have passed by a good many times since then!

He stepped quickly across the room, reached the vestibule, and, stooping, opened the mail box. Yes, this time there were letters here—two of them! Eagerly he examined first one and then the other under the ray of the flashlight—and then, with a grimace of disappointment, he tossed them back and closed the box again. One was an unsealed circular from a furniture house that did business on the instalment plan; the other bore the imprint of a local coal and wood dealer, and was so obviously a bill or statement of account that there was no excuse for tampering with it.

Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders resignedly. Well, that was that! He had hoped the mail box might have provided more information; but in that respect it seemed to be in league with everything else that was connected with Daddy Ratzler!

He came back into the office, hesitated an instant as between the safe and the desk for the next point of attack—and suddenly thrusting the flashlight into his pocket whipped out his automatic in its stead.

Someone was coming! A key was rattling in the front-door lock!

And now through the darkness Jimmie Dale moved swiftly, soundlessly. In scarcely a second he had reached the passageway leading to the rear of the house, and here, just a little back from the office doorway, he waited. He was tense and rigid now, every faculty alert, his jaw outthrust a little—mercilessly. Was something going to break at last? Who was it out there? Daddy Ratzler himself sneaking back to his lair? Who else would have a key? Something pitiless, something elemental, rose up in Jimmie Dale as, in cumulation now, the fear and agony he had suffered during the last three days surged upon him. If it were Daddy Ratzler, he, Jimmie Dale, would choke the truth about the Tocsin out of him; and if any harm had come to her, if she were—were dead, then——

The street door opened and closed. Someone was fumbling with the mail box now. He heard it being closed again. And now a footstep sounded on the office floor, crossing toward the desk. And then the light over the desk went on.

It was not often that Jimmie Dale's hand trembled—it trembled now as he mechanically removed his mask. But he made no other movement. The swift revulsion from the fear and anguish he had known for days to one of sudden overwhelming relief and joy seemed to hold him rooted to the spot. It was she, the Tocsin, who had entered the room, she, the Tocsin, who had seated herself now at the desk. That shabby, haglike old creature was Mother Margot! It did not seem as though it could be so; that it was reality; that it was not some cruel hallucination. He wanted to cry out to her, but somehow the words choked in his throat.

It was all like some dream. He was moving toward her now. Her back was turned to him. She did not see him, did not hear him come. She had taken a piece of paper from a drawer of the desk and was writing hurriedly. He was close to her now, looking over her shoulder. Her pencil danced across the paper. Words of a thousand memories swam before his eyes:

Dear philanthropic crook:

I know that you——

His arms closed around her, crushing her to him.

She gave a sudden startled cry, struggling in her alarm to free herself—and then, with a quick intake of her breath:

"Oh, Jimmie—you!"

"Marie!" he whispered brokenly.

Her arms were around his neck; she laid her cheek against his.

"You frightened me rather badly, Jimmie," she said gently. "You—you shouldn't have done that."

"I did not mean to," he answered huskily. "A little while ago I was afraid that I had—had lost you—for always. I couldn't believe that it was really you. I had a feeling that I was dreaming, and that if I spoke you wouldn't be there. It must have been a subconscious urge to touch you. I don't think I knew what I was actually doing."

"Dear Jimmie!" she said tenderly. "I know. I understand. I have been terribly worried about it. I knew how anxious you would be, but I had no means of reaching you or communicating with you until to-night. I was just writing you a note"—she swung impulsively away from him, pointing to the desk—"when you——"

"Yes; I saw it," he said, and drew her back into his arms again. "But there is something that I want to know far more than that. Have you been in any danger? Are you in any danger now? I must know, Marie! Tell me the literal truth!"

There were tears behind the thick-lensed spectacles of Mother Margot, but she smiled brightly at him.

"No, Jimmie," she answered, "I haven't been in any danger, and I am not in any now; not even if I were found here—providing I were found here *alone*. But, as it is, it will be far safer with that light out. It might attract attention. We mustn't risk that. Pull up another chair, dear, close to mine here, and then switch off the light. I've a lot to tell you—and there's not too much time."

"Yes," agreed Jimmie Dale—but a long minute passed before he dragged another chair forward, while the Tocsin sank, a little breathless into hers, and darkness fell upon the room.

It was the Tocsin who spoke first.

"Jimmie," she said tensely, "before we talk about anything else, tell me something—the most important thing of all—the man who killed Ray—the Ferret! Did you ever find the Ferret?"

He stared at her in amazement.

"The Ferret!" he exclaimed. "Why, don't you know? The papers have been full of it!"

He could see her shake her head in the darkness.

"I haven't seen any papers or heard anything about it," she said. "What was it?"

"He was killed that same night—the night, or, rather, early morning that I started out to look for him," Jimmie Dale answered quietly. "He was trying to escape with a boatload of bootlegger stuff from Tony the Wop's hi-jacking gang. He used to keep the boat hidden under a wharf in the East River. Understand? The boat got away in the fog all right, but the Ferret was shot just after the boat cleared the end of the wharf. He died a few minutes later."

"Dead!" Her voice was suddenly flat. "Then that ends it all, doesn't it, Jimmie? What does the blue envelope matter now? What does it matter now what it was all about? They haven't got it anyhow. It was the man who killed Ray that we were after!"

Jimmie Dale's hand sought and found the Tocsin's.

"We are still after him, Marie," he said gravely.

"But you said that the Ferret was——"

"It wasn't the Ferret who killed Ray," Jimmie Dale interposed. "I was in the boat with the Ferret when he died. As Smarlinghue, of course. The Wop's crowd didn't know I was there. I had found out about their hi-jacking plans, and had gone to warn the Ferret—you remember that my idea was to 'cultivate' him? The Ferret talked a little before he died. Boston Bob and Pinky John had cabled him about the blue envelope—I don't know whether he knew what was in it or not. We were right, though, in our belief that he went to Ray's house that night to get it. He was not only there, but was actually

there at the time of the murder and was an eye-witness to it. He saw the man who shot Ray—the man who he believed, of course, from the papers, to have been the Gray Seal."

"Jimmie!" Her fingers twined fiercely around Jimmie Dale's. "Who was it?"

"A man with black hair!" Jimmie Dale laughed a little harshly. "No one he knew. That's all I got out of the Ferret. A man with black hair."

"Oh!" she said almost under her breath. "I—I was so sure it was the Ferret. And now we've got to start all over again. A man with black hair! That doesn't help very much, does it, Jimmie?"

"Not very much! But tell me now about yourself and what has happened—and how, for instance, you come to have the key to the front door here, and are in a position to walk boldly in, turn on the light, and usurp Daddy Ratzler's desk as though you owned the place?"

"The answer is simple," she replied. "Daddy Ratzler gave me the key, and Daddy Ratzler sent me here."

"In spite of the fact that he had previously been so particular to see that you were never left here for a minute alone?"

"Yes—Daddy Ratzler and I are getting on. He sent me here to-night for his mail."

Jimmie Dale laughed softly.

"Then I'm afraid he's out of luck!" he said.

"Oh!" she said. "So you've been at the mail box, too?"

"Of course!"

"Was there anything there that I didn't get?"

"No; I put it all back. That's why I say he's out of luck. I fancy he'll be rather disappointed with a coal bill and a circular illustrating furniture bargains on the monthly payment plan."

Again in the darkness Jimmie Dale saw the Tocsin shake her head.

"I'm not so sure about that," she said. "It's possible, of course, that he was expecting some special letter, but I hardly think so. I think he'll be quite satisfied with what I take him—not the circular, for that is not sealed; but the coal bill, for instance."

Jimmie Dale's brows puckered.

"I don't follow that," he admitted.

"It's only that he seems to be more interested in the *outside* of his mail than he does with the *inside*," she answered. "When we left here three days ago he took some mail with him, and that night I saw him examining all the envelopes under a magnifying glass before he opened them."

"The devil you did!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale. "Let me see that coal chap's envelope again!"

The Tocsin produced it from beneath her shawl.

Under his flashlight's ray Jimmie Dale examined the envelope, critically, minutely. Finally he handed it back, and the flashlight went out.

"It's been dashed cleverly done, if it's been done at all!" he said, speaking more to himself than to the Tocsin. "But why should anyone want to open a thing like that?"

"Why should anyone want to open *any* of his mail; all of it, for that matter, that can be got hold of?—which is what Daddy Ratzler seems to fear."

"Exactly!" agreed Jimmie Dale tersely. "Why? And who, if anybody, is doing it?"

"I think I know," said the Tocsin quietly. "Not his name, of course—but this dovetails in with something I heard to-night. You'll see, Jimmie, presently; and I think you'll agree with me in theory at least when you have heard all my story."

"Right! Go on, Marie! That's what I want to hear."

"Daddy Ratzler is sick," she said. "He went away the afternoon following the night you and I were together in the Sanctuary. He took me with him to a house of his on Long Island, where——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Jimmie Dale. "That's rather strange! A house of his, you said. I've raked the underworld over and over, Marie, in my search for you and Daddy Ratzler, and I don't see how I

could have slipped up on that, and how, especially if he owned it, no one knew he had a house out there. Everybody took it for granted that he lived *here*."

"Yes, of course!" she said. "That's the impression he has been at infinite pains to create for ever so long. But I am afraid I misled you a little myself when I said 'his' house. It isn't supposed to be his house, though I'm sure it is—but it certainly isn't in his name. It belonged to a man named Blotz, and he——"

"What did you say the name was?" Jimmie Dale broke in sharply.

"Blotz," she repeated. "Does that mean anything in particular? He died a few years ago."

"Oh, he did, did he?" There was a curious quiet in Jimmie Dale's voice.

"Jimmie, what *is* it?" she demanded.

"Just this! When I was searching around here the other night, I found a small piece of paper that had obviously slipped out of the drawer and had stuck to the frame of the desk itself—this desk! There was a line of scrawled writing on it. This: 'Who killed Blotz? Five grand.'"

"Oh!" The Tocsin drew in her breath quickly. "That doesn't sound nice, Jimmie—not a bit nice! Does it mean that Blotz was murdered by contract for five thousand dollars?"

"I don't know!" he said gruffly. "I couldn't find any record of a man by that name ever having been murdered, or even of having died under suspicious circumstances."

"It's queer!" she said in sudden agitation. "It's very queer! Everything about that house is queer! There is something mysterious connected with it that I do not understand. The day before yesterday when I was going upstairs I am sure I heard *two* voices in Daddy Ratzler's room, the door of which was shut. Our household consists of just Daddy Ratzler, old Pascal and myself. I know for a positive fact that Pascal was out in the garden at the time. Furthermore, no one could have entered the house and gone up the stairs to Daddy Ratzler's room without my knowing it. Daddy Ratzler must have

heard my footsteps on the stairs, for suddenly the voices ceased, and he called out to me to come to him. When I opened the door there was nobody in the room except Daddy Ratzler lying there on the bed. He said the light hurt his eyes and that he wanted the blinds closed."

"I would suggest," said Jimmie Dale musingly, "an upper veranda—if the house possesses such a thing."

"It does," she answered, "and Daddy Ratzler's window opens on it; but the window was closed. Anyone who might have made his exit that way would therefore have had to close the window after him. I would have heard it."

"A cupboard? A clothes closet?"

"Neither, Jimmie. There was no one hiding in the room—not even under the bed. Daddy Ratzler very obligingly took pains to see that I was satisfied on even that point, so that, if I had imagined I had heard voices, I should be thoroughly convinced I had been mistaken. In tossing about, he brushed a medicine spoon off the bedside table onto the floor. I picked it up!"

"H'm!" said Jimmie Dale. "That's very *interesting*, Marie. Who's this Pascal?"

"I don't quite know," she replied. "He's a very old man, and seems to be an institution around the place; but I am not quite sure yet whether he is one of Daddy Ratzler's gang or not. I am inclined to think he isn't. Anyway, he is almost stone deaf—which may perhaps be the reason why he is kept on there! He acts as a sort of guardian and caretaker of the place, and, if he's straight—as a *blind*!—you know what I mean—he's lived for years in the neighborhood."

"Quite!" said Jimmie Dale. "Casts an aura of respectability over the house, as it were!"

"Yes. It's rather hard to talk to him because you have to shout—and Daddy Ratzler has sharp ears. The only chance I've had was a few minutes now and then when Pascal was out in the garden. I got a little something pieced together, however. Pascal used to be Blotz's man-of-all-work. When Blotz died the house was sold; but Pascal said he never saw the new owner and didn't know what his name was. He said it was all done through a real estate agent—meaning Daddy Ratzler, of

course; and, if he is telling the truth, he has no suspicion that Daddy Ratzler is anything else but the real estate agent who has charge of the property. According to Pascal, the new owner decided not to occupy the house, but did not want it to run down while he was trying to sell it again—and so Pascal was kept on—and is still there, since the house, though placed on the market again, was never resold. I don't altogether trust Pascal, of course; but it seems clear enough that Daddy Ratzler bought this property in the name, probably, of some tool of his, and has been acting as agent for a mythical owner ever since. Naturally the 'For Sale' sign therefore is not to be taken at its face value. One other thing I got from Pascal. He said that *Mister* Ratzler only came to the house once in a great while to look it over and see that everything was all right. This is obviously not so; for, if it were, it would mean that Daddy Ratzler is nothing but a purposeless fool—which he is not; and if Pascal is honest in what he says, then it is certain that Daddy Ratzler spends many a night there without his deaf caretaker knowing anything about it."

"Our friend seems to have been at some pains to camouflage his double life!" observed Jimmie Dale grimly. "Whereabouts on Long Island is this house?"

"You remember Markel, don't you?"

Jimmie Dale laughed softly.

"The bounder with the paste necklace? Oh, yes—quite well! I believe someone tied him in dishabille to a tree one night in Charleton Park Manor with the cord of his own dressing gown."[4]

"*Someone* did, Jimmie!" she said with mock severity. "Well, just before you get to the park gates, there's a wagon track that leads off the main road, and——"

"It was very convenient—for parking," Jimmie Dale interposed dryly.

"I dare say," she returned, "but if you had followed that track for a quarter of a mile instead of parking you would have came to Daddy Ratzler's house."

Jimmie Dale whistled low under his breath.

"That sounds like a lonely spot!" he exclaimed, his tones no longer light.

"It is," she said; "and secluded—very much so!" Then abruptly: "What time is it, Jimmie?"

The flashlight came into play for an instant.

"A quarter to eleven," he answered.

"That's all right, then," she said. "I would have had to write all this to you, and then I intended to go over to the Sanctuary and leave the letter there for you. I shan't have to do that now, so we are still ahead of time. Let's get back to Daddy Ratzler. I couldn't go anywhere to telephone or post a letter, for, until to-night, Daddy Ratzler hasn't let me get beyond the reach of his voice; and no one comes to the house, for Pascal goes for the supplies and brings them back himself—so you see why I could not communicate with you. I did not dare to trust Pascal with a letter or even to have him see me writing one. It would take very little indeed, Jimmie, to arouse Daddy Ratzler's suspicions."

Jimmie Dale nodded his head in the darkness.

"I see," he said; "but why his volte-face to-night?"

"He wanted me out of the way," she said simply.

"Oh! So the mail was only a pretext after all?"

"In that sense—yes. But that doesn't mean he is any the less anxious to get it."

"I suppose not," Jimmie Dale agreed. "Now tell me something about him. You said he was sick. How sick is he? What's the matter with him?"

"It's his throat. It's a bad attack of tonsillitis, I would say. Of course, he won't have a doctor near the place. Anyway, he is a very miserable old man, and he is suffering enough to make me a little bit sorry for even—Daddy Ratzler! He'll be in bed for another two or three days at least, I'm sure."

Jimmie Dale pulled his hand across his forehead in a puzzled way.

"There are one or two things I must confess I don't understand," he said. "According to what you got from Pascal, this is apparently the first time Daddy Ratzler has *occupied* the house to the caretaker's

knowledge. What prompted Daddy Ratzler to do such an unusual thing? Why did he take you with him? Pascal could have fed and looked after him. And why, above all, if he had to go to bed for a few days, didn't he go to bed here where he lives?"

Her fingers were twined suddenly and tightly around his again.

"I can answer your three questions in one word, Jimmie—*fear*!"

"Fear?"

"Yes! It's not only his throat, Jimmie—he is sick with fear. It was just because he *was* known to live in this house, and because it would therefore be the first place where anybody would look for him, that he was afraid to stay here practically helpless in bed—so he ducked for cover. And he took me with him because, even in hiding, he was still afraid. Where could he find a better ally? Mother Margot had a reputation in the old days of being, not only dependable, but something of a wildcat in a tight corner, hadn't she, dear? I fancy it was much easier to explain to Pascal—which strengthens my belief that Pascal is honest—the presence of an old woman, who was supposed to be out there to cook and look after him generally, than it would be for Daddy Ratzler to explain the presence of a watchdog in the shape of a gunman at his heels. And in the light of what has happened since, I know now the real reason he took me with him was because he was terrified that even his retreat might be discovered, and he was afraid to be there alone with a deaf man—so much afraid that he actually gave me a revolver, and my room is within call of him through the night. Also, he keeps a light burning in his own room all night long."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale. "As bad as that? You are certainly getting on with him if he gave you a gun! What is it that has put his wind up to that extent? Who is it that he is afraid of?"

"*You*, Jimmie!"

Startled, Jimmie Dale leaned forward in his chair.

"Of me!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"The Gray Seal," she said. "I have thought so for several days; I had proof of it to-night. Listen, Jimmie! Early this evening Daddy Ratzler told me I was to go to town, get his mail, and return on the midnight train. As I have said, this was the first time I had been permitted to leave the place, and it was obvious that, in spite of his fear at being left alone, he wanted me out of the way for a few hours. Therefore, it was fairly obvious too that he wasn't going to be alone. Apart from the fact that I had become a member of Daddy Ratzler's household, I hadn't accomplished very much so far—and so, though I left the house at once, I didn't leave immediately for New York. I was quite sure there would be a number of trains at that hour, as there proved to be, so that I could take a later one, accomplish what I had to do here, and still catch the midnight train back. It's only an hour's run out there, as you know, Jimmie."

"Yes, go on, Marie!"

"I started off along the wagon track. But I didn't go very far—I stepped in amongst the trees and waited. I had to wait quite a long while, Jimmie. Then I heard a motor car stop somewhere ahead of me on the wagon track, and then, presently—I could just make them out in the darkness—four men passed by me, walking toward the house. When I thought it was safe, I followed them. Whether Pascal admitted them, or they had a key, or how they got in, I can't say; I only know that they must have made their entry very silently, for I did not hear the door being opened or shut—which still strikes me as strange for I was not very far away."

"How far?" inquired Jimmie Dale abruptly.

"Perhaps fifty yards. But you must remember it was very still out there."

"No comment," said Jimmie Dale after a short silence, "except that, like everything else about the house, as I remarked before—it's interesting! And then?"

"The only light in the house was from Daddy Ratzler's window. We have already spoken about the upper veranda—there are outside stairs leading up to it. I took off my shoes and crept up there to the window of Daddy Ratzler's room. The window was open for air, and I could

hear as well as though I were in the room; but the blinds were closed. I couldn't see at all through the slats on one side; but the slats on the other side were just slightly apart, and through these I could see, though not very clearly, a portion of the room. I——"

Jimmie Dale interrupted suddenly.

"Look here, Marie," he asked, "do you think you could contrive to toy a little with those slats to-morrow without arousing Daddy Ratzler's suspicions?"

"Yes, I am sure I could quite easily," she said; "and I wish I had thought of it myself, though of course I didn't know what was going to happen to-night. I always open the blinds in the morning and close them at night—he would never notice another fraction of an inch, and that's all that would be needed. Do you mean that you are coming out there to-morrow night?"

"I don't know yet. Perhaps! In any case, I like the Scouts' motto: 'Be Prepared!' What did you see and what did you hear?"

"Daddy Ratzler was propped up in bed. The four men were in there. One of them was—another old friend, Jimmie! Silky Hines!"

"My word!" Jimmie Dale's smile was mirthless. "I was talking to him last night in Blind Peter's. We got quite confidential over old times—at least I thought we did. He said he was still playing a lone hand on con rackets. So he's one of the crowd, eh? It looks like a close-mouthed corporation! In three nights and in a dozen dives I never heard a single name connected with Daddy Ratzler! Did you recognize any of the others?"

"No; I had never seen any of the others before. But while they were talking the names of two of them were mentioned. One was called the Muzzler, and the other just plain Jake."

"New to me, too," nodded Jimmie Dale. "Carry on, Marie!"

"When I got to the window they were talking about a roadhouse called the Two Oaks. They're going there at four o'clock this morning. Do you know anything about the place? It's run by a man whose name was vaguely familiar to me when they mentioned it, but I can't place him—Steve Barlow."

"Steve Barlow is, or was, a professional gambler—and was always considered a square shooter," said Jimmie Dale reminiscently. "I never actually met him, but I know him by sight and reputation. He had a snug little joint just on the outskirts of Mount Hope that was always known as 'Big Steve's,' and——"

"Then, that's it, Jimmie! It's the same place except for the name. That's where Daddy Ratzler said it was—he was telling them all how to get there."

"So it's a roadhouse now, is it? The Two Oaks!" There was a caustic note in Jimmie Dale's voice. "There is certainly money in booze—they're all going in for it! Even an artist at the top of his profession—like the Ferret! The Eighteenth Amendment would appear to be the juiciest plucking for a few million-odd of her citizens that ever blew in on the U.S.A.! What are they going out there at four o'clock this morning for?"

"I have no idea. *They* all seemed to know, however! All I caught was that they were going to 'pull' something. If they had discussed any of the details, it was before I got to the window."

"H'm!" muttered Jimmie Dale. "Well, I can't see that whatever they're after will help us any. But where does Daddy Ratzler's fear of the Gray Seal come in?"

"Right here! Daddy Ratzler said so himself. He began to talk to them about the blue envelope. He didn't use nice language; and he wasn't a nice-looking sight, either, as he sat there, sometimes clawing at the bedclothes, and sometimes shaking his fists frantically in the air. There wasn't a speck of color in his face, his cheeks were sunken, and his eyes seemed to stare out of two holes that had been bored in his skull. It isn't a pretty thing to say, but he looked more like a dead man come to life than anything else I can think of. His nerves were in pieces, of course. He raved at them. He told them that if he'd thought any one of them had let a whisper out of them he would have their throats cut so they wouldn't whisper any more. He paid you a compliment, Jimmie. The police!—he laughed like a derisive maniac. The Gray Seal!—he snarled and gibbered and cursed until he was breathless.

"Silky Hines tried to quiet him.

"'Gawd knows how he got next!' Silky Hines said. 'But what good is that envelope going to do him now he's got it?'

"'You fool!' Daddy Ratzler screamed at him. 'Suppose he finds *me*!'"

"Oh!" murmured Jimmie Dale softly. "He does seem ripe, doesn't he?"

"Well, he lost his nerve to-night anyway—and Daddy Ratzler wasn't ever supposed to have had any! But, of course, he *is* sick. Silky Hines flicked him on the raw again without meaning to do so.

"'It's queer, the Gray Seal showing up like this,' Silky Hines said. 'He's supposed to have been dead for years.'

"'Queer!' Daddy Ratzler screamed at him again. 'It's big enough to bring Judas Iscariot back to life! The only thing that's queer about it is how he found out anything!'

"'Which ain't queer at all,' Silky Hines retorted, 'because it was always that way. Nobody knew how the Gray Seal ever found out about anything. Anyway, it's a cinch that none of us spilled the works. And, anyway, we ain't lost the pot yet. All we've got to do is sit tight till we draw openers—which won't be so long now.'

"Daddy Ratzler's voice had grown hoarse, Jimmie.

"'Sit tight?' he croaked. 'You've got to find him, d'ye hear? You've got to *find* him! How do we know that envelope isn't any good to him, and that he doesn't know *all* about it? And that ain't all! If he can find out about one thing we're in, he can find out about others. The rat! The swine! We've got other plums, haven't we? He'll be picking those too if we don't get him!'

"There's a lot I haven't told you, Jimmie; but you have got all of the essentials. I suppose I was an hour at the window. I did not dare stay any longer. But you'll understand now what I meant when I said I thought I knew who it was that is giving Daddy Ratzler so much concern about his mail—it's the man that Daddy Ratzler thinks is the Gray Seal, the man who murdered Ray, the man who Daddy Ratzler is afraid is tapping his mail in order to pick more 'plums,' as he puts it.

And I need not add that this is only one more evidence of how great his fear of the Gray Seal is." She stood up suddenly. "And now I must go, Jimmie. I'll just have time to catch that train."

"Yes," he admitted ruefully. "I suppose you'll have to! And I can't even go with you to the station—Mother Margot and Jimmie Dale wouldn't look well on the street together! The back door for mine! You've told me a lot, Marie—my head's buzzing with it. But there's one thing you haven't told me that I particularly want to know. Which is the window of *your* room out there in that sylvan retreat?"

"Daddy Ratzler's is the one at the head of the veranda stairs, mine is the next one. Why? What do you want me to do?"

"First, and above all," he answered, a sudden throb in his voice as he drew her into his arms, "I want you to remember that you are very precious to me, Marie; and that I shall be anxious about you every minute—and so you are to promise for my sake not to take a single risk that can possibly be avoided, and always to be doubly on your guard."

"I promise, Jimmie; but I do not think I will be in any danger at all," she said reassuringly. "What else?"

"What else? Oh, yes!" His voice was casual again. "Don't go to bed to-morrow night—and if there's anyone in the house besides Pascal and Daddy Ratzler, leave a handkerchief or something white on your window sill."

"What are you going to do?" she whispered tensely.

"I don't know yet," he told her with a cheery laugh. "I haven't thought it out. I fancy a lot will depend upon to-night."

"To-night? Where are you going to-night?"

"Well," he said easily, "I thought I'd take a little spin in my car out Mount Hope way."

"The Two Oaks! That's only inviting unnecessary danger, isn't it? Just what you told me not to do! You said yourself that whatever they were after out there wouldn't help us any. What do you want to go out there for?"

"Well, you see," he said, "I've changed my mind. There's always the chance that Daddy Ratzler is right."

"Right?" she questioned. "Chance?"

The darkness hid the sudden tightening of Jimmie Dale's lips.

"The chance," he said lightly, "that the Gray Seal, Daddy Ratzler's Gray Seal, you know, may be there too—after plums!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE TWO OAKS

It had been half-past twelve when Benson had brought Jimmie Dale's car to the St. James Club—and, being told to leave the car, had been dismissed. It was after two o'clock now, and Jimmie Dale, from the shadows of the grove of trees that surrounded the place, stood frowning speculatively at the low, rambling structure once known as "Big Steve's," but which, in its change of heart from the sale of chips to the more lucrative sale of bottles, had been rechristened the Two Oaks.

Except for what seemed to be a sort of annex in the rear and which was in complete darkness save for a single window in the second story, the establishment blazed with light. Through the open windows there floated out to him on the still air of the hot night the sounds of a jazz orchestra, shouts of hilarious laughter, and the clatter of dishes. The Two Oaks was obviously doing a roaring business in late suppers—and illicit beverages. Steve Barlow seemed to have grabbed opportunity by the forelock! One of these days, of course, the place would be pinched; but meanwhile, in the expressive language of Steve's kind, Steve should worry!

Yes! Quite so! Sometime or other that would probably happen; but to-night something far removed from an official raid *was* going to happen here—at four o'clock!

Jimmie Dale pushed his hat back from his forehead. It was a sticky night, and the quarter-mile walk from where he had discreetly parked his car had not added any to his comfort. What was it that was bringing Silky Hines and his companions here to-night? And why at four o'clock? He shook his head. He could not answer either of those questions, and both of them had harassed him from the moment he had left the Tocsin. But they had to be answered! He had two hours in which to answer them!

Well, what was the first move? For an instant he debated the advisability of entering the Two Oaks and ordering a "late supper" himself—and then promptly decided against doing so. If it became necessary later on—yes; but for the moment—no. A place of this sort required an "introduction"—not that he had any doubts about being able to satisfy Steve Barlow as to his *bona-fides*; but unless it could possibly be avoided, he did not propose, in view of what might transpire later on, to have it known that one Jimmie Dale had even been near the Two Oaks to-night. And, besides, what could he hope to gain by occupying a table in there? A few faces that he might recognize?—perhaps a well-known underworld peer or two whose presence might suggest a lead? Yes! But with a little caution, he could see everybody in there quite as well from the outside without being seen himself!

"Damn it!" exploded Jimmie Dale savagely to himself. "What *is* their game, anyway? It's only a long chance, of course, but I wouldn't like to *miss* that 'plum-picker' with the 'black hair' if he *does* show up—and if I don't want to find myself off-stage when the curtain goes down, I've got to call the turn before the racket starts! It's not just a bald hold-up—that's certain. Anything like that is far too crude for Daddy Ratzler. He would never lay his plans ahead and marshal his gang merely for the sake of whatever cash the Two Oaks takes in to-night, particularly when it might prove to be an off night for Steve's business—in which case the receipts would be practically nil. Also, there are plenty of places where a haul of that sort would be a lot fatter than here. Why, then, the Two Oaks?"

His eyes swept critically again over the scene before him—the motor cars, a dozen or more of them, parked around the front entrance; the boisterous crowd that he could see through the open windows, nearly everyone in evening dress; the annex with its one lighted window in the upper story; and, trailing off in the darkness, another small building, unlighted, at the rear of the annex.

"There must be something queer about the place itself," he muttered. "That seems to be the only answer. There's nothing to do but explore a bit—that annex there, for instance, as a starter!"

Intending to skirt the edge of the grove until he came opposite the annex where, beyond the range of the glare of light from the open windows, the shadows lay deep across the intervening open space, he took a step forward in that direction—but only to halt almost instantly again.

A car had turned in from the road and was rattling up the driveway. Instinctively he stood still and watched it. It was a small, closed car of a cheap make, he could see, a long way from being one of the high-priced models that so far had been attracted to the Two Oaks that night, and, from the noise it made, was in a decidedly run-down condition. It drew up at the entrance, where, leaving the engine running, a man got out and disappeared through the doorway of the Two Oaks.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes held now intently on the scene. He was only a few yards away and he could see quite clearly, for the light from one of the windows fell full upon the car. The driver of the car had been as shabby in appearance as was the car itself. Not at all the sort of person to be ushered into the presence of Steve Barlow's well-groomed "guests!" Nor had he been! He was back now beside the car, and was standing there talking to someone in the rear seat.

Perhaps a minute or two passed, and then Jimmie Dale recognized the big, burly form of Steve Barlow, as the proprietor came hastily out of the Two Oaks and went up to the car. A moment more and Big Steve had taken a valise from the interior, and was helping an old, gray-haired, and poorly dressed woman to alight.

The car turned and rattled back to the highway—but Big Steve and the old woman did not enter the Two Oaks. Instead, carrying the valise, and with his other hand supporting the old woman, who, whether ill or feeble, seemed to walk with tottering steps, Steve Barlow started slowly along the outside of the building in the direction of the annex at the rear.

Jimmie Dale pursed his lips. At this hour, or at any hour for that matter, what he was witnessing certainly fell at least within the category of the unusual—and, heaven knew, it was the unusual he was

looking for to-night! His interest was quickened an instant later as, in lieu of a saxophone number that had just ended with a final blatant squawk, the old woman's voice reached him in a sudden, plaintive cry:

"Oh, Steve, what have they done to him? They haven't hurt him—not that bad, have they? He—he isn't going to—to die, Steve?"

Had this anything to do with Daddy Ratzler? Jimmie Dale, keeping just within the fringe of the trees, was paralleling his steps now with those of Big Steve and the old woman. He had not caught Big Steve's low-toned reply. Was this the "lead" that he had hoped would break for him? Something—was it intuition or just a desperate eagerness to grasp at any straw?—told him that it was. A twisted little smile dragged down the corners of Jimmie Dale's mouth. Well, he would find out anyhow!

Big Steve and the old woman had passed out of the light-flooded area now and had reached a door at the far end of the annex. It was too dark here to see distinctly, but Big Steve had laid the valise on the ground and appeared to be unlocking the door. Yes! The door opened. Big Steve picked up the valise and the two went inside. The door closed again, and almost immediately a light came on in the room adjacent to the doorway.

But Jimmie Dale, running now in the shadows across the open space, was not far behind them. He found himself in a little porch, the door of which Big Steve had just unlocked, and in front of him an inner door, glass-paneled. Through the panels he saw Big Steve and his companion disappear through an unlighted doorway at the farther end of the room.

Jimmie Dale took out his black silk mask from its pocket in the leather girdle, slipped it on—and the inner door opened and closed again behind him without a sound. His glance swept around the room—a safe, a roll-top desk, a high-backed easy chair in the corner, a center table, an inviting-looking leather couch. Obviously Steve Barlow's private office, and—Jimmie Dale nodded approval—obviously Big Steve had done himself rather well in the matter of personal comfort!

Jimmie Dale's pause had been little more than momentary. He moved swiftly now to the threshold of the unlighted doorway. Here the light from the room behind him disclosed a long, narrow passage that undoubtedly led into the pantry or kitchen in the main building, for, from a closed door at the far end of the passage, the faint rattle of dishes was distinguishable. There were also two doors, he noted, opening off the right-hand side of the passage, while immediately at his right was a staircase which, a short way up, made a right-angled turn. From somewhere at the head of the stairs he caught the rumble of Big Steve's voice.

There was no creak of stair-tread, no single sound as Jimmie Dale began the ascent. He smiled almost apologetically. There had been no carpeted stairs like these in the old Sanctuary!

The upper hall was in darkness, he could see, save directly in the path of the open door of a dimly lighted room a few feet away from the head of the stairs—the one, it was apparent, whose window had already attracted his attention from without. He gained the landing, then edged forward a little to a position where, flattened back against the wall and hidden in the darkness, he could see into the room beyond.

The light came from a lamp, turned low, that was burning on a bedside table. The old woman, her shoulders shaken with sobs, was bending over someone in the bed. Big Steve, standing in the center of the room, was talking.

"Don't you take on like that, Mrs. Meegan," he said soothingly. "I'm telling you the Kid hasn't never been hurt at all, and that he's all right."

Jimmie Dale involuntarily leaned a little forward. Kid Meegan! He had heard quite a lot about Kid Meegan in several joints last night. And so, too, probably, had some of Daddy Ratzler's gang! But he had put most of it down to exaggerated rumor. Perhaps there was more truth in it than he had thought. A light began to break dimly in upon him.

"Yes; but"—Mrs. Meegan's eyes were streaming as she faced around from the bed—"he's like he was unconscious."

"The doctor had to give him something," explained Big Steve, as he put his hand on the old woman's shoulder. "Come on, now, Mrs. Meegan, sit down in that chair there and let's talk it out."

"Yes," she said tremulously, sinking into the chair indicated. "Yes; I—I want you to tell me about it."

"Well, you've got it all wrong to begin with," stated Big Steve reassuringly. "I was hoping you wouldn't hear anything about it till it was all over. Who told you, anyway?"

"Mrs. Snelling, a neighbor of mine, who came in to tell me how sorry she was."

"Humph!" grunted Big Steve. "One of them sympathy cats that hates to miss anything! I know the breed! And at this hour!"

"It wasn't so late then, Steve," protested Mrs. Meegan loyally. "It takes a long time to get over here from Jersey, and I didn't get started right away because I couldn't find anybody at first to drive me over—not anybody that I could afford to pay what it was worth, I mean."

Big Steve cleared his throat, reached awkwardly into his pocket for a cigar, glanced at the bed—and thrust the cigar back into his pocket again.

"Sure! I see!" he said. "And what was it this Mrs. Snelling handed you?"

"She said"—Mrs. Meegan twisted her hands anxiously together in her lap—"that somebody heard about it in New York, and that now everybody in the neighborhood was talking about nothing else, and that if I didn't know anything about it, then, being his mother, I'd ought to."

Big Steve reverted to a disdainful grunt.

"That kind would!" he snorted. "That's what I said. Well, go ahead, Mrs. Meegan. What was the story?"

"She said there'd been a terrible row in some place in New York, a club of some sort, and that Danny there"—Mrs. Meegan nodded piteously toward the bed—"had got into trouble and had been so badly hurt that you had to carry him out in your arms, and that you'd taken him away to your home out here."

"Isn't that nice?" observed Big Steve caustically. "And me being originally from the old home town over in Jersey was life-size too in the picture! Anything else?"

"No. I—I was frightened. I hadn't heard anything from you. I was afraid he was so bad that—that you didn't want to tell me until—until you had to."

"You could have telephoned," Big Steve suggested.

The tears came trickling down Mrs. Meegan's cheeks again.

"I didn't think of it," she said. "All I could think of was to get to Danny just as quick as I could."

Big Steve paced the length of the room; then, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, he planted himself again in front of the threadbare and pathetic little figure in the chair.

"All right!" he said, and patted her shoulder again. "I'm glad you came. I *wasn't* going to say anything about it until it was all over, but now I'm going to tell you the *truth*. But there's something else I got to say first. I was brought up alongside of you, and your old man, and Danny, in that same little town you're living in now. You used to be pretty good to me, Mrs. Meegan, when I was a kid. Do you remember the time I got into a fight and was afraid to go home because I'd got my pants tore—and you sewed 'em up for me?"

A smile came quiveringly to the tear-stained face as Mrs. Meegan nodded her head.

"Sure, you do!" said Big Steve heartily. "Well, I'm going to slip a few years now—up to the time when I'd moved away and Danny was looking for a better job to keep the pot boiling after Dad Meegan died. Danny was ten years younger than me, but we'd grown up together and I guess I'd always looked on the kid like a small brother—but I ain't going to butter my words 'cause it won't do any good, and you know it's so anyhow. Danny's always had a bit of a wild streak in him."

"Yes, I—I'm afraid"—her whisper was so low that Jimmie Dale could scarcely catch the words—"I'm afraid that's so, but——"

"At heart he's all right," Big Steve finished gently. "That's what I'm banking on. Well, he came around and wanted a job with me. I didn't give him one, Mrs. Meegan—and you might as well know the reason why. This wasn't any place for Danny. I ain't been any saint in business myself."

Mrs. Meegan shook her head.

"Nothing would make me believe that," she asserted flatly. "Why, Steve, what's wrong with a fine hotel like this?"

"Nothing!" said Big Steve, a sudden gruffness in his voice. "But let it go at that. I got him a job somewhere else."

"You got him more than one, Steve."

"Sure! Yes! Well, that brings us down to pretty near last night. I said I was going to tell you the truth, and I am. It ain't always pleasant, and this ain't neither—that is, all of it ain't—but just you buck up while you're listening, Mrs. Meegan, 'cause the story's going to have a happy ending. Danny got to playing around with a crowd he hadn't ought to have been with. See? The floating crap game don't mean anything to you, I guess, and I ain't going to try to explain it, except to say that it ain't often pulled off twice in the same place, which is why it's called floating. It's well organized; and there's a barrel of money changes hands in them games—thousands and thousands, Mrs. Meegan. Well, Danny started rolling the dice in one of them games last night."

Mrs. Meegan's eyes widened.

"But Danny didn't have any thousands to play with," she said in a bewildered way.

"No; he didn't"—Big Steve chuckled suddenly—"not to begin with. He started on a shoestring, but he had 'em *all* when he quit. He cleaned up. He made one of the biggest killings—and there's been *some* big ones, Mrs. Meegan—that was ever made in New York. I don't know how much he won, because he'd blown in a big hunk of it before I got my paws on him; but I know there's something like eighty thousand dollars left of it downstairs there in a little black bag in my safe."

The shadow against the wall, that was Jimmie Dale, stirred slightly.

Mrs. Meegan's eyes grew wider.

"Steve!" she cried out in a dazed tone.

"Yes," said Big Steve, "that's the straight goods, all right. And now listen to the rest of it, which is the part I'd like to skip over for your sake if I could, but you got to know how Danny came to be lying on that bed there and what's the matter with him. He cut loose. When he walked out of that game with all the dough in the world, I guess he was pretty near crazy anyhow. He headed for one of the biggest and most expensive night clubs in the city. He held a reception, Mrs. Meegan. Do you get me? It was on him! He spent money in handfuls. He gave it away—and there were lots to take it. The word went around outside. Why wouldn't it! Other night clubs closed but *that* one didn't. Everything was free—Danny paid the bills. Not living in the city I didn't hear about it until late this afternoon—that's yesterday afternoon now. Then I went down there and salvaged what was left of Danny and his coin. By this time he was pretty bad, and it's true I had to carry him out. I'm calling a spade a spade now, Mrs. Meegan—he'd drunk himself insensible. He had me scared a bit too after I got him out here, and I called in a doctor. The doctor fixed him up, and then came back around midnight and gave him something to make him sleep like you see him now. The doc says he'll be all right in a day or so."

Mrs. Meegan was crying quietly.

"God bless you, Steve!" she said.

"That's nothing at all, Mrs. Meegan," said Big Steve hastily. "Now about that money. I hope you ain't going to be fussy about it just because it's gambling money. It was won fair and square enough. It was just luck busting wide open."

"I hadn't thought about the money," she said.

"Well, then," smiled Big Steve, "I'll do the thinking for you. And I'll tell you what's going to be done with it. It's going to mean a new life for you and Danny—and I got a hunch it's going to keep Danny so busy after this that he won't have time to hang around with his old crowd any more. I'm going to talk to Danny. The first thing he's going to do is to buy a nice little place for you and him somewhere that ain't

near New York, and where he ain't going to bump into temptation every time he shoves his face outdoors. And with the rest of the money he's going to start himself up in some decent business—and I'll give him a hand to do it. If I know Danny, he'll fall for this hard; but, if it's necessary, I'll help him to make up his mind by busting his nose. Is that all right, Mrs. Meegan?"

Mrs. Meegan's face was transfigured as she rose tremblingly from her chair.

"Oh, Steve!" she sobbed—and buried her face on his shoulder.

"Yes, Steve," said Jimmie Dale softly to himself, as he began to move silently toward the stairs. "I think I've got a warm spot in my heart for you, too!"

Jimmie Dale reached the head of the stairs—but suddenly came to a halt again as something that Big Steve was saying arrested him.

"I've been looking in on him every half-hour or so, Mrs. Meegan," said Big Steve; "but now you're here, I guess you'll sort of want to take that on yourself. There ain't really anything to do, and there's no reason why you can't lie down on that other cot there and get some sleep. We generally close up here around three o'clock, and if you want anything before then just punch the bell; afterwards I'll be downstairs in the room just underneath you, I always have a little game of cards with a few friends every night after closing-up time, and all you've got to do is call me. And if there's anything else ..."

Jimmie Dale went on down the stairs, cast a sidelong glance at the safe as he crossed the lighted office, opened the glass-panelled inner door, stepped out into the porch, the outer door of which was still wide open as Big Steve had left it—and waited. He nodded to himself. Big Steve's movements were now the first consideration, and he, Jimmie Dale, could still see into the office.

He had not long to wait. In scarcely a minute Big Steve appeared in the connecting doorway between the office and the passage. Here Big Steve paused for an instant to reach out for the wall switch. The office was in darkness. Then Big Steve's footsteps sounded crossing toward the glass-panelled door—and Jimmie Dale stepped silently out into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

MEN IN MASKS

Jimmie Dale smiled grimly now as from the shadows he watched Big Steve lock the outer door, light a cigar, and stroll back to his interrupted duties as host of the Two Oaks. Both of his questions had been answered. Eighty thousand dollars in cash! It wasn't often that eighty thousand *in cash* was to be had—outside a bank! His spirits rose. The bait was big enough to tempt the "man with the black hair," the man who was stealing Daddy Ratzler's plums—*the man who had murdered Ray!*

"Something tells me," said Jimmie Dale quietly to the night, "that there isn't so much chance about it after all, and that he'll be here on the heels of Silky Hines for another bite—and I'd like to see his *face*. But anyway, whether I do or not, I think I'm rather glad I came. The ethics of the whole business may be open to debate, but I'd rather Mrs. Meegan got that money—than Daddy Ratzler and Silky Hines! And I think she will!"

Jimmie Dale returned to the porch door—and opened it with a pick-lock. Four o'clock! The Two Oaks began to close up around three. By four the multitude would have departed! It was quite obvious now why Silky Hines was waiting until—four o'clock!

"Yes! Quite!" said Jimmie Dale in communion with himself. "Not awfully bright of me—but I was under the impression that the Two Oaks was in full swing *all* night. My mistake! H'm! It's still rather a long pull to the zero hour, but the time ought not to drag! Big Steve will be starting that private little game of his back here long before that."

Jimmie Dale entered the office, and without pause stepped across to the connecting door on the other side that led into the passageway. He could hear Mrs. Meegan moving about in her room upstairs, and the faint rattle of dishes that he had noticed before was still in

evidence—there were no other sounds. He moved noiselessly along the passage. His flashlight came into play. Big Steve's private card room proved to be the second one beyond the stairs.

From the threshold, Jimmie Dale inspected the room as the ray of his flashlight circled the interior. There was little else in the room save a large poker table of orthodox design which was surrounded by comfortable and inviting-looking chairs. The window at the rear of the room was directly opposite the door.

"It's a hot night," observed Jimmie Dale; "they'll have to open that."

The flashlight went out. Jimmie Dale returned to the office. But here the round, white ray again became inquisitive—it lingered for a full minute over the face of Big Steve's safe.

"Rather ancient vintage!" he murmured. "It might be worse!"

The flashlight went out again—the Gray Seal was at work.

The minutes dragged along; now punctuated by the tinkle of the whirling dial, now by a vexed and deep-breathed exclamation that proclaimed abortive effort; now by periods of utter silence as Jimmie Dale, his ear clamped to the steel door, listened for the tumblers' fall while the dial moved by the barest fraction of an inch.

Mrs. Meegan still moved about in the room upstairs; the faint clatter of dishes still came from beyond the passage; a black shape, formless in outline against the surrounding darkness, still hovered in front of the safe. And then there came another sound—the dull, muffled thud of metal meeting metal, as the bolts slid back in their grooves.

"Got it!"

The door of the safe swung open. The flashlight disclosed a black leather satchel. Jimmie Dale removed the satchel and opened it. It was nearly full of loose, crumpled banknotes.

"I was afraid so," Jimmie Dale confided to himself. "I couldn't get these in my pockets in a thousand years. Well, there's only one thing for it, and, thank heaven, there's plenty of time!"

The flashlight swept around the room—and Jimmie Dale reached for a newspaper that lay on the table. A pocket in his leather girdle contributed a piece of cord. In a minute more the satchel was empty and a parcel lay on the floor beside him.

For an instant after that, Jimmie Dale hesitated; then from his girdle he took out the thin metal case that contained the insignia of the Gray Seal. He had no choice in the matter. With the money gone, Silky Hines and his henchmen would put Big Steve through the third degree anent its whereabouts. It would go very ill with Big Steve then, for they naturally would not believe that he knew nothing of its disappearance. It would end up, of course, in Big Steve being "taken for a ride" unless—Jimmie Dale opened the metal case, and with the tweezers lifted out a diamond-shaped, gray paper seal—unless, well unless the Gray Seal took upon his shoulders the onus of another "crime"!

Jimmie Dale surveyed the face of the safe—and shook his head. No; not there! Big Steve might very naturally come into the office here before he settled down to his game of cards and notice it, in which case he would give the alarm at once. That, of course, would in itself forestall even the possibility of any unpleasantness between Silky Hines and Big Steve, for, with the Two Oaks in an uproar and the money already gone, Silky Hines and his three followers would not put in an appearance at all—but, in that event, neither would the *fifth* man! And it was on that chance alone, the chance that the fifth man might come, that he, Jimmie Dale, was here.

On the outside of the satchel, then? Again Jimmie Dale shook his head. No; not there, either! If Big Steve happened to open the safe, he would still see it—and the results would be the same!

Jimmie Dale lifted his shoulders as though in self-apology for his hesitation. It was only a detail, of course—but it *was* important. Well, *here*—then! He moistened the adhesive side of the seal with his tongue, and, still holding it with the tweezers, reached inside and laid it on the bottom lining of the satchel. There were no telltale fingerprints! He pressed it firmly into place with his handkerchief, closed the satchel, and set the satchel back in the safe; then he shut

and locked the safe, wiped the dial and handle carefully with his handkerchief, picked up the parcel of banknotes from the floor, and, locking the porch door behind him, for the second time that night and from the same exit disappeared into the shadows.

"And to-morrow, Mrs. Meegan," said Jimmie Dale pleasantly to himself, as he tucked the parcel under his arm, "we'll slip this over on some bank. But for the present I fancy it will be safer locked up in my car than anywhere else. Also, the walk will help to pass the idle moments."

Jimmie Dale did not hurry. When he eventually returned to the Two Oaks the cars that had been parked in front of the entrance were gone, and the only windows now alight in the main building were upstairs in what was presumably the servants' quarters; those, and two in the annex—the one occupied by Mrs. Meegan, and the one directly underneath, which latter was, of course, Big Steve's card room. The business day—or night—of the establishment was ended.

He had removed his mask while on the highway. He replaced it now as he stepped a little way out from the fringe of trees for a closer view. The card room window had not only been opened as he had anticipated it would be; but, whether through indifference, or deeming the seclusion of the countryside entirely adequate, or for the sake of more air, or for all of these possible reasons combined, the roller shade had not been pulled down. Five men in shirt sleeves sat around the poker table. Big Steve's customary game after closing hours—he had intimated to Mrs. Meegan that it was a nightly occurrence—was already in full swing.

"And Silky Hines isn't going it blind!" muttered Jimmie Dale tersely. "He'll know about this 'customary' game. The only sure bet is that the curtain will fall with the safe center-stage. But I wonder what the procedure will be?"

Jimmie Dale withdrew again to the shelter of the trees. Here, at most, he was still but a matter of a few yards away from both the card room window and the porch door, and with his eyes grown accustomed to the darkness he could quite easily keep both well in view. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The lights in the servants' quarters upstairs in the main part of the building went out one by one. Occasionally there came gusts of laughter from the card room, occasionally even a word or two that was distinguishable. The time did not pass quickly, but Jimmie waited in grim patience.

"The fifth man!" his mind kept repeating. "I just want to know *who* he is. That's all I want—*to-night*. The rest will come later!"

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale grew tense. A car that he had heard approaching had apparently turned off from the main road a little distance away. And now it had come to a stop. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Three minutes of four!

Five minutes more went by. Jimmie Dale's face set. Yes, here they were! Black shapes emerging from the denser shadows of the trees, and coming from the direction where the car had stopped, were moving swiftly and silently toward the porch door. He counted them. Four!

For a minute or two they stood there, one of their number obviously at work with a skeleton key or pick-lock, for presently, still having made no sound, they vanished through the doorway. Jimmie Dale's eyes traveled expectantly to the spot where the four men had emerged from the trees. There was no fifth man dogging their footsteps. Perhaps it was too soon. Well, suppose that he, Jimmie Dale, reached the porch first then—if he could do so unseen—and waited *there*! If the fifth man came at all, he ...

Jimmie Dale dropped promptly to his hands and knees and began to crawl rapidly forward. But halfway across the open space he came to an abrupt halt at the sound of a sudden commotion in the card room. He was near enough now to hear what was said; but he raised himself up a little that he might see more distinctly. The four men, masked and wearing peaked caps, had crowded into the card room and had covered the players with their revolvers.

"Keep your hands on the table, every one of you!" ordered a voice smoothly.

Jimmie Dale, dividing his glances now between the card room window and the porch door, nodded his head. That was Silky Hines's voice. It belied the man, though it had supplied him with his moniker. Beneath the smooth, soft tones was hidden a devil's venom.

Big Steve had been a gambler all his life. He laughed now.

"Help yourselves!" he said. "I was just going to scoop the pot, but I guess you win." He shoved the little heap of bills that were on the table over in Silky Hines's direction, as he spread out his cards. "And on an ace full, too!"

"You still win—unless one of these gentlemen has you beaten," said Silky Hines. "We didn't come out here after chicken feed."

The players around the table, a white-faced, uneasy group now, their hands obediently in front of them, were silent.

Jimmie Dale's eyes searched the darkness in the neighborhood of the porch door. There was still no sign of the fifth man.

"What do you mean?" Big Steve's voice had hardened.

"I'll tell you," said Silky Hines, "and it won't take long. This afternoon, meaning yesterday now, you carried Kid Meegan, who was soused to the gills, out of a swell New York joint; Kid Meegan—and a black satchel. You put the Kid to bed out here, and you put the satchel in your safe. I'll trouble you for that satchel."

Big Steve's voice choked with sudden fury.

"I'll see you in hell first!" he flung out.

"No," said Silky Hines, "I may meet you there later, but I'm busy to-night! Get me? I'm asking you for the combination of that safe."

Big Steve made no answer.

"All right!" The soft purr was still in Silky Hines's voice, but creeping into it now was a deadly menace. "It's too bad to spoil a pleasant evening—and a safe. We can always 'soup' it if we have to; but that'll take a little work, and it don't seem necessary to ruin the safe when there's a lot easier and quicker way—the combination, Steve?"

Big Steve still made no answer.

"All right!" said Silky Hines again—casually. "Will you gentlemen kindly push your cards over toward me? Thank you!"

Jimmie Dale's lips drew together as, after another quick glance in the direction of the porch door, his eyes came back to Silky Hines again. What deviltry was the man up to! With his revolver still menacing the circle, Silky Hines had arranged the disordered cards and had picked up the pack with his left hand.

"I always knew you were a good loser, Steve," Silky Hines purred on, "but you don't seem to get the idea that you ain't holding even enough to chip in on to-night. We're going to get that money—and we're going to get it the *easiest* way! See? I ain't making any threats against—*you*. Some guys get stubborn when they're handed that sort of a spiel. And from what I've heard of you, Steve, you're that kind of a guy. So I ain't saying, 'Steve, come across, or get bumped off,' because you were born one of those fool birds that'd tell me to shoot and be damned, and to-morrow the papers would be telling how Big Steve died game. No, Steve—nothing like that! I've got your number! I'm just going to deal these cards around to your four friends here, one at a time, leaving *you* out of it. One of *my* friends is handier with a knife than he is with a rod, and it won't make any noise. The first jack is elected." He began to flip the cards around the table. "The first jack—or the combination, Steve."

A blanched silence had fallen on the room. Silky Hines suddenly stopped dealing as a card fell before the man on Big Steve's right.

"The first jack," said Silky Hines.

A queer sound, like a half-choked cry, came from the man on Big Steve's right as he sat gaping, loose-jawed, at the card in front of him. There was no color in his face. He touched his lips with his tongue. One of Silky Hines's companions was suddenly standing at the back of the man's chair.

"There's no particular hurry, Steve," said Silky Hines; "so we'll say—one minute!"

Jimmie Dale's hands clenched. What price human life with any one of Daddy Ratzler's brood! God! Didn't Big Steve realize that Silky Hines *meant* it! If not, then it was up to him, Jimmie Dale, to——

"This is *murder*!" burst suddenly from Big Steve's lips.

"There are *four* jacks," said Silky Hines.

Big Steve came swaying to his feet.

"I'll open it," he said hoarsely.

"No," said Silky Hines, "you'll sit down in that chair again—and stay there! You'll get no chance to play any tricks or broadcast anything. You won't leave the room—none of you will. *I'll* open it! Take that pencil out of your pocket and write down the combination on this card." He tossed a card from the pack in his hand across the table. "Another jack! That's *queer*—Steve! But there's no room on that. Well, here's the deuce of diamonds. The boys here'll entertain you while I'm gone, so——"

Jimmie Dale was creeping again toward the porch door. He felt suddenly let down. Moisture that was not from the heat had gathered on his forehead beneath his mask. His thoughts were chaotic. The fifth man! There had been no sign of the fifth man—not likely to be! Not a chance in a thousand now! No fifth man had gone in through that porch door. But there was still left some recompense for the night's work quite apart from the fact that Mrs. Meegan upstairs there wouldn't be the poorer to-morrow by the sum of eighty thousand dollars. He knew, in anticipation, an unholy satisfaction in watching that silver-tongued potential murderer, Silky Hines, open the satchel. The Gray Seal again! Thank heaven, for the sake of those men in the card room, he had not left anything open to question! And perhaps Daddy Ratzler's teeth would chatter a little the harder when he heard the story!

Jimmie Dale slipped into the porch—and at the same moment he saw Silky Hines pause inside the doorway from the passage and switch on the office light. Silky Hines had a playing card in his hand as well as his revolver. The deuce of diamonds.

Inside the porch, but well back from the inner, glass-panelled door which had been left wide open, Jimmie Dale watched. Silky Hines walked to the safe, knelt down before it, laid his revolver on the floor beside him, and, as he studied the playing card in his hand, began to manipulate the dial.

He worked deftly—Silky Hines was deft in everything he did! The safe door swung open, he reached inside for the black satchel—and suddenly Jimmie Dale stood tense and rigid.

Somebody else was in the room!

The door leading into the passage was closing without a sound. A man, masked, was locking the door, still without sound, behind him.

Thought is swifter than word or deed. Jimmie Dale's brain was racing. *The fifth man*! It wasn't one of the three from the other room who had been with Silky Hines. This man wore a slouch hat—not a cap. He must have been hiding on the stairs—had got there somehow, either through the front entrance or the rear, after he, Jimmie Dale, had gone to his car, and before Silky Hines and his companions had entered. Jimmie Dale's pulse leaped. The man had black hair. The weapon in his hand was fitted with a silencer.

It happened in the winking of an eye. There had been no sound. It might have been intuition, or that out of the corner of his eye Silky Hines had caught sight of the other; but Silky Hines's hand, outstretched toward the satchel in the safe, snatched up instead the revolver from the floor—and Silky Hines fired. The roar of the report racketed through the room. It was answered by a flash from the masked man in the slouch hat—and Silky Hines, spinning around, pitched to the ground.

Jimmie Dale whipped his automatic from his pocket. Silky Hines's bullet had not wholly missed its mark. It had at least grazed the other. The man, still near the door, was leaning back against the wall, his revolver dangling in his right hand, his other hand clapped to his left ear from which the blood was crimsoning his fingers.

Jimmie Dale stepped into the room.

"Drop that gun!" he ordered coldly from behind his outflung automatic; and then, as the other's weapon clattered obediently to the floor: "Now take off that mask!"

The man made no protest—there seemed no fight left in him. Perhaps he was too badly hit. He raised his hand to the fastening of his mask, and shrugged his shoulders as though in philosophical

resignation at defeat—and with the shrug of his shoulders the light went out, and there came a jeering laugh.

The next instant something came hurtling through the air, a chair, that, even as he sprang forward, caught Jimmie Dale on ankles and knees. He stumbled and fell head first against the table in the center of the room. The blow for a moment dazed him—but in that moment, and even in his dazed condition he heard the other dash across the room and leap out through the porch.

Jimmie Dale reeled to his feet.

"Bilked!" he muttered; and then in a sort of savage admiration: "Good work! He had his shoulder against that wall switch all the time!"

Someone was pounding on the passageway door. Someone was calling Silky Hines's name. From overhead a woman's voice was crying out in alarm. There was no time to lose. Jimmie Dale, with his girdle of burglars' tools and his little metal case of diamond-shaped gray paper seals, could not afford to be caught here, either!

He was groping around him now on the floor.

"Bilked!" he repeated; "but"—as his hand came in contact with a revolver that was fitted with a silencer—"at least, *this*!"

And then Jimmie Dale was gone.

CHAPTER XV

INSIDE INFORMATION

It was the next night—but Jimmie Dale, though at the St. James Club, was not as usual in evening attire. He was wearing a dark and very unobtrusive though fashionably cut suit of tweed as he entered the reading room, and, selecting an evening paper whose headlines afforded him a peculiar interest, seated himself in an unoccupied corner of the room. He read the headlines again. They were stretched in two rows of lurid type across the entire width of the front page:

GRAY SEAL ROBS FELLOW CROOKS
OF $80,000
AFTERMATH OF BIG FLOATING
CRAP GAME

Jimmie Dale skimmed over the first part of the text rapidly. His interest began where the "fifth" man had entered the office. The version of the affair was obviously Big Steve's. At the sound of a shot from the office one of the three remaining bandits in the card room had rushed to the office door and had found it locked. He was then joined by another of his companions, leaving one man on guard in the doorway of the card room. The two bandits broke down the office door. On the floor, unconscious, was the leader of the hold-up gang who had originally gone into the office to open the safe. The satchel was still there, but it was empty except for a gray seal pasted inside on the bottom. The Gray Seal had apparently been hiding in the room, had waited until the safe was opened, had then deliberately shot the gang leader, had exchanged the money in the satchel for one of his wretched and despicable stickers, and had got away with the loot. Meanwhile, of course, the servants had been awakened by the noise, and the whole establishment was in an uproar. The leader of the gang had, however, regained consciousness by this time, and did not appear to be at all seriously wounded, for, unaided by his

companions, he had taken to his heels as expeditiously as any of the rest. The four men, like the Gray Seal, had made their escape. No one's identity had been established.

"H'm!" commented Jimmie Dale. "Comprehensive but inaccurate!"

He lighted a cigarette, and, putting the newspaper aside, leaned back in his chair. He watched the blue spiral curling from the tip of his cigarette thoughtfully. So Silky Hines was still on the job and still going strong! That, at least, was worth knowing! Probably no more than a bullet graze that had stunned him for the moment! And nothing had been said about a certain bank having mysteriously received a certain sum of money in trust for a certain Mrs. Meegan. Just so! The bank was probably quite a little worried, and premature publicity might not have been politic! Whether they opened an account with Mrs. Meegan or not was their affair—and Mrs. Meegan's! The point was that the money, being in their custody, was *safe*. If they established friendly and cordial relations with Mrs. Meegan, well and good; if not, well, they would have to get a receipt from Mrs. Meegan —and Mrs. Meegan would get the money in any case. So that was that!

Jimmie Dale looked up. A club attendant was standing at his elbow.

"There is a telephone call for you, Mr. Dale," said the man. "The booth on this floor, if you care to answer it, sir."

"Thank you," said Jimmie Dale.

He rose from his chair, and, going to the telephone booth in the hall, picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he inquired.

A voice came tensely over the wire:

"That you, Jimmie?"

"Oh, hello, Carruthers," replied Jimmie Dale. "Yes, Jimmie speaking. Anything new?"

"You bet! The Gray Seal's latest!"

"Some haul!" said Jimmie Dale brightly. "It must have been lively out at the Two Oaks. I've just finished reading about it."

"Damn it," cried Carruthers excitedly, "I know you can read! Everybody's read it. You don't think I'd call you up about *that*, do you?"

"My error!" murmured Jimmie Dale apologetically. "Well?"

"Jimmie, listen! Of all the damned nerve! Do you know what the Gray Seal has done?"

"Haven't the faintest!"

"Well, listen!"

"I'm listening," said Jimmie Dale patiently.

"Well, you're going to get a shock. He sent a parcel to Detective Sergeant Waud. It was left at the Homicide Bureau before daylight this morning—hung on the doorknob, Jimmie. The parcel contained a note of condolence adorned with one of his infernal gray seals—and a revolver that was fitted with a silencer."

There was a sudden gleam of laughter in Jimmie Dale's dark eyes—but his voice was plaintive as he spoke.

"I wish you wouldn't talk in riddles, Carruthers," he complained. "I'm not very good at them. What is the connection between a note of condolence and a lethal weapon? Was he suggesting suicide to the worthy sergeant?"

"Confound you, Jimmie!" replied Carruthers, "I tell you this is serious. It's hot stuff! Front page! The gall and egotism of that blood-drunk pervert is enough to make Satan himself sick with envy! He condoled with Waud over the fatuous results so far achieved by the police in their distracted efforts to apprehend the murderer of Ray Thorne. He ragged Waud unmercifully. Said he realized how deeply chagrined and mortified Waud would be when, if no one held out a helping hand to him, he must finally come to an understanding of his own abysmal innocuity. I don't think Waud knew what that word meant, but he looked it up and swore like hell! The note—it was all in printed characters, not a scrap of writing, Jimmie—ended up by the Gray Seal saying that, having no immediate use for the weapon himself, he begged to enclose with his compliments and in the hope

that Waud's efforts thereby would be directed into more intelligent channels hereafter, the gun with which Ray Thorne had been shot. What do you think of that?"

"Not very much!" said Jimmie contemptuously. "He's spoofing, of course. He probably picked it up out of some junk pile just to have a go at the police and pull their legs."

"Spoofing—nothing!" Carruthers' voice over the phone was at fever pitch with excitement now. "It *was* the gun that killed Ray. The markings on a bullet fired from it correspond with the markings on the bullet extracted from Ray's body."

"Good Lord!" gasped Jimmie Dale.

"Yes!" gloated Carruthers. "I thought you'd swallow hard before you were through! This opens a new field for investigation. You see where it leads to, don't you? That bird's unholy thirst for vicious notoriety will do him down yet! If that gun can be traced to where it was bought, and a description of the purchaser obtained, we'll have got a long way ahead!"

"Yes, of course!" agreed Jimmie Dale. "Naturally!"

"Well, that's all for now," said Carruthers. "Waud's turned his whole crowd loose on it, and I'll keep you posted if anything new turns up."

"Rather! I should hope so!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale fervently. "Thanks, Carruthers."

"Good-night," said Carruthers.

"Good-night," said Jimmie Dale.

There was a quizzical lift to Jimmie Dale's eyebrows as he hung up the receiver.

"Even the police are useful at times," he informed the sound-proof booth whimsically. "I just wanted to be sure. So, besides having black hair, he has a clipped left ear. We're getting on!"

He left the telephone booth, chatted for a moment with a fellow-member whom he encountered in the hall, and then sauntered leisurely into the writing room. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past ten. He nodded to himself. That would just about give him time to write a short but rather difficult note comfortably.

He sat down at a desk and drew a sheet of note paper toward him. He sat there for some twenty minutes, at end of which time he had written no more than perhaps a dozen or fifteen lines. But they had been written to his satisfaction, for he made no changes now as he re-read them carefully; then, enclosing the sheet of paper in an envelope, he tucked the envelope into the inside pocket of his coat—and as he did so his fingers came in contact with another envelope that was already there. A grim little smile flickered across his lips. The night's agenda! Quite so! And if all went well the meeting would be called to order some time in the vicinity of midnight! It had been a busy day; it would be a busy night! He had left nothing undone that he could think of. He shrugged his shoulders. Pray heaven that fate was in a genial mood during the next few hours, that was all!

And then Jimmie Dale left the club.

Twenty minutes later, with his car parked a block away, he was walking along a shabby cross-street in the lower East Side where evening clothes, had he worn them, would have attracted very undesirable attention. His tweed suit attracted none. And presently he slipped unnoticed into the dark mouth of a lane. A minute more, and, entering by the French window, he was standing in the Sanctuary.

No one had seen him enter, and he had no need of any light that might proclaim his presence now. He crossed the room and from the opening behind the movable section of the baseboard took out a parcel and his make-up box. With these, as unobtrusively as he had come, he returned to his car.

Thereafter, once free of the New York and Brooklyn traffic, he drove at a stiff clip—the Long Island roads were good, and Charleton Park Manor was at least an hour away!

The man with the clipped left ear! Again and again as Jimmie Dale left the miles behind him, his mind reverted to the masked figure who last night in Big Steve's office had shot down Silky Hines. It was no longer a moot question whether this was the man who had murdered Ray—it was now an established fact. He, Jimmie Dale, had had very little doubt about it, but between doubt and certainty there was a wide gulf. He had bridged that gulf—but *who* was this man, and *how*, and

where was he stealing Daddy Ratzler's secrets? One of the gang? Hardly! From the Tocsin's report of the conversation that had taken place at Daddy Ratzler's bedside last night, Daddy Ratzler's *intimate* followers would appear to be limited to the four who had been present there—and all four had afterward been at the Two Oaks together.

Jimmie Dale shook his head suddenly over the wheel of his speeding car. No, there perhaps might be another! He had forgotten—the Angel! A nice moniker! It was the Angel who was to have gone to Ray in person for the blue envelope. But the Angel still might be one of the four. The Tocsin had placed by name only three of the men last night. But did this matter very much? Whether Daddy Ratzler's group numbered four or five it was almost fantastic to entertain the idea that the man in question was one of them.

Well, then, where was the leak coming from that supplied Ray's murderer with the advance information that enabled him to pick Daddy Ratzler's plums? Last night, for instance! It would have been a very juicy plum if the man had had only the gang itself to deal with! The mail? Daddy Ratzler's concern about his letters! Was that the answer?

Again Jimmie Dale shook his head. That also was almost too fantastic to be worthy of consideration. Daddy Ratzler was the brains of the organization. Daddy Ratzler formulated the plans. The gang wouldn't be writing letters to Daddy Ratzler about his own schemes! But why, then, did Daddy Ratzler examine his letters with a magnifying glass?

"Damn!" said Jimmie Dale heartily.

One phase of the blue envelope mystery only led to another. One question began a cycle. He wrenched his mind back to what was for him now the main consideration. There would be no difficulty now in identifying the man with that clipped left ear; what was vital now was to make contact with him again. There was only one way—through Daddy Ratzler; granting, of course, that the man would go on picking plums. Last night the Tocsin, as well as Ray's murderer, had been able to obtain advance information of one of Daddy Ratzler's schemes. She might be able to do so again—and then again she might not! There

might be many games pulled off in which the man with the clipped ear would be an uninvited participant, and neither he, Jimmie Dale, nor the Tocsin, know anything about them.

But there *was* one plum, and the biggest of all, still to be picked, which the man he was after now would not fail to snatch if he could—the plum for whose possession he had futilely murdered Ray. The blue envelope! Silky Hines in the course of the discussion that the Tocsin had overheard last night had said, basing his statement on the assumption that the blue envelope was never recovered, and providing of course that the Gray Seal could not read its riddle, that "the pot wasn't lost yet" and that it was only a question of "waiting for openers, which wouldn't be long in coming." Translated into English that meant the loss of the blue envelope spelled only a temporary delay in pulling off what had all the earmarks of being the master coup of Daddy Ratzler's long and nefarious career. Ray's murderer, unless his own peculiar source of inside information had suddenly dried up, would certainly be present on that occasion; but the only way that he, Jimmie Dale, could be certain of being present, too, was to discover in some way or another, and *beforehand*, what the message was that the blue envelope contained.

"And," confessed Jimmie Dale to the headlights' glare along the road, "I haven't had any luck so far with those beastly acids and test tubes! All I've done, I fancy, is make a mess and worry Jason! Most perplexing thing, that blue envelope! It means everything now if I am ever to get that hound and keep my promise to Ray. I can't afford to let it beat me; but, then"—a sudden cryptic smile crossed Jimmie Dale's lips—"I'm rather sure it won't—before I'm through!"

The miles and the minutes sped away together. Midnight came—and passed. And then suddenly Jimmie Dale slowed his car. Thanks to that bounder, Markel, of the days gone by, the surroundings were very definitely familiar. Charleton Park Manor was just ahead—and here was the wagon track where he had parked his car that night, and which, if followed for a quarter of a mile, the Tocsin said, would bring him to Daddy Ratzler's house.

Jimmie Dale swung the car into the wagon track, but he did not follow it for more than a hundred yards—the sound of a motor would travel far on the night air, and Daddy Ratzler was noted for his acute hearing! At the first opening disclosed by the headlights, Jimmie Dale ran the car far enough in among the trees to hide it from sight should anyone chance along the wagon track.

And then the lights went out.

From under the front seat Jimmie Dale took out several strips of heavy black cloth which he pinned across the windshield and the front windows; then, climbing over into the back of the car, he pulled down the rear curtains. The car had blended into the surrounding darkness.

And now, confident that it could not be seen from without, Jimmie Dale switched on the little dome light overhead and opened the parcel that he had brought with him from the Sanctuary. He laid the contents out on the back seat—the old pair of shoes with broken laces; the mismated socks; the patched trousers, frayed at the bottoms; the disreputable collarless flannel shirt; the torn and filthy coat; the shapeless and dirt-stained slouch hat. And for a moment he stared at these in somber fashion, and almost as though a puzzled curiosity due to some vaguely familiar sight had been suddenly aroused. He had not seen them for years. He had put them away, preserved them, it was true, against an unforeseen need, but he had never expected to see them again. They brought back unnumbered memories. Here were the clothes of Larry the Bat, the dope fiend, a one-time habitué of every crooked joint in the Bad Lands, an intimate associate of thugs and criminals, and later known and execrated alike by the police, the underworld, and the public at large—*as the Gray Seal*. Larry the Bat—who was to live again to-night!

Jimmie Dale began rapidly to make the exchange of clothing, retaining the leather girdle he was already wearing, and transferring the contents of the pockets of the tweed suit to those of the disreputable rags he was now donning. Since that night long ago in the old Crime Club when the Magpie had stumbled upon the fact that Larry the Bat and the Gray Seal were one, and had spread his tidings throughout the underworld, and the news had swept like wildfire to

the police and press, Larry the Bat had virtually disappeared from the land of the living—but the Gray Seal had kept steadily at work. Neither the police nor the underworld, however, were blind fools! The obvious had stared them in the face. It was realized at once that Larry the Bat was only *one* of the characters that cloaked the Gray Seal—though the guise in which he had still continued to masquerade had never been discovered. And Daddy Ratzler was one of those who had been personally acquainted, quite well acquainted, with Larry the Bat in the days gone by. Daddy Ratzler was one of those who *knew* that Larry the Bat was the Gray Seal. But, also, Daddy Ratzler was a wily and tricky customer!

The make-up box now claimed Jimmie Dale's attention. But he did not work so quickly now, as his wrists, neck, throat, and face received their quota of stain, and the shapely, well-cared-for hands grew unkempt and grimy, artfully black beneath the finger nails. The vision mirror was awkwardly placed and small. The rehabilitation of Larry the Bat could have been more readily and simply effected at the Sanctuary. Exactly! But the risk had been too great. Daddy Ratzler was not the only one who would recognize Larry the Bat on sight. There were many a private citizen, many a denizen of the underworld, and many a member of the police who could do so, too—traffic officers some of the latter now, probably. Larry the Bat driving in the seclusion of a closed car at night might ordinarily be expected to pass unnoticed, though there was always the possibility of a traffic mix-up and an inquisitive officer, or a perhaps trivial incident of some kind that would force him to alight and expose himself; but the greatest danger had lurked in the fact that the Gray Seal was in the limelight again—and wanted for the murder of Ray Thorne! With the police at fever heat, even the glimpse of a suspicious-looking character at the wheel of a car might have been enough to trip him up and bring recognition in its wake—and recognition meant ruin, and disaster, inevitable and swift. "Death to the Gray Seal!" That ugly slogan was to-day as clamorous as ever! It would have been foolhardy, an act of insanity, to attempt it!

He stared into the mirror as his fingers deftly inserted little distorting pieces of wax behind his ears, in his nostrils, and under his upper lip—the features reflected there were dissolute and vicious now, and from under drug-laden lids the narrowed eyes of Larry the Bat stared back at him. He paid himself a grim compliment. There would have been no question about the certainty of recognition had he risked exposure and been seen by anyone who had ever known—Larry the Bat!

CHAPTER XVI

WITHOUT REHEARSAL

Jimmie Dale was ready now! He picked up the battered slouch hat, pulled it well down over his eyes, switched off the dome light, and, stepping out of the car, made his way back to the wagon track. Here he walked swiftly—not with the accustomed slouch of Larry the Bat, for the darkness was discreet—and five minutes later was standing before the shadowy outline of what appeared to be a large, old-fashioned, two-story house.

There were no lights in the front of the house; but from the angle at which he stood he could see a series of little streaky threads of light stealing through the closed shutters of one of the upper side windows. He nodded to himself. That would be Daddy Ratzler's room. Daddy Ratzler kept his light burning all night. The room next to it was the Tocsin's. Moving a little closer he stared up at the latter for a long minute. The all-important question now was whether any of the gang was in the house with Daddy Ratzler. Again he nodded his head—this time in satisfaction. Even at this distance he was quite sure that anything white on the Tocsin's window would have showed up against the darkness—and he could see nothing. *She* would be there though, of course! And he could at least see that her window was both unshuttered and wide open.

Jimmie Dale began to climb the outside veranda stairs. His lips were tight now. This was not the task of last night; there was no carpet here, no wrangling voices to aid him as there had been for the Tocsin—and Daddy Ratzler's room was just at the head of the stairs. But, as he made his way upward, there was no sound save the peaceful night sounds of the countryside dominated by the croaking of a frog.

The Tocsin's deft touch was in evidence. He peered in through the slightly widened slats of Daddy Ratzler's shutters. A single incandescent illuminated the room. Daddy Ratzler lay there

motionless in the bed with his eyes closed. He might or might not be asleep, but what was of more interest to Jimmie Dale was a heavy-calibered revolver that lay within hand reach of Daddy Ratzler on a table beside the bed.

Jimmie Dale moved on to the next window—and from within, low-breathed, a single word reached him:

"Jimmie?"

Jimmie Dale took from his pocket the note he had written in the club, and passed it in through the window.

"Don't make any noise," he whispered, "but turn on your light and read this. I'll give you five minutes. Right?"

"Yes."

Jimmie Dale drew back along the veranda, glanced in again at the still motionless form in the bed, and descended to the ground—and a minute later, having selected an instrument from the kit of tools in his leather girdle, was at work upon the lock of the front door. It was a massive and intricate lock. The luminous dial of his wrist watch told him that he had already exceeded his stated five minutes when finally it yielded.

He stepped silently into the house, leaving the door ajar behind him. The white ray of his flashlight stabbed through the darkness. He crept up the stairs. A door at the end of the corridor stood open. Light flooded out from it, Jimmie Dale exchanged his flashlight for his automatic—and stepped over the threshold.

"Hello, Daddy!" snickered Larry the Bat. "I heard youse was sick, an' I thought mabbe a visit from an old pal might brighten youse up."

The figure in the bed sat bolt upright, his eyes blinking—and suddenly the sunken cheeks assumed an ashen hue.

"Larry the Bat!" he gulped. "The—the Gray Seal! What—what do you want?"

Larry the Bat's gaze played insolently over the unshaven pock-marked face, the small ratlike eyes glowing out of deep sockets, and the sagging jaw that disclosed an almost toothless mouth. As the Tocsin had said, the man was not pleasant to look upon!

"Wot youse scared of?" grinned Larry the Bat.

Daddy Ratzler swallowed hard.

"Nothing," he said—and now his voice held a wheedling and ingratiating note. "You and me have always been on the level, Larry. Why should I be scared? I wasn't scared. You gave me a start, that's all. I guess you'd have got one too if you'd been me. My God!" He wet his lips with his tongue, "How—how did you find out I was here? What—what do you want? I never let you down, Larry; you—you know that."

"Dat's wot I was bankin' on," observed Larry the Bat smoothly. "Youse an' me have always worked well together, an' de idea I got in me nut now is dat we'll do it again. Youse an' me, Daddy—see? A fifty-fifty split. But first mabbe"—he slipped suddenly across the room to the table beside the bed, dropped his own automatic into his pocket, and, picking up Daddy Ratzler's revolver, pocketed that as well —"mabbe de two of us 'ud feel more comfortable if I wasn't stickin' a rod under yer nose, an' youse wasn't tryin' to make a grab fer yers. Dat's de only way to do business—like friends—on de level, like youse said. Wot?"

Daddy Ratzler's bony fingers plucked at the counterpane.

"What—what do you want?" he asked for the third time.

"I'll tell youse," said Larry the Bat. "Youse heard about a guy named Ray Thorne gettin bumped off de other night, didn't youse?"

"Sure!" nodded Daddy Ratzler. "It was all in the papers."

"Sure!" Larry the Bat was smiling coldly now. "But de papers didn't say nothin' about a blue envelope dat was in de safe, ner nothin' about de fact of Daddy Ratzler bein' de one de blue envelope was fer, an' nothing about de big haul Daddy Ratzler was going to make when he got dat envelope."

Daddy Ratzler stared with his ratlike eyes—and his eyes became narrowed. Daddy Ratzler had been in a pinch before—and fear became subservient to Daddy Ratzler's brain. A blank look spread over his face.

"You're in wrong, Larry," he said earnestly. "I don't know where you got that sort of dope from, but it's all bunk. I don't know anything about any envelope, and I never heard of Thorne until I read about you handing him the spot."

"Is *dat* so?" inquired Larry the Bat caustically. "Well, youse're a damned liar, Daddy, an' youse knows dat I knows youse are!"

Daddy Ratzler shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I'm giving you the straight goods, Larry," he protested, "that's all I can say."

"Aw, cut dat out!" There was a snarl now in Larry the Bat's voice. "We'll get down to cases." He thrust his hand suddenly into his pocket and produced a sealed blue envelope that was slit open at one end. "Wot de hell's in dis? Dat's wot I wants to know!"

Daddy Ratzler shook his head.

"I never saw it before," he insisted.

"Mabbe youse didn't!" snapped Larry the Bat. "But youse *knows* all about it. An envelope an' a blank piece of paper don't mean nothin' to me, only dat I knows dere's a message dere somewhere an' dat youse knows how to read it! See? I'm tellin' youse, ain't I, dat I'm playin' square wid youse? De envelope ain't no good to me unless I'm wise to wot youse knows, and wot youse knows ain't no good to youse widout de envelope. Dat's an even break, ain't it? I'm offerin' youse fifty-fifty on whatever dere is in de pot, so come across!"

Daddy Ratzler became suddenly irascible.

"What do you want me to do—fake up something?" he squeaked. "How many times have I got to tell you you're in the wrong street?"

Larry the Bat leaned slightly over the bed.

"Well, den," he said through shut teeth, "suppose instead of comin' clean wid youse on a fair cut I blow yer blasted block off! Is dat wot youse're askin' fer?"

But now Daddy Ratzler laughed.

"That's a bum play!" he cackled. "You couldn't bluff me like that, even if I knew what you were talking about. That's the last thing you'd do. A dead man couldn't tell you anything, could he? But as long as he

was alive there'd be always a chance for you to horn in. You don't get anywhere with me like that!"

Larry the Bat straightened up. A look of discomfiture crossed his face.

"I don't want to start no rough-house," he admitted. "All I wants is ——"

The sentence was never ended—Mother Margot was standing in the doorway with a leveled revolver in her hand.

"Youse dere," she ordered curtly, "*put up yer mitts*!" And then with a gasp: "My Gawd, Larry de Bat! De Gray Seal! Wot do youse knows about dat!"

"The letter!" screamed Daddy Ratzler. "The letter! The letter!"

Jimmie Dale's hands, in one of which he still held the blue envelope, were raised above his head. Mother Margot, her revolver still covering him, advanced into the room.

"Sure t'ing!" she croaked. "Drop it! See? Drop dat letter on de bed!"

The envelope fluttered from Jimmie Dale's hand to the counterpane —and Daddy Ratzler with a snarl of triumph pounced upon it.

"Plug him, Margot!" shrieked Daddy Ratzler. "Let him have it! Kill the——"

Jimmie Dale risked Mother Margot's marksmanship! He made a sudden leap for the door. Mother Margot's shot roared out behind him—and missed! He heard Daddy Ratzler scream with rage and Mother Margot shrill her execrations. He reached the stairs and took them at breakneck pace, while again and again behind him, from the head of the stairs now, the flashes of Mother Margot's shots split the black. And then the front door slammed behind him.

But he was crouched beneath the window and was peering in through the slats again as Mother Margot reëntered Daddy Ratzler's room.

Daddy Ratzler, still clutching the blue envelope in his hand, was panting with excitement.

"Did you get him?" he cried eagerly.

Mother Margot wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Gawd, I dunno," she said hoarsely. "I must've hit him, but he was able to beat it all right, 'cause I heard him runnin' away outside. I thought I heard someone talkin' in here a few minutes ago—dat's wot woke me up!"

"It's a good thing you did," grunted Daddy Ratzler approvingly. "I won't forget this, Margot, though I wish you'd plugged him! He pinched my gun, but there's another one in that top drawer over there. Give it to me!"

Mother Margot obeyed, and Daddy Ratzler laid the revolver on the table beside the bed.

"In case he comes back we'll be ready for him, curse him!" he snarled. "You turn on the lights downstairs and keep 'em on. And wake up Pascal. He can't hear, but he can keep his eyes open. And you needn't tell him who it was that bust in. I don't want the police nosing around out here. Tell him it was a burglar. And keep your own mouth tight about who it was, too! See? And don't neither of you go to bed again to-night. Get me? Yes, and bring me a lamp up here."

"Sure!" said Mother Margot—and scurried from the room. She was back presently carrying a lighted lamp which she set down on the table. "D'youse want de electric light switched off?"

"No," said Daddy Ratzler curtly. "Is Pascal on the job?"

"Both of us is on de job," said Mother Margot with a vicious smile. "Dat bird won't sneak into dis house again widout us gettin' wise to it! Gawd, I hope he tries it!"

"All right," said Daddy Ratzler gruffly; "only remember what I told you! Beat it—and shut the door! I'll be listening now, and I can take care of myself in here."

The door closed behind Mother Margot—and Jimmie Dale, watching, saw Daddy Ratzler contemptuously toss away the blank piece of paper that the envelope contained, then reach avidly for a knife that lay on the table and begin carefully to slit open lengthwise the top of the blue envelope itself. And now Daddy Ratzler's little ratlike black eyes were glistening.

"Bluffed him!" gloated Daddy Ratzler. "Bluffed him! The Gray Seal! Bluffed him!"

Still using the utmost care he now doubled back as much of the upper edge of the gummed flap of the envelope as would yield to pressure, and, leaning far out over the bed, held this for a few moments over the top of the lamp. The result as he examined it, seemed to puzzle Daddy Ratzler. He repeated the experiment over and over again. His hands were trembling now, and the puzzlement in his face had deepened into consternation.

And outside the window Jimmie Dale laughed softly.

"Thank you, Daddy!" he murmured as he began silently to descend the veranda stairs. "I'll try that on the original!"

CHAPTER XVII

AT MIDNIGHT

The storm had broken half an hour before, and even yet did not seem to have attained its height. On-driven by furious gusts of wind, the downpour of rain swept across the river in weird, gray, misty sheets. The opposite shore was indiscernible, save only at moments when the lightning play made daylight of the night. Here and there the lights of some passing craft showed faintly out of the blackness, but these were few and far between—there was no other sign of life.

Crouching in a small clump of bushes near the water's edge, Jimmie Dale dashed the rain irritably from his face and eyes. Except for those occasional lights out there he could see nothing. Around him trees, shrubbery, and river bank all blended into a meaningless wall of darkness.

It was his third night of vigil. He smiled at himself suddenly in a sort of half-angry, half-pitying way. How many more nights was he going to keep this up? The chances at best were a hundred to one against him. He knew that and was quite willing to admit it; and, with every stitch of clothing wet now, his discomfort made the odds after two nights of failure assume even greater proportions.

He shrugged his shoulders. A wild goose chase? A snatching at straws? Perhaps! But, then—perhaps not! There *was* a chance.

He pushed back his rain-soaked sleeve and looked at his wrist watch. The luminous dial marked five minutes to midnight. His eyes strained out through the darkness to the few moving lights on the river. The message in the blue envelope specified midnight, but there was still no sign that to-night would be any more productive of results than those that had gone before. Quite true! But then—a sort of dogged optimism rose up within him—it wasn't the kind of a night on which one would be expected to keep a rendezvous to the minute!

Rather curious, that message! And rather curious, too, the blue envelope itself! After leaving Daddy Ratzler that night he had lost no time in returning to Riverside Drive and in taking the original blue envelope from the safe in his den. And thereafter, thanks to Daddy Ratzler's enlightening demonstration with the spurious envelope, the rest had been simplicity itself. As Daddy Ratzler had done, so he, too, had slit the top of the envelope open and had carefully doubled back the loose edge of the gummed flap. The simple application of heat had brought out the writing.

He smiled queerly. Sympathetic ink had been used after all! But who would have thought of looking for it under what was virtually another layer of paper! Even pen pressure marks, had there been any, had in this way been covered up. Perhaps that accounted for the use of a blue envelope rather than a white one, the blue-colored paper being less transparent than white. He was inclined to think it did, and to accept this as the answer to the question that had perplexed him in this respect from the beginning. But, in any case, that did not matter any further now since the secret of the envelope had been exposed.

The message had been written with what must have been an exceedingly fine pen, for, though the letters were perfectly formed, he had barely been able to read it with the naked eye. He remembered that his reaction to it all had been one of hesitancy, an uncertainty of mind as to what he should do—though within an hour of reading the message he had locked the envelope away in his safe again and had left New York. That was three days ago—and yet here now in the darkness and the storm it seemed as though he could still see the words and letters forming again on the upper edge of the envelope where the flap had been turned back just as they had done when he had watched them first appear:

Send boat Canadian side a mile above Prescott.
Midnight, July 16th. Show only starboard light.

An ironical smile crossed his lips as the thought of a moment ago about this being a night when punctuality measured in minutes might be excused recurred to him. If the rendezvous were kept to-night,

Daddy Ratzler and his crowd would be a *week* late! Ray had been killed three days before the date specified in the message, and those three days, of course, if the blue envelope had been delivered to the Angel as had been planned, would have given Daddy Ratzler ample time to make his arrangements and conform with the instructions in the message. That was all quite logical; but since then the date itself had not only lapsed, but practically a whole week had passed besides.

Why, then, should he have any hope or expectation that the rendezvous would be kept to-night, or on any other night now for that matter? And especially when Daddy Ratzler had never received the blue envelope at all! On the face of it, it seemed absurd. Yes! Precisely! And it would have been absurd except for that remark of Silky Hines that they had only to wait for "openers" which would not be long in coming. And also one other thing. The elaborate and carefully worked-out plan of which the blue envelope was the visible evidence was dependent for its success on *someone*, for some purpose or other, being here at the spot specified in the message. He did not know how those "openers" were to reach Daddy Ratzler, nor how long it would be before they did; but it seemed at least an even chance that when contact was reëstablished the meeting place would still be here as originally planned.

Jimmie Dale shook the rain from his face. Why not? Those words in the message—"Canadian side"—were extremely significant. It was obvious that smuggling of some sort that was far from petty in its character was being attempted. It was therefore apparently essential that the rendezvous should be kept on the Canadian side. Why then should the locality already selected be changed?

"No," said Jimmie Dale suddenly; "I'm not so sure about that. I'm still gambling with the odds against me. There's Daddy Ratzler. I wish I knew about Daddy Ratzler. Does he think I tried to trick him with a fake envelope—and lost out on it thanks to Mother Margot; or does he think that the envelope was either tampered with in Paris, or that something went wrong with their precious ink? I *don't* think he has any suspicion that he showed me how to decipher the message; but if

he gets the idea that it has been tampered with at all, then it's all off here! It's the toss of a coin. I don't know. I only know I'm here, and that it's worth seeing through, that's all!"

A vivid flash of lightning came and went—and disclosed a small boat some distance up the river that he had not seen before. He lost it again in the darkness. Let alone a single green starboard light, the boat was showing no light of any kind.

But still he continued to stare in that direction. The boat might be still too far away to show any signal—and then, again, it might not. There was nothing very definite about "a mile above Prescott." Where did Prescott begin and end in respect of the river bank? One might easily be a quarter or half a mile out. That made little or no difference, of course, so far as signaling was concerned, for the inference was that a boat passing up or down the river anywhere in the vicinity and showing a single green light would receive an answering flash of some kind from the shore. His own position, for instance, was only approximate, but he was near enough to the locality indicated so that no rendezvous could be kept under the prescribed conditions without his being aware of it. A grain of comfort! He had no cause to worry on that score at least.

Doubt surged back on him again. Three nights of watching already; and the days, so that he might attract no attention in the neighborhood, spent miles away, now in one direction and now in another, his rôle of motor tourist camouflaging his movements! It would be so simple a matter to dispel all doubt, so easy to discover whether or not the rendezvous was still existent here! He had only to take a boat himself, and, showing a single green light, patrol up and down near the shore—and draw the answering signal, provided there was one to draw. Yes, quite so! Was he becoming childish, or was he merely peevish because he was drenched to the skin? That would be the end of any chance of the man with the clipped ear appearing on the scene! And, also, there was——

The green light!

He stepped out from the clump of bushes, straining his eyes through the darkness. Yes, unmistakably, it was there! In the same general direction in which he had seen the boat in the lightning's flare, but much closer in toward the shore now, a single green light was showing—there was no red light, no port light—just the green.

So in some way or other they had drawn their "openers" after all—and the game was on! A sense of grim satisfaction settled upon Jimmie Dale. He had played against the odds—and won! Daddy Ratzler was sick, of course; but from the newspaper account Silky Hines had certainly not been rendered inactive as a result of that night at the Two Oaks—and therefore, logically, it would be Silky Hines who was out there now in that boat! Yes, undoubtedly, it would be Silky Hines, either alone, or with some of the gang!

Jimmie Dale began to make his way along the shoreline; but, mindful of the intermittent lightning flashes that might at any moment limn him against the night, he kept close to the trees and bushes that lined the river bank. The boat, perhaps some five hundred yards away, was heading directly in now for the shore—but there was no hurry. It was not Silky Hines or any other of Daddy Ratzler's followers that he was after—it was the man who had murdered Ray. The plum-picker! And if the man's apparently uncanny source of information had not failed him, and if he ran true to form, he would put in an appearance somewhere and from some unexpected source to Silky Hines' undoing—but not until the plum was thoroughly ripe and ready to drop into his hand. And that was the point at which he, Jimmie Dale, proposed to do a little undoing himself.

But now something unexpected was happening, and involuntarily Jimmie Dale paused. Still several hundred yards away from where he stood, the boat appeared to have touched the shoreline and from the shore itself a faint pin-point of white light, a lantern presumably, appeared. And then there came a tiny flash through the darkness. There was no sound save the howl and sweep of the wind. The lantern seemed to drop suddenly to the ground—and go out.

And then, urged on by he knew not what, Jimmie Dale sprinted forward.

Again a flash of lightning—and again for a moment it was as bright as day. The boat was speeding away from the shore. It held a single occupant—a man who wore a mask, a man who wore a bandage over his left ear, the white of which was clearly defined in the lurid, unearthly light!

Then utter blackness again, and the pelting rain.

And as he ran, something abysmal, a realization of disaster, registered itself on Jimmie Dale's brain. Not Silky Hines! Not any of Daddy Ratzler's gang! How had Ray's murderer come *first*—outplayed them all?

The next instant he was bending over a murdered man at the water's edge.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TOCSIN'S STORY

Engine trouble had delayed Jimmie Dale on his return trip from the Canadian border, and it was after seven o'clock in the evening when he drew up in front of his residence on Riverside Drive and alighted from a very dirty and mud-spattered car.

Jason, with undisguised relief, opened the door for him.

"It's good to see you back, Master Jim, sir," said the privileged old man. "I trust you had an enjoyable trip, sir."

"Very—Jason, thank you!" said Jimmie Dale pleasantly. "Anything new since I've been away?"

Jason glanced guardedly around the hall in which they were still standing.

"Well, yes, Master Jim," he answered; "and it's in respect to those instructions of yours, sir, that no one was to answer the phone except myself."

"Yes?" inquired Jimmie Dale.

"The day before yesterday, Master Jim—a woman"—Jason coughed apologetically behind his hand—"I couldn't exactly call her a lady, sir, for she had a very coarse voice, and, if I may so express it, her English was rather low—rang up and asked for you. I was a bit taken aback at the voice, sir; but I answered that you were away and that I was unable to say when you might be expected to return. I hope I did right, sir?"

Jimmie Dale suppressed a smile. Jason would instantly have recognized the voice of his future mistress—who was supposed to be in Europe! Jason was not acquainted with Mother Margot. Exactly! But this struck a serious note. What had happened at that house out there near Charleton Park Manor? How had the Tocsin managed to get to a phone at all?

"You did perfectly right, Jason," he said approvingly. "And what message did this—er—woman leave?"

"None, sir," replied Jason; "at least not on that occasion—not even her name or a phone number, though I asked for both. But she called up again this afternoon around five o'clock, about two hours ago. She was quite a bit more insistent this time, sir. I had to assure her over and over again, Master Jim, that I had no idea as to your whereabouts. Then she said I was on no account to forget to tell you the minute you got back that she had left a letter for you, and that you'd know where to find it."

Jimmie Dale retrieved his hat from the old butler's hand.

"Most intriguing, Jason!" he grinned. "She may have a pretty face in spite of her voice, you know. I'm off! It's irresistible!"

A startled, anxious look showed suddenly in Jason's eyes.

"But, Master Jim!" he protested. "Without dinner, sir!"

"I had a bite on the road an hour ago," smiled Jimmie Dale.

Jason cleared his throat.

"Master Jim," he faltered, "I hope you'll forgive me for taking liberties, sir—but—but it's like the old days with these letters and you away so much, and—and I know that somehow you're in danger. I dandled you on my knee when you were a baby, Master Jim, as I've been proud to say many a time, and if I could be of any help now I'd like you to know, sir, that there isn't anything I wouldn't do."

"Help?" echoed Jimmie Dale cheerfully. "You're invaluable! Just keep the home fires burning the way you're doing—telephone and all that, you know. And, Jason!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get that idea of danger out of your head. There isn't any. You quite understand that?"

Jason had never contradicted his master in his life.

"Perfectly, sir!" he answered—but his eyes did not meet Jimmie Dale's. "It's very kind of you, Master Jim, to relieve an old man's mind."

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes swept for an instant in kindly, whimsical appraisal over the other.

"Jason," he said solemnly, as he turned abruptly and started out through the front door, "you are a damned fraud!"

Jason this time, however, did not answer—but as Jimmie Dale got into his car and drove away, he could still see the old man standing there on the front steps, bareheaded, watching him out of sight.

Jimmie Dale drove fast; the traffic was light at that hour, and some twenty minutes later, entering unseen by means of the lane and the French window, he was standing in the Sanctuary. Still light outside, it was dark within the dingy room; and now, as he lighted it, the air-choked gas jet hissed and wheezed into a meager blue and yellow flame. He crossed the room quickly, displaced the movable section of the baseboard, and reached into the opening. The letter was here, of course, as he had expected. He stood up with it in his hand, and, about to replace the baseboard, hesitated for a minute. He might only have to open it up again! What rôle was he to play to-night? Was Smarlinghue, or perhaps even Larry the Bat, to step out from that hiding-place again? The letter first!

He stepped back under the gas jet, tore open the envelope, extracted a single closely written sheet of notepaper and began to read the letter rapidly. It bore that day's date, and began as the Tocsin had begun every letter she had ever addressed to the Gray Seal:

Dear philanthropic crook:

> I know you are away somewhere, but I am hoping that you will perhaps still be back in time to come to me to-night. If not, then to-morrow night—or the next. I shall be waiting for you. Come *as soon after dark* as possible—but do not try to communicate with me unless you see a light in my window. This may seem almost incoherent; but I am writing in great haste, and you do not need any

detailed explanation in order to make you understand that it is urgent. I have made some strange discoveries about the country house.

M.

Jimmie Dale re-read the letter, then he began to tear it into fragments, and the fragments into still smaller ones. These he dropped into the pocket of his coat. Then he crossed the room and replaced the movable section of the baseboard. Obviously, neither the services of Larry the Bat nor Smarlinghue were required to-night. A mask, yes—if even that proved necessary!—but the leather girdle he was already wearing would supply all requirements of that sort. His automatic and a flashlight were also on his person. He needed nothing that the Sanctuary could supply.

Darkness fell upon the squalid room, the French window opened and closed noiselessly, a shadow hovered for a moment at the mouth of the lane—and then Jimmie Dale, walking casually down the block, turned the corner and regained his car.

Already growing dusk as the car shot away from the curb, it was dark when, after a little more than the hour's run to Charleton Park Manor, Jimmie Dale swung from the main road into the wagon track that led to Daddy Ratzler's house, and, diverging again, secreted his car among the bordering trees as he had done on his previous visit here some nights before. Five minutes later, following the wagon track on foot, he was standing in the shadow of the trees, with the house looming up before him.

The only light showing anywhere as he now made a cautious circuit of the house came from the Tocsin's window. It seemed rather curious that there was none in Daddy Ratzler's room—but in any case, from what she had said in her letter, the coast appeared to be clear. He slipped out of the shadows and moved toward the house. A dark form showed suddenly on the veranda, and Mother Margot's voice came through the darkness.

"Who's dat out dere?" she demanded.

"Lady," said Jimmie Dale circumspectly, "I may do you a gross injustice, but my mother told me never to confide—in women."

Her laugh floated down to him.

"It's all right, Jimmie," she said. "Everything is perfectly safe. Wait a minute and I'll open the front door for you."

It was less than a minute before the front door opened—and the Tocsin was in Jimmie Dale's arms. It was much more than a minute, however, before she spoke again.

"Jimmie," she whispered finally, as she drew back into the hall and closed the door behind them, "do you suppose we'll ever grow up to be a staid old married couple?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale piously.

"Yes!" she agreed. "But now listen, Jimmie! We might as well talk here in the hall for the next few minutes as anywhere else—afterwards I have something to show you. And thank heaven you have come as early as this; but, even so, the time is short. That's what I meant by telling you to come as soon after dark as possible. I was afraid Pascal might see you and report your visit if you came too early; while, on the other hand, Daddy Ratzler generally gets back around nine o'clock."

"Back?" repeated Jimmie Dale in surprise. "Isn't he here?"

"No," she said. "I don't think he was physically up to it, and even now he is none too well; but, anyhow, he got up the next morning after your visit to him and went to New York—and he has been going to the city every day since."

"H'm!" said Jimmie Dale. "And Pascal? Where's he?"

"Upstairs in his room at the other side of the house. He gets up with the dawn and goes to bed with the dark—you know that, besides being deaf, he's a very old man. So we've got the house to ourselves for the moment, and I want to make the most of it. I want to know very badly, Jimmie, everything that has happened, and whether, after all, you found out the secret of the blue envelope; but I am not going to ask a single question until I have told you my story, and, above all, *shown*

you what I have found. Daddy Ratzler *might* come back earlier than I expect, you see—and when he does come back I must be upstairs in my room."

"Right!" conceded Jimmie Dale. "Go on, dear."

"Well," she said, "Daddy Ratzler got up the next morning after you were here, and went to town for the day. He said he wouldn't be back until about nine o'clock. And Pascal, taking advantage of Daddy Ratzler's absence, went off to spend the afternoon with some cronies in the neighborhood—so I risked a trip to New York that afternoon. I was terribly anxious to know about the blue envelope, and also what had happened at the Two Oaks; for, of course, we had had no chance to discuss anything that night when you staged that little one-act play. So, as I say, I went to town. I called up Jason on the phone—as Mother Margot, of course, because I didn't want him to recognize my voice."

"You succeeded!" chuckled Jimmie Dale. "I am afraid you even offended his sense of decorum. He was not very complimentary about either your voice or your English; in fact, he referred to the latter as being rather 'low.'"

"Dear old Jason!" she exclaimed affectionately. "He told me you were away. I went to the Sanctuary to see if you had left any message. There wasn't any, and I came back here—quite early in the afternoon. Daddy Ratzler returned about nine o'clock. He went to bed, and I heard him *lock* both his door and his window. Whatever else you did, Jimmie, I think you succeeded in frightening him worse than ever. Anyway, I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. My door was open. I suppose it must have been somewhere around eleven o'clock when, as I lay there, I suddenly heard voices in Daddy Ratzler's room. They were low and muffled, of course, and not a word was distinguishable—but Daddy Ratzler was unmistakably talking to someone. Now, no one could have got into that room without my knowing it—for even you, Jimmie, couldn't have opened the shutters and the locked window and have got in that way without my hearing you, for my window was

wide open on the veranda just a few yards away—so this was the *second* time I had heard two voices in that room when it seemed impossible that any one could be in there with Daddy Ratzler."

The darkness hid the sudden thinning of Jimmie Dale's lips.

"I'd like your story better, Marie," he said grimly, "if you were out of this cursed place for good and all! But go on! What happened then?"

"A great deal, Jimmie—then and afterwards," she said quietly. "The voices only lasted for a very few minutes. Then I heard Daddy Ratzler get out of bed. A moment after that he unlocked his door cautiously and came quietly out into the hall. He stood there for a little while, apparently listening; then he tiptoed into my room—you remember I told you my door was open—and bent over the bed. I pretended to be asleep. He stood there so long that I was afraid I would give myself away, but he was finally satisfied that I was not awake and went out of the room again. I watched him as he went out. He was wearing a dressing gown. I could see just enough to make that out, you understand, dark as it was; for, though the light was on in his room, so little of it could show along the hall that he had evidently not even thought of closing his door."

"I understand!" said Jimmie Dale tensely. "And then?"

"He went downstairs. I heard him go into the kitchen and open the door leading to the cellar, and then I heard him go down the cellar stairs. I did not, of course, know whether he would be back almost at once or not, so I waited awhile to see. I suppose I waited nearly half an hour. Then, as he did not return, I got up. It was *my* turn then, Jimmie—that was what I was out here for. Besides that mysterious conversation, Daddy Ratzler was up to something and I meant to find out what it was if I could. I went into his room; but it was of course empty, and there was no sign of anyone else having been there. Then I crept downstairs without making any noise. I wasn't really taking any risk, you know, for I——"

"No; I suppose not—just every one there was!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale uneasily.

"No—really, Jimmie!" she protested. "To all intents and purposes, as I have said, there was actually no light showing in the hall, but it would have served excellently as an excuse. If he had seen me, I had only to say that I had wakened up suddenly, and, noting a faint glow in the hall that I thought could only be coming from the open door of his room, I had jumped out of bed to see if anything was the matter; and then, finding his room empty, I had become alarmed and had started to look for him. Anyway, he did not see me, nor did I see him. I went to the door at the head of the cellar stairs and listened, but I couldn't hear a sound. Then I opened the door quietly. There was no light in the cellar and still no sound. I turned on the light at the head of the stairs, and went down a little way; but I did not have to go anywhere near the bottom to see that there was nobody in the cellar. I turned out the light, went back upstairs, got into bed again, and lay there for a long time trying to puzzle it all out. It was certain that Daddy Ratzler had gone down to the cellar; it was certain that he was not there; and it was certain that he had not come up the cellar stairs again. It was true, of course, that there was a door in the cellar through which he could have gone outside; but if he had intended to go outdoors, why should he take so awkward and roundabout a way when he could have gone out so much more easily by the front door? And, then, another thing! If he had intended to remain outdoors for so long a time—it was more than an hour, Jimmie, before he eventually came back *by the cellar stairs*, and, as he thought, found me still asleep—it seemed strange that he had not put on his clothes instead of going out in his dressing gown. I could not answer those questions, but I spent hours in the cellar yesterday and again to-day—every minute when Pascal was out of the way. And then I—but you'll see for yourself, Jimmie. It was about noontime when I made my discovery. I waited until Pascal had gone off on what had now become his habitual neighborhood visits, then I went to town and again telephoned Jason. You still were not back, so I left that note for you in the Sanctuary and hurried back here, as I did not dare to be too long away. And now, come and I will show you what I found—though I do not think from what I have told you that it will surprise you very much."

"I have a hazy notion—which may be all wrong," said Jimmie Dale in a strangely quiet voice.

"But not a woman's curiosity," she laughed softly. "Well, give me your flashlight—it will be much safer than to turn on any lights here downstairs which might be seen by Daddy Ratzler if he were on his way here sooner than I expect."

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

The hall, disclosed by the flashlight's ray, led through to the rear of the house and into the kitchen. Here the Tocsin opened the door at the head of the cellar stairs—and a moment later, following the Tocsin, Jimmie Dale found himself standing in the cellar itself.

And now the flashlight in the Tocsin's hand rested for a moment on a door with a few short steps leading up to it at the far end of the cellar, and then played slowly over the rear wall—which Jimmie Dale could see was sheathed with rough planking and still formed the backing for what at one time, though they were now in disrepair, had evidently been a series of large bins.

"Yes?" inquired Jimmie Dale, as the flashlight came to rest again on a portion of the planking almost opposite where they stood.

"Pascal says they did a lot of truck gardening out here years ago," she explained, "and that these used to be vegetable bins. And now, Jimmie—*look*!"

She had stepped close to the wall and was pressing with her finger on what appeared to be no more than the rusty head of an old nail—and without a sound, and as though operating on well-oiled hinges, three of the planks swung suddenly outward.

Jimmie Dale whistled low under his breath.

"My word!" he ejaculated. "Good work, Marie!" And then, eagerly: "Here, give me the flashlight and let's have a look at what's in there!"

But the Tocsin shook her head.

"No; not yet," she said. "It's a sort of half cave, half cellar—but you can explore it as much as you like presently. As soon as you have told me *your* story, I am going to leave you here so as to take no chances of being anywhere else but in my room when Daddy Ratzler gets back. But first I must tell you what else I found. You will see a speaking tube

sticking out of the wall at the far end when you go in there—and that, of course, accounted at once for the two voices. The other end was obviously in Daddy Ratzler's room. It wasn't nearly so hard then to unearth what was in Daddy Ratzler's room as it had been to find this secret door here, and I didn't have to spend the hours sounding the walls that I did down here in the cellar. On both occasions when I heard the two voices, Daddy Ratzler had been in bed—therefore the end of the tube in his room must be so close to the bed itself that he could speak into it without getting up. So, as soon as I had seen this end of the speaking tube, I went up to Daddy Ratzler's room and began to search around near the bed. You will remember, from what you saw on the night you were there, that the room is finished in cheap, varnished wood—so cheap, Jimmie, that it is everywhere full of knots."

Jimmie Dale nodded quickly.

"Yes; I remember," he said tersely.

"Well, that is the answer," she said. "The upstairs end of the speaking tube is behind one of those knots just beside the head of Daddy Ratzler's bed—the knot can be taken out and replaced quite readily."

Jimmie Dale was frowning now.

"It's queer!" he muttered suddenly, as though almost unconscious of the Tocsin's presence. "I wonder!"

"Everything about this house is queer, as I told you that night in Daddy Ratzler's office," she said; "but you'll think it is queerer still when you've seen what is behind this secret door—which, by the way, opens and closes on the inside by means of a push-button that is not camouflaged by the head of a nail. And now the things that I want to know! Did the man with the 'black hair' turn up at the Two Oaks after all?"

"Yes—masked!" said Jimmie Dale with a short laugh. "But he went away *marked* with a wound on his left ear. Also, his revolver, which he left behind him, proved to be the one with which Ray was shot—which dispels any possible doubt that he is the man who murdered Ray."

"Oh, Jimmie, tell me about it!" she exclaimed tensely—and listened as tensely while he rapidly sketched in the details of the night at the Two Oaks. "Yes," she said at the end, "he is the man, of course—but if only we knew *who* he is! And now about the envelope—did the ruse work with Daddy Ratzler?"

"Perfectly!" said Jimmie Dale with a tight smile. "There was a message written in sympathetic ink under the flap of the envelope—brought out by heat. That was what he wanted the lamp for. It simply gave details for a midnight rendezvous on the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence and specified a date that was then a week or more past."

"But you went there just the same?" she suggested quickly. "That is where you have been for the last three days?"

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale, "it was the only chance I saw, and I took it because of what you told me Silky Hines had said about not having to wait long for 'openers' for the pot anyway. My idea was that, if Silky Hines was right, the rendezvous would eventually be kept at the same place, and if the man with the clipped ear was still getting inside information, as Daddy Ratzler seemed to be afraid he was, he would be there on the heels of Daddy Ratzler's gang in an attempt to pick what Daddy Ratzler intimated was the choicest plum of all. And so ——"

"Wait, Jimmie!" she interrupted hurriedly. "What was the reason for this rendezvous? What is it all about?"

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I don't know," he said; "except, of course, that it is probably an international smuggling ring of some sort—but from *our* standpoint that's not of vital moment, is it?"

"No," she said; "that's true. Tell me the rest, then, Jimmie. Was the rendezvous kept?"

"Yes," he answered, a sudden bitterness in his voice; "but not at all in the way I expected. It was kept last night. And last night was a beast of a night—though I have to thank the lightning for most of what I saw. The plan was that a boat showing a single green light was to make contact with the shore. I saw the boat coming through the storm, but I was still some distance away when it swung abruptly in

toward the land. I expected, of course, that, since Daddy Ratzler was sick, Silky Hines would be in the boat, either alone or with some of the rest of the gang. What happened then happened very quickly. As the boat touched the shore a lantern light appeared at the water's edge, then came a sudden little flash, which I know now was a revolver shot, and the lantern went out; and then, in a flare of lightning, I saw the boat for an instant as plainly as though it were daylight. It was racing away from the shore again. There was just one man in it, and he wasn't Silky Hines or——"

"Jimmie," she interrupted breathlessly, "the man with the clipped ear!"

"Yes!" Jimmie Dale nodded shortly. "And when I reached the spot I found a man lying dead beside the broken lantern. He had been shot through the heart—just as Ray was—and by the same hand."

There was silence for a moment in the cellar. It was the Tocsin who spoke first.

"This is terrible," she said, her voice shaking a little. "Do you know who the dead man was?"

"No. I searched him, of course, for that purpose. He was well supplied with money; but there was nothing in his pockets in the shape of letters, or papers, or anything of any nature that afforded even a clue to his identity. I left him there. It seemed almost a callous thing to do; but he was dead and beyond any help of mine, and the last thing I could afford to do was to appear in the affair. He would certainly be found by daylight; but whether the police have since identified him or not I cannot say. That's all, Marie. That brings us down to the present moment."

"And now?" she queried anxiously.

"I don't know," Jimmie Dale admitted frankly. "If the fellow, having picked Daddy Ratzler's richest plum, is now satisfied, there would be no chance of getting track of him again by watching Daddy Ratzler any further; for, in that case, there wouldn't be any 'next' coup at which the man would be present, even if we could discover beforehand what it was to be. That, however, is purely problematical; he may *not* be satisfied, and so, for the time being, we shall have to

carry on as we have been doing. But that is not all. Last night worries me. Last night he outplayed them all. The boat was a little late in reaching the rendezvous, but I put that down at first to the storm. I've thought a lot about that since. Why was there no sign of Silky Hines? Had Silky Hines originally been in the boat? Was Silky Hines still in it—dead—when the boat raced away again from the shore? Or what? With Daddy Ratzler not taking an active part, the mantle would naturally have fallen on Silky Hines' shoulders. Where was Silky Hines last night? I've had no chance to check up on him from this end, for I came straight out here the moment I got back to New York. I haven't even seen the evening papers—I do not know whether they have reported the finding of a body, or bodies, up there on the Canadian border. I was going to try to find out to-night if Silky Hines was still around his usual haunts, and whether or not he had ever left New York at all. There is always the possibility, of course, that he was more seriously hurt at the Two Oaks than the newspaper reported, though I do not for a moment think so—but even that would not explain matters, for, in such an event, some other member, or members, of the gang would have taken his place at the rendezvous. Has he been out here, do you know?"

The Tocsin shook her head.

"Not since the time I told you about when he was here with the rest of the gang," she answered. "I am positive of that, unless, of course"—the flashlight in her hand bored suddenly in through the opening beyond the secret door—"it was Silky Hines who was in there the other night with Daddy Ratzler."

Jimmie Dale shook his head in turn.

"I don't think so," he demurred. "It's possible, of course, and it would explain the two voices; but the only trouble is, Marie, that the pieces do not fit. Why wouldn't Silky Hines have gone to Daddy Ratzler's room as he did on that other occasion?"

"On that other occasion, Jimmie," she reminded him, "I was out of the house, and, so Daddy Ratzler thought, on my way to New York."

Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"That's one explanation, of course," he admitted. "So you think that the second time you heard two voices was the night when, having somehow or other obtained their 'openers,' Daddy Ratzler and Silky Hines discussed arrangements for keeping the blue envelope rendezvous?"

"What else is there to think?" she asked a little helplessly.

"Heaven knows!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale. "But if that is so, I'd say unhesitatingly that Silky Hines has now passed on into the beyond—a martyr to a sordid cause. And in that case, how did Ray's murderer get 'next' to what was going on?"

"I don't know," she said numbly.

"No," said Jimmie Dale; "that's just it—and speculation won't get us anywhere. But"—he nodded toward the opening—"I've a growing hunch that the explanation is in there, if we can only find it—and I'm keen for a look around. But first there's just one question before I poke around here for a bit while you go upstairs to forestall Daddy Ratzler's arrival. I'm rather curious to know what Daddy Ratzler's reaction was when he found he couldn't make anything out of that blue envelope. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No," she answered; "he never mentioned it, and I never saw it again. He simply got up the next morning and said he was well enough to go to town. But he was frightened, and he has been frightened ever since."

"Right!" grinned Jimmie Dale with sudden cheerfulness. "Well, you go on up now, Marie, so as to be sure to be on hand as a reception committee for him! I'll let you know before I go away whether I've stumbled on anything worth while down here or not."

"But suppose he gets back in the meanwhile, as he is almost sure to do?" she asked dubiously. "He is still far from well, as I told you, and he always goes to his room at once and straight to bed. After that, though his own door is locked, he insists that I remain in my room within call. He is in a highly nervous and excited condition. He would hear me if I left my room and went downstairs."

"That's all right," smiled Jimmie Dale reassuringly, as he took the flashlight from her hand. "I've got to you before, and I can do it again. The veranda is still there, and you say he keeps his window closed now—which is so much to the good. Just you keep yours open—and stand by, no matter how long you have to wait. I'll be there. All set?"

"Yes," she said; and, as Jimmie Dale pointed the way for her with the flashlight's ray, she ran up the cellar stairs and closed the door behind her.

And then Jimmie Dale was in action. Several times he tested the mechanism that controlled the secret door both from within and without, and then the three planks, noiseless in their movement, swung finally back into place against the wall behind him. A flight of rough, unenclosed steps comprised of some six or seven treads led downward. He descended these, and at the bottom stood motionless for a long time while the white beam of his flashlight again and again, slowly, inquisitively, swept in all directions around him.

"A sort of half cave, half cellar," the Tocsin had said. He nodded in agreement with her description. It was a long and narrow tunnel-like chamber running at right angles from the steps that he had just descended, and paralleling the wall of the house. The floor was cemented but was badly cracked in places and in need of repair; and the roof, boarded, was supported by wooden beams and uprights that had every appearance of having been in existence there for years. But the place itself bore eloquent testimony to present-day occupation; for, from where he stood beside the steps, which were at one extreme end, his flashlight picked out at the other end, perhaps some forty feet away, a bed, a table with a lamp upon it, a washstand equipped with bowl and pitcher, several chairs, and a high bureau.

A queer and sudden smile touched Jimmie Dale's lips.

"Yes," he muttered. "I certainly would like to know who Daddy Ratzler was talking to down here! I think it would bring us very close to—the end!"

He moved slowly forward now. Strewn in more or less confusion against the sides of the walls were a number of dust-laden boxes of various sizes, their covers for the most part awry, and—he stopped

suddenly again, and bent down for a closer inspection—yes, unmistakably, the remains of an old printing press. The next instant he was delving into some of the boxes. Some engraver's tools, gone to rust, and several steel plates upon which work had been started rewarded his search.

Jimmie Dale straightened up. All this didn't matter very much except that it justified the original existence of the place and satisfied one's curiosity in that respect. Years ago, for there was no sign of any modern photographic appliances of the up-to-date counterfeiter, this had obviously been a safe and doubtless busy little retreat where Uncle Sam's banknotes were reproduced—without the sanction of Uncle Sam! Perhaps it was Blotz, the former owner, whose ingenuity was responsible for that three-planked door! "Who killed Blotz?" Had Daddy Ratzler been a partner in that enterprise too—only to abandon it later on for something perhaps more lucrative and less risky, though he had been assiduously careful not to abandon the house itself? And no wonder! This hidden chamber could serve many an ugly purpose dear to Daddy Ratzler's heart that was far removed from the original one for which it had been constructed—and had probably been made to do so, too!

Jimmie Dale moved forward again.

The bedroom, if it could be so called, now occupied his attention. There had been no attempt at seclusion, no effort made to divide it off from the rest of the chamber, even to the extent of a hanging of any sort. And here his flashlight, circling around, disclosed the mouthpiece of the speaking tube protruding from the side wall that was the nearer to the house; it played over the unmade bed, whose blankets of an excellent quality had been flung back over the footboard; it picked out a rug of rather good quality that covered this section of the cement floor, and, near the table, a most inviting easy chair.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes were somber now, reflective. If there was not luxury, whoever frequented the place had at least an eye to his own comfort! Who was it? Perhaps Daddy Ratzler, sometimes—which would account for the fact that he might make many visits here

unknown to the deaf Pascal who claimed that Daddy Ratzler rarely came to the house, and then only in his capacity of the real estate agent in charge of the property. But was Pascal honest? And why should Daddy Ratzler ever elect to sleep in here at all?

Who else came here—and apparently was quite *at home* here? Those clothes hanging on the wall pegs were not Daddy Ratzler's clothes! They ought to prove well worth a close examination—and those bureau drawers as well!

Jimmie Dale stepped over to the array of pegs, reached up to take down a coat—and stood motionless with his hand poised in mid-air.

Someone was out there in the cellar!

And then, while a second passed, Jimmie Dale's brain raced. There must be an opening somewhere, craftily arranged, whereby the sound of anyone moving about in the cellar could be heard in here.... It was fortunate that Marie had not gone all the way down into the cellar that night....Who was it out there now?... Marie?...Not likely....Then it was either Daddy Ratzler or the unknown to whom these clothes belonged.... And discovery here now would be disastrously premature!... What was he to do?...There was no place to hide....Yes—just one!

He was running now, silently, swiftly back along the way he had come. Those steps! They were open at the sides! There would be just room enough to crouch down under them! He gained the steps, and, switching off his flashlight, wormed his way quickly in beneath them.

The door above made no sound as it opened; but an instant later footsteps creaked upon the treads over his head. Came then the crackle of a match—and someone stepped down onto the cement flooring.

And now, peering out from beneath his hiding-place, Jimmie Dale could see the shadowy figure of a man, the match flame lighting his way, walking briskly toward the far end of the tunnel-like sub-cellar, and carrying what was obviously, if only dimly seen, a large valise in his free hand. The match went out. The man struck another, reached the table, and, bending over, lighted the lamp.

And then it seemed to Jimmie Dale as though his veins were suddenly afire. The man's back was toward him, but over the man's left ear a bandage was plainly in evidence. And then the man, stooping to pick up the valise which he had set down beside the table when lighting the lamp, turned his head—and this time there was no mask upon his face.

It was Beaton, Ray Thorne's valet.

CHAPTER XX

THE TWO VOICES

Beaton! All that was primal, a surge of passion, the urge to kill, a blind fury, swept over Jimmie Dale. He was not conscious that he had drawn his automatic from his pocket, but it was in his hand now. Beaton! He not only knew at last who Ray's murderer was, but the man was now at his mercy.

And then cold common sense and reason came. The man's life was forfeit—but not at his hands. He, Jimmie Dale, was not a murderer too! It was enough now for the moment that he had identified his man. That was all he had asked for, striven for, up to now. True, his task was not yet done. *He* knew that Beaton was the murderer, *he* could prove it; but it still remained to prove it to judge and jury—and the Gray Seal could hardly take the witness stand! Well, he had quite fully realized that all along, hadn't he? That was the last phase of the problem which he had always known he would have to face once he had run his quarry to earth—and he was face to face with that last phase of the problem now.

Where passion a moment before had held him in its sway, Jimmie Dale's brain was working now coolly, methodically, judicially—but in his eyes, that never left the figure standing there beside the table, there was something more deadly and remorseless than any sudden flare of impetuous and unbridled passion could ever bring. So Beaton, in spite of his alibi that had satisfied Detective Sergeant Waud and the police in general—yes, and until now, one Jimmie Dale as well—was the guilty man!

Where was the flaw in that alibi that had escaped detection? His mind searched back for an instant over Beaton's statements to the police—and almost instantly dismissed the question from his mind. That did not matter for the time being; nor did it matter at this moment how or in what manner the proof of guilt would be

forthcoming. He knew now who the man with the clipped ear was; and, with that knowledge in his possession, Beaton would never escape. He had promised Ray that he would "get" the murderer; he had promised himself that the Gray Seal should be proven innocent of Ray's death—and both of those promises would be kept. There would be a way, and he would find it. What mattered now at this moment, and from now on until that way was found, was that Beaton should not take alarm—and it would, for instance, be exceedingly unfortunate if Beaton discovered that the existence of this secret cellar was not only known, but that he was being watched at this precise moment by someone beneath these steps here!

Jimmie Dale smiled coldly. Quite so! But there was, however, nothing to fear on that score; for, quite apart from the protection afforded by the steps, the steps themselves were in almost total darkness since the rays diffused by the lamp did not reach more than halfway to them.

Jimmie Dale's smile became whimsical. It was almost like watching the lighted screen of a moving picture from the darkened body of the house—only with decidedly less comfort! Beaton had placed his valise on the table and had opened it. He took out from it now a bottle of whisky. From the washstand he procured a glass, and, pouring out a stiff portion, tossed the liquor down raw. Then he set the glass and bottle on the table and walked over to the speaking tube.

"Hello, Daddy!" he called. "You there?"

Apparently receiving no reply, he flung himself into the easy chair, which he pulled up within reach of the table—and helped himself again to the bottle.

Beaton—and Daddy Ratzler! The two voices! Jimmie Dale nodded to himself in grim understanding. From the moment the Tocsin had mentioned her discovery of the speaking tube, it had seemed at least a fair inference—unless, as she had suggested, it was Silky Hines or some other one of the gang whom Daddy Ratzler had visited here that night—that it was Daddy Ratzler himself who was the Judas and who was playing fast and loose with his own followers. And now with the appearance on the scene of Beaton, the actual "plum-picker" himself,

that inference had become fact, undeniable, obvious. There was, however, ordinarily speaking, nothing amazing in that. Daddy Ratzler was quite capable of it—or of anything else however foul that would feather his nest—providing he was confident that his own skin was safe. But with Beaton! Beaton was still but a young man, certainly not more than thirty. How far back, and where and how in his criminal career, had Daddy Ratzler picked Beaton up? Daddy Ratzler was playing the most dangerous game known to the underworld; and, furthermore, he was playing it in this case, not merely against a few local crooks who had put blind and misguided trust in his leadership, but apparently against a powerful and widespread organization—whose tentacles reached to Europe. His life would go out like a snuffed candle if he were caught. He would have to be very sure indeed of the man with whom he entered into a partnership of this kind! And he had entered into it with Beaton!

Beaton! Jimmie Dale studied the man, as the one-time valet sat there now in the easy chair. He had known Beaton, of course, as one knows a friend's valet, from the time the fellow had entered Ray Thorne's service—but he had never been *interested* in Beaton until now! Beaton had black hair, of course—the Ferret had been quite right about that—but otherwise the Beaton of to-night was not the Beaton who so often had bowed him, Jimmie Dale, into Ray Thorne's home. The man was no longer the polite and gracious servant; and, no longer playing that part, the mask of respectability had dropped from his face and he was—himself. It was a crafty, cynical, vicious face that loomed up in the lamplight now out of that chair. The man must have been a master of facial control to have smiled his way about so disarmingly while in Ray Thorne's employ. Possibly that accounted for Daddy Ratzler's choice! Daddy Ratzler, through long years of evil-doing, was a competent judge of evil men!

The minutes passed. At intervals Beaton had recourse to the bottle, and at intervals got up and went to the speaking tube; but it was not until the expiration of fully half an hour, so far as Jimmie Dale was able to judge the passage of time, before there was any response from the other end of the tube.

The conversation was not prolonged.

"Hurry up and come down here, Daddy!" said Beaton impatiently—and flung himself back into his chair again.

Jimmie Dale, with infinite caution, shifted his position so far as the restricted space would permit. To remain half-stooped, half-crouched beneath these steps here for any extended period of time was not without its drawbacks, and his cramped muscles were beginning to protest vigorously against the unusual treatment to which they were being subjected. But, at that, he told himself philosophically, they would probably be worse before they were better! And there were untold compensations! Here was Daddy Ratzler now! His footsteps, hurrying, were sounding out there in the cellar. Daddy Ratzler hadn't lost any time. He appeared to be as impatient to join Beaton as Beaton was to have him.

There was no sound as the secret door opened and closed, just the sudden creaking of the steps above Jimmie Dale's head—and a minute later Daddy Ratzler, a little breathless from his haste, was facing Beaton across the table.

"Was he there?" Daddy Ratzler demanded excitedly. "Did you get it?"

Beaton lurched up from his chair, an evil grin on his face.

"Sure!" he said. "Sure, I got it—*and so did he*!"

"Ha!" exclaimed Daddy Ratzler sharply. "Well, you will tell me all that in a minute. Let me see the stuff. My God, we've risked enough for it! Let me see it!"

Beaton reached into the valise and produced a large package, paper-wrapped, and tied with strong cord.

"I had a look at it," he said. "He must have done some slick work to have got it all through the customs at Quebec or Montreal, or wherever it was he landed and pulled the stunt. I've got to hand it to him for that. I suppose he lumped it all together into this parcel after he got ashore."

Daddy Ratzler's fingers were eagerly, avariciously at work on the package.

"The customs!" he sniffed. "Bah! They hadn't a chance with the Spider! He had shore lines out everywhere in Canada, and he's been putting it over long before a lot of those birds wore pants! He used to work for the big London ring until Frenchy Jacob got him to come in with us—this time. That's why we kept holding off and not sending anything across for the last few months, isn't it?—waiting for him to do the trick, and letting the stuff pile up. That's why this is the biggest shipment we ever made, isn't it? There wasn't anyone could touch the Spider at this game—millions in duties, to say nothing of the pinched swag—he's had the Secret Service trying to spot him for years, but they didn't have a look-in with him because one rule he never broke was never to come over the American line himself. He hasn't put his foot in the United States for twenty years!"

"Well, he won't bother any of the watchdogs on either side of the border any more—but we should worry!" observed Beaton callously.

Daddy Ratzler did not appear to hear the remark. He was too intent on opening the package. And now his hands were trembling, and a hectic flush was coloring his deep-sunken cheeks, as a number of small packages were produced from the large one.

Jimmie Dale could not see as well as he would have liked, but he could see well enough to realize what was going on. The valise had been set down on the floor, and little strips of cotton wadding were now being unrolled and spread out on the top of the table. And now this snowy bed, even under nothing stronger than lamplight, began to sparkle, and to become alive with innumerable little scintillating flashes. Diamonds! Unset stones! A great quantity of them! Yes, it was quite true, the smuggling of stones from Europe had become a very painful thorn in the side of the United States government—and these had not only been smuggled, but a good many of them, most of them probably, had doubtless been stolen, and then bought for the account of the "ring" from the swarming thieves on the continent by the fences of Paris, Vienna, Rome, and God knew where else! How many lives had they cost? This pair of nauseous rats, traitors even to their own kind, had themselves accounted for two!

Daddy Ratzler's eyes were burning in their hollow sockets, as, his fingers shaking with greed, he lifted up now one stone and now another for closer inspection.

"Yes, yes!" he gloated. "It was worth the risk! To hell with Frenchy Jacob and all the rest of them! And how would they ever know anyhow? We were too clever for them, eh, you and old Daddy Ratzler? Little beauties! Big beauties! They're worth half a million here if they're sold right. Half a million! Half a——" He leaned abruptly across the table toward Beaton. The avarice in his face had given place to sudden suspicion. His voice rasped and croaked. "Are you holding any out on me?" he demanded. "Are they *all* here?"

Beaton poured a drink from the bottle—and leered at Daddy Ratzler over the glass.

"And his own son, too!" he mourned plaintively, "Think of that!"

"Bah!" snarled Daddy Ratzler.

"Bah, yourself!" retorted Beaton in a sweep of rage as he gulped down his liquor. "You may be my father, but you're so near your dotage that you're getting to be nothing but a damned old fool! If I'd been playing that game, I could have pinched the lot and flown the coop, couldn't I? And what would you have done? Advertised in the papers for the son you never owned? Want to search my pockets?"

A frightened look crept into Daddy Ratzler's face.

"No, no!" he protested placatingly. "We won't quarrel. You're a good boy, Harry. You always were. And haven't I always taken good care of you? I could see you were smart when you were only a kid—smart enough so that later on you and me'd pull a lot of things together. And we've made a lot out of no one knowing you were my son. A lot of things, Harry, like"—his fingers trembled over the spoils on the table —"like this."

"Yes," grimaced Beaton maliciously, "and like me feeding arsenic to Blotz until he died so's you'd get this dump out here all for yourself. And like us taking Big Heinie for a ride right here in this little old hole, and afterwards burying what was left of him under the cement down there in the corner because we found out he was the bird that had got wise to the Blotz killing and was asking for five grand to be

left under some doorstep somewhere to keep his mouth shut. He got his five grand, and he kept his mouth shut all right—and we got the five grand back! Yes, I'll say we've pulled a few together, and that you've taken good care of me, and that I've been well brought up, but maybe it's just as well that the mother died out there in—where did you tell me once it was?—Mexico?—when I was born!"

Daddy Ratzler's tongue was circling his lips, and he was looking furtively around him now.

"Heinie!" his voice rose in a jerky squeak. "Heinie's dead years ago. What are you bringing him into this for? What are you trying to do to me?"

"Make you sweat for what you said to me a minute ago, you old skate!" said Beaton viciously. "Age is telling on your nerve—father mine! Heinie isn't the only one under the cement here. We ought to get some of those cracks filled up."

"Damn you," screamed Daddy Ratzler, "hold your tongue!" And then abjectly: "I didn't mean what I said, Harry. That's a good boy! I know you wouldn't do——"

"Have a drink!" invited Beaton caustically—and pushed the bottle toward Daddy Ratzler.

Father and son! Jimmie Dale's face was set and hard as he watched Daddy Ratzler reach eagerly for the bottle. Daddy Ratzler had kept his secret well! The underworld had had no inkling that Daddy Ratzler had bred, if that were possible, a greater monster than himself! So this accounted for the unholy alliance between the two! It was not pleasant—that reference to Blotz and Heinie! With Ray and the Spider of last night the known murder score now stood at four. How many more were there to be added for the years during which this inhuman pair had worked together?

Beaton was speaking again.

"Forget all that, and let's size up the lay," he said almost amiably. "We've got the goods. What about peddling out some of the sparklers and turning them into cash?"

But now Daddy Ratzler seemed to have recovered his nerve, for he shook his head decidedly.

"Not yet," he said. "It'd be too dangerous till we see how the break goes. Some of 'em will be coming over from Paris, and Silky Hines is no fool, and if there's a lot of loose stones showing up they'll have something to work on. And then there's the Spider. What about him?"

"I've told you, haven't I? I bumped him off. I went up there the next day, but I didn't do anything that night because I couldn't find a boat that would fill the bill. I didn't dare hire one. Get me? I had to pinch one."

"Sure!" Daddy Ratzler was fingering the stones again. "Sure—that's right."

"Well, the next night—that's last night—there was a hell of a storm; but I got a boat and showed the light, and the Spider showed one from the shore. I ran the boat in, the Spider came to meet me with his lantern and that package in his hand, and"—an ugly grin spread over Beaton's face—"having a filial duty to perform I gave him the spot. He didn't know who I was, but I couldn't let him live and tell the gang that, getting nervous after hanging around there a week with half a million whities on him and no one showing up, and not daring to write because he knew the tip had gone out that the post office was taking a peek at all of Daddy Ratzler's mail before it was delivered, he telephoned long-distance to Daddy Ratzler, and told Daddy Ratzler where and how to meet him, same as had been originally planned—only Daddy Ratzler kept that telephone call a deep, dark secret, and pinched the swag for himself. No, the Spider'll never give that away, 'cause he's where they don't talk now; and neither Silky Hines nor none of the rest of them will ever know. So, you see, there's nothing to worry about on that lay."

But again Daddy Ratzler shook his head.

"That end of it's all right, and the way we figured," he said. "But there's something else. The police'll find the Spider. Maybe they'll identify the body. If they do, Silky Hines and the crowd on the other

side'll know that somebody's *got* the stones away from him—and the ring's big enough to put the screws on every fence from here to California."

Beaton scowled, and then he nodded.

"You're coming back, Daddy!" he admitted. "Well, what's the answer? You never said anything about this when you sent me chasing up there."

"Time enough when we got the stones!" grunted Daddy Ratzler. "We've got 'em now. I never thought we would when that damned Gray Seal got away with the blue envelope. I knew, and so did Silky Hines, that the Spider would have to take the risk of getting into communication with us somehow sooner or later, but I wasn't banking on getting a lone break, and being able to slip that telephone message over to you the way I did. But now we've got the goods, we'll play our hand. If the Spider isn't identified, we can start cashing in a few—but not around here. Out West. That'll be your job. If they get wise to the Spider, the stones will be safer than in a deposit vault down here, and we'll hang onto them until I size up what the boys are going to do. You leave that to me, Harry, my boy—Daddy Ratzler'll be in on the conferences and'll be raising hell with the rest of them."

Beaton was rocking slightly on his feet.

"Oh, all right!" he said. "Have another drink!"

"No," said Daddy Ratzler tersely. "And you let it alone yourself. You've had enough. There's something else we've got to think about."

"I can think better when I've got half a skinful," said Beaton, and helped himself again—liberally. "What is it?"

Daddy Ratzler's voice was suddenly a half snarl, half whine.

"The Gray Seal," he said.

"Well, what about him?" demanded Beaton. "That envelope he handed you was either a fake, or else something was wrong with the ink to begin with; but in either case it didn't get him anywhere. What are you worrying about?"

Daddy Ratzler moistened his lips with his tongue.

"About the Gray Seal, I tell you!" he reiterated with fierce, nervous insistence. "It doesn't matter whether the envelope was a fake or not, we're not through with him. He'll show up again. He knows I'm after something big, and he'll never let go. He never has yet. I'm afraid, if you want the truth. Nobody ever found out how he got next to things—and he got next to hundreds of them. He's in league with hell itself—do you understand that? How did he find out about that envelope in Thorne's safe? How did he find out that I had anything to do with it? That's what we're up against!"

Beaton's fingers crept to the bottle's neck.

"You mean," he inquired a little thickly, "you're afraid he'll come around to make another friendly call to find out how you're getting on with the blue envelope stuff, or maybe that he'll find out you've annexed the big haul yourself?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I—hic—hope he does!" stated Beaton complacently.

"You leave that stuff alone!" snarled Daddy Ratzler. "You're talking like a fool!"

"Is that so?" drawled Beaton. "Are you going to keep on staying out here?"

Daddy Ratzler stared.

"What's that got to do with——"

"You answer my question," Beaton cut in with another hiccough. "What're your plans?"

Daddy Ratzler hesitated an instant, eyeing Beaton and the bottle angrily.

"No; I'm not going to stay out here after to-night," he snapped. "I wouldn't have come back at all after I'd once got out of bed, except that I expected you either last night or to-night. I came out here when I was sick because I didn't want to take any chances on the Gray Seal knowing where I was. And that's another thing he found out! So far as that is concerned now it doesn't matter whether I'm here or in New York."

"What's the big idea for making the move, then?"

Daddy Ratzler's face was crafty again.

"If the Spider's identified," he said, "things'll start humming in New York, and I've got to be there every minute to see that Silky Hines and the boys don't get any wrong ideas into their heads. And, besides, there's Pascal. Pascal's deaf—and dumb mentally. That's why he's here. He thinks it was only a burglar the other night when the Gray Seal broke in, and that's all right; but there's been too much going on around this house lately. He's never had a suspicion that everything wasn't straight out here, and I can't afford to let him get one into his nut now. Pascals are hard to find. Everybody around here has known Pascal for years—Pascal makes the place *safe*."

"Sounds reasonable," commented Beaton. "So you're going back to New York for keeps to-morrow, and you're figuring to wake up some night with the Gray Seal sticking his gun in your ribs. Is that—hic!—the idea? Sure, it is! And he'll ask nice and polite for his share. Well, the answer's easy; no use—hic!—having trouble with him. We'll give him his share, that's all."

"*What!*" Daddy snatched at the bottle, but Beaton forestalled him.

"That's all right," said Beaton with a hard grin. "Here's to you! One more! Didn't I tell you hootch always made me think better? Sure, we'll—hic!—give it to him—all that's coming to him. Now, you listen to me!" Beaton's voice sharpened suddenly. "I know all about the Gray Seal. I know he'll show up again before long as well as you do. But he's just a crook—see? Out for what he can get! Well, he'll get it! Maybe he's found out about last night, but I don't think so. Anyway, when he's got his gun on you, fall for his threats. You've always—hic!—been a slick actor. Let him wheedle the whole story about the blue envelope out of you, and how you double-crossed your bosom pals, and that you've got the goods out here. See? Then bring him out here for the—divide! He'll come. He started it himself. He won't smell any trap. Bring him down *here*."

A sudden sound like an ugly cackle issued from Daddy Ratzler's lips. He began to rub his hands together again.

"Like Heinie!" he whispered. "You're a good boy, Harry! You're a good boy! Drink all you like!"

"Damn him!" exploded Beaton in a burst of rage. "I owe him one myself for that night at the Two Oaks. Yes, like Heinie! He'll never—hic!—leave here alive. I'll sleep out here for a while. I'll be here every night after ten o'clock. You bring him along!"

"Yes!" The breath hissed out of Daddy Ratzler. "Yes! God, and I was afraid of him! *Yes*!"

"And another thing!" said Beaton, his lips parted over set teeth. "Don't have anybody hanging around you any more at night to queer the game. Make it—hic!—easy for him! Get rid of that old hag—what'd you call her?—Mother Margot?—that you've got out here. You're not sick now, and you don't need a nurse any more. That's a good enough excuse."

"I was going to anyhow"—Daddy Ratzler nodded his head in vigorous agreement—"on account of Silky Hines or some of the boys being likely to keep blowing into the office, or of me telephoning a lot. I wasn't going to have her there, and I don't want her here. A few dollars and a lot of promises'll satisfy her. You can leave that to me. She's out from to-morrow morning."

Beaton held the bottle up to the lamplight.

"It's damned near gone," he grumbled. "I can't think any more. Put those sparklers away where the—hic!—moths won't get at them, and beat it upstairs. I'm going to sleep here, and I want to get to bed. Had a hard night"—he finished the bottle—"hic!—and a hard day."

"I don't know what night he'll come," said Daddy Ratzler in sudden anxiety, as he began to roll up and replace the strips of cotton wadding in the original package. "So how are you going to know? And what's the plan?"

Beaton was beginning to undress.

"I'll hear you coming out there in the cellar," he yawned. "You leave the rest to me. He'll never get further than just inside the door here—hic!—alive!"

Jimmie Dale was aching in every limb and muscle, but he made no movement other than to compress his lips more tightly together. He was intent now on watching Daddy Ratzler. Daddy Ratzler with the

package in his hand was pulling at one of the bureau drawers—but instead of the drawer being opened, the entire front of the bureau swung outward, disclosing a large metal-lined compartment that appeared to be already filled almost to repletion—but what its contents were, he could not tell at that distance, though he had little doubt that they were as ill-gotten as the package that Daddy Ratzler now added to the rest.

Daddy Ratzler was chuckling gleefully as he closed the front of the bureau again.

"You're a good boy, Harry!" he smirked. "A good boy! God, I ain't scared any more!"

Beaton had already flung himself on the bed.

"All right!" he grunted. "Blow out the lamp, and beat it!"

"Yes!" chortled Daddy Ratzler happily. "Yes! Good-night."

The place was in darkness. The treads above Jimmie Dale's head creaked—and then Daddy Ratzler's footsteps died away across the cellar.

Jimmie Dale smiled queerly. It was not every man who was privileged to hear his own murder planned! A rush of emotions surged over him. He was conscious of a sense of revolting unreality, of abhorrence, of mental nausea, of a foul taste that was in his mouth, of contamination. Flesh and blood! Father and son! Not men! Ghouls!

Stertorous breathing—a snore—sounded from the direction of the bed. Beaton was fast falling into heavy, drunken slumber.

Jimmie Dale began to flex his muscles—and winced with pain.

A minute, two, went by—and then Beaton, snoring loudly, was alone. And presently a shadow, that was Jimmie Dale, crept past Daddy Ratzler's closed and shuttered window and along the veranda to a wide-open, unlighted window beyond.

"Marie!" he breathed.

"I'm here, Jimmie," she whispered back. "Be careful! Daddy Ratzler has just come upstairs, and he hasn't gone to bed yet."

"I know it," Jimmie Dale answered. "I ache. I've only just crawled out from under the steps of that murder hole."

"Oh!" she said. "I wondered where you were, because I couldn't think of any place in there to hide. I was frightened when I heard Daddy Ratzler going down into the cellar. I went into his room and listened through the tube. I heard nearly everything that was said, and it was horrible; but I soon knew, of course, that, wherever you were, you were all right, and hadn't been seen. Oh, it was horrible," she repeated; "but I was so glad, so very, very glad to know that old Pascal wasn't one of them. Jimmie"—her whisper was suddenly tense—"who was that beast down there with Daddy Ratzler? I know from what was said that he is Daddy Ratzler's son, and that he must be the man who murdered Ray; but do you know *who* he is?"

"Beaton!" said Jimmie Dale grimly.

"*Jimmie*!" Her hand reached out over the sill and clutched at Jimmie Dale's arm. "Ray's valet!"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"Still down there. Asleep—and half drunk."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing—yet. We know he killed Ray; but Mother Margot and the Gray Seal can't testify! I've got to get some other kind of evidence than that!"

"How?"

"I don't know. Somehow! I only know that he'll never escape now—and neither will Daddy Ratzler! And now, listen, Marie! You heard Daddy Ratzler say that he was going to let you go to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Well, when you say good-bye to Daddy Ratzler to-morrow, say good-bye to Mother Margot, too. That is what I particularly wanted to say to you. With your association with Daddy Ratzler severed, your work is finished. I don't know what the break is going to be, or what the final round is going to be like; but I want to know that whatever happens you are safe and completely out of the picture. Do you understand, Marie?"

"Y-yes," she said a little dubiously.

"All right! Go back to that hotel of yours and be 'Agnes Watkins' for the next few days. We can see each other all we like there, and we can arrange for Marie LaSalle's 'return' to New York whenever it seems advisable. You promise, dear?"

"Yes," she said, after another instant's hesitation. "If you think it's best—I promise."

The whispers died away—but for a little while the shadow that was Jimmie Dale still lingered there at the window. And then a whisper again:

"Till to-morrow, Marie. Good-night, dear."

And five minutes later, Jimmie Dale, at the wheel of his car, was speeding back toward New York.

He drove fast. His eyes were on the road—but his mind was far afield. The proof of Beaton's guilt! The evidence that would convict the man of Ray's murder! How? He shook his head. The Tocsin had asked that same question. He had not known the answer then. He did not know now.

Half an hour passed, and then suddenly Jimmie Dale spoke aloud.

"Carruthers!" he exclaimed—and began to laugh softly. "Carruthers—and the Gray Seal! Yes! And rather rich, too!"

He looked at his watch. It had seemed as though half the night were gone, but it was still only half-past ten. Of course! He had reached Daddy Ratzler's house just after dark. Carruthers would almost certainly be at the newspaper office for some time yet.

The speed of the car increased. There was only one man in the world whose word he would dare trust under like circumstances. Carruthers! If Carruthers gave his word, Carruthers would keep it to the letter. And Carruthers *would* give it. Carruthers would do anything to bring the murderer of Ray Thorne to book.

"Yes!" said Jimmie Dale grimly. "That's the answer! The last round—with Carruthers as referee!"

Jimmie Dale was eating up the miles now, and it still lacked a few minutes to eleven when he entered a telephone booth at the Grand Central station, and, calling the office of the *Morning News-Argus*,

asked for Mr. Carruthers.

A moment's wait, and then Carruthers' voice came over the wire.

"Yes?" demanded Carruthers briskly. "What is it?"

"Is dat Mr. Carruthers?" inquired Jimmie Dale.

"Yes! Who's speaking?"

"Dis is Larry de Bat," said Jimmie Dale. "De Gray Seal."

"*Who*?"

"Aw, can dat fancy surprise stuff!" said Larry the Bat wearily. "I'm tellin' youse, ain't I, dat it's de Gray Seal? Dis ain't de first time dat I've slipped youse something juicy over de phone. Youse've made some dirty cracks about me, but I don't hold dat up against youse partic'lar 'cause some of de other papers has tried to be just as dirty, an'——"

Jimmie Dale stuck his tongue in his cheek—Carruthers was indulging in a flood of unprintable language.

"Dat's O.K. wid me," interposed Larry the Bat soothingly. "Get it all off yer chest at once!"

"Well, what do you want this time?" demanded Carruthers savagely.

"Me?" purred Larry the Bat. "I don't want nothin'. I was only tryin' to slip youse somethin'. I heard youse was a pal of Ray Thorne, an' dat youse'd like to get de guy dat bumped him off."

An inarticulate sound, as of one in the throes of strangulation, reached Jimmie Dale from the other end of the wire.

"I didn't get dat," complained Larry the Bat. "Wot did youse say?"

"I said," stuttered Carruthers in his wrath, "that's why I'd give every cent I'm worth to get my hands on *you*!"

"Well, youse can do it—an' it won't cost youse a nickel," grinned Larry the Bat. "How about to-morrow night? D'youse think yer office boy would let youse off fer a few hours?"

"For the second time, what do you want?" barked Carruthers.

"Say, listen!" Larry the Bat's voice was suddenly earnest. "I never handed youse no bum steer when I called youse up before, did I?"

"N-no," admitted Carruthers grudgingly.

"Well, I ain't handin' youse none now," stated Larry the Bat sharply. "Mabbe I don't stand in wid de clergy or de police, but I got me pride. See? I don't pull dat sort of stuff. It wasn't me dat took dat Thorne guy fer a ride, an' I'm sore on de bird dat's planted it on me. See? Well, I got after him, dat's all. I know who he is. An' if youse wants him, I'll hand him over to youse wid de goods on him to-morrow night. Wot d'youse say?"

"Where?" inquired Carruthers tersely.

"Nix on dat!" said Larry the Bat curtly. "Youse'll say yes or no. An' youse'll come alone—get me?"

"And suppose I agree," said Carruthers after a moment's silence, "and bring the police with me to get—*you*?"

"It's fifty-fifty," retorted Larry the Bat. "If youse tries any funny business dere won't be nothin' doin, dat's all."

Again a silence, and then Carruthers' voice rasped:

"You'll take my word?"

"Sure! I ain't asked youse fer nothin' else, has I?"

"A high compliment! Thank you!"

"Dat's all right!" said Larry the Bat graciously. "But wot d'youse say?"

Again still another silence, and then deliberately:

"I understand that you will point out the man who murdered Ray Thorne?"

"Naw!" snorted Larry the Bat in disgust. "I didn't say nothin' like dat at all. I said I'd make youse a present of him—wid de goods on him."

"My God!" ejaculated Carruthers heavily. "Is this straight?"

"It ain't de first scoop youse have got from me, is it?" inquired Larry the Bat querulously. "I asks youse again, did I ever hand youse a bum steer?"

"No," said Carruthers. "All right! I agree! You said to-morrow night. I take it, I'm to meet you some place?"

"Youse only needs one guess!" said Larry the Bat. "Dat's de idea. D'youse remember de time I called youse over de phone about a gazabo dat was tryin' to bust into de social columns of de papers wid a fake necklace dat he'd bought fer his wife?"

"You mean——"

"I mean de gazabo wid de fake necklace," cut in Larry the Bat sharply. "We ain't mentionin' no names ner places in public over de phone. De gazabo wot got tied to one of his own trees in his pajamas."

"Yes; I remember," said Carruthers crisply. "But I also remember that on that occasion your voice was—er—quite a lot more cultured and distinctly different from your voice to-night."

"I've grown older since den, an' me voice has changed," sniffed Larry the Bat. "Ferget it! Youse knows where de guy I'm talkin' about lived, don't youse?"

"Yes."

"Well, dat goes! Youse drives out dere in yer car to-morrow night, an' youse parks yer bus anywhere youse likes near de gates, an' den youse walks back along de road until youse gets de high sign. An' de time is nine o'clock. Prompt! See?"

"Look here," said Carruthers, "there's someone just as much interested in this as I am, and someone that I'll vouch for will play the game with you. I'd like to bring him along."

"Who's dat?" asked Larry the Bat suspiciously.

"A closer friend of Ray Thorne's than ever I was. His name is Jimmie Dale."

"T'hell wid him!" snapped Larry the Bat. "Youse comes alone, or youse don't come at all."

"Would you suggest," Carruthers laughed a little unpleasantly, "that I also made my will?"

"Youse can do wot youse damned likes!" snarled Larry the Bat. "If youse've got cold feet, get a hot-water bottle!"

"I will be there," said Carruthers coldly.

"At nine o'clock!"

"At nine o'clock."

"Alone!"

"Alone."

"Good-night!" said Larry the Bat.

"Good-night!" said Carruthers.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRAP

It was three minutes to nine. The only car that had passed in the last little while had, as disclosed by the tail light, borne Carruthers' license plate. And now the road was deserted, save for a single and somewhat shadowy figure in the darkness, who, though he walked briskly, kept turning his head constantly from side to side.

Jimmie Dale, as Larry the Bat, stepped suddenly out from the shelter of the trees that bordered the main road at the edge of the wagon track, and accosted the solitary pedestrian.

"I ain't askin' youse to shake hands," he said blandly, "'cause youse might get leprosy; but I'm pleased to meet yer, Mr. Carruthers."

Carruthers came to an abrupt halt.

"Perhaps it is just as well!" he retorted caustically. He leaned forward and peered into Larry the Bat's face. "I suppose you *are* the Gray Seal, as you call yourself?" he questioned sharply.

"Sure! Dat's me! De Gray Seal an' Larry de Bat all in one. But, say"—Larry the Bat's voice roughened—"we ain't here to hold no open air meetin'! If youse wants to do any gassin' come on in here under de trees. An' spill it quick, 'cause we got to get movin' pretty soon."

"Yes," said Carruthers evenly, as he followed Jimmie Dale a few yards in along the wagon track, "I certainly do propose to do a little gassing, as you put it, before I go any further. I'm here. I've kept my appointment with you; and, though I am perhaps a fool, I have adhered rigidly to the conditions you imposed, and——"

"Sure, youse have!" agreed Larry the Bat complacently. "Wot's a word passed between gentlemen if it ain't good fer dat?"

"Gentlemen!" Carruthers choked slightly. "Look here, who in hell are you anyhow? I mentioned the matter of your voice last night, and I ——"

"Mabbe de Gray Seal ain't always Larry de Bat; but dat ain't none of yer business!" snapped Larry the Bat. "Youse didn't come out to write me biography, did youse? Youse can do dat fer de other guy dat youse're going to meet out here. Now, den, anythin' more before we steps along?"

"Where are we going?"

"Into a house a little way down de line here."

"Is this man there—the man you said was the one who killed Mr. Thorne?"

"No; not yet, he ain't," said Larry the Bat tersely. "But he will be. De idea is dat we'll be waitin' fer him."

"Who is he? You said you knew. What's his name?"

"Youse can bet yer life I knows!" stated Larry the Bat with finality. "He's a guy dat uster work fer Thorne by de name of Beaton."

"Beaton!" Carruthers' voice was loud with incredulity.

"Don't yell!" snarled Larry the Bat. "Youse don't have to tell all de world about it yet—save some of it fer one of dem newspaper scoops of yers!"

"But this is impossible!" exclaimed Carruthers. "It couldn't have been Beaton. Thorne was murdered before Beaton entered the house. Beaton had an alibi that thoroughly satisfied the police."

"I don't know nothin' about how good de alibi was," said Larry the Bat contemptuously; "but I knows dat Beaton handed Thorne de spot wid a rod dat had a silencer on it dat I slipped over to de police de other day."

"Yes, I heard about that!" There was a new and tense note of interest in Carruthers' voice. "You say that gun belonged to Beaton?"

"Dat's wot!"

"Where did you get it?"

"Listen to de star reporter interviewin' de Gray Seal!" murmured Larry the Bat.

"Well, then, why did you send it to the police?"

"An' he ain't so bright, at dat!" observed Larry the Bat pityingly. "Say, I had ter find out, didn't I, if dat was de cannon dat fired de fatal slug?"

"And you found out that it was?"

"Sure! De cops wrote me a nice long letter about it!"

"Well, I happen to know that it was, too," said Carruthers meditatively; "and if you're telling the truth, if that revolver really was Beaton's, then——"

"Say," interrupted Larry the Bat irritably, "did I ask youse to take me say-so fer anythin'? Didn't I tell youse dat I'd hand de bird over to youse wid de goods on him?"

"You'll forgive me," said Carruthers a little sarcastically, "if I am still slightly skeptical. The circumstances are somewhat unusual, and your reputation, if you don't mind my saying so, is a bit spotty. Do you mean to say you can prove that Beaton killed Ray Thorne?"

"Yes—to youse!" asserted Larry the Bat curtly. "An' youse can do de rest! Dat's why I'm lettin' youse in on it. See? Youse're a friend of de guy dat went fer de ride, an' I'm out fer de skunk dat made youse hire a glass wagon, 'cause I ain't standin' fer no dirty job like dat from no man, no matter wot youse just said about me reputation, damn youse! Get me? It'll be up to youse. De Gray Seal'd look nice, I don't think, sittin' in de witness chair an' all booked fer de hot seat himself while he was handin' out de harrowin' details to de judge an' jury! See?"

"I'm beginning to get a glimmer," admitted Carruthers grimly. "I take it I'm to occupy—the witness chair?"

"Youse've spilled a mouthful!" declared Larry the Bat. "Well, are youse drawin' cards, or ain't youse?"

Carruthers was silent for a moment.

"Yes!" he decided abruptly. "I'm not a particularly brave man, and something keeps telling me I'm a fool to trust you, but I'll take a chance!"

"T'anks!" said Larry the Bat sourly. "Well, den, dere's two things youse're goin' to do."

"What are they?" demanded Carruthers.

"De first is dat, no matter wot happens, youse don't make a move, an' dat youse don't let a peep out of youse."

"All right!" agreed Carruthers laconically.

"All right is all right," growled Larry the Bat; "but it ain't enough. Youse've got to get me on dis. Even if youse thinks de whole works has gone fluey, youse're to keep yer face shut. D'youse get dat? If youse shows yer hand, den it's all off, an' Beaton scoops de pot. Understand? An' don't make no mistake about it! Youse leaves it to me—*no matter wot happens*!"

"I agree," said Carruthers icily. "I suppose I have to. What else?"

"De rod youse've parked in yer pocket," requested Larry the Bat coolly. "I'll trouble youse to hand dat over."

"The trust," said Carruthers ironically, "appears to be all on one side!"

"Nix!" Larry the Bat's voice was almost friendly. "I ain't lettin' youse down; but I ain't takin' any chance on youse lettin' me down either—even if youse don't mean to. Come across!"

Carruthers hesitated—then he produced a revolver from his pocket and handed it to Larry the Bat.

"'Where angels fear to tread!'" he muttered.

"T'anks again!" said Larry the Bat with sudden cordiality. "I'm beginnin' to like youse—even if de feelin's ain't mutual. Now, come on!"

He led the way down the wagon track to the front door of Daddy Ratzler's house.

"Whose house is this?" asked Carruthers pithily.

Jimmie Dale opened the door deftly with a pick-lock.

"De only guy dat's in here," explained Larry the Bat, "is so deaf dat he couldn't hear Niagara Falls if he was gettin' splashed by de cataract; but dat's no reason fer us takin' any chances dat he's awake an' nosin' around."

"Who is he?"

"His name's Pascal—I dunno his other name," answered Larry the Bat. "But dere's somethin' else I wants to tell youse about him. He's de only one dat's got anythin' to do wid dis dump dat's straight, an' I'll ask youse to remember dat when de rockets goes up."

"I don't know what you mean," said Carruthers in a puzzled tone.

"No," returned Larry the Bat; "but youse will before youse're through. Youse keep de old man out of de ditch, dat's all—'cause he ain't never known no more about wot's been pulled out here dan youse have. An' I guess he's asleep now all right, 'cause I don't hear nothin'. So youse follow me."

Jimmie Dale produced a flashlight and led the way to the door at the head of the cellar stairs—but here sudden caution descended upon him. It was not in any degree likely, for it was still a long way from ten o'clock, but it *was* possible that Beaton might have already arrived.

"Youse wait here a minute," he said brusquely, "an' don't make no noise till youse hears from me. Savvy?"

"Yes," said Carruthers.

There was no creak of stair tread, no echoing footstep as Jimmie Dale descended the stairs and crossed the cellar, and no sound as he opened the secret door. The interior was inky black. He listened. Nothing!

He turned, and called softly to Carruthers.

"Shut dat door behind youse, an' come on down here!" he instructed—and a moment later, focusing his flashlight upon it, he opened and shut the secret door several times for Carruthers' benefit.

"Good God!" ejaculated Carruthers heavily. "What's in there?"

"Once upon a time, like dey says in de story books," said Larry the Bat with a short laugh, "dere was a guy named Blotz dat built himself dis nice little private suite so's nobody wouldn't interrupt him while he was helpin' de government to increase de circulation of banknotes in de country, an'——"

"You mean a counterfeiting plant?"

"Sure! Him an' another guy named Daddy Ratzler dat's got his paws on dis house now. Daddy Ratzler an' Beaton bumps off Blotz, an' takes a bird called Heinie fer a ride, too. See? Dat's how de estate changed hands. See? Beaton's de son of Daddy Ratzler, only his name ain't down in de family Bible."

There was an ugly rasp in Carruthers' voice now.

"But this is abominable!" he cried out.

"Sure!" assented Larry the Bat heartily. "Youse've said it! It ain't got nothin' to do wid yer pal Thorne, but I thought youse'd like to know de kind of bird youse was up against. An' maybe now youse're beginnin' to tumble to de fact dat I'm handin' youse de straight goods."

"I haven't any more doubt of it!" Carruthers' tones were hard and crisp. "Well, what's the next move?"

Jimmie Dale pointed the way through the opening with his flashlight.

"Go on down in dere," answered Larry the Bat; and then, with a sudden, inward chuckle, as Carruthers stepped forward: "Youse'll get better acquainted wid dem steps before youse're through, but look out youse don't bust yer neck on dem now!"

"They're all right," affirmed Carruthers.

"Sure, dey are!" concurred Larry the Bat pleasantly, as, closing the door behind him, he followed Carruthers down the steps. "Youse won't be seen once youse crawls in under dem."

"Under them?"

"Dat's de idea! Now take a look around de place while I gives it de once-over fer youse wid de flashlight. It's a nice little dump, ain't it? Well, de minute youse hears anyone out dere in de cellar, youse ducks under de steps here. See? An' don't youse make a sound no matter even if youse thinks de whole works is blown up. All youse've got to do is listen—an' mabbe youse'll get an earful. I'll be up dere at de other end havin' a spiel wid Beaton. D'youse get dat?"

"Yes," said Carruthers. "I get your idea; but I'm free to say I am a little doubtful as to the result. The man isn't going to be fool enough to admit that he killed Mr. Thorne, is he?"

"Well," submitted Larry the Bat philosophically, "youse never can tell! Mabbe yes, an' mabbe no. But I got a hunch he'll come clean if youse don't mess it up an' make a fool of *yerself* by buttin' in!"

"You need not give yourself any concern on that score!" retorted Carruthers with some asperity. "I quite understand what *I* have to do!"

"All right, den!" said Larry the Bat. "Mabbe he'll be here in a little while, an' mabbe it'll be a lot longer; but we don't do no more yappin'. An' youse be careful when youse crawls in under dem steps dat youse don't make no noise! All right?"

"Yes!" said Carruthers briefly.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FINAL ROUND

Jimmie Dale ensconced himself in the easy chair near the table at the far end of the chamber and switched off his flashlight.

The minutes dragged along—five, ten, fifteen of them—twenty. Came then the sound of a footstep in the cellar. Then Carruthers' whisper:

"All right! I hear him."

Another minute passed. The footfalls were on the steps now, and now they scuffled on the cement floor; and the ray of a flashlight streamed down the length of the almost cavern-like place disclosing table, lamp, and easy chair—but the easy chair was empty.

And now a shadowy form showed at the edge of the table, a match crackled, the lamp was lighted—and Jimmie Dale, from where he had taken refuge behind the easy chair, rose suddenly to his feet.

"Hello, Beaton," he said casually, as the automatic in his hand swung to a level with the other's eyes, "stick 'em up!"

With a sharp, startled cry, Beaton drew back, and his hand went instinctively toward his pocket.

"I said *stick 'em up*!" repeated Larry the Bat.

A dazed look spread itself over Beaton's face.

"My God," he mumbled, as his hands went up over his head, "how did you get in here?"

"Aw," sniffed Larry the Bat, as he felt deftly over the other's clothing, and transferred a revolver from Beaton's pocket to his own, "someone left de door open! Now youse can put 'em down."

Beaton's hands flopped to his sides. He circled his lips with his tongue.

"How did you get in here?" he repeated hoarsely. "How did you know about this place?"

"I knows a lot of things"—Larry the Bat's voice was almost friendly—"only I ferget a lot of de answers! See? But if youse wants to know about me gettin' in here, I'll put youse wise. I been watchin' dat father of yers fer de last few days."

"My father!" The sweat was standing out on Beaton's forehead; he flirted it away with a sweep of his hand.

"Sure!" asserted Larry the Bat. "Daddy Ratzler! Dat's another thing I knows."

A bottle of whisky was on the table. Beaton reached out his hand toward it.

"Do you mind if I take a shot?" he asked shakily.

"Help yerself!" said Larry the Bat graciously. "Youse don't seem to have de nerve I thought youse had, an' mabbe dat'll buck youse up. I didn't mean to throw no scare into youse. Wot I wants is to talk business an' get down to cases."

Beaton poured a generous helping from the bottle into a glass and gulped it down at a swallow.

"What do you want?" he coughed.

"D'youse knows who I am?" inquired Larry the Bat pleasantly.

"I've never seen you before"—Beaton wiped his lips nervously with the back of his hand—"but from what you said about Daddy Ratzler I can make a guess. You're the bird that was out here the other night. You're Larry the Bat—the Gray Seal."

"Youse're a good guesser!" Larry the Bat wagged his head in assent. "Sure, dat's me! Well, listen! I comes out here to make a deal wid Daddy Ratzler, only some old bag he's got hangin' around puts de crimp in it. See? But I'm still fer de deal. An' dat's wot I wants to talk to youse about, youse bein' one of de family."

The liquor appeared somewhat to have restored Beaton's self-control.

"Well, that sounds all right to me," he said—and attempted an encouraging smile. "Go ahead!"

Larry the Bat waved his automatic toward the bottle.

"Have another?" he invited.

"Thanks!" said Beaton—and helped himself again.

"Now, den"—Larry the Bat's voice was suddenly confidential—"I knows a lot about dis, an' I'm puttin' me cards on de table so's youse can see dere's no use tryin' to slip anythin' over on me. I knows dat Daddy Ratzler was de head on dis side of de pond of one of de big rings dat's been pinchin' sparklers, an' smugglin' 'em in, an' givin' de Secret Service de horse laugh. An' I knows dat de last bunch of sparklers dat was sent over is de juiciest of all, which is why youse an' Daddy Ratzler was goin' to swipe dem fer yerselves an' double-cross de gang."

Beaton's face was white.

"How do you know that?" he stammered.

"Aw, say," said Larry the Bat patiently, "a blind man could see dat! Listen! De Secret Service ain't so dumb as dey looks. Dey has been wonderin' about Daddy Ratzler an' his outfit fer a long time, an' dey starts in havin' a look at Daddy Ratzler's mail in de post office—only Daddy Ratzler gets tipped off to wot dey're doin'. See? Well, dat puts de line of communication on de blink, like us uster say in de war, an' Daddy Ratzler an' de French H.Q. has to find another way. So dey picks on a guy dat nobody ain't goin' to be suspicious of—an' dey picks on a guy named Thorne. But de gang don't know dat Thorne's valet is Daddy Ratzler's son—an' dat's how I knows youse two was goin' to hand de crowd de frozen mitt. Say, youse wouldn't like to have me spill dat little piece of infermation to Silky Hines, would youse? Youse knows wot'd happen, don't youse? He'd take de two of youse fer a long, long ride—an' he wouldn't keep youse waitin' fer de start, neither!"

There was a hunted look in Beaton's eyes.

"How did you find out all this?" he asked miserably.

Larry the Bat shook his head.

"Dat don't make no difference," he grinned; "an I'm tellin' youse again to ferget dat end of it. I'm showin' youse me cards, ain't I? An' I'm talkin' friendly 'cause dere's still a chance to pull off dat deal. I knows a lot more. A letter was sent from Paree to Thorne, an' inside de letter was a blue envelope dat was sealed, an' inside de blue

envelope was de dope fixed up nice an' secret about how an' when de sparklers was to come. An' Daddy Ratzler knows how to read dat dope. An' de idea was dat youse was to pinch de letter, an' youse an' Daddy Ratzler was to lift de sparklers while de gang was still wonderin' why de letter didn't come—only I beat youse to it."

Beaton's eyes narrowed suddenly.

"Yes—and bumped off Thorne in doing it!" he laughed throatily.

Larry the Bat bridled instantly.

"Dat's a lie!" he snapped. "I opened de safe an' took de blue envelope all right, but I never saw Thorne. Y'understand? It wasn't me!"

"Well," Beaton shrugged his shoulders, "who was it, then?"

"How t'hell does I know!" exclaimed Larry the Bat viciously. "But I'll slip youse dis! If I ever finds out, he'll get his! I'll put de skids under him! I'll make him squawk! I ain't standin' fer no lousy murder jobs dat I didn't do! D'youse get me! It wasn't me dat done it!"

Again Beaton laughed throatily.

"I'm not disputing you," he said hastily.

"Youse'd better not!" growled Larry the Bat threateningly. "Dat's a sore spot wid me!" And then, his voice amicable once more: "But dis ain't gettin' down to cases. If I can't read wot's in dat letter, it's no good to me; an' if youse haven't got de letter *to* read, youse're out of luck too! Dat's a cinch, ain't it? I'm askin' youse how to read de dope in dat letter. I'm makin' de same proposition dat I made de other night. Dat was a fake envelope I handed Daddy Ratzler, 'cause I wasn't playin' any chances. But I still got de joker up me sleeve, an' dat's de real envelope wid de hidden message in dat I'm offerin' youse an' Daddy Ratzler on a fifty-fifty swop fer whatever dere is in de pot."

A sudden look of relief, veiled the next instant by half-closed lids, flashed in Beaton's eyes.

"You mean," he asked quickly, "that you think there's still a chance of getting the stuff before the crowd on the other side get busy and wise up the gang here where it is and what to do?"

"Sure!" said Larry the Bat complacently. "Dat's wot I'm talkin' about. I got de dope an' youse haven't. Mabbe it's kind of tough on youse an' Daddy Ratzler to have to cough up to me, but dat's yer own fault."

"What do you mean—our own fault?" Beaton was almost at his ease now.

"Well," chuckled Larry the Bat, "it looks to me dat, bein' Thorne's valet, an' bein' in de house, an' knowin' it was comin', an' bein' able to pick out anythin' wid French stamps on it, youse made a bum play on yer end of it by not pinchin' de letter before Thorne got it, an' den gettin' away wid de goods while de bunch was guessin' why it never came."

"Look here," said Beaton with sudden heartiness, "this looks good to me. I'll say right now that I'll come in on it with you—and so will Daddy Ratzler. You can leave him to me, no matter what he said the other night. He's getting old and feeble-minded, and I guess he thought you were bluffing; but you've said enough so's I can see it's the only chance we've got left. You're on—and that goes! And to show you that I'm on the level, I'll put some cards on the table, too. It wasn't my fault that Thorne ever even saw that letter—it was just damned tough luck. I knew it was coming just about that time and I was keeping my eyes peeled for it—the postman never made a round that I wasn't on the job. Get that? But the afternoon that it *did* come, Thorne was standing there in the hall, and he held out his hand for the little bunch of letters with that one amongst them, that the postman had just brought—and I had to give them to him."

Larry the Bat was intensely interested—his mouth gaped a little.

"Wouldn't dat jar youse!" he ejaculated heavily.

"It did!" said Beaton, with a vicious oath. "It put everything on the rocks! The letter that came from France with the blue envelope in it was from a fellow named Keane who was batman for Thorne for a while in the war; and Keane said in the letter that he'd just heard that an old pal of his who was somewhere in New York called Peter Halstead—who was a fake, of course, and didn't exist—was on his uppers, and that there was a small draft in the letter which, though it

wasn't much, he wanted Halstead to have, only he didn't know Halstead's address, and that the friend he'd met in Paris who had told him about Halstead didn't know Halstead's address either. So he didn't know who to turn to except his, meaning Keane's, old captain, and he asked Thorne to please put a 'personal' in his newspaper the next morning requesting Halstead to call—and to keep the envelope in his safe until Halstead turned up."

Larry the Bat was leaning over the table now and was apparently so absorbed in Beaton's recital that, though he still retained his automatic in his hand, it no longer covered the other.

"I get youse!" he said—and nodded admiringly. "So dat's why youse took a job wid Thorne?"

Beaton shook his head—and reached for the bottle.

"Have one!" he suggested.

The relations between the two men were becoming almost cordial.

"Mabbe I will in a minute," said Larry the Bat, "but I'd rather hear de rest of yer spiel first. De job's a peach so far—I got to hand it to youse fer dat!"

Beaton's eyes over the rim of his glass rested for a fleeting second on the automatic in Larry the Bat's hand, and for another on the innocent-looking tier of bureau drawers—and a queer smile, almost but not entirely hidden by the glass, and which Larry the Bat did not appear to notice, crossed his lips.

"No," he said, "that wasn't why I took a job with Thorne. I didn't know that Thorne had ever had anything to do with Keane then. I went with Thorne because it's always a safe play to have some visible means of support and be an honest-to-God respectable citizen—while you're working side lines! Get the idea? Thorne's was an easy berth. I got a lot of time off—for my own business."

"Youse're a bird!" murmured Larry the Bat with wholesome respect.

Beaton acknowledged the compliment with a deprecating wave of his hand.

"But I knew Keane," he said. "Keane, before the war, used to do a lot of jobs with Daddy Ratzler, and after the war he went back to France on the diamond lay as sort of representing Daddy Ratzler over there. Maybe you know him—Cokey Keane?"

"I never had de pleasure," regretted Larry the Bat.

"Well, you never will now," said Beaton; "for, according to the papers, he had a run-in with the Paris police and got bumped off—and, as near as I can figure it, just about the time he posted that letter to Thorne. But that doesn't matter now. What happened was this. A few months ago the Big Chief of the ring, Frenchy Jacob, who lives in Paris, came over here. Communications were getting difficult, and there was a special shipment that was going to be sent along as soon as they could make arrangements with a new 'runner' that they were trying to get away from the London outfit. Daddy Ratzler had got a tip that his mail was being censored. Well, just about that time and while Frenchy Jacob was still here, I heard Thorne say one day that Keane had been a batman of his during part of the war. That sounded good to me, and I slipped it over to Daddy Ratzler, and Daddy Ratzler slipped it over to Frenchy Jacob—and Frenchy Jacob fell for it. Nobody was going to interfere with any mail addressed to a man like Thorne, and that gave Daddy Ratzler and me the open-and-shut for a play to get away with the whole pool—and no risk to it. Get it?"

Larry the Bat licked his lips greedily.

"Dat's a pippin!" he applauded.

"Yes," said Beaton; "and it would have gone across like clockwork if Thorne hadn't been standing in the hall that afternoon just when the letter arrived. And that brings me back to where I was saying he took the whole bunch of mail away from me. He took the letters into that little room of his—you ought to know the one I mean!"

"Let dat go!" smirked Larry the Bat.

"All right! Later on he went out. I went into the room; but, though I saw Keane's letter lying on the desk, I couldn't find the blue envelope, so I knew Thorne had put it in the safe as Keane had asked him to do. I had the combination of the safe and a key to the little steel drawer that I'd got from a wax impression, but I didn't monkey with anything

then because it would look too much like an *inside* job, and I wasn't asking for trouble. I knew that Thorne was dining at the club, and wasn't likely to be home before eleven or twelve o'clock, and besides it was my night out. I got hold of Daddy Ratzler, told him what had happened, and we doped out a little plan. Daddy Ratzler telephoned Thorne at the club and pretended to be Halstead. He told Thorne that he had met a friend who had just worked his way back from the other side, and this friend had seen a pal of his named Keane in Paris, and they had talked about him, Halstead, having run into hard luck, and Keane had said he was going to send over a little money through Thorne. You understand? The same story as the letter. He said he didn't want to bother Thorne, but that he was in desperate circumstances, and though he hadn't seen any 'personal' yet in the papers, perhaps Thorne might possibly have heard from Keane and hadn't had time to attend to it, or, if no letter had yet come, perhaps Thorne himself would let him have a few dollars in the meanwhile. Thorne, of course, said that the letter had come that afternoon and that there was an envelope in his safe at home for Halstead. Daddy Ratzler thanked Thorne with tears in his voice, and said he'd go round and get it in the morning, and asked Thorne please not to say anything about it at all to anybody as it was the first time in his life that he had ever begged or received charity. Thorne promised, and ——"

"Which," interrupted Larry the Bat sententiously, "accounts fer de fact dat even Thorne's friends didn't know nothin' about it 'cause, if dey'd had, dey'd have spilled it to de cops."

"Yes," said Beaton.

"Wot'd youse do next?"

"Daddy Ratzler sent for Silky Hines and tipped him off to what he had done. He said he'd been getting nervous and worried, just as they all were with nothing showing up in the newspaper, and so he had taken a chance and telephoned. That let Daddy Ratzler out with the gang—he was laying all *his* cards on the table. When the safe was found cracked open, and the envelope gone, and Thorne told the

police about the telephone conversation with a man named Halstead, as he would then have to do, it wouldn't be anything that the gang didn't know already."

"Sure," agreed Larry the Bat, "dat was de only play Daddy Ratzler could make. Anybody could see dat in de dark. An' den wot?"

Beaton's glance traveled from the bottle to the carelessly held weapon in Larry the Bat's hand and back again to the bottle.

"Daddy Ratzler fixed it up with Silky Hines to have one of the gang go around in the morning and play Halstead and get the envelope; and the idea was, of course, that I was to pinch the envelope during the night. I had it all doped out so that no one would suspect me, and I would have got away with it all right, too—if you hadn't butted in!"

"Well, ferget dat!" advised Larry the Bat placatingly. "Youse're goin' to get a look-in anyway, ain't youse? But, say"—Larry the Bat's tones grew puzzled—"it's a funny thing de police ner nobody else didn't find dat letter dat Cokey Keane wrote. An' I'm tellin' youse straight dat I didn't take it, neither."

Beaton indulged in a faintly amused smile.

"Thorne didn't put *that* in the safe," he said. "I told you I'd seen it on his desk, and it was still lying there when I went into the room and found him dead on the floor. It looked as though Daddy Ratzler's little game and mine was all up, but that was no reason why I should give the police a chance to dig up anything about how the gang was operating, and, with a murder on their hands, they might have got the French police working and gone pretty far with that letter. So, after I had telephoned headquarters and while I was waiting, I got rid of it, burned it—and, if you want to know the ugly details, stirred the charred remains up in the garbage can."

"Some nifty piece of work"—Larry the Bat's voice was awed—"de whole of it! Say, I ain't so sure dat I'm stuck on meself fer puttin' it on de blink!"

"That's nice of you," returned Beaton magnanimously, "though I've got to be honest enough to admit that I'm not happy about it myself; but, believe me, I'm for picking up the pieces, and I've come across

wide enough and clean enough to show that I'm on the level, haven't I?"

"Youse sure has!" declared Larry the Bat enthusiastically.

"Fine!" said Beaton, with equal enthusiasm. "And now with the smoke cleared away, we'll get down to business. You're to hand over the original blue envelope, and we're to decipher what's in it—and then go out after the goods. If it's too late, we all lose; but, if it isn't, it's to be a fifty-fifty split. Fifty for you and fifty for Daddy Ratzler and me—is that right?"

"Dat's de contract!" confirmed Larry the Bat amiably.

"Well, I agree. I've got to"—Beaton laughed philosophically —"because otherwise I wouldn't get anything out of it at all. Daddy Ratzler, of course, would get his share from the gang if we don't beat them to it; but he'll get a lot more this way, and he'll agree, too—I'll see to that, as I said before. Have you got the envelope with you?"

"No," said Larry the Bat, "'cause until I was sure wot was goin' to break, I wasn't carryin' *dat* around wid me; but dat don't cut no ice, fer I can get it in a couple of hours."

"All right!" Beaton nodded. "You go and get it, and I'll go over to the village and telephone Daddy Ratzler to come out here. One thing is sure, we haven't got any time to lose—there've been too many days by a whole lot that have gone by already. We'll say midnight if you can get back by then. Does that suit you?"

"Sure, it does!" said Larry the Bat heartily. "I can make dat easy."

"Shake!" said Beaton.

Larry the Bat laid his automatic spontaneously down on the edge of the table and extended his hand.

"Atta boy!" he grinned.

"Fifty-fifty," Beaton grinned back, "and we'll have a drink to seal the bargain." He leaned over the table and pushed bottle and glass toward Larry the Bat. "It's the real stuff right off a ship. Help yourself!"

Larry the Bat reached out and picked up the bottle and glass.

"Sure, I'll have a drink wid youse now," he said genially, "an' here's to——"

The bottle and glass slipped from his fingers and crashed down on the table. It had been quickly done—done in the winking of an eye. Already leaning half over the table, Beaton had lunged swiftly forward—and Larry the Bat, a stunned look in his face, was staring into the muzzle of his own automatic.

And Beaton was a man transformed—his face in fury, his lips working.

"So you'd squeal to Silky Hines, would you!" he screamed. "Well, you'll never squeal to anyone because you're going for a ride! You fool! What did you think you were getting away with? I got all that stuff last night. I thought you'd fall for a come-on game before you were through. And you're the Gray Seal that they talk about in hushed voices, are you? You're a laugh! And you're the bird that was boasting a few minutes ago about how you'd put the skids under the fellow who killed Thorne and make him squawk if you ever found out who he was, are you? Well, you've found him! And now what are you going to do about it?"

Larry the Bat, moistening his lips, found his voice.

"What d'youse mean?" he quavered.

Beaton moved around the table—and leered into Larry the Bat's face.

"You won't tell anybody, will you?" Beaton was snarling like a beast now. "Not till you bump into whoever's on the station platform in hell—because you're going to make a quick trip there, and no stop-overs! I shot Thorne—just the way I'm going to plug you! So what about those skids? You cheap skate!"

Larry the Bat's nerve seemed utterly to have deserted him. He shrank back, a cringing, spineless thing, twisting and wringing his hands together in terror.

"Aw, say, youse wouldn't do dat!" he pleaded desperately. "Say, listen! I was only kiddin' about Silky Hines just to make youse come across. I wouldn't have spilled nothin' to him even if youse had said youse wouldn't make de split. Honest to Gawd, I wouldn't! An' youse ain't got nothin' against me fer wot I said about de guy dat bumped Thorne off, 'cause I knows youse're only kiddin' when youse says it

was youse dat gave him de spot. I read in de papers all about de two dames dat brought youse home, an' youse was so drunk youse couldn't have killed nobody, an' besides dat youse had a time alibi dat let youse out."

"Drunk!" There was ugly glee in Beaton's laugh. "Didn't I tell you that I'd fixed it up with Daddy Ratzler to open that safe? Do you think I'd get drunk with a job like that to do? I wasn't drunk—but the girls thought I was. That's where the time alibi came from—when I let my watch fall out of my pocket, and they told me what time it was because I was too drunk to tell it myself! I'd set my watch ahead twenty minutes. Do you get that, Mister Gray Seal—or can't you count that far? You brainy bird, you underworld terror—*not*! Open your face, and answer me! Do you get that, you louse?"

"Yes," mumbled Larry the Bat weakly.

"Oh, you do! But you don't know why I wanted those twenty minutes, do you? Answer me!" Beaton prodded Larry the Bat viciously with the muzzle of the automatic. "That's too deep for the Gray Seal, isn't it?"

There was a miserable, hunted look in Larry the Bat's face, and twice he swallowed hard.

"I—I don't know"—his words were almost inarticulate.

"I'll tell you, then! You'll make a hit with the story—*where you're going*!" Beaton was gloating now, jeering, his eyes blazing with an almost maniacal light. "Maybe it will help you to save the Gray Seal's face if you tell them down there in hell that it was one of your own jobs! That'll save you from getting the laugh as a piker, because you're going to be among a lot of wise guys from now on! I knew the combination and I had the key to the little drawer, and I could have got into the safe in a minute or two, but I told you I was leery about anything that looked like an inside job. Who else would it be but me that did it? And even if they couldn't prove it, they'd have got too damned inquisitive about my record. Get that?" He thrust viciously again with the automatic. "Don't forget the fine points when you're telling the story! I needed that twenty minutes to fix things up. After I'd got the envelope I was going to 'soup' the safe and the drawer—

using time fuses. That's another point—cut so's they'd burn just so long. Then I was going to set my watch right and leave the house again—and just about the time when the bang went off and the household was running around in their nighties, I'd be drunk and trying to find the keyhole to let myself in, and according to the girls, who could prove the time, I would have been with them not only all night, but they'd only have just left me not more than a minute or so when the break was pulled, so it couldn't have been me. It was ironclad. There was nothing to it. But you"—his voice rose furiously—"you, damn you, you queered it!"

Larry the Bat cowered.

"Fer Gawd's sake, Beaton," he whimpered, "youse ain't goin' to do wot youse said, are youse?"

Beaton bared his teeth in a cat-and-mouse grin.

"How do you like the story?" he leered. "Listen to the rest of it—and the last few words you'll ever hear in this little old world! It'll interest you, seeing you feel so badly about the Thorne killing and that it's a sore spot with you! When I got into that room, you, you mangy rat, had beaten me to it, and the envelope was gone. And then Thorne walked into the room. I don't know what brought him down there, whether he couldn't sleep and had just come for a book or something, or what; but he wasn't walking in his sleep, as one of his fool pals suggested when the police were nosing around, because he recognized me. Thorne's the only one that knows why he came downstairs, and, if you're curious about it, you can ask him—you'll be talking to him in a minute or two!"

Larry the Bat licked at his lips feverishly.

"Wot—wot d'youse kill him fer?" he mouthed piteously. "Dere wouldn't have been nothin' like dis if youse hadn't."

"What did I kill him for!" echoed Beaton sardonically. "I killed him for one of the same reasons that I'm going to kill you! Didn't I tell you he *recognized* me! The safe was open, and its insides were all over the floor, and the blue envelope was gone. If I'd made an escape from the house and left him alive to tell about it, it wouldn't have been only the police I'd have had to duck—I'd have gone for a ride with Silky Hines'

crowd if they ever found me, because they'd never believe I hadn't swiped the envelope. I had a silencer on my rod and I plugged Thorne with it. He never knew what hit him—he went down on the floor dead. It was a safe play—just as safe as the one I'm playing with you right now! Nobody heard the shot, and I still had that time alibi up my sleeve—and I used that to get rid of the 'soup' and stuff I'd brought with me, and to burn up Keane's letter; and then I waited until it would look as though I had had just about time enough to get into the house after the girls left me, then I set my watch back, and telephoned down to headquarters to tell them what I'd *found*. Have you got it all?" Beaton broke suddenly into wicked laughter. "Don't forget any of the fine points! And tell Thorne I'm wearing mourning for him, will you? And now, you——"

The cringing figure of Larry the Bat was gone—and swift as a lightning flash, while the mechanism of the automatic in the other's hand clicked harmlessly, Jimmie Dale's fist, with every ounce of his strength and weight behind the blow, crashed to the point of Beaton's chin—and Beaton lay sprawled, inert and stunned, upon the floor. And it was Jimmie Dale, too, the next instant who whipped a pair of handcuffs from his pockets, and bending down, slipped them deftly over Beaton's wrists—but it was Larry the Bat, tonguing his lips complacently, who stood up as Carruthers, white-faced, came running toward him.

"My God," Carruthers whispered shakily, "I—I didn't know what to do! I—I thought you——"

"Aw, say," said Larry the Bat soothingly, "dere wasn't nothin' to worry about. Didn't I tell youse all youse had to do was listen? Dere wasn't nothin' to it at all after I'd given him de chance to grab dat gun. It wasn't loaded. Sure, he talked his head off! Dey're all alike when dey thinks dey has got youse cold—dey likes to see youse squirm an' hear demselves gloat before dey bumps youse off. Well, dere he is all made up into a nice little package fer youse. Are youse satisfied wid wot youse heard?"

"Very fully!" said Carruthers grimly. "And I'll see that——"

"Youse needn't make a speech about it," interrupted Larry the Bat coolly, "'cause wot youse said before goes wid me, an' I got to be on me way. All youse've got to do is see dat he don't get gay while youse're waitin' fer de police to come. I'll send Pascal over to de village fer 'em. An' here's yer gun, an' here's his." Larry the Bat took the two weapons from his pocket and laid them on the table; then, stooping down, he picked up his own automatic from where it had fallen to the floor from Beaton's hand. "I got another dat *is* loaded," he informed Carruthers casually.

Carruthers smiled queerly.

"That's all right," he said quietly; and then abruptly: "Look here! I can quite understand that you can't afford to be found hanging around here when the police come, and I am quite prepared to see this man behind the bars, but there's something I'd like to know a little more about—I mean that blue envelope."

Larry the Bat nodded his head.

"Sure!" he agreed. "Dat's all right—an' mabbe de judge 'ud like to see how it was worked, too. I'll send it to youse by mail—as soon as I get me fingerprints rubbed off it. An' mabbe dere's somethin' else dat youse an' de judge 'ud like to see, too. De night before last, up on de St. Lawrence River, Beaton bumped off dat 'runner' he was yappin' about, so when de police comes, get dem to bust open dat bureau—youse'll find de sparklers in dere, an' mabbe dat ain't all neither—mabbe dere's some things of Daddy Ratzler's dat he's been keepin' private from de world! An' say, listen, dere's one more thing. Slip it to de police to keep dere faces shut until dey gets dere claws on Daddy Ratzler, 'cause if dey don't it'll be a race between de police and de gang dat he gyped to see who grabs him first. See?"

"Where does this Daddy Ratzler live?" demanded Carruthers tersely.

"Youse can leave dat to de cops," grinned Larry the Bat reassuringly; "dey've had his address for a long time, only dey ain't never been invited to none of his 'at homes' until to-night!" He glanced speculatively down at the floor—Beaton was beginning to

recover consciousness. "I don't think dis bird'll make any more trouble," he observed judicially; "but mabbe if youse tapped him on de bean every once in a while wid one of dem guns youse'd be sure of it!"

"I'll take care of him!" promised Carruthers with a hard smile.

"Sure, youse will!" conceded Larry the Bat cordially. "Well, as I said, I'll be on me way, an' I'll see dat de cops gets here on de jump. Good-night, Mr. Carruthers!"

"Wait a minute!" said Carruthers.

Larry the Bat, already half-turned, faced around again.

Carruthers was holding out his hand.

"Well, wot d'youse knows about dat!" gasped Larry the Bat.

It was not yet daylight as Jimmie Dale, awakened out of a sound sleep, sat up in bed. The telephone was ringing. He got up and lifted the receiver from the hook.

It was Carruthers' voice that answered him.

"What! Again!" complained Jimmie Dale plaintively. "Look here, Carruthers, did it ever occur to you that there are certain amenities in life that one does not wantonly profane, and this habit of calling people out of bed at ungodly hours is——"

"Oh, shut up, Jimmie!" Carruthers broke in violently. "Listen! We've got Ray's murderer!"

"Say that again!" Jimmie Dale drew in his breath sharply. "You mean the Gray Seal has been caught?"

"No! It wasn't the Gray Seal. It was Beaton!"

"*What*?" shouted Jimmie Dale.

"Yes!" asserted Carruthers feverishly. "Beaton and his father—a crook known as Daddy Ratzler. We've got them both! And it was the Gray Seal that landed them. There's a house with a secret cellar, and heaven knows how many thousands of stolen bonds, to say nothing of half a million in diamonds. I've just got back to town, and though it's far too long a story for the phone, I had to give you a ring to break the news; but I'm on my way uptown now to tell you all about it."

"Then for heaven's sake step on it, old man!" urged Jimmie Dale frantically—and winked confidentially at the receiver as he replaced it on the hook.

THE END

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *The Adventures of Jimmie Dale*.
[2] *The Further Adventures of Jimmie Dale*.
[3] *Jimmie Dale and the Phantom Clue*.
[4] *The Adventures of Jimmie Dale*.

Colophon

Jimmie Dale and the Blue Envelope Murder
Frank L. Packard

Pipcub Editions

Newly typeset from the 1930 Doubleday, Doran first-edition text. Original dedication, all twenty-two chapters and four notes retained. Pagination is new.