

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 papets abroad fea-

tured 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 Brotsky'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.

¹*The Adventures of Jimmie Dale.*

"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 up-

stairs—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 fer-

vently. "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.