

## 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 purred from work-

ing 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 R. Jy 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 Smarly, 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.

"Maybe I will and maybe 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 Thome 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! Gallousness 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.