

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 *purposefully* 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 eyewitness 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 dis-

cover 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 Watkin;" 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.