

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 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 boulder 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."¹

"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 come 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

¹*The Adventures of Jimmie Dale.*

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

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 chape 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 Jinimie 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!"