

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 sound 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 cer-

tain. Anything like that is far too crude for Daddy Ratzle'. 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 en-

trance, 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 wick. 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.