

CHAPTER XIV

MEN IN MASKS

JIMMIE DALE smiled grimly now as from the shadows he watched Big Steve lock the outer door, light a cigar, and stroll back to his interrupted duties as host of the Two Oaks. Both of his questions had been answered. Eighty thousand dollars in cash! It wasn't often that eighty thousand *in cash* was to be had—outside a bank! His spirits rose. The bait was big enough to tempt the "man with the black hair," the man who was stealing Daddy Ratzler's plums—the man who had murdered Ray!

"Something tells me," said Jimmie Dale quietly to the night, "that there isn't so much chance about it after all, and that he'll be here on the heels of Silky Hines for another bite—and I'd like to see his face. But anyway, whether I do or not, I think I'm rather glad I came. The ethics of the whole business may be open to debate, but I'd rather Mrs. Meegan got that money—than Daddy Ratzler and Silky Hines! And I think she will!"

Jimmie Dale returned to the porch door—and opened it with a pick-lock. Four o'clock! The Two Oaks began to close up around three. By four the multitude would have departed! It was quite obvious now why Silky Hines was waiting until—four o'clock!

"Yes! Quit!" said Jimmie Dale in communion with

himself. "Not awfully bright of me—but I was under the impression that the Two Oaks was in full swing *all* night. My mistake! H'm! It's still rather a long pull to the zero hour, but the time ought not to drag! Big Steve will be starting that private little game of his back here long before that."

Jimmie Dale entered the office, and without pause stepped across to the connecting door on the other side that led into the passageway. He could hear Mrs. Meegan moving about in her room upstairs, and the faint rattle of dishes that he had noticed before was still in evidence—there were no other sounds. He moved noiselessly along the passage. His flashlight came into play. Big Steve's private card room proved to be the second one beyond the stairs.

From the threshold, Jimmie Dale inspected the room as the ray of his flashlight circled the interior. There was little else in the room save a large poker table of orthodox design which was surrounded by comfortable and inviting-looking chairs. The window at the rear of the room was directly opposite the door.

"It's a hot night," observed Jimmie Dale; "they'll have to open that."

The flashlight went out. Jimmie Dale returned to the office. But here the round, white ray again became inquisitive—it lingered for a full minute over the face of Big Steve's safe.

"Rather ancient vintage!" he murmured. "It might be worse!"

The flashlight went out again—the Gray Seal was at work.

The minutes dragged along; now punctuated by the tinkle of the whirling dial, now by a vexed and deep-

breathed exclamation that proclaimed abortive effort; now by periods of utter silence as Jimmie Dale, his ear clamped to the steel door, listened for the tumblers' fall while the dial moved by the barest fraction of an inch.

Mrs. Meegan still moved about in the room upstairs; the faint clatter of dishes still came from beyond the passage; a black shape, formless in outline against the surrounding darkness, still hovered in front of the safe. And then there came another sound—the dull, muffled thud of metal meeting metal, as the bolts slid back in their grooves.

"Got it!"

The door of the safe swung open. The flashlight disclosed a black leather satchel. Jimmie Dale removed the satchel and opened it. It was nearly full of loose, crumpled banknotes.

"I was afraid so," Jimmie Dale confided to himself. "I couldn't get these in my pockets in a thousand years. Well, there's only one thing for it, and, thank heaven, there's plenty of time!"

The flashlight swept around the room—and Jimmie Dale reached for a newspaper that lay on the table. A pocket in his leather girdle contributed a piece of cord. In a minute more the satchel was empty and a parcel lay on the floor beside him.

For an instant after that, Jimmie Dale hesitated; then from his girdle he took out the thin metal case that contained the insignia of the Gray Seal. He had no choice in the matter. With the money gone, Silky Hines and his henchmen would put Big Steve through the third degree anent its whereabouts. It would go very ill with Big Steve then, for they naturally would not

believe that he knew nothing of its disappearance. It would end up, of course, in Big Steve being "taken for a ride" unless—Jimmie Dale opened the metal case, and with the tweezers lifted out a diamond-shaped, gray paper seal—unless, well unless the Gray Seal took upon his shoulders the onus of another "crime"!

Jimmie Dale surveyed the face of the safe—and shook his head. No; not there! Big Steve might very naturally come into the office here before he settled down to his game of cards and notice it, in which case he would give the alarm at once. That, of course, would in itself forestall even the possibility of any unpleasantness between Silky Hines and Big Steve, for, with the Two Oaks in an uproar and the money already gone, Silky Hines and his three followers would not put in an appearance at all—but, in that event, neither would the *fifth* man! And it was on that chance alone, the chance that the fifth man might come, that he, Jimmie Dale, was here.

On the outside of the satchel, then? Again Jimmie Dale shook his head. No; not there, either! If Big Steve happened to open the safe, he would still see it—and the results would be the same!

Jimmie Dale lifted his shoulders as though in self-apology for his hesitation. It was only a detail, of course—but it *was* important. Well, *here*—then! He moistened the adhesive side of the seal with his tongue, and, still holding it with the tweezers, reached inside and laid it on the bottom lining of the satchel. There were no tell-tale fingerprints! He pressed it firmly into place with his handkerchief, closed the satchel, and set the satchel back in the safe; then he shut and locked the safe, wiped the dial and handle carefully with his handkerchief, picked up the parcel of banknotes from the floor, and,

locking the porch door behind him, for the second time that night and from the same exit disappeared into the shadows.

"And to-morrow, Mrs. Meegan," said Jimmie Dale pleasantly to himself, as he tucked the parcel under his arm, "we'll slip this over on some bank. But for the present I fancy it will be safer locked up in my car than anywhere else. Also, the walk will help to pass the idle moments."

Jimmie Dale did not hurry. When he eventually returned to the Two Oaks the cars that had been parked in front of the entrance were gone, and the only windows now alight in the main building were upstairs in what was presumably the servants' quarters; those, and two in the annex—the one occupied by Mrs. Meegan, and the one directly underneath, which latter was, of course, Big Steve's card room. The business day—or night—of the establishment was ended.

He had removed his mask while on the highway. He replaced it now as he stepped a little way out from the fringe of trees for a closer view. The card room window had not only been opened as he had anticipated it would be; but, whether through indifference, or deeming the seclusion of the countryside entirely adequate, or for the sake of more air, or for all of these possible reasons combined, the roller shade had not been pulled down. Five men in shirt sleeves sat around the poker table. Big Steve's customary game after closing hours—he had intimated to Mrs. Meegan that it was a nightly occurrence—was already in full swing.

"And Silky Hines isn't going it blind!" muttered Jimmie Dale tersely. "He'll know about this 'customary' game. The only sure bet is that the curtain will fall

with the safe center-stage. But I wonder what the procedure will be?"

Jimmie Dale withdrew again to the shelter of the trees. Here, at most, he was still but a matter of a few yards away from both the card room window and the porch door, and with his eyes grown accustomed to the darkness he could quite easily keep both well in view. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The lights in the servants' quarters upstairs in the main part of the building went out one by one. Occasionally there came gusts of laughter from the card room, occasionally even a word or two that was distinguishable. The time did not pass quickly, but Jimmie waited in grim patience.

"The fifth man!" his mind kept repeating. "I just want to know *who* he is. That's all I want—to-night. The rest will come later!"

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale grew tense. A car that he had heard approaching had apparently turned off from the main road a little distance away. And now it had come to a stop. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Three minutes of four!

Five minutes more went by. Jimmie Dale's face set. Yes, here they were! Black shapes emerging from the denser shadows of the trees, and coming from the direction where the car had stopped, were moving swiftly and silently toward the porch door. He counted them. Four!

For a minute or two they stood there, one of their number obviously at work with a skeleton key or pick-lock, for presently, still having made no sound, they vanished through the doorway. Jimmie Dale's eyes

traveled expectantly to the spot where the four men had emerged from the trees. There was no fifth man dogging their footsteps. Perhaps it was too soon. Well, suppose that he, Jimmie Dale, reached the porch first then—if he could do so unseen—and waited *there!* If the fifth man came at all, he . . .

Jimmie Dale dropped promptly to his hands and knees and began to crawl rapidly forward. But halfway across the open space he came to an abrupt halt at the sound of a sudden commotion in the card room. He was near enough now to hear what was said; but he raised himself up a little that he might see more distinctly. The four men, masked and wearing peaked caps, had crowded into the card room and had covered the players with their revolvers.

“Keep your hands on the table, every one of you!” ordered a voice smoothly.

Jimmie Dale, dividing his glances now between the card room window and the porch door, nodded his head. That was Silky Hines’s voice. It belied the man, though it had supplied him with his moniker. Beneath the smooth, soft tones was hidden a devil’s venom.

Big Steve had been a gambler all his life. He laughed now.

“Help yourselves!” he said. “I was just going to scoop the pot, but I guess you win.” He shoved the little heap of bills that were on the table over in Silky Hines’s direction, as he spread out his cards. “And on an ace full, too!”

“You still win—unless one of these gentlemen has you beaten,” said Silky Hines. “We didn’t come out here after chicken feed.”

The players around the table, a white-faced, uneasy group now, their hands obediently in front of them, were silent.

Jimmie Dale's eyes searched the darkness in the neighborhood of the porch door. There was still no sign of the fifth man.

"What do you mean?" Big Steve's voice had hardened.

"I'll tell you," said Silky Hines, "and it won't take long. This afternoon, meaning yesterday now, you carried Kid Meegan, who was soused to the gills, out of a swell New York joint; Kid Meegan—and a black satchel. You put the Kid to bed out here, and you put the satchel in your safe. I'll trouble you for that satchel."

Big Steve's voice choked with sudden fury.

"I'll see you in hell first!" he flung out.

"No," said Silky Hines, "I may meet you there later, but I'm busy to-night! Get me? I'm asking you for the combination of that safe."

Big Steve made no answer.

"All right!" The soft purr was still in Silky Hines's voice, but creeping into it now was a deadly menace. "It's too bad to spoil a pleasant evening—and a safe. We can always 'soup' it if we have to; but that'll take a little work, and it don't seem necessary to ruin the safe when there's a lot easier and quicker way—the combination, Steve?"

Big Steve still made no answer.

"All right!" said Silky Hines again—casually. "Will you gentlemen kindly push your cards over toward me? Thank you!"

Jimmie Dale's lips drew together as, after another quick glance in the direction of the porch door, his eyes

came back to Silky Hines again. What deviltry was the man up to! With his revolver still menacing the circle, Silky Hines had arranged the disordered cards and had picked up the pack with his left hand.

"I always knew you were a good loser, Steve," Silky Hines purred on, "but you don't seem to get the idea that you ain't holding even enough to chip in on to-night. We're going to get that money—and we're going to get it the *easiest* way! See? I ain't making any threats, against—you. Some guys get stubborn when they're handed that sort of a spiel. And from what I've heard of you, Steve, you're that kind of a guy. So I ain't saying, 'Steve, come across, or get bumped off,' because you were born one of those fool birds that'd tell me to shoot and be damned, and to-morrow the papers would be telling how Big Steve died game. No, Steve—nothing like that! I've got your number! I'm just going to deal these cards around to your four friends here, one at a time, leaving *you* out of it. One of *my* friends is handier with a knife than he is with a rod, and it won't make any noise. The first jack is elected." He began to flip the cards around the table. "The first jack—or the combination, Steve."

A blanched silence had fallen on the room. Silky Hines suddenly stopped dealing as a card fell before the man on Big Steve's right.

"The first jack," said Silky Hines.

A queer sound, like a half-choked cry, came from the man on Big Steve's right as he sat gaping, loose-jawed, at the card in front of him. There was no color in his face. He touched his lips with his tongue. One of Silky Hines's companions was suddenly standing at the back of the man's chair.

"There's no particular hurry, Steve," said Silky Hines; "so we'll say—one minute!"

Jimmie Dale's hands clenched. What price human life with any one of Daddy Ratzler's brood! God! Didn't Big Steve realize that Silky Hines *meant* it! If not, then it was up to him, Jimmie Dale, to——

"This is *murder!*" burst suddenly from Big Steve's lips.

"There are *four* jacks," said Silky Hines.

Big Steve came swaying to his feet.

"I'll open it," he said hoarsely.

"No," said Silky Hines, "you'll sit down in that chair again—and stay there! You'll get no chance to play any tricks or broadcast anything. You won't leave the room—none of you will. *I'll* open it! Take that pencil out of your pocket and write down the combination on this card." He tossed a card from the pack in his hand across the table. "Another jack! That's *queer*—Steve! But there's no room on that. Well, here's the deuce of diamonds. The boys here'll entertain you while I'm gone, so——"

Jimmie Dale was creeping again toward the porch door. He felt suddenly let down. Moisture that was not from the heat had gathered on his forehead beneath his mask. His thoughts were chaotic. The fifth man! There had been no sign of the fifth man—not likely to be! Not a chance in a thousand now! No fifth man had gone in through that porch door. But there was still left some recompense for the night's work quite apart from the fact that Mrs. Meegan upstairs there wouldn't be the poorer to-morrow by the sum of eighty thousand dollars. He knew, in anticipation, an unholy satisfaction in

watching that silver-tongued potential murderer, Silky Hines, open the satchel. The Gray Seal again! Thank heaven, for the sake of those men in the card room, he had not left anything open to question! And perhaps Daddy Ratzler's teeth would chatter a little the harder when he heard the story!

Jimmie Dale slipped into the porch—and at the same moment he saw Silky Hines pause inside the doorway from the passage and switch on the office light. Silky Hines had a playing card in his hand as well as his revolver. The deuce of diamonds.

Inside the porch, but well back from the inner, glass-panelled door which had been left wide open, Jimmie Dale watched. Silky Hines walked to the safe, knelt down before it, laid his revolver on the floor beside him, and, as he studied the playing card in his hand, began to manipulate the dial.

He worked deftly—Silky Hines was deft in everything he did! The safe door swung open, he reached inside for the black satchel—and suddenly Jimmie Dale stood tense and rigid.

Somebody else was in the room!

The door leading into the passage was closing without a sound. A man, masked, was locking the door, still without sound, behind him.

Thought is swifter than word or deed. Jimmie Dale's brain was racing. *The fifth man!* It wasn't one of the three from the other room who had been with Silky Hines. This man wore a slouch hat—not a cap. He must have been hiding on the stairs—had got there somehow, either through the front entrance or the rear, after he, Jimmie Dale, had gone to his car, and before Silky

Hines and his companions had entered. Jimmie Dale's pulse leaped. The man had black hair. The weapon in his hand was fitted with a silencer.

It happened in the winking of an eye. There had been no sound. It might have been intuition, or that out of the corner of his eye Silky Hines had caught sight of the other; but Silky Hines's hand, outstretched toward the satchel in the safe, snatched up instead the revolver from the floor—and Silky Hines fired. The roar of the report racketed through the room. It was answered by a flash from the masked man in the slouch hat—and Silky Hines, spinning around, pitched to the ground.

Jimmie Dale whipped his automatic from his pocket. Silky Hines's bullet had not wholly missed its mark. It had at least grazed the other. The man, still near the door, was leaning back against the wall, his revolver dangling in his right hand, his other hand clapped to his left ear from which the blood was crimsoning his fingers.

Jimmie Dale stepped into the room.

"Drop that gun!" he ordered coldly from behind his outflung automatic; and then, as the other's weapon clattered obediently to the floor: "Now take off that mask!"

The man made no protest—there seemed no fight left in him. Perhaps he was too badly hit. He raised his hand to the fastening of his mask, and shrugged his shoulders as though in philosophical resignation at defeat—and with the shrug of his shoulders the light went out, and there came a jeering laugh.

The next instant something came hurtling through the air, a chair, that, even as he sprang forward, caught Jimmie Dale on ankles and knees. He stumbled and fell

head first against the table in the center of the room. The blow for a moment dazed him—but in that moment, and even in his dazed condition he heard the other dash across the room and leap out through the porch.

Jimmie Dale reeled to his feet.

“Bilked!” he muttered; and then in a sort of savage admiration: “Good work! He had his shoulder against that wall switch all the time!”

Someone was pounding on the passageway door. Someone was calling Silky Hines’s name. From overhead a woman’s voice was crying out in alarm. There was no time to lose. Jimmie Dale, with his girdle of burglars’ tools and his little metal case of diamond-shaped gray paper seals, could not afford to be caught here, either!

He was groping around him now on the floor.

“Bilked!” he repeated; “but”—as his hand came in contact with a revolver that was fitted with a silencer—“at least, *this!*”

And then Jimmie Dale was gone.