

CHAPTER XVI

WITHOUT REHEARSAL

JIMMIE DALE was ready now! He picked up the battered slouch hat, pulled it well down over his eyes, switched off the dome light, and, stepping out of the car, made his way back to the wagon track. Here he walked swiftly—not with the accustomed slouch of Larry the Bat, for the darkness was discreet—and five minutes later was standing before the shadowy outline of what appeared to be a large, old-fashioned, two-story house.

There were no lights in the front of the house; but from the angle at which he stood he could see a series of little streaky threads of light stealing through the closed shutters of one of the upper side windows. He nodded to himself. That would be Daddy Ratzler's room. Daddy Ratzler kept his light burning all night. The room next to it was the Tocsin's. Moving a little closer he stared up at the latter for a long minute. The all-important question now was whether any of the gang was in the house with Daddy Ratzler. Again he nodded his head—this time in satisfaction. Even at this distance he was quite sure that anything white on the Tocsin's window would have showed up against the darkness—and he could see nothing. *She* would be there though, of course! And he could at least see that her window was both unshuttered and wide open.

Jimmie Dale began to climb the outside veranda stairs. His lips were tight now. This was not the task of last night; there was no carpet here, no wrangling voices to aid him as there had been for the Tocsin—and Daddy Ratzler's room was just at the head of the stairs. But, as he made his way upward, there was no sound save the peaceful night sounds of the countryside dominated by the croaking of a frog.

The Tocsin's deft touch was in evidence. He peered in, through the slightly widened slats of Daddy Ratzler's shutters. A single incandescent illuminated the room. Daddy Ratzler lay there motionless in the bed with his eyes closed. He might or might not be asleep, but what was of more interest to Jimmie Dale was a heavy-calibered revolver that lay within hand reach of Daddy Ratzler on a table beside the bed.

Jimmie Dale moved on to the next window—and from within, low-breathed, a single word reached him: "Jimmie?"

Jimmie Dale took from his pocket the note he had written in the club, and passed it in through the window.

"Don't make any noise," he whispered, "but turn on your light and read this. I'll give you five minutes. Right?"

"Yes."

Jimmie Dale drew back along the veranda, glanced in again at the still motionless form in the bed, and descended to the ground—and a minute later, having selected an instrument from the kit of tools in his leather girdle, was at work upon the lock of the front door. It was a massive and intricate lock. The luminous dial of his wrist watch told him that he had already exceeded his stated five minutes when finally it yielded.

He stepped silently into the house, leaving the door ajar behind him. The white ray of his flashlight stabbed through the darkness. He crept up the stairs. A door at the end of the corridor stood open. Light flooded out from it. Jimmie Dale exchanged his flashlight for his automatic—and stepped over the threshold.

"Hello, Daddy!" snickered Larry the Bat. "I heard youse was sick, an' I thought mabbe a visit from an old pal might brighten youse up."

The figure in the bed sat bolt upright, his eyes blinking—and suddenly the sunken cheeks assumed an ashen hue.

"Larry the Bat!" he gulped. "The—the Gray Seal! What—what do you want?"

Larry the Bat's gaze played insolently over the unshaven pock-marked face, the small ratlike eyes glowing out of deep sockets, and the sagging jaw that disclosed an almost toothless mouth. As the Tocsin had said, the man was not pleasant to look upon!

"Wot youse scared o?" grinned Larry the Bat.

Daddy Ratzler swallowed hard.

"Nothing," he said—and now his voice held a wheedling and ingratiating note. "You and me have always been on the level, Larry. Why should I be scared? I wasn't scared. You gave me a start, that's all. I guess you'd have got one too if you'd been me. My God!" He wet his lips with his tongue. "How—how did you find out I was here? What—what do you want? I never let you down, Larry; you—you know that."

"Dat's wot I was bankin' on," observed Larry the Bat smoothly. "Youse an' me have always worked well together, an' de idea I got in me nut now is dat we'll do it again. Youse an' me, Daddy—see? A fifty-fifty split.

But first mabbe"—he slipped suddenly across the room to the table beside the bed, dropped his own automatic into his pocket, and, picking up Daddy Ratzler's revolver, pocketed that as well—"mabbe de two of us 'ud feel more comfortable if I wasn't stickin' a rod under yer nose, an' youse wasn't tryin' to make a grab fer yers. Dat's de only way to do business—like friends—on de level, like youse said. Wot?"

Daddy Ratzler's bony fingers plucked at the counter pane.

"What—what do you want?" he asked for the third time.

"I'll tell youse," said Larry the Bat. "Youse heard about a guy named Ray Thorne gettin' bumped off de other night, didn't youse?"

"Sure!" nodded Daddy Ratzler. "It was all in the papers."

"Sure!" Larry the Bat was smiling coicly now. "But de papers didn't say nothin' about a blue envelope dat was in de safe, ner nothin' about de fact of Daddy Ratzler bein' de one de blue envelope was fer, an' nothin' about de big haul Daddy Ratzler was going to make when he got dat envelope."

Daddy Ratzler stared with his ratlike eyes—and his eyes became narrowed. Daddy Ratzler had been in a pinch before—and fear became subservient to Daddy Ratzler's brain. A blank look spread over his face.

"You're in wrong, Larry," he said earnestly. "I don't know where you got that sort of dope 'from, but it's all bunk. I don't know anything about any envelope, and I never heard of Thorne until I read about you handing him the spot."

"Is *dat* so?" inquired Larry the Fat caustically.

"Well, youse're a damned liar, Daddy, an' youse knows dat I knows youse are!"

Daddy Ratzler shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I'm giving you the straight goods, Larry," he protested, "that's all I can say."

"Aw, cut dat out!" There was a snarl now in Larry the Bat's voice. "We'll get down to cases." He thrust his hand suddenly into his pocket and produced a sealed blue envelope that was slit open at one end. "Wot de hell's in dis? Dat's wot I wants to know!"

Daddy Ratzler shook his head.

"I never saw it before," he insisted.

"Mabbe youse didn't!" snapped Larry the Bat. "But youse *knows* all about it. An envelope an' a blank piece of paper don't mean nothin' to me, only dat I knows dere's a message dere somewhere an' dat youse knows how to read it! See? I'm tellin' youse, ain't I, dat I'm playin' squat wid youse? De envelope ain't no good to me unless I'm wise to wot youse knows, and wot youse knows ain't no good to youse widout de envelope. Dat's an even break, ain't it? I'm offerin' youse fifty-fifty on whatever dere is in de pot, so come across!"

Daddy Ratzler became suddenly irascible.

"What do you want me to do—fake up something?" he squeaked. "How many times have I got to tell you you're in the wrong street?"

Larry the Bat leaned slightly over the bed.

"Well, den," he said through shut teeth, "suppose instead of comin' clean wid youse on a fair cut I blow yer blasted block off! Is dat wot youse're askin' fer?"

But now Daddy Ratzler laughed.

"That's a bum play!" he cackled. "You couldn't bluff me like that, even if I knew what you were talking

about. That's the last thing you'd do. A dead man couldn't tell you anything, could he? But as long as he was alive there'd be always a chance for you to horn in. You don't get anywhere with me like that!"

Larry the Bat straightened up. A look of discomfiture crossed his face.

"I don't want to start no rough-house," he admitted. "All I wants is——"

The sentence was never ended—Mother Margot was standing in the doorway with a leveled revolver in her hand.

"Youse dere," she ordered curtly, "*put up yer mitts!*" And then with a gasp: "My Gawd, Larry de Bat! De Gray Seal! Wot do youse knows about dat!"

"The letter!" screamed Daddy Ratzler. "The letter! The letter!"

Jimmie Dale's hands, in one of which he still held the blue envelope, were raised above his head. Mother Margot, her revolver still covering him, advanced into the room.

"Sure t'ing!" she croaked. "Drop it! See? Drop dat letter on de bed!"

The envelope fluttered from Jimmie Dale's hand to the counterpane—and Daddy Ratzler with a snarl of triumph pounced upon it.

"Plug him, Margot!" shrieked Daddy Ratzler. "Let him have it! Kill the——"

Jimmie Dale risked Mother Margot's marksmanship! He made a sudden leap for the door. Mother Margot's shot roared out behind him—and missed! He heard Daddy Ratzler scream with rage and Mother Margot shrill her execrations. He reached the stairs and took them at breakneck pace, while again and again behind

him, from the head of the stairs now, the flashes of Mother Margot's shots split the black. And then the front door slammed behind him.

But he was crouched beneath the window and was peering in through the slats again as Mother Margot reëntered Daddy Ratzler's room.

Daddy Ratzler, still clutching the blue envelope in his hand, was panting with excitement.

"Did you get him?" he cried eagerly.

Mother Margot wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Gawd, I dunno," she said hoarsely. "I must've hit him, but he was able to beat it all right, 'cause I heard him runnin' away outside. I thought I heard someone taikin' in here a few minutes ago—dar's wot woke me up!"

"It's a good thing you did," grunted Daddy Ratzler approvingly. "I won't forget this, Margot, though I wish you'd plugged him! He pinched my gun, but there's another one in that top drawer over there. Give it to me!"

Mother Margot obeyed, and Daddy Ratzler laid the revolver on the table beside the bed.

"In case he comes back we'll be ready for him, curse him!" he snarled. "You turn on the lights downstairs and keep 'em on. And wake up Pascal. He can't hear, but he can keep his eyes open. And you needn't tell him who it was that bust in. I don't want the police nosing around out here. Tell him it was a burglar. And keep your own mouth tight about who it was, too! See? And don't neither of you go to bed again to-night. Get me? Yes, and bring me a lamp up here."

"Sure!" said Mother Margot—and scurried from the room. She was back presently carrying a lighted lamp

which she set down on the table. "D'youse want de electric light switched off?"

"No," said Daddy Ratzler curtly. "Is Pascal on the job?"

"Both of us is on de job," said Mother Margot with a vicious smile. "Dat bird won't sneak into dis house again widout us gettin' wise to it! Gawd, I hope he tries it!"

"All right," said Daddy Ratzler gruffly; "only remember what I told you! Beat it—and shut the door! I'll be listening now, and I can take care of myself in here."

The door closed behind Mother Margot—and Jimmie Dale, watching, saw Daddy Ratzler contemptuously toss away the blank piece of paper that the envelope contained, then reach avidly for a knife that lay on the table and begin carefully to slit open lengthwise the top of the blue envelope itself. And now Daddy Ratzler's little ratlike black eyes were glistening.

"Bluffed him!" gloated Daddy Ratzler. "Bluffed him! The Gray Seal! Bluffed him!"

Still using the utmost care he now doubled back as much of the upper edge of the gummed flap of the envelope as would yield to pressure, and, leaning far out over the bed, held this for a few moments over the top of the lamp. The result as he examined it, seemed to puzzle Daddy Ratzler. He repeated the experiment over and over again. His hands were trembling now, and the puzzlement in his face had deepened into consternation.

And outside the window Jimmie Dale laughed softly.

"Thank you, Daddy!" he murmured as he began silently to descend the veranda stairs. "I'll try that on the original!"