

CHAPTER XVII

AT MIDNIGHT

THE storm had broken half an hour before, and even yet did not seem to have attained its height. On-driven by furious gusts of wind, the downpour of rain swept across the river in weird, gray, misty sheets. The opposite shore was indiscernible, save only at moments when the lightning play made daylight of the night. Here and there the lights of some passing craft showed faintly out of the blackness, but these were few and far between—there was no other sign of life.

Crouching in a small clump of bushes near the water's edge, Jimmie Dale dashed the rain irritably from his face and eyes. Except for those occasional lights out there he could see nothing. Around him trees, shrubbery, and river bank all blended into a meaningless wall of darkness.

It was his third night of vigil. He smiled at himself suddenly in a sort of half-angry, half-pitying way. How many more nights was he going to keep this up? The chances at best were a hundred to one against him. He knew that and was quite willing to admit it; and, with every stitch of clothing wet now, his discomfort made the odds after two nights of failure assume even greater proportions.

He shrugged his shoulders. A wild goose chase? A snatching at straws? Perhaps! But, then—perhaps not! There *was* a chance.

He pushed back his rain-soaked sleeve and looked at his wrist watch. The luminous dial marked five minutes to midnight. His eyes strained out through the darkness to the few moving lights on the river. The message in the blue envelope specified midnight, but there was still no sign that to-night would be any more productive of results than those that had gone before. Quite true! But then—a sort of dogged optimism rose up within him—it wasn't the kind of a night on which one would be expected to keep a rendezvous to the minute!

Rather curious, that message! And rather curious, too, the blue envelope itself! After leaving Daddy Ratzler that night he had lost no time in returning to Riverside Drive and in taking the original blue envelope from the safe in his den. And thereafter, thanks to Daddy Ratzler's enlightening demonstration with the spurious envelope, the rest had been simplicity itself. As Daddy Ratzler had done, so he, too, had slit the top of the envelope open and had carefully doubled back the loose edge of the gummed flap. The simple application of heat had brought out the writing.

He smiled queerly. Sympathetic ink had been used after all! But who would have thought of looking for it under what was virtually another layer of paper! Even pen pressure marks, had there been any, had in this way been covered up. Perhaps that accounted for the use of a blue envelope rather than a white one, the blue-colored paper being less transparent than white. He was inclined to think it did, and to accept this as the answer to the question that had perplexed him in this respect from the beginning. But, in any case, that did not matter any further now since the secret of the envelope had been exposed.

The message had been written with what must have been an exceedingly fine pen, for, though the letters were perfectly formed, he had barely been able to read it with the naked eye. He remembered that his reaction to it all had been one of hesitancy, an uncertainty of mind as to what he should do—though within an hour of reading the message he had locked the envelope away in his safe again and had left New York. That was three days ago—and yet here now in the darkness and the storm it seemed as though he could still see the words and letters forming again on the upper edge of the envelope where the flap had been turned back just as they had done when he had watched them first appear:

Send boat Canadian side a mile above Prescott.
Midnight, July 16th. Show only starboard light.

An ironical smile crossed his lips as the thought of a moment ago about this being a night when punctuality measured in minutes might be excused recurred to him. If the rendezvous were kept to-night, Daddy Ratzler and his crowd would be a *week* late! Ray had been killed three days before the date specified in the message, and those three days, of course, if the blue envelope had been delivered to the Angel as had been planned, would have given Daddy Ratzler ample time to make his arrangements and conform with the instructions in the message. That was all quite logical; but since then the date itself had not only lapsed, but practically a whole week had passed besides.

Why, then, should he have any hope or expectation that the rendezvous would be kept to-night, or on any other night now for that matter? And especially when

Daddy Ratzler had never received the blue envelope at all! On the face of it, it seemed absurd. Yes! Precisely! And it would have been absurd except for that remark of Silky Hines that they had only to wait for "openers" which would not be long in coming. And also one other thing. The elaborate and carefully worked-out plan of which the blue envelope was the visible evidence was dependent for its success on *someone*, for some purpose or other, being here at the spot specified in the message. He did not know how those "openers" were to reach Daddy Ratzler, nor how long it would be before they did; but it seemed at least an even chance that when contact was reestablished the meeting place would still be here as originally planned.

Jimmie Dale shook the rain from his face. Why not? Those words in the message—"Caradian side"—were extremely significant. It was obvious that smuggling of some sort that was far from petty in its character was being attempted. It was therefore apparently essential that the rendezvous should be kept on the Canadian side. Why then should the locality already selected be changed?

"No," said Jimmie Dale suddenly; "I'm not so sure about that. I'm still gambling with the odds against me. There's Daddy Ratzler. I wish I knew about Daddy Ratzler. Does he think I tried to trick him with a fake envelope—and lost out on it thanks to Mother Margot; or does he think that the envelope was either tampered with in Paris, or that something went wrong with their precious ink? I *don't* think he has any suspicion that he showed me how to decipher the message; but if he gets the idea that it has been tampered with at all, then it's all off here! It's the toss of a coin. I don't know. I only

know I'm here, and that it's worth seeing through, that's all!"

A vivid flash of lightning came and went—and disclosed a small boat some distance up the river that he had not seen before. He lost it again in the darkness. Let alone a single green starboard light, the boat was showing no light of any kind.

But still he continued to stare in that direction. The boat might be still too far away to show any signal—and then, again, it might not. There was nothing very definite about "a mile above Prescott." Where did Prescott begin and end in respect of the river bank? One might easily be a quarter or half a mile out. That made little or no difference, of course, so far as signaling was concerned, for the inference was that a boat passing up or down the river anywhere in the vicinity and showing a single green light would receive an answering flash of some kind from the shore. His own position, for instance, was only approximate, but he was near enough to the locality indicated so that no rendezvous could be kept under the prescribed conditions without his being aware of it. A grain of comfort! He had no cause to worry on that score at least.

Doubt surged back on him again. Three nights of watching already; and the days, so that he might attract no attention in the neighborhood, spent miles away, now in one direction and now in another, his rôle of motor tourist camouflaging his movements! It would be so simple a matter to dispel all doubt, so easy to discover whether or not the rendezvous was still existent here! He had only to take a boat himself, and, showing a single green light, patrol up and down near the shore—and draw the answering signal, provided there was one

to draw. Yes, quite so! Was he becoming childish, or was he merely peevish because he was drenched to the skin? That would be the end of any chance of the man with the clipped ear appearing on the scene! And, also, there was——

The green light!

He stepped out from the clump of bushes, straining his eyes through the darkness. Yes, unmistakably, it was there! In the same general direction in which he had seen the boat in the lightning's flare, but much closer in toward the shore now, a single green light was showing—there was no red light, no port light—just the green.

So in some way or other they had drawn their "openers" after all—and the game was on! A sense of grim satisfaction settled upon Jimmie Dale. He had played against the odds—and won! Daddy Ratzler was sick, of course; but from the newspaper account Silky Hines had certainly not been rendered inactive as a result of that night at the Two Oaks—and therefore, logically, it would be Silky Hines who was out there now, in that boat! Yes, undoubtedly, it would be Silky Hines, either alone, or with some of the gang!

Jimmie Dale began to make his way along the shoreline; but, mindful of the intermittent lightning flashes that might at any moment limn him against the night, he kept close to the trees and bushes that lined the river bank. The boat, perhaps some five hundred yards away, was heading directly in now for the shore—but there was no hurry. It was not Silky Hines or any other of Daddy Ratzler's followers that he was after—it was the man who had murdered Ray. The plum-picker! And if the man's apparently uncanny source of information

had not failed him, and if he ran true to form, he would put in an appearance somewhere and from some unexpected source to Silky Hines' undoing—but not until the plum was thoroughly ripe and ready to drop into his hand. And that was the point at which he, Jimmie Dale, proposed to do a little undoing himself.

But now something unexpected was happening, and involuntarily Jimmie Dale paused. Still several hundred yards away from where he stood, the boat appeared to have touched the shoreline and from the shore itself a faint pin-point of white light, a lantern presumably, appeared. And then there came a tiny flash through the darkness. There was no sound save the howl and sweep of the wind. The lantern seemed to drop suddenly to the ground—and go out.

And then, urged on by he knew not what, Jimmie Dale sprinted forward.

Again a flash of lightning—and again for a moment it was as bright as day. The boat was speeding away from the shore. It held a single occupant—a man who wore a mask, a man who wore a bandage over his left ear, the white of which was clearly defined in the lurid, unearthly light!

Then utter blackness again, and the pelting rain.

And as he ran something abysmal, a realization of disaster, registered itself on Jimmie Dale's brain. Not Silky Hines! Not any of Daddy Ratzler's gang! How had Ray's murderer come *first*—outplayed them all?

The next instant he was bending over a murdered man at the water's edge.