

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TOCSIN'S STORY

ENGINE trouble had delayed Jimmie Dale on his return trip from the Canadian border, and it was after seven o'clock in the evening when he drew up in front of his residence on Riverside Drive and alighted from a very dirty and mud-spattered car.

Jason, with undisguised relief, opened the door for him.

"It's good to see you back, Master Jim, sir," said the privileged old man. "I trust you had an enjoyable trip, sir."

"Very—Jason, thank you!" said Jimmie Dale pleasantly. "Anything new since I've been away?"

Jason glanced guardedly around the hall in which they were still standing.

"Well, yes, Master Jim," he answered; "and it's in respect to those instructions of yours, sir, that no one was to answer the phone except myself."

"Yes?" inquired Jimmie Dale.

"The day before yesterday, Master Jim—a woman"—Jason coughed apologetically behind his hand—"I couldn't exactly call her a lady, sir, for she had a very coarse voice, and, if I may so express it, her English was rather low—rang up and asked for you. I was a bit taken aback at the voice, sir; but I answered that you were away and that I was unable to say when you might be expected to return. I hope I did right, sir?"

Jimmie Dale suppressed a smile. Jason would instantly have recognized the voice of his future mistress—who was supposed to be in Europe! Jason was not acquainted with Mother Margot. Exactly! But this struck a serious note. What had happened at that house out there near Charleton Park Manor? How had the Tocsin managed to get to a phone at all?

"You did perfectly right, Jason," he said approvingly. "And what message did this—er—woman leave?"

"None, sir," replied Jason; "at least not on that occasion—not even her name or a phone number, though I asked for both. But she called up again this afternoon around five o'clock, about two hours ago. She was quite a bit more insistent this time, sir. I had to assure her over and over again, Master Jim, that I had no idea as to your whereabouts. Then she said I was on no account to forget to tell you the minute you got back that she had left a letter for you, and that you'd know where to find it."

Jimmie Dale retrieved his hat from the old butler's hand.

"Most intriguing, Jason!" he grinned. "She may have a pretty face in spite of her voice, you know. I'm off! It's irresistible!"

A startled, anxious look showed suddenly in Jason's eyes.

"But, Master Jim!" he protested. "Without dinner, sir!"

"I had a bite on the road an hour ago," smiled Jimmie Dale.

Jason cleared his throat.

"Master Jim," he faltered, "I hope you'll forgive me for taking liberties, sir—but—but it's like the old days

with these letters and you away so much, and—and I know that somehow you're in danger. I dandled you on my knee when you were a baby, Master Jim, as I've been proud to say many a time, and if I could be of any help now I'd like you to know, sir, that there isn't anything I wouldn't do."

"Help?" echoed Jimmie Dale cheerfully. "You're invaluable! Just keep the home fires burning the way you're doing—telephone and all that, you know. And, Jason!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get that idea of danger out of your head. There isn't any. You quite understand that?"

Jason had never contradicted his master in his life.

"Perfectly, sir!" he answered—but his eyes did not meet Jimmie Dale's. "It's very kind of you, Master Jim, to relieve an old man's mind."

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes swept for an instant in kindly, whimsical appraisal over the other.

"Jason," he said solemnly, as he turned abruptly and started out through the front door, "you are a damned fraud!"

Jason this time, however, did not answer—but as Jimmie Dale got into his car and drove away, he could still see the old man standing there on the front steps, bareheaded, watching him out of sight.

Jimmie Dale drove fast; the traffic was light at that hour, and some twenty minutes later, entering unseen by means of the lane and the French window, he was standing in the Sanctuary. Still light outside, it was dark within the dingy room; and now, as he lighted it, the air-choked gas jet hissed and wheezed into a meager blue and yellow flame. He crossed the room quickly,

displaced the movable section of the baseboard, and reached into the opening. The letter was here, of course, as he had expected. He stood up with it in his hand, and, about to replace the baseboard, hesitated for a minute. He might only have to open it up again! What rôle was he to play to-night? Was Smarlinghue, or perhaps even Larry the Bat, to step out from that hiding-place again? The letter first!

He stepped back under the gas jet, tore open the envelope, extracted a single closely written sheet of note-paper and began to read the letter rapidly. It bore that day's date, and began as the Tocsin had begun every letter she had ever addressed to the Gray Seal:

DEAR PHILANTHROPIC CROOK:

I know you are away somewhere, but I am hoping that you will perhaps still be back in time to come to me to-night. If not, then to-morrow night—or the next. I shall be waiting for you. Come *as soon after dark* as possible—but do not try to communicate with me unless you see a light in my window. This may seem almost incoherent; but I am writing in great haste, and you do not need any detailed explanation in order to make you understand that it is urgent. I have made some strange discoveries about the country house.

M.

Jimmie Dale re-read the letter, then he began to tear it into fragments, and the fragments into still smaller ones. These he dropped into the pocket of his coat. Then he crossed the room and replaced the movable section of the baseboard. Obviously, neither the services of Larry the Bat nor Smarlinghue were required to-night. A mask, yes—if even that proved necessary!—but the leather girdle he was already wearing would supply

all requirements of that sort. His automatic and a flashlight were also on his person. He needed nothing that the Sanctuary could supply.

Darkness fell upon the squalid room, the French window opened and closed noiselessly, a shadow hovered for a moment at the mouth of the lane—and then Jimmie Dale, walking casually down the block, turned the corner and regained his car.

Already growing dusk as the car shot away from the curb, it was dark when, after a little more than the hour's run to Charleton Park Manor, Jimmie Dale swung from the main road into the wagon track that led to Daddy Ratzler's house, and, diverging again, secreted his car among the bordering trees as he had done on his previous visit here some nights before. Five minutes later, following the wagon track on foot, he was standing in the shadow of the trees, with the house looming up before him.

The only light showing anywhere as he now made a cautious circuit of the house came from the Tocsin's window. It seemed rather curious that there was none in Daddy Ratzler's room—but in any case, from what she had said in her letter, the coast appeared to be clear. He slipped out of the shadows and moved toward the house. A dark form showed suddenly on the veranda, and Mother Margot's voice came through the darkness.

"Who's dat out dere?" she demanded.

"Lady," said Jimmie Dale circumspectly, "I may do you a gross injustice, but my mother told me never to confide—in women."

Her laugh floated down to him.

"It's all right, Jimmie," she said. "Everything is per-

fectly safe. Wait a minute and I'll open the front door for you."

It was less than a minute before the front door opened—and the Tocsin was in Jimmie Dale's arms. It was much more than a minute, however, before she spoke again.

"Jimmie," she whispered finally, as she drew back into the hall and closed the door behind them, "do you suppose we'll ever grow up to be a staid old married couple?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale piously.

"Yes!" she agreed. "But now listen, Jimmie! We might as well talk here in the hall for the next few minutes as anywhere else—afterwards I have something to show you. And thank heaven you have come as early as this; but, even so, the time is short. That's what I meant by telling you to come as soon after dark as possible. I was afraid Pascal might see you and report your visit if you came too early; while, on the other hand, Daddy Ratzler generally gets back around nine o'clock."

"Back?" repeated Jimmie Dale in surprise. "Isn't he here?"

"No," she said. "I don't think he was physically up to it, and even now he is none too well; but, anyhow, he got up the next morning after your visit to him and went to New York—and he has been going to the city every day since."

"H'm!" said Jimmie Dale. "And Pascal? Where's he?"

"Upstairs in his room at the other side of the house. He gets up with the dawn and goes to bed with the dark—you know that, besides being deaf, he's a very old

man. So we've got the house to ourselves for the moment, and I want to make the most of it. I want to know very badly, Jimmie, everything that has happened, and whether, after all, you found out the secret of the blue envelope; but I am not going to ask a single question until I have told you my story, and, above all, *shown* you what I have found. Daddy Ratzler *might* come back earlier than I expect, you see—and when he does come back I must be upstairs in my room."

"Right!" conceded Jimmie Dale. "Go on, dear."

"Well," she said, "Daddy Ratzler got up the next morning after you were here, and went to town for the day. He said he wouldn't be back until about nine o'clock. And Pascal, taking advantage of Daddy Ratzler's absence, went off to spend the afternoon with some cronies in the neighborhood—so I risked a trip to New York that afternoon. I was terribly anxious to know about the blue envelope, and also ~~what~~ had happened at the Two Oaks; for, of course, we had had no chance to discuss anything that night when you staged that little one-act play. So, as I say, I went to town. I called up Jason on the phone—as Mother Margot, of course, because I didn't want him to recognize my voice."

"You succeeded!" chuckled Jimmie Dale. "I am afraid you even offended his sense of decorum. He was not very complimentary about either your voice or your English; in fact, he referred to the latter as being rather 'low.'"

"Dear old Jason!" she exclaimed affectionately. "He told me you were away. I went to the Sanctuary to see if you had left any message. There wasn't any, and I came back here—quite early in the afternoon. Daddy Ratzler returned about nine o'clock. He went to bed,

and I heard him *lock* both his door and his window. Whatever else you did, Jimmie, I think you succeeded in frightening him worse than ever. Anyway, I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. My door was open. I suppose it must have been somewhere around eleven o'clock when, as I lay there, I suddenly heard voices in Daddy Ratzler's room. They were low and muffled, of course, and not a word was distinguishable—but Daddy Ratzler was unmistakably talking to someone. Now, no one could have got into that room without my knowing it—for even you, Jimmie, couldn't have opened the shutters and the locked window and have got in that way without my hearing you, for my window was wide open on the veranda just a few yards away—so this was the *second* time I had heard two voices in that room when it seemed impossible that any one could be in there with Daddy Ratzler."

The darkness hid the sudden thinning of Jimmie Dale's lips.

"I'd like your story better, Marie," he said grimly, "if you were out of this cursed place for good and all! But go on! What happened then?"

"A great deal, Jimmie—then and afterwards," she said quietly. "The voices only lasted for a very few minutes. Then I heard Daddy Ratzler get out of bed. A moment after that he unlocked his door cautiously and came quietly out into the hall. He stood there for a little while, apparently listening; then he tiptoed into my room—you remember I told you my door was open—and bent over the bed. I pretended to be asleep. He stood there so long that I was afraid I would give myself away, but he was finally satisfied that I was not awake and went out of the room again. I watched him as he

went out. He was wearing a dressing gown. I could see just enough to make that out, you understand, dark as it was; for, though the light was on in his room, so little of it could show along the hall that he had evidently not even thought of closing his door."

"I understand!" said Jimmie Dale tensely. "And then?"

"He went downstairs. I heard him go into the kitchen and open the door leading to the cellar, and then I heard him go down the cellar stairs. I did not, of course, know whether he would be back almost at once or not, so I waited awhile to see. I suppose I waited nearly half an hour. Then, as he did not return, I got up. It was *my* turn then, Jimmie—that was what I was out here for. Besides that mysterious conversation, Daddy Ratzler was up to something and I meant to find out what it was if I could. I went into his room; but it was of course empty, and there was no sign of anyone else having been there. Then I crept downstairs without making any noise. I wasn't really taking any risk, you know, for I——"

"No; I suppose not—just every one there was!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale uneasily.

"No—really, Jimmie!" she protested. "To all intents and purposes, as I have said, there was actually no light showing in the hall, but it would have served excellently as an excuse. If he had seen me, I had only to say that I had wakened up suddenly, and, noting a faint glow in the hall that I thought could only be coming from the open door of his room, I had jumped out of bed to see if anything was the matter; and then, finding his room empty, I had become alarmed and had started to look for him. Anyway, he did not see me, nor did I."

see him. I went to the door at the head of the cellar stairs and listened, but I couldn't hear a sound. Then I opened the door quietly. There was no light in the cellar and still no sound. I turned on the light at the head of the stairs, and went down a little way; but I did not have to go anywhere near the bottom to see that there was nobody in the cellar. I turned out the light, went back upstairs, got into bed again, and lay there for a long time trying to puzzle it all out. It was certain that Daddy Ratzler had gone down to the cellar; it was certain that he was not there; and it was certain that he had not come up the cellar stairs again. It was true, of course, that there was a door in the cellar through which he could have gone outside; but if he had intended to go outdoors, why should he take so awkward and round-about a way when he could have gone out so much more easily by the front door? And, then, another thing! If he had intended to remain outdoors for so long a time—it was more than an hour, Jimmie, before he eventually came back *by the cellar stairs*, and, as he thought, found me still asleep—it seemed strange that he had not put on his clothes instead of going out in his dressing gown. I could not answer those questions, but I spent hours in the cellar yesterday and again to-day—every minute when Pascal was out of the way. And then I—but you'll see for yourself, Jimmie. It was about noontime when I made my discovery. I waited until Pascal had gone off on what had now become his habitual neighborhood visits, then I went to town and again telephoned Jason. You still were not back, so I left that note for you in the Sanctuary and hurried back here, as I did not dare to be too long away. And now, come and I will show

you what I found—though I do not think from what I have told you that it will surprise you very much.”

“I have a hazy notion—which may be all wrong,” said Jimmie Dale in a strangely quiet voice.

“But not a woman’s curiosity,” she laughed softly. “Well, give me your flashlight—it will be much safer than to turn on any lights here downstairs which might be seen by Daddy Ratzler if he were on his way here sooner than I expect.”