

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

THE hall, disclosed by the flashlight's ray, led through to the rear of the house and into the kitchen. Here the Tocsin opened the door at the head of the cellar stairs—and a moment later, following the Tocsin, Jimmie Dale found himself standing in the cellar itself.

And now the flashlight in the Tocsin's hand rested for a moment on a door with a few short steps leading up to it at the far end of the cellar, and then played slowly over the rear wall—which Jimmie Dale could see was sheathed with rough planking and still formed the backing for what at one time, though they were now in disrepair, had evidently been a series of large bins.

"Yes?" inquired Jimmie Dale, as the flashlight came to rest again on a portion of the planking almost opposite where they stood.

"Pascal says they did a lot of truck gardening out here years ago," she explained, "and that these used to be vegetable bins. And now, Jimmie—*look!*"

She had stepped close to the wall and was pressing with her finger on what appeared to be no more than the rusty head of an old nail—and without a sound, and as though operating on well-oiled hinges, three of the planks swung suddenly outward.

Jimmie Dale whistled low under his breath.

"My word!" he ejaculated. "Good work, Marie!"

And then, eagerly: "Here, give me the flashlight and let's have a look at what's in there!"

But the Tocsin shook her head.

"No; not yet," she said. "It's a sort of half cave, half cellar—but you can explore it as much as you like presently. As soon as you have told me *your* story, I am going to leave you here so as to take no chances of being anywhere else but in my room when Daddy Ratzler gets back. But first I must tell you what else I found. You will see a speaking tube sticking out of the wall at the far end when you go in there—and that, of course, accounted at once for the two voices. The other end was obviously in Daddy Ratzler's room. It wasn't nearly so hard then to unearth what was in Daddy Ratzler's room as it had been to find this secret door here, and I didn't have to spend the hours sounding the walls that I did down here in the cellar. On both occasions when I heard the two voices, Daddy Ratzler had been in bed—therefore the end of the tube in his room must be so close to the bed itself that he could speak into it without getting up. So, as soon as I had seen this end of the speaking tube, I went up to Daddy Ratzler's room and began to search around near the bed. You will remember, from what you saw on the night you were there, that the room is finished in cheap, varnished wood—so cheap, Jimmie, that it is everywhere full of knots."

Jimmie Dale nodded quickly.

"Yes; I remember," he said tersely.

"Well, that is the answer," she said. "The upstairs end of the speaking tube is behind one of those knots just beside the head of Daddy Ratzler's bed—the knot can be taken out and replaced quite readily."

Jimmie Dale was frowning now.

"It's queer!" he muttered suddenly, as though almost unconscious of the Tocsin's presence. "I wonder!"

"Everything about this house is queer, as I told you that night in Daddy Ratzler's office," she said; "but you'll think it is queerer still when you've seen what is behind this secret door—which, by the way, opens and closes on the inside by means of a push-button that is not camouflaged by the head of a nail. And now the things that I want to know! Did the man with the 'black hair' turn up at the Two Oaks after all?"

"Yes—masked!" said Jimmie Dale with a short laugh. "But he went away *marked* with a wound on his left ear. Also, his revolver, which he left behind him, proved to be the one with which Ray was shot—which dispels any possible doubt that he is the man who murdered Ray."

"Oh, Jimmie, tell me about it!" she exclaimed tensely—and listened as tensely while he rapidly sketched in the details of the night at the Two Oaks. "Yes," she said at the end, "he is the man, of course—but if only we knew *who* he is! And now about the envelope—did the ruse work with Daddy Ratzler?"

"Perfectly!" said Jimmie Dale with a tight smile. "There was a message written in sympathetic ink under the flap of the envelope—brought out by heat. That was what he wanted the lamp for. It simply gave details for a midnight rendezvous on the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence and specified a date that was then a week or more past."

"But you went there just the same?" she suggested quickly. "That is where you have been for the last three days?"

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale, "it was the only chance I saw, and I took it because of what you told me Silky Hines had said about not having to wait long for 'openers' for the pot anyway. My idea was that, if Silky Hines was right, the rendezvous would eventually be kept at the same place, and if the man with the clipped ear was still getting inside information, as Daddy Ratzler seemed to be afraid he was, he would be there on the heels of Daddy Ratzler's gang in an attempt to pick what Daddy Ratzler intimated was the choicest plum of all. And so——"

"Wait, Jimmie!" she interrupted hurriedly. "What was the reason for this rendezvous? What is it all about?"

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I don't know," he said; "except, of course, that it is probably an international smuggling ring of some sort—but from *our* standpoint that's not of vital moment, is it?"

"No," she said; "that's true. Tell me the rest, then, Jimmie. Was the rendezvous kept?"

"Yes," he answered, a sudden bitterness in his voice; "but not at all in the way I expected. It was kept last night. And last night was a beast of a night—though I have to thank the lightning for most of what I saw. The plan was that a boat showing a single green light was to make contact with the shore. I saw the boat coming through the storm, but I was still some distance away when it swung abruptly in toward the land. I expected, of course, that, since Daddy Ratzler was sick, Silky Hines would be in the boat, either alone or with some of the rest of the gang. What happened then happened very quickly. As the boat touched the shore

lantern light appeared at the water's edge, then came a sudden little flash, which I know now was a revolver shot, and the lantern went out; and then, in a flare of lightning, I saw the boat for an instant as plainly as though it were daylight. It was racing away from the shore again. There was just one man in it, and he wasn't Silky Hines or——"

"Jimmie," she interrupted breathlessly, "the man with the clipped ear!"

"Yes!" Jimmie Dale nodded shortly. "And when I reached the spot I found a man lying dead beside the broken lantern. He had been shot through the heart—just as Ray was—and by the same hand."

There was silence for a moment in the cellar. It was the Tocsin who spoke first.

"This is terrible," she said, her voice shaking a little. "Do you know who the dead man was?"

"No. I searched him, of course, for that purpose. He was well supplied with money; but there was nothing in his pockets in the shape of letters, or papers, or anything of any nature that afforded even a clue to his identity. I left him there. It seemed almost a callous thing to do; but he was dead and beyond any help of mine, and the last thing I could afford to do was to appear in the affair. He would certainly be found by daylight; but whether the police have since identified him or not I cannot say. That's all, Marie. That brings us down to the present moment."

"And now?" she queried anxiously.

"I don't know," Jimmie Dale admitted frankly. "If the fellow, having picked Daddy Ratzler's richest plum, is now satisfied, there would be no chance of getting track of him again by watching Daddy Ratzler

any further; for, in that case, there wouldn't be any 'next' coup at which the man would be present, even if we could discover beforehand what it was to be. That, however, is purely problematical; he may *not* be satisfied, and so, for the time being, we shall have to carry on as we have been doing. But that is not all. Last night worries me. Last night he outplayed them all. The boat was a little late in reaching the rendezvous, but I put that down at first to the storm. I've thought a lot about that since. Why was there no sign of Silky Hines? Had Silky Hines originally been in the boat? Was Silky Hines still in it—dead—when the boat raced away again from the shore? Or what? With Daddy Ratzler not taking an active part, the mantle would naturally have fallen on Silky Hines' shoulders. Where was Silky Hines last night? I've had no chance to check up on him from this end, for I came straight out here the moment I got back to New York. I haven't even seen the evening papers—I do not know whether they have reported the finding of a body, or bodies, up there on the Canadian border. I was going to try to find out to-night if Silky Hines was still around his usual haunts, and whether or not he had ever left New York at all. There is always the possibility, of course, that he was more seriously hurt at the Two Oaks than the newspaper reported, though I do not for a moment think so—but even that would not explain matters, for, in such an event, some other member, or members, of the gang would have taken his place at the rendezvous. Has he been out here, do you know?"

The Tocsin shook her head.

"Not since the time I told you about when he was here with the rest of the gang," she answered. "I am

positive of that, unless, of course"—the flashlight in her hand bored suddenly in through the opening beyond the secret door—"it was Silky Hines who was in there the other night with Daddy Ratzler."

Jimmie Dale shook his head in turn.

"I don't think so," he demurred. "It's possible, of course, and it would explain the two voices; but the only trouble is, Marie, that the pieces do not fit. Why wouldn't Silky Hines have gone to Daddy Ratzler's room as he did on that other occasion?"

"On that other occasion, Jimmie," she reminded him, "I was out of the house, and, so Daddy Ratzler thought, on my way to New York."

Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"That's one explanation, of course," he admitted. "So you think that the second time you heard two voices was the night when, having somehow or other obtained their 'openers,' Daddy Ratzler and Silky Hines discussed arrangements for keeping the blue envelope rendezvous?"

"What else is there to think?" she asked a little helplessly.

"Heaven knows!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale. "But if that is so, I'd say unhesitatingly that Silky Hines has now passed on into the beyond—a martyr to a sordid cause. And in that case, how did Ray's murderer get 'next' to what was going on?"

"I don't know," she said numbly.

"No," said Jimmie Dale; "that's just it—and speculation won't get us anywhere. But"—he nodded toward the opening—"I've a growing hunch that the explanation is in there, if we can only find it—and I'm keen for a look around. But first there's just one ques-

tion before I poke around here for a bit while you go upstairs to forestall Daddy Ratzler's arrival. I'm rather curious to know what Daddy Ratzler's reaction was when he found he couldn't make anything out of that blue envelope. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No," she answered; "he never mentioned it, and I never saw it again. He simply got up the next morning and said he was well enough to go to town. But he was frightened, and he has been frightened ever since."

"Right!" grinned Jimmie Dale with sudden cheerfulness. "Well, you go on up now, Marie, so as to be sure to be on hand as a reception committee for him! I'll let you know before I go away whether I've stumbled on anything worth while down here or not."

"But suppose he gets back in the meanwhile, as he is almost sure to do?" she asked dubiously. "He is still far from well, as I told you, and he always goes to his room at once and straight to bed. After that, though his own door is locked, he insists that I remain in my room within call. He is in a highly nervous and excited condition. He would hear me if I left my room and went downstairs."

"That's all right," smiled Jimmie Dale reassuringly, as he took the flashlight from her hand. "I've got to you before, and I can do it again. The veranda is still there, and you say he keeps his window closed now—which is so much to the good. Just you keep yours open—and stand by, no matter how long you have to wait. I'll be there. All set?"

"Yes," she said; and, as Jimmie Dale pointed the way for her with the flashlight's ray, she ran up the cellar stairs and closed the door behind her.

And then Jimmie Dale was in action. Several times he,



tested the mechanism that controlled the secret door both from within and without, and then the three planks, noiseless in their movement, swung finally back into place against the wall behind him. A flight of rough, unenclosed steps comprised of some six or seven treads led downward. He descended these, and at the bottom stood motionless for a long time while the white beam of his flashlight again and again, slowly, inquisitively, swept in all directions around him.

"A sort of half cave, half cellar," the Tocsin had said. He nodded in agreement with her description. It was a long and narrow tunnel-like chamber running at right angles from the steps that he had just descended, and paralleling the wall of the house. The floor was cemented but was badly cracked in places and in need of repair; and the roof, boarded, was supported by wooden beams and uprights that had every appearance of having been in existence there for years. But the place itself bore eloquent testimony to present-day occupation; for, from where he stood beside the steps, which were at one extreme end, his flashlight picked out at the other end, perhaps some forty feet away, a bed, a table with a lamp upon it, a washstand equipped with bowl and pitcher, several chairs, and a high bureau.

A queer and sudden smile touched Jimmie Dale's lips.

"Yes," he muttered. "I certainly would like to know who Daddy Ratzler was talking to down here! I think it would bring us very close to—the end!"

He moved slowly forward now. Strewn in more or less confusion against the sides of the walls were a number of dust-laden boxes of various sizes, their covers for the most part awry, and—he stopped suddenly again, and

bent down for a closer inspection—yes, unmistakably, the remains of an old printing press. The next instant he was delving into some of the boxes. Some engraver's tools, gone to rust, and several steel plates upon which work had been started rewarded his search.

Jimmie Dale straightened up. All this didn't matter very much except that it justified the original existence of the place and satisfied one's curiosity in that respect. Years ago, for there was no sign of any modern photographic appliances of the up-to-date counterfeiter, this had obviously been a safe and doubtless busy little retreat where Uncle Sam's banknotes were reproduced—without the sanction of Uncle Sam! Perhaps it was Blotz, the former owner, whose ingenuity was responsible for that three-planked door! "Who killed Blotz?" Had Daddy Ratzler been a partner in that enterprise too—only to abandon it later on for something perhaps more lucrative and less risky, though he had been assiduously careful not to abandon the house itself? And no wonder! This hidden chamber could serve many an ugly purpose dear to Daddy Ratzler's heart that was far removed from the original one for which it had been constructed—and had probably been made to do so, too!

Jimmie Dale moved forward again.

The bedroom, if it could be so called, now occupied his attention. There had been no attempt at seclusion, no effort made to divide it off from the rest of the chamber, even to the extent of a hanging of any sort. And here his flashlight, circling around, disclosed the mouth-piece of the speaking tube protruding from the side wall that was the nearer to the house; it played over the unmade bed, whose blankets of an excellent quality had been flung back over the footboard; it picked out a rug

of rather good quality that covered this section of the cement floor, and, near the table, a most inviting easy chair.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes were somber now, reflective. If there was not luxury, whoever frequented the place had at least an eye to his own comfort! Who was it? Perhaps Daddy Ratzler, sometimes—which would account for the fact that he might make many visits here unknown to the deaf Pascal who claimed that Daddy Ratzler rarely came to the house, and then only in his capacity of the real estate agent in charge of the property. But was Pascal honest? And why should Daddy Ratzler ever elect to sleep in here at all?

Who else came here—and apparently was quite *at home* here? Those clothes hanging on the wall pegs were not Daddy Ratzler's clothes! They ought to prove well worth a close examination—and those bureau drawers as well!

Jimmie Dale stepped over to the array of pegs, reached up to take down a coat—and stood motionless with his hand poised in mid-air.

*Someone was out there in the cellar!*

And then, while a second passed, Jimmie Dale's brain raced. There must be an opening somewhere, craftily arranged, whereby the sound of anyone moving about in the cellar could be heard in here. . . . It was fortunate that Marie had not gone all the way down into the cellar that night. . . . Who was it out there now? . . . Marie? . . . Not likely. . . . Then it was either Daddy Ratzler or the unknown to whom these clothes belonged. . . . And discovery here now would be disastrously premature! . . . What was he to do? . . . There was no place to hide. . . . Yes—just one!

He was running now, silently, swiftly back along the way he had come. Those steps! They were open at the sides! There would be just room enough to crouch down under them! He gained the steps, and, switching off his flashlight, wormed his way quickly in beneath them.

The door above made no sound as it opened; but an instant later footsteps creaked upon the treads over his head. Came then the crackle of a match—and someone stepped down onto the cement flooring.

And now, peering out from beneath his hiding-place, Jimmie Dale could see the shadowy figure of a man, the match flame lighting his way, walking briskly toward the far end of the tunnel-like sub-cellar, and carrying what was obviously, if only dimly seen, a large valise in his free hand. The match went out. The man struck another, reached the table, and, bending over, lighted the lamp.

And then it seemed to Jimmie Dale as though his veins were suddenly afire. The man's back was toward him, but over the man's left ear a bandage was plainly in evidence. And then the man, stooping to pick up the valise which he had set down beside the table, when lighting the lamp, turned his head—and this time there was no mask upon his face.

It was Beaton, Ray Thorne's valet.