

CHAPTER II

THE ONLY WAY

JIMMIE DALE mounted the stairs, opened a door on the first landing, switched on the lights and closed the door behind him. Outwardly calm, his brain was seething. Almost down to the most minute details, to-night was becoming more and more the counterpart of that "other night." It was here in his "den" even that he had then read the Tocsin's sudden call to arms which had again set the Gray Seal to work. Everything was the same—except, of course, that the old Crime Club was no more; and that, instead of the Tocsin being a mystery to him any longer, he and Marie were to be married next month after her return from Europe where she now was.

He was quick, decisive now in his movements as he crossed the room and dropped into a chair before the flat-topped rosewood desk; but his brain outraced his physical actions. In Europe? In Paris? The texture of this envelope! Impossible! She couldn't have got this envelope there. There was no mistake about the texture. There was only one place where she could have got it, and that was where she had procured the same kind of envelopes and paper in the years gone by when she was living under cover in the underworld—somewhere here in New York. She was *here* then, and almost certainly in hiding—and in danger. Danger! It seemed as

though the clutch of icy fingers was suddenly upon his heart.

Tight-lipped, his dark eyes narrowed, Jimmie Dale tore open the envelope, and, extracting a letter in the Tocsin's handwriting, began to read:

DEAR PHILANTHROPIC CROOK:

It seems incredible that I should write those three words. I never thought I should call you that again except in just the same dear intimate way that you still so often call me the Tocsin. But to-night it is in the old way, with all its old meaning, that those words are written, and I am afraid I am going to shock and alarm you with a statement that will seem almost unbelievable. *Ray Thorne's life is in grave danger.*

The story, even what little I know of it, is too long to tell you here, and I would hardly know where to begin anyway. But, at least, and before I say anything further about Ray, I must not let the receipt of one of these old-time letters bring added anxiety to you because of me.

I am supposed by my friends in Paris to have changed my plans slightly and to have gone to England earlier than I had arranged. They believe I am there now, and that I will sail for home as I originally intended on Saturday. I am, however, as I am sure you have already surmised, in New York at the present moment. But not as Marie LaSalle, for—but, oh, if I start to explain, I shall never end, and you would be little the wiser, for I myself do not know just what it all means, except that there is some miserable and cowardly criminal work afoot, the scene of which has recently shifted from Paris to New York. I know just enough to make me feel absolutely confident that in three or four days—and Jimmie, you must not shake your head and frown so, for I am not going to be in the slightest danger—that in three or four days I will be able to verify certain suspicions which will enable me to supply the police with enough information to put an end to the whole affair. By the time the ship on which I am supposed

to be sailing arrives, everything will be all over, you can meet me at the pier as though I really *had* just arrived, and no one will ever know the difference.

But meanwhile, as I have said, I could not act as Marie LaSalle, for, besides the necessity of remaining unknown for my own sake, I dared not, as the fiancée of Ray Thorne's closest friend, risk the remotest chance of Marie LaSalle being suspected of knowing anything, for then you too would naturally be suspected as well, and would be in equal peril.

I know you do not understand. How could you? I understand so little myself! But when you meet me at the pier next week I will be able to tell you everything.

And now, Jimmie, I come to to-night. Enclosed in a letter, Ray received a plain, blue envelope to-day, and at the present moment that blue envelope is in his safe at his home. I do not know what the envelope contains. I do not know how Ray ever came to be involved in this affair or what his connection with it is, but I do know that so long as he is in possession of the blue envelope he is in constant danger of his life. He would not give it up of his own accord—therefore it must be *stolen* from him. But it must be stolen in such a way that the theft not only become quickly and widely known, but, above all, in such a way that there could be no question that it was anything other than a *bona-fide* theft; so that, in other words, it will be instantly apparent, even to those concerned in the affair, that Ray has not so much as a suspicion of the "thief's" identity, and hence is obviously ignorant of what has become of the blue envelope itself. In that way he is safe. Otherwise it might be construed as a theft engineered by himself, a trick on Ray's own part—and that would only hasten his death. And there is only one way to accomplish this end, isn't there, Jimmie? You understand what I mean. I know that this will create a furor; I know what the result will be; I know that every newspaper in New York will flare with vicious headlines—but it is that very furor which will stamp the theft as genuine, and it is the only way I know to save Ray. You will

do it, of course; I am sure that long before you have read this far your mind has already been made up—but you must act at once, to-night, Jimmie. And when you have secured the blue envelope, oh, be very sure, be very careful that it does not under any circumstances pass out of your hands until you have heard from me.

That is everything, Jimmie—except all, *all* my love.

THE TOGSIN.

P. S. Oh, I want to see you so much, Jimmie—and I will in a few days now. And then, just think of it, Jimmie, our wedding is next month! M.

Jimmie Dale read the letter over again; then, rising from his chair, began to pace up and down the length of that rather unique but luxuriously furnished den of his, which, with its matched panels, its cozy fireplace, its queer little curtained alcove, ran the entire depth of the house. His footsteps made no sound on the rich velvet rug, and, as he walked, the old habit mechanically asserting itself, he began to tear the letter into fragments, and the fragments into smaller pieces.

Confusion, perplexity, and anxiety were in his mind; the past, the years that were gone, came crowding upon him with their myriad memories. The Call to Arms again! Another “crime” for the Gray Seal to commit! Crime! Not one in the decalogue but was already charged to the Gray Seal. Crime! Where there had been no crime! And he had thought those days were over forever. But that was what she meant by “the only way.” She was right, of course. No one would ever for an instant imagine that it was anything but a *bona-fide* theft if the Gray Seal committed it. Ray’s life! Ray—who was to be his best man! She never wrote idle words. Obviously he would go.

He paced up and down, tearing the paper into bits.

That old slogan of police and underworld alike was suddenly ringing in his ears once more to-night: "Death to the Gray Seal!" He could already see to-morrow's papers—the virulent diatribes, the hectic denunciations. Anathema! He could hear the blasphemous whispers of the underworld. He could see the furtive looks, the glances cast askance at one another by those who lived outside the law and preyed upon society. Who was the Gray Seal? Larry the Bat! Yes, they knew that—but they had never been able to find Larry the Bat since the day when the old Sanctuary had burned down, and when like ravening wolves they had watched the fire and howled for the Gray Seal's death. Under what other guise had Larry the Bat hidden himself? Who was the traitor amongst them? Whose turn would it be next to make, through the instrumentality of the Gray Seal, a trip to the Big House—and perhaps to the chair?

Fury on the part of the police and populace—fear-goaded fury on the part of the underworld!

The past was back again—to be lived again, to be re-enacted. If he were ever caught! A murderous roar of voices hoarse with blood lust was in his ears. Headlines blazed before his eyes:

CRIME MONSTER CAUGHT AT LAST
MILLIONAIRE CLUBMAN
LEADS DOUBLE LIFE
JIMMIE DALE UNMASKED AS THE
GRAY SEAL

He passed his hand across his eyes. This sudden resurrection of the buried past, this change in the twinkling

of an eye from the security of years to the ever-present menace of exposure again had left him a little jumpy, hadn't it? Well, why shouldn't it? He was no superman.

What time was it? He glanced at his watch. Not quite midnight. Too early yet to go to Ray's. Jason would hardly have got to bed; and Ray's household would not likely have settled down for the night.

Halting abruptly he placed the shreds of paper in the fireplace, touched a match to them, and watched them burn—and was immediately conscious that this, too, was precisely what he had done on that "other night." He forced a short laugh. It *was* a bit eerie—and almost as though it actually *were* that "other night." And presently there would be other little things he already knew he was going to do which would strengthen that illusion. Well, did it make any difference? Let it carry through that way. If there was any significance attached to these constant little reminders, it was at least one of good omen. On that "other night" there had been two fellow humans who had been the happier for the Gray Seal's call to arms, and to-night—there was Ray!

He flung himself into a chair and lighted a cigarette. How had Marie become mixed up in the affair, the aspects of which, to say the least, were obviously sinister in the extreme? He did not know, of course—nor could he even guess. He could, on the other hand, perfectly understand that she would act exactly as she had done, for it was the way that, as "Silver Mag" and "Mother Margot," she had acted in the years gone by—but that only served to put a still more serious complexion on the whole matter. She was living under cover, playing some rôle, her identity hidden; and, in spite of her light words and the statement that it was merely a question of a

few days, she certainly would not have gone to any such extreme had she not realized that every move she made would involve great danger. And, too, she was trying to protect *him*, Jimmie Dale—as she had so often done in the past. She had admitted that in her letter.

Jimmie Dale's lips firmed. Anxiety was growing upon him. Her danger was so great that she would not share it with him! Bluntly, that was what it meant.

He sank his chin in his hands. His mind went back over the years. Her love, her courage, her marvelous resourcefulness, her steadfastness, her sacrifice. And then, with the Crime Club destroyed and her normal life restored to her, they were to have been married—but the war had intervened. They had both gone. That had been like her. That was just what she would do, and nothing would have deterred her. She could not have been herself and have done anything else. She had gone as a nurse. Wisely or unwisely, selfishly or unselfishly, they had both agreed to postpone their marriage until after the war was over.

He wished now with all his soul they had not done so, for then she would not have made this recent trip alone to Paris to visit some of her wartime friends, and incidentally, womanlike, to buy her trousseau. He shook his head suddenly. He did not quite mean that, did he? She would in those circumstances never have been in a position to write that letter, which obviously had its genesis in something that had happened in Paris—and if she had not written it, what then of Ray? She would never have known that Ray's life was threatened, and the result would probably have been Ray's death.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes traveled unseeingly around the room. Fate indulged in strange vagaries, didn't it?

And Ray! The same question in respect of Ray that he could neither answer nor guess at! How had Ray become involved in any such affair as this? She had said she did not know—and he, Jimmie Dale, certainly had no clue to the key of it.

He had come to know Ray in the war, and they had grown close to each other—as those men do who have linked arms together with death, not once but often; as men do when one, sore wounded himself, has crawled, dragging the other, worse wounded still, over bullet-sprayed terrain—to safety and life. One man's love for another—that was what Ray meant to him.

And yet he did not *know* Ray. There were things in Ray's life that Ray had, as it were, sidetracked, that were locked up within the man himself—a sort of closed book. He, Jimmie Dale, had sensed that; and, naturally, had never attempted to intrude or question where confidences were not volunteered. He knew that from childhood Ray had traveled far and wide, and had lived long in strange, out-of-the-way places. He knew practically nothing of Ray's family, except that Ray had a brother living in Sydney, Australia. He did know that Ray was a bachelor, and obviously a man of independent means.

More or less unsatisfactory in view of that letter! It left the field of supposition wide open. It was not at all improbable that out of Ray's wandering past had been laid the foundation of this present murderous attitude toward him. Not that Ray was in any way culpable—he would not believe that. Ray was too clean, too much the man, too much the straightforward, open-minded gentleman for that.

To dispossess Ray of that blue envelope! And merely

by so doing to render Ray immune from all personal danger! That in itself was queer—very queer indeed. It invited so many questions. Who had brought or sent Ray that envelope? Through what single act, or through what chain of circumstances, had Ray become the necessary or logical recipient of it, and yet at the same time would have no further connection with it from the standpoint of the past if it were taken away from him?—and this in spite of the fact that the envelope contained something of so much value to someone that murder would unhesitatingly be resorted to, if necessary, to obtain it! The pieces did not fit! What did it mean?

Jimmie Dale sat almost immovable in his chair, lost to his surroundings, his mind groping and probing for some explanation of this cataclysmic situation that was now, suddenly and without warning, thrusting upon him the old dual life again. The quarters and the half-hours passed. When he looked at his watch again, it was after one o'clock. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically. His mental delvings had got him nowhere. But, after all, for the moment, that was not essential. He had been asked to do only one thing.

It was time to go.