

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRAP

IT WAS three minutes to nine. The only car that had passed in the last little while had, as disclosed by the tail light, borne Carruthers' license plate. And now the road was deserted, save for a single and somewhat shadowy figure in the darkness, who, though he walked briskly, kept turning his head constantly from side to side.

Jimmie Dale, as Larry the Bat, stepped suddenly out from the shelter of the trees that bordered the main road at the edge of the wagon track, and accosted the solitary pedestrian.

"I ain't askin' youse to shake hands," he said blandly, "'cause youse might get leprosy; but I'm pleased to meet yer, Mr. Carruthers."

Carruthers came to an abrupt halt.

"Perhaps it is just as well!" he retorted caustically. He leaned forward and peered into Larry the Bat's face. "I suppose you *are* the Gray Seal, as you call yourself?" he questioned sharply.

"Sure! Dat's me! De Gray Seal an' Larry de Bat all in one. But, say"—Larry the Bat's voice roughened—"we ain't here to hold no open air meetin'! If youse wants to do any gassin' come on in here under de trees. An' spill it quick, 'cause we got to get movin' pretty soon."

"Yes," said Carruthers evenly, as he followed Jimmie Dale a few yards in along the wagon track, "I certainly do propose to do a little gassing, as you put it, before I go any further. I'm here. I've kept my appointment with you; and, though I am perhaps a fool, I have adhered rigidly to the conditions you imposed, and——"

"Sure, youse have!" agreed Larry the Bat complacently. "Wot's a word passed between gentlemen if it ain't good fer dat?"

"Gentlemen!" Carruthers choked slightly. "Look here, who in hell are you anyhow? I mentioned the matter of your voice last night, and I——"

"Mabbe de Gray Seal ain't always Larry de Bat; but dat ain't none of yer business!" snapped Larry the Bat. "Youse didn't come out to write me biography, did youse? Youse cæn do dat fer de other guy dat youse're going to meet out here. Now, den, anythin' more before we steps along?"

"Where are we going?"

"Into a house a little way down de line here."

"Is this man there—the man you said was the one who killed Mr. Thorne?"

"No; not yet, he ain't," said Larry the Bat tersely. "But he will be. De idea is dat we'll be waitin' fer him."

"Who is he? You said you knew. What's his name?"

"Youse can bet yer life I knows!" stated Larry the Bat with finality. "He's a guy dat uster work fer Thorne by de name of Beaton."

"Beaton!" Carruthers' voice was loud with incredulity.

"Don't yell!" snarled Larry the Bat. "Youse don't have to tell all de world about it yet—save some of it fer one of dem newspaper scoops of yers!"

"But this is impossible!" exclaimed Carruthers. "It couldn't have been Beaton. Thorne was murdered before Beaton entered the house. Beaton had an alibi that thoroughly satisfied the police."

"I don't know nothin' about how good de alibi was," said Larry the Bat contemptuously; "but I knows dat Beaton handed Thorne de spot wid a rod dat had a silencer on it dat I slipped over to de police de other day."

"Yes, I heard about that!" There was a new and tense note of interest in Carruthers' voice. "You say that gun belonged to Beaton?"

"Dat's wot!"

"Where did you get it?"

"Listen to de star reporter intervieuwin' de Gray Seal!" murmured Larry the Bat.

"Well, then, why did you send it to the police?"

"An' he ain't so bright, at dat!" observed Larry the Bat pityingly. "Say, I had ter find out, didn't I, if dat was de cannon dat fired de fatal slug?"

"And you found out that it was?"

"Sure! De cops wrote me a nice long letter about it!"

"Well, I happen to know that it was, too," said Carruthers meditatively; "and if you're telling the truth, if that revolver really was Beaton's, then——"

"Say," interrupted Larry the Bat irritably, "did I ask youse to take me say-so fer anythin'? Didn't I tell youse dat I'd hand de bird over to youse wid de goods on him?"

"You'll forgive me," said Carruthers a little sarcastically, "if I am still slightly skeptical. The circumstances are somewhat unusual, and your reputation, if you don't mind my saying so, is a bit spotty. Do you

mean to say you can prove that Beaton killed Ray Thorne?"

"Yes—to youse!" asserted Larry the Bat curtly. "An' youse can do de rest! Dat's why I'm lettin' youse in on it. (See? Youse're a friend of de guy dat went fer de ride, an' I'm out fer de skunk dat made youse hire a glass wagon, 'cause I ain't standin' fer no dirty job like dat from no man, no matter wot youse just said about me reputation, damn youse! Get me? It'll be up to youse. De Gray Seal'd look nice, I don't think, sittin' in de witness chair an' all booked fer de hot seat himself while he was handin' out de harrowin' details to de judge an' jury! See?"

"I'm beginning to get a glimmer," admitted Carruthers grimly. "I take it I'm to occupy—the witness chair?"

"Youse've spilled a mouthful!" declared Larry the Bat. "Well, are youse drawin' cards, or ain't youse?"

Carruthers was silent for a moment.

"Yes!" he decided abruptly. "I'm not a particularly brave man, and something keeps telling me I'm a fool to trust you, but I'll take a chance!"

"T'anks!" said Larry the Bat sourly. "Well, den, dere's two things youse're goin' to do."

"What are they?" demanded Carruthers.

"De first is dat, no matter wot happens, youse don't make a move, an' dat youse don't let a peep out of youse."

"All right!" agreed Carruthers laconically.

"All right is all right," growled Larry the Bat; "but it ain't enough. Youse've got to get me on dis. Even if youse thinks de whole works has gone fluey, youse're to keep yer face shut. D'youse get dat? If youse shows

yer hand, den it's all off, an' Beaton scoops de pot. Understand? An' don't make no mistake about it! Youse leaves it to me—*no matter wot happens!*"

"I agree," said Carruthers icily. "I suppose I have to. What else?"

"De rod youse've parked in yer pocket," requested Larry the Bat coolly. "I'll trouble youse to hand dat over."

"The trust," said Carruthers ironically, "appears to be all on one side!"

"Nix!" Larry the Bat's voice was almost friendly. "I ain't lettin' youse down; but I ain't takin' any chance on youse lettin' me down either—even if youse don't mean to. Come across!"

Carruthers hesitated—then he produced a revolver from his pocket and handed it to Larry the Bat.

"Where angels fear to tread!" he muttered.

"T'anks again!" said Larry the Bat with sudden cordiality. "I'm beginnin' to like youse—even if de feelin's ain't mutual. Now, come on!"

He led the way down the wagon track to the front door of Daddy Ratzler's house.

"Whose house is this?" asked Carruthers pithily.

Jimmie Dale opened the door deftly with a pick-lock.

"De only guy dat's in here," explained Larry the Bat, "is so deaf dat he couldn't hear Niagara Falls if he was gettin' splashed by de cataract; but dat's no reason fer us takin' any chances 'dat he's awake an' nosin' around."

"Who is he?"

"His name's Pascal—I dunno his other name," answered Larry the Bat. "But dere's somethin' else I wants to tell youse about him. He's de only one dat's

got anythin' to do wid dis dump dat's straight, an' I'll ask youse to remember dat when de rockets goes up."

"I don't know what you mean," said Carruthers in a puzzled one.

"No," returned Larry the Bat; "but youse will before youse're through. Youse keep de old man out of de ditch, dat's all—'cause he ain't never known no more about wot's been pulled out here dan youse have. An' I gues he's asleep now all right, 'cause I don't hear notin'. So youse follow me."

Jimmie Dale produced a flashlight and led the way to the door at the head of the cellar stairs—but here sudden caution descended upon him. It was not in any degree likely, for it was still a long way from ten o'clock, but it *was* possible that Beaton might have already arrived.

"Youse wait her a minute," he said brusquely, "an' don't make no noise till youse hears from me. Savvy?"

"Yes," said Carruthers.

There was no creak of stair tread, no echoing foot-step as Jimmie Dale descended the stairs and crossed the cellar, and no sound as he opened the secret door. The interior was inky black. He listened. Nothing!

He turned, and called softly to Carruthers.

"Shut dat door behind youse, an' come on down here!" he instructed—and a moment later, focusing his flashlight upon it, he opened and shut the secret door several times for Carruthers' benefit.

"Good God!" ejaculated Carruthers heavily. "What's in there?"

"Once upon a time, like dey says in de story books," said Larry the Bat with a short laugh, "dere was a guy named Blotz dat built himself dis nice little private suite

so's nobody wouldn't interrupt him while he was helpin' de government to increase de circulation of banknotes in de country, an'——"

"You mean a counterfeiting plant?"

"Sure! Him an' another guy named Daddy Ratzler dat's got his paws on dis house now. Daddy Ratzler an' Beaton bumps off Blotz, an' takes a bird called Heinie fer a ride, too. See? Dat's how de estate changed hands. See? Beaton's de son of Daddy Ratzler, on'y his name ain't down in de family Bible."

There was an ugly rasp in Carruthers' voice now.

"But this is abominable!" he cried out.

"Sure!" assented Larry the Bat heartily. "Youse've said it! It ain't got nothin' to do wid yer pal Thorne, but I thought youse'd like to know de kind of bird youse was up against. An' maybe now youse're beginnin' to tumble to de fact dat I'm handin' youse de straight goods."

"I haven't any more doubt of it!", Carruthers' tones were hard and crisp. "Well, what's the next move?"

Jimmie Dale pointed the way through the opening with his flashlight.

"Go on down in dere," answered Larry the Bat; and then, with a sudden, inward chuckle, as Carruthers stepped forward: "Youse'll get better acquainted wid dem steps before youse're through, but look out youse don't bust yer neck on dem now!"

"They're all right," affirmed Carruthers.

"Sure, dey are!" concurred Larry the Bat pleasantly, as, closing the door behind him, he followed Carruthers down the steps. "Youse won't be seen once youse crawls in under dem."

"Under them?"

"Dat's de idea! Now take a look around de place while I gives it de once-over fer youse wid de flashlight. It's a nice little dump, ain't it? Well, de minute youse hears anyone out dere in de cellar, youse ducks under de steps here. See? An' don't youse make a sound no matter even if youse thinks de whole works is blown up. All youse've got to do is listen—an' mabbe youse'll get an earful. I'll be up dere at de other end havin' a spiel wid Beaton. D'youse get dat?"

"Yes," said Carruthers. "I get your idea; but I'm free to say I am a little doubtful as to the result. The man isn't going to be fool enough to admit that he killed Mr. Thorne, is he?"

"Weil," submitted Larry the Bat philosophically, "youse never can tell! Mabbe yes, an' mabbe no. But I got a hunch he'll come clean if youse don't mess it up an' make a fool of *y^erself* by buttin' in!"

"You need not give yourself any concern on that score!" retorted Carruthers with some asperity. "I quit understand what I have to do!"

"All right, den!" said Larry the Bat. "Mabbe he'll be here in a little while. an' mabbe it'll be a lot longer; but we don't do no more yappin'. An' youse be careful when youse crawls in under dem steps dat youse don't make no noise! All right?"

"Yes!" said Carruthers briefly.