

CHAPTER III

THE BREAK

HE ROSE from his chair, crossed the room, and, drawing aside the portière that hung before the alcove, disclosed the squat, barrel-shaped safe that he had designed himself in the days when he had been associated in business with his father—who had owned and operated one of the largest safe manufacturing plants in the United States until just prior to his death, when he had sold out to a combine. His fingers played for a moment deftly over the several knobs and dials that confronted him—and the door swung open. An inner door, no less complicated in its mechanism, followed suit. And then, from a secret compartment within, Jimmie Dale took out what looked like a little bundle of leather that was rolled up and tied with thongs; then he closed and locked the doors of the safe, and carried the bundle over to the desk. Here he unrolled it, laying it out at full length—and stood for a moment, regarding it while a grim smile gathered in his eyes and played around his lips. It was the belt with its stout-sewn upright pockets containing those blued-steel, finely tempered tools, that compact, powerful burglar's kit, which had stood him so often in good stead in the days gone by—and which, until scarcely more than an hour ago, he had never dreamed he would use again.

He began to examine the tools critically, taking them

one by one from their respective pockets, and, as he replaced them, nodded his head in approval of the condition in which he found them. There remained two pockets still uninspected. From one he took out a black silk mask, and from the other a thin, flat metal case much like a cigarette case. The mask after inspection went back into its pocket, and then he opened the metal case. On the top reposed a tiny pair of tweezers; and beneath, between sheets of oil-paper, lay row upon row of gray, diamond-shaped, adhesive-paper seals.

And now a minute passed, and still another, as Jimmie Dale stood there with the metal case still open in his hand while he stared at the little gray seals within—and the years seemed suddenly to come rushing back upon him out of the past. It had been in the spirit of fun and adventure that he had originally pitted his brains against the police, but in order that no one else by mischance should suffer or be accused of the apparent “crimes” he committed, he had adopted these gray paper seals as his insignia—and had thus launched the Gray Seal on his career. And he had gone unknown and unsuspected until that night when, having opened a safe in a jewelry establishment in Maiden Lane, he had just barely managed to make his escape from the police—and the next morning had received a letter in a woman’s handwriting informing him that *she* knew who had opened Marx’s safe even if the police did not. The letter had taken the form of an ultimatum. He could choose between her and the police. Thereafter she would plan the coups and the Gray Seal would execute them, or else Jimmie Dale would be exposed. He was to answer “yes” or “no” through the personal column of the *News-Argus*. He had had no choice. He had answered

“yes”—but with the mental reservation that he would always in some way speciously manage to render abortive, rather than perpetrate, any crime in which she endeavored to make him an accomplice. How little he had known! How little need there had been for any mental reservation of that sort! There was many a man and many a woman to-day who was the happier because of the “crimes” that she, as the Tocsin, or Silver Mag, or Mother Margot, and he, as the Gray Seal, or Larry the Bat, or Smarlinghue,¹ had committed—and no man or woman who had suffered save those who had outraged the law and had richly merited their punishment.

And he had thought those days over forever!

He closed the metal case abruptly, returned it to its pocket, and, taking off his coat and vest, put on the belt, making use of the thongs as shoulder straps. Then he got into his coat and vest again; but now his eyes were suddenly wistful. Where was the Tocsin to-night? Here in New York—yes! But where? *Was* she safe? Was this really to be like those other days, or would to-night, if he were successful in the task she had set him, bring the end in sight as she believed?

Who knew? Jimmie Dale shook his head. Speculation would get him nowhere. It was a question of action now. From a drawer in his desk he transferred to his pockets a flashlight and an automatic; then, switching off the light, he left the room, descended the stairs—and the front door closed noiselessly behind him.

At that hour in the morning the streets in his neighborhood were empty and deserted. Jimmie Dale walked

¹*The Further Adventures of Jimmie Dale.*

swiftly, and some fifteen minutes later, no more than a blotch in the darkness, he was crouched beneath the stoop at the basement entrance of Ray Thorne's home.

And now the Gray Seal was at work. From a pocket in the belt around his waist he took out and slipped over his face his black silk mask; while from another pocket came a delicate little steel instrument which he inserted in the doorlock.

But for once the Gray Seal's deft sureness seemed to have deserted him. A minute passed, perhaps two—fruitlessly.

"I am afraid I am a little out of practice," explained Jimmie Dale to himself whimsically, "and—ah, that's better!"

The door opened and shut behind him—without a sound. For a moment he stood listening; and then, with that tread of almost uncanny silence acquired through long practice as a defense against the rickety stairs of the old Sanctuary, he stepped swiftly forward. It was inky black, but he had no need of light, and his flashlight for the moment was an unnecessary risk. He knew Ray Thorne's home almost as well as he knew his own. He moved unerringly.

The safe was in a small room on the first floor off the living room that Ray called his sanctum. Jimmie Dale made his way through the silent house to the room he sought, and dropped upon his knees in front of the safe.

And then for the first time the round, white ray of his flashlight cut through the darkness, playing long and inquisitively on the polished nickel dial that glistened responsively now in front of him.

And under the mask Jimmie Dale's brows grew wrinkled.

He had never paid any particular attention to Ray's safe before; but having designed and built so many himself, Jimmie Dale knew safes as few men knew them, and what he saw now he did not like. It would take all he knew, take all that was in him, to open this one; and besides, as he had said a few minutes ago, he was out of practice.

"But anyway," he muttered optimistically, "it's a type that hasn't got an inner door."

The light went out.

Jimmie Dale's ear was pressed against the face of the safe; the slim sensitive fingers, that in their tips seemed to embody all the human senses, crept to the dial knob.

A long time passed with no sound at first save a faint musical tinkle as the dial whirled. And then there came another sound—the sound of labored breathing, of a man panting almost, as though in distress.

Beneath the mask the sweat was pouring now down Jimmie Dale's face. Again and again he frictioned his moist finger tips on the rug upon which he knelt; again and again he returned to the attack, giving, as he had known he would have to give, all that was in him to the task.

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale whispered out into the darkness.

"Thank God!" he breathed fervently.

The safe stood open.

The flashlight's ray bored into the interior. The safe contained what appeared to be a number of account books, and an innumerable number of documents and papers. He began to remove these from the safe and toss them quite callously on the floor around him. Why not? A thief would have little regard for another's prop-

erty, and less for what did not interest the thief himself!

Jimmie Dale's lips twitched in grim humor. The blue envelope was all the time in that little locked drawer, of course. But one must do one's job as artistically as one could!

A blued-steel instrument was at work. A ratchet gnawed. The drawer came open—and the blue envelope lay in Jimmie Dale's hand. He examined it curiously under the flashlight's ray. It was just slightly larger than the ordinary size of commercial envelope; and was so far from being bulky that one might almost imagine that it contained nothing at all. It was sealed and bore neither address nor mark of any kind upon it.

With a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders Jimmie Dale placed the envelope in his inside coat pocket, and from his belt took out the thin metal case. Propping the flashlight against the edge of the safe, he opened the case, and with the tweezers lifted out one of the diamond-shaped gray paper seals. He moistened the adhesive side of this with his tongue, took his handkerchief from his pocket, placed the gray seal upon it—and pressed it against the face of the safe. Headquarters had yet to discover the trace of a fingerprint on the insignia of the Gray Seal! Or anywhere else for that matter!

He wiped the dial and knob of the safe carefully with his handkerchief, picked up the flashlight, stood for a moment surveying his handiwork critically—then the room was in darkness, and, as silently as he had entered, Jimmie Dale left the house.

As he reëntered his own house, he consulted his watch. It was twenty minutes after two. He smiled a

little cryptically as he mounted the staircase, entered his den, and, divesting himself of his belt, rolled it up and locked it away with the blue envelope in his safe. This new début of the Gray Seal had been without any misadventure and had taken approximately only an hour and twenty minutes—but what of the afterwards? The repercussion was still to come! To-morrow's papers!

He crossed the hall, entered his dressing room, began to remove his clothes—and suddenly, as his eyes lighted on the telephone on the table, a sense of the analogy between this night and that "other night" which had once in the long ago witnessed the reappearance of the Gray Seal intruded itself forcibly again upon him. So far, in detail after detail, to-night had run true to form. All that was needed to put the finishing touch upon it was to have Carruthers call up at some such ungodly hour as this and bombshell his news about the Gray Seal's return!

Jimmie Dale shook his head as he got into bed. Even to contemplate such a possibility was to verge on the fantastic! He certainly need have no fear that his slumbers would be disturbed, for on this occasion he had had no run-in with the police to bring the consequent inevitable newspaper man immediately on the job; so, until Ray's household awoke in the morning, nothing obviously would be known about the "break."

For a time Jimmie Dale lay staring into the darkness, his mind too active to permit of sleep—anxiety on the Tocsin's account, this unexplained connection of Ray with the affair, and the intriguing nature of the blue envelope itself, all conspired to keep him wakeful. But finally he drowsed off into restless slumber.

He was awakened by the ringing of a bell near at hand.

He sat bolt upright in bed and for a moment listened incredulously. It *was* the telephone!

"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated Jimmie Dale heavily.

He got out of bed, switched on the light, and lifted the receiver from the hook.

Carruthers' voice came instantly and tensely over the wire:

"Hello! Hello! Jimmie, is that you?"

"Look here, Carruthers," complained Jimmie Dale, "if this is your idea of a brilliant joke, I must say it's not mine! It's a bit stiff to yank a chap out of bed at this hour with the perverted hope of getting a rise out of him, just because of what I said about an analogy at the club. I suppose you're going to tell me, as you did once before, that the Gray Seal has come to life again!"

"Joke!" cried Carruthers wildly. "My God, Jimmie, he has just killed Ray Thorne."