

CHAPTER IV

DRAWN BLINDS

WHITE-FACED, as rigid as a figure carved in stone, and as silent, Jimmie Dale stood there while the seconds passed. Mentally stunned, he was unconscious of his surroundings, unconscious that he was still holding the telephone receiver to his ear. Then slowly his brain began to emerge from torpor, and grief came—and then horror and fury swept in a surge upon him. Dead! Ray Thorne murdered—*by the Gray Seal!* There was something of abysmal mockery in that accusation which racked him to the soul. His best friend! The man he had tried to save—and, instead, had but furnished the murderer with an alias that practically defied detection!

A voice came to him as though 'from some outside world:

“Jimmie! Jimmie! Are you there?”

Of course! It was Carruthers calling frantically over the wire.

“Yes,” said Jimmie Dale mechanically; and then, with a strange hush in his voice: “I’ve been taking the count, Carruthers. Now tell me about it.”

“I’m speaking from Ray’s house”—Carruthers’ tones were jerky and shaken. “He was found on the floor of that little room he called his sanctum—shot through the heart. The safe was open, with a gray seal plastered on it, and the contents scattered all over the place—but you’d better come over here yourself. I’m

a bit in pieces, Jimmie. I telephoned at once to Sergeant Waud of the Homicide Bureau, a friend of mine, and he's on his way now. He'll be here by the time you arrive. You won't be long, Jimmie?"

"Ten minutes," said Jimmie Dale tersely.

He hung up the receiver, and called Benson, his chauffeur of many years, on the house telephone. After a moment Benson answered him.

"Benson," he said, an ominous quiet in his voice now, "this is an emergency. Get into your clothes as quickly as you can. I want the light car without an instant's loss of time."

"Right, sir!"

Jimmie Dale dressed hurriedly. In less than five minutes he was standing on the sidewalk in front of his house. A minute later the car came out of the drive—and Benson was holding the door open.

"I hope nothing is very seriously wrong, and that I haven't kept you waiting, Mr. Dale," said Benson anxiously.

It was like Benson to say that. Benson was a second Jason, and in spite of the mental strain under which he, Jimmie Dale, was laboring, the thought of how rich he was in the service of these two men flashed through his mind.

"Yes, Benson," he said in a low voice as he stepped into the car, "something *is* very seriously wrong. Mr. Thorne has been murdered in his home. Drive there as fast as you can."

Benson, in the act of closing the door, drew back with a startled cry.

"Murdered, sir? Mr. Thorne!" He was stumbling out his words. "How, sir? When?"

"I have no details," replied Jimmie Dale, "except that Mr. Carruthers said it was the Gray Seal who committed the crime."

Benson closed the door—but red rage had flamed suddenly into his face.

"That swine! At work again! Damn him to the pit!" he burst out impulsively; then, hoarsely: "I beg your pardon, Mr. Dale, but I—I liked Mr. Thorne. He was a great gentleman."

Jimmie Dale made no answer. Benson expected none. The car leaped forward from the curb.

There was a wan smile on Jimmie Dale's lips as he leaned back in his seat. Benson had but voiced the popular sentiment. "That swine!" The words repeated themselves. They were ugly words. "That swine!" Suppose Benson ever came to *know*? What would even Benson, despite his years of loyalty, do?

Jimmie Dale brushed his hand across his eyes. His brain seemed fogged to-night, his thoughts running off at tangents. "That swine!" There was ample justification in the public mind for the superlative in opprobrious epithets. In the years gone by, to save the innocent, he had deliberately made it appear that the Gray Seal had been guilty of crimes without number—even the crime of murder. And, save for the warning they conveyed, he had accepted in a sort of grim complacency the invectives hurled against him. But to-night it was different. To-night those words of Benson were like rapier thrusts. To-night there was cruel and bitter irony in it all. To-night Ray Thorne was dead. And by morning the world would proclaim the Gray Seal the murderer!

His hands clenched. He looked out of the window. Ben-

son was covering the few blocks that separated the two houses at a pace that ignored all speed laws. They were nearly there.

Jimmie Dale's lips moved silently.

"If I live," he said under his breath, "I'll get the man or men who did this! I promise you that, Ray! And I promise myself that, for once, the Gray Seal shall be proven innocent!"

Benson drew up to the curb, and, as Jimmie Dale stepped out, he saw, though the blinds were drawn, that the windows were everywhere alight, and that there were already a number of cars standing in front of the house, amongst them one that he recognized as belonging to Carruthers. He nodded his head in understanding. There had been smart work here. He knew fairly well the routine that had been followed. Carruthers had said nothing about notifying anyone except his friend at the Homicide Bureau, but someone must have notified Carruthers himself prior to that, and it was a fair presumption, since it would be the most natural and obvious thing to do, that Carruthers' informant would have sent in the first alarm to police headquarters. That, at any rate, would account for the several cars that were gathered here. Police headquarters would have at once communicated with the precinct station, who would have flashed the signal-box light to the patrolman on post and would also have sent over one or two uniformed men, at the same time notifying the district detective headquarters, who likewise would have sent men. And meanwhile, quite irrespective of anything Carruthers might have done, police headquarters would have notified the Homicide Bureau. There would be quite a few men inside there—with probably a uni-

formed man at the door, and, certainly, in accordance with the regulations, a uniformed man would be on guard over the body until it had been viewed by the medical examiner. And that little group of men there by the steps were probably police headquarters reporters, who, for some reason or other, had not yet been admitted to the house.

Something rose suddenly choking hot in Jimmie Dale's throat. All this machinery was in motion because it was, not the murder of some previously unheard-of person of whom one read daily and without personal interest in the papers, but because it was Ray. Ray was in there—dead. He turned abruptly to Benson.

"Wait for me, Benson," he directed tersely—and, crossing the sidewalk, mounted the steps.

As he had expected, the door was opened by a policeman, who barred the way—but Carruthers' voice came almost instantly from the lighted hall within.

"That's all right, officer," he said. "This is Mr. Dale. Detective Sergeant Waud is expecting him."

The man stood aside, and Jimmie Dale, stepping forward, clasped Carruthers' outstretched hand in a long, hard grip, as, with set faces, they stared into each other's eyes.

It was Carruthers who broke the pregnant silence.

"Jimmie, I"—his voice broke a little—"I can't believe it yet. It—it's fierce!"

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale hoarsely; then quietly: "I'd like to see him."

"He's lying just where he was," Carruthers answered. "The medical examiner hasn't come yet, and nothing has been disturbed. Sergeant Waud brought a photographer along from headquarters and they're going to

take some photographs, but I think we can go in first. I'll introduce you to Waud. I don't know any of the others—and there must be four or five of them, some from district detective headquarters. They're combing the house now."

They stepped from the hall into the living room, and instinctively Jimmie Dale's first glance went to the open doorway at the far end of the room that led into Ray Thorne's "sanctum"; then his eyes traveled around the living room and rested on the figure of a man, the sole occupant of the room for the moment apart from Carruthers and himself, who was slumped down in a dejected attitude in a chair, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. He recognized Beaton, Thorne's valet. The man made no attempt to rise, nor did he even lift his head. Also, added to this rather strange behavior, Jimmie Dale noted that the man presented a decidedly bedraggled appearance.

Jimmie Dale looked inquiringly at Carruthers.

Carruthers shook his head.

"I don't know," he said in an undertone, "except that he has been drinking heavily. There's something queer about it. It was Beaton who found Ray and telephoned the police and me. Waud's going to question the household presently. The maids have been told to stay in their rooms until they are wanted. There's Waud now—standing in the doorway of the 'sanctum.' Come along."

Jimmie Dale, as Carruthers introduced him to the Homicide Bureau man, found himself looking into a pair of steel-gray eyes and a face that was dominated by an almost abnormally square chin and aggressive jaw.

"Sorry to meet you under these circumstances, Mr.

Dale," Sergeant Waud said brusquely. "I understand from Mr. Carruthers that you and he were Mr. Thorne's closest friends."

"Yes," said Jimmie Dale simply. "May I go in?"

"Sure! Go ahead," Sergeant Waud nodded; "but I'll want to talk to you and Mr. Carruthers as well as everybody else here presently. As far as is known, you and Mr. Carruthers were the last ones to see him alive."

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I'm afraid that won't help much," he said. "That was fairly early last evening at the St. James Club."

"There's more than that to it," replied Sergeant Waud crisply. "You know who pulled this job, don't you?"

"Carruthers told me over the phone that it was the Gray Seal."

"Yes! We thought we were through with that God. . . ."—Detective Sergeant Waud burst into fervent profanity—"forever. Hell will crack loose for this, and if we don't get him this time there'll be some heads falling—and mine'll probably be one of them. But I'm hoping that you and Mr. Carruthers, being so intimate with the murdered man, may be able to hand us a line on something that will give us a lead." He smiled grimly. "We know who killed Thorne; and the only little question we have to answer is the question we've been asking for years: *Who* is the Gray Seal?"

Again Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't help you there, either," he said.

Sergeant Waud shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll see," he grunted—and motioned Jimmie Dale through the doorway.

"I'll wait for you here with the sergeant, Jimmie,"

said Carruthers huskily. "I—I've been in, you know."

Without answer, Jimmie Dale stepped over the threshold—and stood still. Across the room near a second door that led into the hall, a crumpled form lay upon the floor. Ray! A minute passed, and another—and then, wet-eyed, Jimmie Dale looked around the room. The photographer was setting up his camera, a uniformed man leaned against the wall, while strewn all over the floor, as he, Jimmie Dale, had strewn them, were the littered contents of the safe—and on the face of the safe itself that diamond-shaped, gray paper seal. He stared at this as though he had never seen it in his life before. For the first time in all the years since he had adopted the gray seal as his insignia it assumed a malignant and inimical aspect. There was something almost diabolical about it now. It jeered at him and mocked him. Not a muscle of his face moved, and yet upon him swept torrentially again that surge of mingled emotions which finally resolved themselves into one of bitterest fury. It had been bad enough before when Carruthers had telephoned; it was immeasurably worse now in the presence of his murdered friend with that thing on the safe flaunting him in the face. Ray lay here dead on the floor just a few feet away from him, shot down in cold blood—and he, Jimmie Dale, had thrown an impenetrable cloak over the murderer's shoulders!

The police photographer, without pausing in his preparations, volunteered a remark.

"It's the genuine goods, all right!" he stated. "It ain't the first time I've seen it. I've photographed it before, too—the night he bumped off Slimmy Jack at Malay John's; only that time he stuck his damned

advertisement on the dead man's sleeve. Some guy! But, sure as God, the hot seat's waiting for him sooner or later up at the Big House!"

Jimmie Dale made no comment other than to nod mechanically. Then he turned abruptly, and, crossing the room, dropped down on his knees beside the still form on the floor—causing the uniformed man to make a hurried forward movement.

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I know," he said quietly.

His eyes were dry and hard now. Minutely, critically, they searched over the body of his pajama-clad friend, noting its position, imprinting on his mind and memory the details of the scene around him. And then for the second time that night his lips moved silently, and he spoke below his breath.

"I promise, Ray," he said.

He rose to his feet, and turned away.

It was another Jimmie Dale now, a man implacable, the keen, virile brain awake and on the alert. A clue to the actual murderer? Yes, if he could find one in what was transpiring here; but there was also *danger!* There was the *bona-fide* Gray Seal to think of, too!