

CHAPTER VI

SMARLINGHUE

THERE was a thin drizzle of rain, and a mist that was near to fog. Jimmie Dale paused under a street light and consulted his watch. It was half-past nine. Still plenty of time! There were only about another three blocks to go.

He smiled grimly. It was a strange rendezvous that he was about to keep—with his dual self of other days! He was on his way back into the underworld. The Sanctuary again—and Smarlinghue! This was where the trail of the blue envelope was leading him!

Under the wet brim of his hat he pushed his hand across his eyes. His mind was in disquiet—restless. It was full of too many variant things that insisted on intruding themselves one upon the other. Nor could he dismiss or lay them aside. It had been that way all day since early morning when he had opened the blue envelope on which he had counted so much, and had found—nothing!

The blue envelope! That apparently blank piece of paper! A hoax? He shook his head impatiently. How many times must he tell himself that such a premise was absurd and untenable? One did not commit murder for blank pieces of paper! He had never seriously considered that as a solution. There was something too deadly, too far-reaching here to permit of any such

theory being entertained for a moment. True, it kept on recurring in his mind in an insistent sort of way as at least a bare possibility—but he would not admit it to be even that! That envelope and that piece of paper meant something, contained some hidden message, which, if discovered, would not only lay bare the motive for Ray Thorne's murder, but would almost to a certainty disclose the identity of the murderer himself. He was convinced of that.

But what was that message? How was it hidden? He had been unable to find the trace of even a mark on either the envelope or the paper. What, then? The obvious answer was almost too obvious; so much so, in fact, that he had but little faith in it. But what else could it be?

Invisible ink! Faith in it or not, it was the only lead he had, and it had to be probed to a sure conclusion one way or the other. And there at the outset an ironic difficulty had faced him. He dared trust no one to make the tests, for suppose the writing *did* show up—then what? Unless the wording proved to be meaningless to an outsider, how was he to account for the possession of the envelope and paper?—to obtain which would then obviously be known to have been the purpose of Ray Thorne's murderer! He dared not risk the chance that it might prove to be meaningless. But, on the other hand, those tests must be made, and his own knowledge of chemistry was of the most meagre description, just the ragged, remnant memories of college days. Still, the difficulty wasn't quite so insurmountable as it had appeared to be at first glance. There were books at the public library.

He had spent several hours there; and then, to Jason's

disturbed amazement, the den had taken on somewhat the aspect of an embryonic chemical laboratory. All, however, that he had been able to do so far had been to make a few simple experiments with the most common reagents, and the results had been nil. But he was only on the fringe of his experiments—to-morrow he would go on with them.

He had been interrupted in his work by a telephone call from Carruthers. Carruthers had had little if anything new to report. With every newspaper in New York dressed with blatant headlines, and the editorial columns seething with the Gray Seal's reappearance, the police heads, according to Carruthers, fearful for their jobs in the face of the storm of denunciation hurled against them, were throwing every available man into the fray. Exactly! He, Jimmie Dale, had expected no more nor less. He had read a few of the papers. They were all alike—except that perhaps Carruthers' own sheet had been, if that were possible, more venomous than the rest. Carruthers over the phone had also stated that Beaton's story, as had been expected, had been corroborated in every detail by the two girls who had been with him in the taxi. That was about all Carruthers had had to say.

And then, later on in the afternoon, there had come another interruption—but this time one that had immediately caused him to lock away his bottles and phials and turn his energies into quite another channel. Smarlinghue could not be rehabilitated on the spur of the moment without at least *some* preparation!

All day he had been anxiously expecting and waiting for a message from the Tocsin, but when at last it had come its tenor had been of a nature drastically afield

from anything he had even anticipated. It had come in the shape of a note, left, Jason had said, by a messenger boy. It had been very brief, but for that very reason, perhaps, its effect upon him had been all the more dynamic. The words had danced before his eyes as he had read them. They danced before his mental vision now as he walked here along the murky street:

This is terrible! This changes everything! My hope to have kept you from any further participation in the affair is no longer of any avail, for I know now that nothing will hold you back. Mother Margot has arranged that Smarlinghue is to have his old quarters again, and will meet him there at ten o'clock to-night.

Smarlinghue, the Sanctuary, Mother Margot! Names and scenes of the years ago! His brain whirled with it all again. *She* was Mother Margot once more! He had suspected as much. And she had been quite right—nothing would have held him back! Not even if Ray had not been murdered. That she was again living under cover in the underworld would have been enough. But whether he would have gone back as Smarlinghue or not, he had not then decided, for he had hoped before making any definite move in that direction that he would have wrung its secret from the blue envelope. She had made the decision for him. Smarlinghue! The Sanctuary was waiting for him! How had she managed to accomplish that?

But that wasn't all. There was Marie herself—the Tocsin! In a little while now, in just a few minutes, he would be with her again. His pulse quickened at the thought. Did it matter that she would be in the guise of an old hag, and he in that of the down-at-the-heels,

drug-wrecked artist who had had the freedom of every dive in the underworld? Whatever happened this time they would be together. There would not be the days and weeks of ceaseless search for her, when he was constantly tortured with fears for her safety, as there had been in the past!

And then unconsciously Jimmie Dale spoke aloud.

"Thank God for that!" he said.

He flung a swift glance around him. He had come abreast of a tenement of the poorer class. The Sanctuary! The Sanctuary of Smarlinghue's day—replacing the original one that had been burned down over Larry the Bat's head! And here was the narrow, black lane that flanked it. It was not a night for pedestrians. No one was in sight. Jimmie Dale vanished from the street.

How many times in the past had this well-remembered lane stood him in the same good stead! He could not enter the tenement as Jimmie Dale, could he?—*Smarlinghue* lived here!

He moved swiftly—without a sound. It was the Gray Seal of old at work now. Was that board in the fence that bordered the rubbish-littered courtyard at the rear of the tenement still loose? He reached the spot—and smiled queerly to himself in the darkness. There was scarcely *any* fence left at all. Repairs were not an outstanding feature of the neighborhood! Well, so much the better, perhaps!

He slipped through one of the gaping holes, and, hugging the shadows of the tenement, reached the familiar little French window that gave on the courtyard.

And now he stood for an instant listening intently. The clang of a trolley bell came faintly from the Bowery a block away—there was no other sound. He tried the

window. It was unlocked, and opened without effort under his hand. Perhaps it was the Tocsin who had arranged that! In any case it saved him the delay of forcing it.

He stepped inside, stood for another instant listening, his eyes searching through the blackness; then he closed and locked the French window behind him. The French window, in the days of Smarlinghue's former occupancy, was always equipped with a roller shade, a dilapidated affair, so old even then that it was almost falling to pieces. *That* certainly could not have lasted out the years! He felt out with his hand. No—but it had been replaced by another! A miracle!

It was utterly dark. There were no stars, no moon, and the top light over the French window was not even discernible. He stepped silently across the room. The door now! He reached it and again felt out with his hand. It was unlocked, and the key was in the lock on the inside. Whoever it was who had vacated the premises in favor of Smarlinghue had been very decent and considerate about it! Or was it the Tocsin? He locked the door.

He was safe now from any sudden interruption. He could risk a light. It was only a question now of that movable section of the baseboard here near the door, though he had little or no concern about it. The chances were not one in many thousand that the secret had been discovered; and, besides, the Tocsin would have made sure of that before she brought him back here, and would not have failed to warn him if it had been tampered with. He had left "Smarlinghue" there when, as he then believed, he had severed his ties with the underworld forever on that night so long ago now when the

Tocsin and he had made their escape from Blind Peter's unholy dive. He had never come back; but his rent had been paid in advance, so Smarlinghue, as a memory, was not in bad odor with the landlord, who, being a crook of no mean order himself, was accustomed to tenants of far less financial responsibility! The landlord would merely have pinched the few belongings left around the place before renting the room again! He wondered if the present landlord was the same smug Isaacs of yore, and——

But the baseboard! His flashlight traced a line of light along the lower edge of the wall close to where he stood—and stopped—and went out. Jimmie Dale dropped down on his knees, and a moment later grunted in satisfaction. He thrust his hand into the opening he had made. It was quite all right—Smarlinghue's wardrobe and make-up were still there.

He rose to his feet, crossed the room again, and, striking a match, lighted the gas. It was the same wheezy, air-choked gas jet of old that sputtered asthmatically into a blue and yellow flame which only a confirmed optimist would have called illumination, for, except in its immediate neighborhood, it did little more than throw the room into shadowy relief. Jimmie Dale's eyes swept his surroundings swiftly, critically. There in one corner was the same cheap cot bed, and in another the rickety washstand; here in the center was the deal table, and, flanking it, he recognized the two familiar crippled chairs; while, on the floor, the strip of carpet, already but a disreputable rag when he had left it, was now frayed almost to strings. It was the same old Sanctuary—just a little the worse for wear, that was all! Except, of course, that the battered old easel, and

the dirty canvases with their appalling daubs, which were Smarlinghue's contribution to art, were missing. He smiled whimsically, wondering how much old Isaacs had got for them! Well, they would have to be replaced if Smarlinghue took up his abode here for long!

The survey had taken but a second. Jimmie Dale was working quickly now. In a few minutes—at ten o'clock—Mother Margot would be knocking at the door, and she would expect that Smarlinghue would open it. Furthermore, she had certainly not resurrected Smarlinghue without some definite purpose in mind, and quite possibly one that would even call for action in that rôle before the night was out.

He took a small parcel from his pocket and hurriedly began to remove his clothing. What the years had done to Smarlinghue's wardrobe in there behind the baseboard, he could readily guess. The garments would probably be moldy and wholly disreputable. But Smarlinghue had never been anything else but disreputable. That did not matter—the clothes in there would still be clothes. The contents of the make-up box, however, would not have stood so well the ravages of time! The make-up box would need to be replenished with certain accessories. That little parcel he had just placed on the table, though it had taken him several hours to make the purchases, was still not wholly complete—but it contained the essentials.

From behind the baseboard now Jimmie Dale took out Smarlinghue's clothes. They *were* pretty bad; but at least they had held together, and that was the one vital thing. He began to put them on. The patched boots were dried and cracked. They made him wince. The shabby, faded coat, spotted with grease and paint

stains, and always a size too small for him, seemed to have shrunk a little, causing the soiled and frayed wristbands of his shirt to protrude more blatantly than ever. He felt carefully over the back of his coat to satisfy himself that the leather girdle which he had donned before leaving home left no telltale bulge. He shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps he would have no need for those little blued-steel instruments to-night. Who knew? He could tell better when he had talked with Mother Margot. Perhaps all he would need would be, if anything, his automatic, his flashlight—and *this!* He had thrust his hand into the pocket of the tattered coat. Smarlinghue, the drug addict, without his hypodermic syringe might as well not exist at all!

And now the make-up box, augmented by the contents of the parcel he had brought with him, absorbed his attention. He sat down with it in front of the cracked and streaked mirror that the washstand boasted. He worked swiftly, deftly now—and with masterly touch the unhealthy pallor that was Smarlinghue's chief characteristic overspread his face. His wrists received the same attention; his hands became artistically unkempt; with the aid of little distorting pieces of wax Smarlinghue's hollow cheeks, distended lips, and widened nostrils came into being—and then with a final, critical survey of himself in the mirror, he stood up. Down to the last minute detail, the Smarlinghue known of old to the élite of Crimeland and welcomed everywhere in the Bad Lands lived again.

The gas jet sputtered vociferously. Jimmie Dale bowed to it facetiously.

"I take that as applause!" he said.

He carefully folded the fashionably tailored tweeds of

Jimmie Dale, the millionaire clubman, and placed them in the aperture behind the baseboard. The make-up box followed suit; but, as he replaced this latter, he suddenly paused. The clothes had taken up more space than the rags he had removed, and he had been obliged to reach further to one side to find room for the make-up box. His hand had come into contact with a paper-wrapped bundle.

For a moment he frowned—then a little twisted smile crossed his lips. He had quite forgotten! Larry the Bat's clothes! He recalled now the night that he had rehabilitated Larry the Bat, whom the underworld had believed dead—the night that the Magpie had died unpleasantly. It had taken him a great deal of time, and he had had infinite trouble in matching the original clothing of Larry the Bat which had been destroyed. That was what was in the bundle. Well, let it remain there! He had not the slightest expectation of ever bringing Larry the Bat to life again—but, up to less than twenty-four hours ago, he had never thought that Smarlinghue would ever live again, either! One never knew!

He replaced the movable section of the baseboard, and, lighting a cigarette, straddled one of the weebegone chairs. It was almost ten o'clock

Smarlinghue was "at home."