

CHAPTER VII

CROOKS KNOWN OF OLD

JIMMIE DALE had not long to wait. A footstep creaked on the bare boards of the hall without. A knock sounded on the door.

The Tocsin! A wistful light sprang suddenly into Jimmie Dale's dark eyes, but he was slow to the point of exaggeration in his movements as he rose from his chair and scuffled across the room. A whimsical smile came and vanished. The parts men play! This house that harbored the Sanctuary was a house of many eyes and straining ears!

"Who's there?" demanded Smarlinghue gruffly.

"Smarly, is dat youse?" came the answer in the voice he knew so well. "It's me, Smarly. It's Mother Margot."

He unlocked and opened the door. Mother Margot! Just an old hag who stood there! The old hag he had not seen since the night he had carried her unconscious from the gang fight at Blind Peter's before the war! She had not changed any! The years had been kind to Mother Margot—and Smarlinghue! Just the same bedraggled-looking creature that she had always been—the threadbare black shawl pulled hoodlike over her head and clasped tightly around her throat—the gray wisps of hair that straggled over her eyes—the heavy-lensed spectacles—the pinched face that was nore too clear!

Smarlinghue became suddenly gracious.

"Hello, Mother! Come on in!" he invited.

He closed and locked the door behind her—and for a long minute, his hands on her shoulders, holding her at arm's length, his soul in his eyes, he stood looking at her—and then she was in his arms, held tightly there as though he would never let her go again.

"Marie!" he whispered passionately. "Even to have you here! Even to have you like this!"

She drew herself gently out of his arms, and shook her head at him through sudden tears.

"Jimmie," she smiled tremulously, "I shan't look much like Mother Margot, and you won't look much like Smarlinghue either, if you do that again! It—it rubs off, you know!"

"Yes," he admitted ruefully. "Well, then, I won't!"—but her hand was in his as he led her across the room to the chair he had just vacated at the table.

For a moment there was silence between them as she seated herself and his arm stole fondly around her shoulders—and then the Tocsin spoke brokenly out of a full heart.

"Jimmie, there—there aren't any words that mean anything, are there?" she asked piteously. "I—we tried to save him. Perhaps there *was* something else I might have done; perhaps there was another way. Oh, Jimmie, Ray is dead, and I—I——"

"Hush!" he said tenderly. "Ray knows. There is only one woman in the world who could have done so much. I am sure of that even before I have heard your story. What has happened was beyond your power or mine to prevent. You mustn't grieve on that score."

She turned her head away.

"It's awful!" she said beneath her breath. "And-

and we've made it so almost *safe* for the real murderer! Oh, Jimmie, the Gray Seal! What cruel, cruel irony! The police will never find the man now!"

"That's why I'm Smarlinghue again, isn't it?" he returned meaningly.

She faced him, one small hand suddenly clenched.

"Yes!" she exclaimed almost fiercely; then hesitantly: "But even in suggesting that, in taking it on myself to get this horrible place back for you, I'm not sure I've——"

"Wait!" he smiled—and fetching the other chair, placed it opposite to her. "Now," he invited, as he reached out across the table and took both her hands in his, "tell me everything from the beginning—in Paris."

She nodded her head quickly.

"Yes, I will," she said. "Everything! That's what we are here for. But as I told you in my letter last night, there are so many things that I do not understand myself, and I think it would make it much clearer for both of us if I asked you a few questions first."

"All right," he agreed. "Go ahead!"

"Well," she said hurriedly, "the first news I had of—of—that Ray had been murdered was in the morning papers. The Gray Seal was accused of the crime, so I knew of course that you had gone to the house for the blue envelope, and that Ray must have been killed *afterwards* or else you would never have put that gray seal on the safe."

"Of course!" he said. "Also, I got the envelope, and took it away with me. Nothing had happened in the house up to that time. Ray was then, so far as I knew, asleep in his bedroom upstairs."

"Had the envelope been opened?"

"No," he replied, his brows knitting suddenly together; "and that's not without significance, either, is it? It's been more or less in my mind all day."

"Yes, perhaps; but"—she was plying her questions anxiously—"did you open it?"

"Yes," he answered; "but not at once—and I wouldn't have opened it at all under any other circumstances. Carruthers telephoned me what had happened. I went over to Ray's house, and Carruthers and I spent practically all the rest of the night there with the police. With the Gray Seal accused of the crime"—he smiled mirthlessly—"I couldn't very well say I had been there before and had taken a certain blue envelope from the safe, could I? And yet on the face of it that envelope appeared to be the key to the whole mystery. I do not need to tell you that long before your second note came I had made up my mind to see this through. I"—something seemed to rise up suddenly in Jimmie Dale's throat, and he swallowed hard—"I promised Ray I would. When I got back home at daylight this morning I opened the envelope."

"Then tell me, Jimmie"—she was leaning tensely across the table now—"what *was* in it?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?" she echoed faintly.

"A blank piece of paper."

"But—but, Jimmie," she faltered, "that is impossible!"

"It's the bald fact," he stated tersely.

"But it can't be!" she protested wildly. "I know it can't! I'm positive that envelope contained a message, and since you say it hadn't been opened, it must be there

yet. I'm sure, Jimmie! I'm sure! I can't believe that paper is really blank!"

"I've started testing it for invisible ink," he observed quietly. "No luck so far."

"You mean," she said eagerly, "that you think——"

"As you do?" he broke in. "Yes! Even with the little I know, which is practically nothing of what has gone before, I could not logically think otherwise. And while we're on that point, do you know of anything that would lead you to believe there is any significance in the fact that the envelope and paper are blue?"

"No," she replied quickly, "nothing that I know of. In fact, I did not even know that the envelope *was* blue until just a few minutes before I wrote you that note last night. What made you think of that?"

Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders.

"No particular reason. It just occurred to me several times to-day, and I've wondered about it—that's all. Is there anything else you want to ask before we take up your end of it?"

"No"—she shook her head—"but I had counted so much on knowing what was in that envelope. And, as it is now, I'm almost as much in the dark as I was when I left Paris."

"Tell me about it," Jimmie Dale invited reassuringly, "and we'll see."

She remained for a little while thoughtful.

"I hardly know how to begin," she said at last. "You've heard me speak often of Pierre Vidon?"

"The Paris crook you nursed at the front? Yes!"

She nodded her head, smiling a little wanly.

"Yes, I'm afraid he was a crook," she said; "but the apaches did brave things in the war, you know. I liked

him. He was all patience and all courage, and his sufferings were terrible. As you know, we came to be friends, and he told me a lot about his life, and where he lived in Paris. He was finally discharged, you will remember, with a leg and an arm gone, and went back to Paris to live."

"I remember," nodded Jimmie Dale. "And I rather imagine from what you are leading up to that he went back to the old apache life as well, eh?"

"I didn't ask him," she said; "but from the quarter in which he was living, which was one of the vilest in Paris, I do not think there is any doubt about it. Anyway, on my trip over this time, I looked him up and found him very ill and practically unattended in hopelessly squalid surroundings. I wanted to move him to a hospital, or some other place where he would be more comfortable and have better care, but he refused almost violently. He said he had 'reasons.' I thought I could guess what those reasons were, so I did not press my offer. After that I visited him several times, and it was on my last visit to him that—that all this happened."

She paused, toying absently with the heavy-lensed spectacles which she had removed from her eyes.

"Go on, dear!" prompted Jimmie Dale. "I think I'm beginning to see."

"No; I don't think you are." She shook her head. "Pierre Vidon was not personally mixed up in it at all. You are going to hear a lot of familiar names—names that we both knew well in the old Crime Club days—the names of those who knew us too: you, either as Larry the Bat, or Smarlinghue; and me, as either Silver Mag, or the Mother Margot of to-night. Do you remember Boston Bob and Pinky John?"

"Yes, *and* Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret!" Jimmie Dale appended grimly. "The star triumvirate of safe-workers! But Connie was the king-pin of the three!"

Again she nodded her head.

"And I need hardly ask you"—she smiled cheerlessly—"if you remember Daddy Ratzler, who was called Old Pockface behind his back?"

Jimmie Dale whistled low under his breath.

He had known the Ferret's gang in the more recent days of Smarlinghue; but his acquaintanceship with Old Pockface reached back into the years beyond that. He had known and was known to Daddy Ratzler as Larry the Bat. The man was little less than diabolical, and even in those days comparatively rich. The underworld held him in awe—both because he was fiendishly successful in his criminal activities and because they were afraid of him. He had never been caught. He had paid his followers well. Any rat in the Bad Lands would have snatched at any job he offered. Oh, yes, he, Jimmie Dale, in the rôle of Larry the Bat, *yes*, and in that of Smarlinghue too, for that matter, had known the man quite intimately! A musty and unpretentious real estate office just off the Bowery, which actually did a certain amount of legitimate business, had camouflaged Daddy Ratzler's worse than unscrupulous undertakings; and, whether or not the police had ever had any deep-seated suspicions concerning him, he had been too clever for them, and had got away with his double life unscathed. Daddy Ratzler! In those days the established price for bumping off anyone who, for whatever cause it might be, was in the way, was from twenty-five to fifty dollars according to the status and prominence of the victim—Daddy Ratzler always doubled the tariff!

Jimmie Dale's face under Smarlinghue's make-up was suddenly hard and set.

"Is *he* in this?" he demanded.

"There is no question about that," she asserted unhesitatingly; "though I do not think that he or any of his parasites killed Ray. But you will see in a minute. Let me get back to that last visit to Pierre Vidon. It wasn't a nice locality, as you can imagine, and I had never gone there before except in daylight; but this time I was delayed in starting out, and, although it was then almost dusk, I decided to go on since I had promised to see him that afternoon, and I did not want to disappoint him—a sick person counts so much on promises, you know. When I got there it was quite dark outside; and inside, with the passages unlighted, I almost had to feel my way. Pierre's room was at the top of the house—the garret, in fact. I paid my visit to him and started to go downstairs again. I had almost reached the second floor when I heard a man's footsteps coming up the first flight of stairs. I couldn't see him in the darkness, but I didn't need to see him to know that he had been drinking. He was stumbling, and the stair rail creaked as he clutched at it. I very decidedly did not want to meet him, so I started to tiptoe back up the second flight of stairs on which I was standing, with the intention of going back to Pierre Vidon's room, if necessary, until the man was out of the way. But I didn't have to do that as the man only came as far as the second floor, and I stopped again as I heard him pounding on a door. And then I heard him say: 'Heh, Pinky, are youse dere? It's Boston Bob.'

"It came as a shock, Jimmie—I think you can well believe that. 'Boston Bob and Pinky John! For a mo-

ment it seemed as though I was back in some rat hole in New York and was living the old days over again as—well, as Mother Margot—just as I am really doing now. But at that moment I never dreamed that was what I actually would soon be doing once more, and that I would have made up my mind to it within the next few hours.

“I leaned over the stair rail and saw the door open, and in the lighted doorway I saw both men quite plainly for an instant. Boston Bob was a little unsteady on his feet, but he appeared to be far more excited than drunk.

“‘Listen, big boy,’ he told Pinky in a rush, ‘I got somethin’ dat’ll make yer mouth water. Old Pockface is pullin’ de biggest game of his life, an’ he’s got a high-hat guy named Ray Thorne workin’ it wid him.’

“Jimmie, it seemed as though the whole staircase suddenly began to swirl around. Subconsciously I was aware that the two men had gone into the room, that the door had closed behind them, and that it was pitch black around me again; but it was fully a minute, I am sure, and perhaps longer, before I recovered my self-control, *Ray Thorne*, Jimmie! *Ray Thorne* and *Old Pockface*—*Daddy Ratzler*! I think that even you would have been thrown off your mental balance.”

“I am now!” said Jimmie Dale through tight lips. “And then?”

“Then I crept down the stairs and listened at the door. Both because Boston Bob had a few drinks in him and because they were speaking English, which they probably thought wouldn’t be understood even if they were overheard, they weren’t as cautious as they might have been; but, even so, I couldn’t hear every-

thing, for every once in a while they would instinctively resort to whispers.

“Boston Bob was talking again when I got to the door.

“‘Say,’ he was saying, ‘dat guy wot told us we could call him anythin’ we liked so long as we didn’t ask questions, de guy wot we did dat little job fer last week, is Daddy Ratzler’s plentypotenshurary, or whatever youse calls it, to de Republic of France! Wot do youse knows about dat? His name’s Keane—moniker Cokey—Cokey Keane, an’ he’s one of Old Pockface’s gang! Sure! But dat ain’t all—an’ it ain’t half! He got shot up by de policz a few hours ago an’ ducked into my dump. Say, he croaked dere in my arms. He was talkin’ delirious before he cashed in, an’ he spilled his name an’ all de beans in Europe right into my mitt!’

“I lost what was said consecutively after that; the rest came mostly in snatches. I heard Boston Bob say: ‘Sure, de dope’s all in de letter dat Cokey mailed to New York dis afternoon before he got plugged.’ Then, after a confused interchange of words between them: ‘We’ll have to duck our own nuts on account of dat guy doin’ de stiff act in my dump.’ And then I caught this from Pinky: ‘Bo, dis is de swellest layout dat’s ever bust loose, an’ if de goods is straight we’re rich; but we ain’t in New York yet, an’ mabbe Cokey being found in your dump’ll slow us up some on our travels.’ ‘No, we ain’t dere yet,’ Boston Bob answered; ‘but de Ferret is. All we got to do is wise him up to keep his eyes peeled while we’re on de way. Dere’s enough for three in dis, ain’t dere?’

“Of course, there was a lot more, but nothing that gave me any inkling of what was in that letter, or what the nature of the scheme was that Daddy Ratzler was

engineering. You can piece that end of it together as well as I can. I only knew that Daddy Ratzler was engaged in what was apparently, from its international aspect, the biggest criminal operation of his career; and that Boston Bob had stated that Ray Thorne—our Ray Thorne, Jimmie, for there couldn't be any other Ray Thorne that Boston Bob would refer to as a 'high-hat guy', meaning a gentleman—was one of Daddy Ratzler's accomplices.

"Jimmie, when I left that house my brain was whirling, and I was nearly mad with anxiety and fear. What was I to do? What I knew was enough to make me a moral accomplice myself if I did nothing, but I could not communicate with the police because of Ray. I couldn't believe Ray was guilty; but then I began to think how little we knew about him, in spite of the fact that in the short time since you had first met him you had grown so close together. It was possible that he wasn't what he seemed—it was more than possible from what Boston Bob had said. I had to be sure. To have cabled you and cast suspicion on him, which might after all be unfounded, would have hurt you cruelly, and besides you were the last person in the world I wanted to bring into this, if I could possibly avoid it; and, as I said, my hands were tied in so far as the police were concerned. But I had to act. I do not know whether I meant to protect Ray if I found him guilty—I never quite got that far in my own mind. I only knew that I must just make sure, and meanwhile try my utmost to prevent the projected crime, whatever it was, from being carried out. If I could do that, then, even if he were criminally involved and we had to put him out of our lives, no harm would come to Ray. I was very fond

of Ray, too—like you, Jimmie. I did not want any harm to come to him.”

She paused and smiled a little wistfully. Jimmie Dale was frowning, and there was no responsive smile.

“Yes, I know, Jimmie,” she said; “you would never have permitted it for a single instant. But then, you see, dear, you did not know. I think I did what one who had lived so long as Silver Mag and Mother Margot would naturally have done—and especially so since Mother Margot had personally known Daddy Ratzler well enough to make her feel sure she would not have much difficulty in renewing her acquaintanceship with him without arousing any suspicions on his part. Anyway, I did it. I looked up the sailings, made the specious excuses to my friends that I outlined to you in my letter, chose the boat that would reach New York first, and sailed at once. There was even a good chance of beating that letter to New York, as it might easily have been routed some other way and on a slower boat—and I did beat it by two days! I traveled second class to avoid being mentioned amongst the ‘notables arriving’”—she arched her eyebrows naïvely—“and I kept to my stateroom all the way over on the plea of illness as a precaution against meeting or being seen by anyone who knew me. I am sure I arrived in New York without anyone knowing anything about it.”

“And became Mother Margot!” Jimmie Dale summed up a little severely—but the admiration in his dark eyes as they played critically over the haglike creature facing him belied the remonstrance in his voice. “Certainly I would never have sanctioned it if I had known, and I would never have let your courage and unselfishness expose you to any such peril again, if I could have

prevented it; but it is done now—and, at least, please God, you will not face the risks and dangers alone this time. But, quite apart from that, I do not altogether understand. You knew, of course, that I had left Smarlinghue's togs hidden here; but you never told me that you still had those old rags of Mother Margot stowed away somewhere."

"And I didn't have them, either, Jimmie," she answered. "But it was much more simple for me to become Mother Margot again than for you to recreate Smarlinghue without anything to start with. An old black shawl and a shabby black skirt—what is there to that? The gray hairs and the make-up?—yes! But that was simple, too. I bought it all in Paris where I was unknown and where I *wasn't* going to use it. As soon as I had decided what I was going to do, it was only a question of half an hour's visit to a costumer—the pretext a fancy dress party. It was all in my trunk when I landed in New York. After that I had little or no difficulty. There are hundreds of rooms to be had, especially on the lower East Side, as we both know, where not too many questions are asked providing the rent is paid. After a little search I found just what I wanted, a room with easy access to the street that I could get in and out of, just as you can here, with little or no chance of being observed. I moved in with my baggage and paid the rent a month in advance. An hour after that I slipped out of the house as Mother Margot without being seen."

"Where is this room?" Jimmie Dale demanded succinctly.

"You know Dink Moran's old place, don't you, where he combined a so-called 'family' hotel with a saloon that used to be called the Big Tent?"

"I do—very well!" said Jimmie Dale—and frowned again. "But Dink left there in our time and went out to Chicago because New York had got too hot for him."

"I know! Well, of course"—Mother Margot stuck her tongue in her cheek—"it hasn't got a saloon any longer, because there aren't any more saloons since prohibition came in and New York went dry; it's only used as a rooming house now."

"And tougher than ever, I suppose!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale unhappily. "I wish to God you were out of this, Marie!"

"Oh, it's all right, Jimmie," she said reassuringly. "You ought to know by this time that I am quite able to take care of myself. And the place is absolutely ideal for my purpose. Nobody would either know or care if I were away for days at a stretch. And what appealed to me particularly was that side entrance, for even if Mother Margot were seen going in there it wouldn't occasion any comment. Don't you see? My room's the first one on the right—ground floor—side entrance."

"What's the use!" Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Well, go on! What then?"

"Then I went down to see Daddy Ratzler."

Jimmie Dale showed sudden consternation.

"Daddy Ratzler!" he ejaculated. "Look here, Marie, wasn't that placing too many cards on the table? Wouldn't it have been——"

"Wait a minute, Jimmie," she intervened. "I had thought it all out on the way over. I crossed the ocean to get next to Daddy Ratzler, and this seemed the best way to do it—to work in with him if I could. You must remember that I was very much in the dark, and my best chance, I believed, was to connect myself with him

in some way as closely as I could. I depended on Mother Margot's shady reputation of the past to accomplish that—and it did, in the very luckiest kind of a way, Jimmie.

“That real estate office is in the same old dingy little house; and, I might as well tell you now, I soon discovered that he keeps the whole lower floor for himself, and sometimes sleeps there, though where he actually *lives* I haven't as yet found out. When I went in he was alone there at that dirty old desk of his. He knew me at once, and in that squeaky voice of his politely asked me what in hell had brought me there. I told him that I'd beat it out of New York just before the war and that I'd got into trouble out West—but that was all fixed up again, only I was stony broke. He asked me where I was living, and I said nowhere because I'd just blown into town that afternoon—but incidentally, Jimmie, Mother Margot has since hired a room, in case Daddy Ratzler got suspicious and started to check her up.”

“Where?” inquired Jimmie Dale crisply.

She shook her head at him laughingly.

“You'll never have any occasion to go *there*, Jimmie, for it's only a blind, and you're not very likely ever to find Mother Margot at home. But I suppose you won't be satisfied until you know. It's the attic of that hovel where Silver Mag used to live.”

“I congratulate you on your two establishments!” commented Jimmie Dale grimly.

“Now, Jimmie!” she chided. “You know that nothing could be better! But to go on with Daddy Ratzler. He asked me why I'd come to him. I told him that the whole layout had been changed so much since I was

away that I didn't even recognize the Bowery any more, that I hadn't been able to find any of my old pals so far, and that he seemed to be the only one I knew who was in the same old place. Then he asked me again what I wanted, and I told him I wanted a job. He looked at me queerly for a minute. 'What do you mean—*job*?' he said. 'I haven't got any jobs.' 'Aw, say,' I answered, 'dat's all right, I'm even willin' to do some *work* so's to get a few bucks to keep me goin'. Look at dem windows—the place was a pigsty, Jimmie, and I snatched at the idea—'it don't look like any woman had been around here since de house was built. I'll clean 'em for youse, Daddy, an' wash de floors an' do all dat, an' den mabbe when dere's something wid a bit of a rake-off in it like dere uster to be youse won't forget to give old Mother Margot a chance.' Jimmie, he sat there for a minute or two without a word, just staring at me through squinted eyes. He made me think of an ugly old spider 'urking in his web. I don't know what was passing in his mind, but I am quite sure it wasn't pure philanthropy on his part that made him fall in with my suggestion; in fact he intimated as much when he said: 'All right, go to it! You can clean the whole place up. That'll keep you going for a while, and after that perhaps you can make yourself useful some other way.'

"That was the day before yesterday in the afternoon, Jimmie. What I was hoping for, apart from what I might possibly overhear if he had any visitors, was that he would go out and I would get a chance to search the place, not only in the hope of unearthing something that would give me a clue to what was going on, but there was also that letter, which at that time I

naturally supposed had been sent to Old Pockface, though, of course, I didn't know whether it had arrived yet or not.

"But nothing happened that afternoon, and he didn't go out until about six o'clock. He locked up the place and made me leave at the same time. He said he wouldn't be there next morning, and told me bluntly enough that he didn't want me hanging around there alone, so that I needn't come back until he did the following afternoon. That wasn't so good, Jimmie!

"The same thing happened yesterday afternoon. He made me leave when he did at six o'clock. But I *had* to get into the house alone just the same! I had noticed on the previous day that he did not go near the cellar when he lockèd up. I had been down with rubbish several times—for I really was house-cleaning, Jimmie!—and so I knew there was a small window there that opened on the back yard. During yesterday afternoon I loosened the catches on that window.

"I suppose it was nearly nine o'clock when I went back there last night. I did not know whether Daddy Ratzler intended to return or not, but the place was in darkness so I knew that, at least, he wasn't there then. I crawled in through the cellar window and went at once to his desk. I had a small pencil flashlight which I shaded with my shawl. And then, Jimmie, before I had hardly had time to begin my search, something else happened."