

CHAPTER VIII

THE COUNCIL ENDS

THE Tocsin had paused for a moment as though debating how best to express what she had to say; but now she went on again almost hurriedly:

"I heard the back door creak, and for a moment my heart stood still. I thought it was Daddy Ratzler coming in secretly that way for some reason or other. There was no way of escape for me. I could only hide. In the hallway, just at the rear of the office and opposite the bedroom which was the next room to the office, was a small clothes closet. I darted into the clothes closet and closed the door. I heard someone pass by and go into the office. Then I opened the door a crack. I could just see about half the desk through the office doorway. A man was standing there—but it wasn't Daddy Ratzler.

"He was turning over the papers on the desk and carefully replacing them. He had a flashlight, but he was keeping the rays from flooding around the room with his coat just as I had done with my shawl. His back was toward me. I had been watching him for perhaps two or three minutes when he half turned around, stooped over to open a drawer, and the light fell full on his face. Jimmie, it was Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret!"

Jimmie Dale made a quick, impulsive motion with his hand.

"Yes?" he urged under his breath.

The Tocsin smiled mirthlessly.

"He was after the letter, of course," she said, "just as I was; but he didn't get it any more than I did, because, as we know now, it was never there at all. Jimmie, I think it was the Ferret who killed Ray."

"*What!*" Low-toned though it was, Jimmie Dale flung the exclamation tensely, incredulously, across the table.

"Wait, Jimmie! Listen! Just as the Ferret had interrupted me in my search, he was interrupted in turn. His flashlight went out suddenly. I couldn't see anything then, of course, but I could hear him. He came back into the hallway and stood for an instant just beside the clothes-closet door, evidently listening for something which I hadn't heard. Then he stepped into the bedroom. A moment after that the front door of the house opened and closed, and someone came into the office. Then the light went on. It was Daddy Ratzler.

"Jimmie, it was weird, the three of us in the house—I in the clothes closet, the Ferret across the hall in the bedroom, and Old Pockface sitting there at his desk! He seemed to be waiting for something and to be impatient, for he constantly consulted his watch. I don't know how long it was before the front door opened again, but I suppose it couldn't have been more than five or ten minutes though it seemed ages to me. I couldn't see who it was that came into the office then, for my field of vision was very narrow, and the man—I could tell that, of course, from his voice—did not go near the desk. I do not know yet who it was except

that, from what was said, he was obviously an intimate member of Daddy Ratzler's gang.

"I know I'm late," the man said; "but I only got your message a few minutes ago. What's up?"

"Something I couldn't spill over the telephone," Daddy Ratzler answered. "The blue envelope's come!"

"I could hear the man sucking in his breath and swearing jubilantly.

"So he got it off, then, before he croaked!" he exclaimed.

"Sure!" said Daddy Ratzler.

"Where is it now?" the man asked.

"In Thorne's house-safe," Daddy Ratzler replied. "The Angel can doll up and get it in the morning."

"Well, that's all right," the other said, "so long as you're sure you can trust this bird Thorne."

"There's nothing to trust!" Daddy Ratzler snapped. "Have you got to be told that again? He doesn't know any of us, and he never will. He won't even know who he delivers the envelope to. And even if he opened the envelope, it wouldn't do any good, would it?"

"Jimmie, I——"

"Just a minute!" Jimmie Dale broke in, his voice suddenly buoyant and eager. "This clears old Ray! I told you I had been puzzling all day as to why Ray put that envelope in his safe unopened. The rather obvious answer was, of course, that the envelope wasn't for him, and that he was merely acting as an intermediary; but the serious question was whether he was a wholly *innocent* intermediary or not. This proves that he was, thank God!"

"Yes!" she said. "And that was why I told you in my letter I was sure I would be able to supply the police

with enough information within two or three days to put an end to the whole affair, for up to that time, as I have explained to you, I had always the fear that Ray might be criminally involved. But I still do not know how he ever came to be mixed up in it at all."

Jimmie Dale's jaws clamped.

"That's one of many things Daddy Ratzler is going to explain!" he said evenly. "What happened after that?"

"You've heard all of the conversation that really counts," she said. "I won't detail the rest of it. They talked for another ten minutes. Daddy Ratzler said something that I didn't understand about being worried because there had been nothing in some newspaper and so he had telephoned; and then they arranged that the Angel, whoever he or she is, was to go to Ray for the letter next morning—that was this morning. Meanwhile the boys were to be tipped off to get together the next afternoon—that was this afternoon—to make the necessary plans to take care of whatever the message in the envelope called for. So, you see, in spite of that blank piece of paper, there *is* a message there somewhere. Of course, after what happened, the Angel never went to Ray; and I imagine that any meeting which took place was an emergency one held long before the time originally specified. I don't know where these meetings are held—but at some accustomed place undoubtedly, as no reference was made to any address. Anyway, Daddy Ratzler was at his desk all this afternoon, and I can tell you, Jimmie, he's badly shaken up. He was in a state of fury bordering on frenzy, and I think, too, he is not a little frightened—of the Gray Seal."

"Perhaps he's right," said Jimmie Dale in a level

voice. "There'll be a showdown anyway—winner take all! Go on about last night."

"Daddy Ratzler's visitor went away; but Daddy Ratzler stayed at his desk for another half-hour, sometimes writing, but poring mostly over what looked like an account book of some sort. Then, after turning out the light, he too left the house.

"There was still the Ferret, Jimmie. I heard him chuckling wickedly to himself as he stepped out of the bedroom into the hall. 'Juicy pickings, Daddy! Thanks for letting me know!' I heard him jeer. And then I heard him retreat along the hallway and go out by the back door. I waited until he was well away, then I got out of the house the way I had come in—by the cellar window.

"It was then about ten o'clock. I was terribly anxious, Jimmie; and terribly afraid—on Ray's account. Though I now knew him to be innocent and that he was merely being used as a cat's-paw, I had not expected that *he* would have the envelope; and so, then, I did not dare communicate with the police when I discovered it *was* actually in his possession, for I know Daddy Ratzler too well—nothing would have convinced Old Pockface that Ray had not betrayed the trust, as it were, that, even if it were wholly uninvited, had been thrust upon him. Who else but Ray could have known of the envelope, who else but Ray, even if the tip appeared to come from some outside source, could have put the police on the trail! I know Daddy Ratzler. You know him. Nothing would have prevented him from wreaking vengeance on Ray. But if I could not go to the police, I equally could not afford to wait. It was obvious that before morning the Ferret meant to steal the envelope.

And there again Ray was in danger. As I said in my letter, Daddy Ratzler might construe it as a ruse on Ray's part. And, besides all this, it was imperative, in order to prevent the crime that was brewing, that the envelope must not be allowed to get into either Daddy Ratzler's or the Ferret's hands. Do you see?"

"I see," said Jimmie Dale quietly. "And so the only thing left was the old call to arms again—and have the Gray Seal 'steal' it."

"Yes," she said; "for that would safeguard Ray, and at the same time give us possession of the envelope. I couldn't see any other way. I hurried back to my room, wrote that letter, and then took it up to Riverside Drive. I"—she smiled reminiscently—"knew Jason's habits! Jason would give it to you in plenty of time, for the Ferret would certainly not make his attempt until well on in the early morning hours."

"Where did you get that paper and envelope?" demanded Jimmie Dale abruptly.

The color came mounting through Mother Margot's make-up into the Tocsin's cheeks.

"Yes," she said, a sudden shy confusion in her voice, "I knew you would recognize it. I have always kept a little of it in my writing case, but I never dreamed that I would ever use it under the same old circumstances again. I—I suppose you will call me a little goose. It—it was just a queer little conceit of mine. But this matter was of such infinite importance, and the use of that paper would make you understand at once how desperate the situation was! I—I had saved it to write a note, Jimmie, on our wedding day to 'Dear Philanthropic Crook' to tell him that he had all the—the Tocsin's love."

Jimmie Dale was across the table in an instant.

"The make-up, Jimmie! The make-up!" she warned.

"It still looks all right to me," pronounced Jimmie Dale with a critical grin as he finally released her from his arms; and then, instantly serious, as he perched himself on the table beside her: "Now let's see where we stand. First, how did you get this room back for me?"

"There was far less difficulty about it than I had thought there might be," she answered; "in fact, there really wasn't any at all. As I wrote you in my second note, I realized that Ray's murder changed everything, that nothing after that would hold you back; and under those circumstances I, too, changed all my ideas, for I knew I could no longer work alone; and that I could not hope to succeed without your help, Jimmie. The first thing I thought of was the Sanctuary. I came here this morning as Mother Margot. The lodger was a very shabby old man, a musician, he called himself, who goes out fiddling on the streets for a living. I explained that I was an old friend of yours, that you used to have this room, that you had been away for a long time, but that you were coming back. I told him that you were an artist, and that the light here from that French window just suited you."

"Exquisite!" murmured Jimmie Dale modestly.

"Yes—wasn't it! I think he was already sadly behind in his rent, and on the verge of being ejected anyway. He couldn't get away too quickly when I offered to pay the rent and give him an extra ten dollars for himself. Then I saw old Isaacs—and he was delighted. But, of course, prior to all this and before Smarlinghue's name was mentioned, I had to make certain that the secret of

the baseboard over there had never been discovered, as, otherwise, for you to come back as Smarlinghue would have meant exposure and the end of everything. I found, as I expected, that Smarlinghue's clothes were still there, and that nothing had ever been touched! That took only a few moments—while the old fellow was out of the room. I said I wanted to talk business with him, but maybe we could talk better over a bottle of beer—if he knew where to get it. He knew! So I gave him the money, and out he went. That's all there was to it."

Jimmie Dale nodded approvingly—and then his brows drew together.

"That cable you sent me giving the name of the ship and the date you would reach New York, and that I told all our friends about!" he said. "You are supposed to be back in a few days; but it's almost a negligible chance now that this will be cleared up in a few days! It's a case of explaining that I've received another cable saying that you have been unavoidably detained on the other side, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," she admitted reluctantly.

"All right!" Jimmie Dale's voice was quick, incisive now. "Let's sum up! First and foremost, in view of the fact that Ray apparently was voluntarily going to deliver that envelope to one of Daddy Ratzler's emissaries this morning, there is no reason why Daddy Ratzler or any of his gang should have killed Ray, and they therefore would logically appear to be innocent of any participation in the actual murder. On the other hand, from what you saw and heard, we are morally certain that the Ferret intended to go to Ray's house last night to steal that envelope. That means he must

have received a communication from those two precious pals of his in Paris, and it seems almost a certainty that he is the guilty man. That is what you said—and I have no more doubt about it than you have. I just want to get all the points into clear focus. Very well! We start with the assumption—more than the assumption: the belief—that the Ferret, being surprised in the house, killed Ray in order to escape—but it is another thing to *prove* it.”

“Yes,” she said a little faintly.

“That will be my job,” Jimmie Dale stated in quiet tones.

“How are you going to do it?”

The corners of Jimmie Dale’s lips drooped into a hard smile.

“The Ferret used to know Smarlinghue more or less casually in the old days,” he answered; and then, with a whimsical lift of his shoulders: “I’ll *cultivate* him! It’s early yet, and if I can find him I’ll begin to-night.”

“And I?” she asked. “What am I to do?”

“You keep on cultivating Daddy Ratzler,” he replied, with a short laugh. “The Ferret may be the murderer; but, even so, neither he nor his pals may ever have imagined that the blue envelope contained apparently only a blank sheet of paper, and it is quite a fair supposition that none of them may know how to dig the secret out of it. Daddy Ratzler does. I can’t turn it over to the police—and the police might not be able to solve it anyway. That cursed thing is responsible for Ray’s murder, and Daddy Ratzler and his crowd are as guilty as the man who fired the shot—and they are going to pay too! But to make them pay, we’ve got to know what game they’re up to—and to know that we’ve got

to know what the message is that the blue envelope contains. I'm not through with it myself; in fact, I've only begun the tests—but I'm neither an expert nor a chemist, and I'm not at all optimistic that I shall get anywhere along that line. Besides, I haven't got very much faith that there's any invisible writing about it at all! But so far as that is concerned, I think we've got a little time in our favor. Daddy Ratzler and his brood were certainly waiting for that message—which they still haven't got!—before making a move; but, even after they knew it was in New York, it obviously did not demand immediate action or else they would not have been content to allow it to remain in Ray's safe overnight. I think that's worth something to us. Anyway, you stick to Daddy Ratzler."

"Yes," she said—and rose from her chair. "It must be close to eleven if not later, and if you're going to try to find the Ferret to-night, you'll need all the time there is. I'll go now."

He started with her toward the door—but as his arm went around her he felt her shiver suddenly.

"What is it? What's the matter, Marie?" He asked anxiously.

She turned her head away.

"I'm afraid," she admitted in a whisper.

He halted her, staring incredulously into her face.

"*You*—afraid!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Jimmie, sometimes," she answered. "You—you *will* be careful?"

He held her close to him.

"Afraid—for me, you mean!" he whispered back. "And yet, God knows, it is you who are in the greater danger."

"Oh, no!" she answered. "You must remember that Daddy Ratzler knows the Gray Seal has that blue envelope. It won't be the police alone who are trying to track you down. Daddy Ratzler and his pack won't leave a stone unturned to uncover the Gray Seal."

He laughed at her inspiritingly.

"Of course, they won't!" he said. "But hasn't it always been that way? Was there ever a time when the Gray Seal wasn't the one and only link that ever bound the police and underworld together in a common cause? You know that, Marie. Of course, there's danger—only fools would shut their eyes to that fact; but Daddy Ratzler isn't a bit more dangerous than any of the others have been. You are not to worry, and you are not even to think about it from that angle. There!"—his arms tightened around her—"you are not frightened any more, are you?"

"I was just a little coward for a moment, Jimmie." She smiled up at him tremulously as she drew herself away. "Sometimes it comes like that—suddenly. It's all over now. Where are you going to look for the Ferret? Everything in the underworld we once knew is all changed now."

"Not everything," he said with a queer smile. "There are some of the old places that even prohibition, and the bootleggers, and the new breed of crooks in evening clothes will never change. I'll find him. But about ourselves! How are we going to keep in touch with each other?"

"I know how to reach you, Jimmie," she said, as she moved on again toward the door; "and there's a telephone in my 'hotel'—ask for Agnes Watkins, and——" She had opened the door abruptly and stepped outside.

“Night, Smarly! See youse again!” she called huskily from the hall, as her footsteps scuffled hurriedly away.

He stood there a little dazed for a moment—and then mechanically he shut the door as understanding came. That sudden confession of fear—for him! She had been nearer to the breaking point than he had realized—and flight had been her one way of escape.