JIMMIE DALE
AND THE PHANTOM CLUE

Frank L. Packard

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DOORS OF THE NIGHT

PAWNED

THE WHITE MOLL

FROM NOW ON

THE NIGHT OPERATOR

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE

THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE

THE WIRE DEVILS

THE SIN THAT WAS HIS

THE BELOVED TRAITOR

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN

THE MIRACLE MAN

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JIMMIE DALE AND THE PHANTOM CLUE

BY

FRANK L. PACKARD

AUTHOR OF "DOORS OF THE NIGHT," "PAWNED," "FROM NOW ON," "THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF JIMMIE DALE," ETC.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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JIMMIE DALE AND THE PHANTOM CLUE. I

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— I —

THE TOCSIN

THE boat drifted on. In the distance a ferry churned its way across the river. From the farther shore the myriad lights of Brooklyn flung a soft glow into the sky, like a canopy between the city and the night.

And in the boat two figures merged as one in the darkness.

"Marie!" Jimmie Dale whispered. His arms tightened about her. "Marie!"

She made answer by a little pressure of her hand.

He looked behind him—in toward the nearer shore. Somewhere back there, somewhere amongst those irregular outlines that thrust out points of deeper darkness into the black, mirror-like surface of the water, was the old pier from beneath which they had escaped, and, above the pier, the shed where but a little while ago—or was it hours, or a lifetime ago?—Clarke, alias Wizard Marre, alias Hunchback Joe, had played his last card, and lost.

A grim smile touched Jimmie Dale's lips. Inside that shed the secret service men had found their quarry—dead. They were there now. In their hands lay the evidence that solved the murder of Jathan Lane; and in their hands, too, was the murderer himself—only Wizard Marre had taken the easier way, and was dead.

Jimmie Dale's smile softened. Inside that shed at the present moment there was commotion enough and light

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enough; but he could hear nothing, and he could see no light. The Tocsin here and himself were too far away. Too far away! Yes, that was it—at last! Too far away from the old life—forever. The road of fear lay behind them, and she was free, free to come out into the sunlight again. She had said so herself in that letter he had read at the club only a few hours ago. Free! Life lay before them now—and love. With the death of Wizard Marre there could now be an end of his, Jimmie Dale's, own rôles of the Gray Seal, and Larry the Bat, and Smarlinghue, and —no, not hers as the Tocsin, that could never change or terminate, for she would always be the Tocsin to him.

The Tocsin! Memory came surging upon him. That night in the long ago, before he had ever seen her, when he had known her only as the woman who addressed him as "Dear Philanthropic Crook" in those mysterious notes of hers that, supplying the data on which he had acted, the data for those "crimes," where no crime save that of rendering abortive the crimes of others had ever been, had made the name of the Gray Seal anathema to police and underworld alike; that night when, besides a note, he had also found a gold seal ring of hers, a dainty thing that bore a crest, a bell surmounted by a bishop's mitre, and underneath, in the scroll, a motto in French: *Sonnez le Tocsin!* It had seemed so apt! Ring the Tocsin! Sound the alarm! Always her notes had done that—calling the Gray Seal to arms that some one else might be the better or the happier for what she bade him do. The Tocsin! The word had seemed to visualise her then, and, knowing her by no other name, he had called her—the Tocsin.

She stirred a little in his arms.

"What time is it, Jimmie?" she asked.

He shook his head. Time! What did time matter now? To Marie LaSalle, who once had lived in hourly peril of her life as Silver Mag in the days of the old Crime Club, and later, yes even until to-night, had again been forced to live under cover of some rôle which she had never divulged to him and which he had never penetrated; and to him, Jimmie

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Dale, in whose ears need never sound again that slogan of the underworld, "Death to the Gray Seal!" that reached to every nook and corner of the Bad Lands—to her and to him what did time count for now, save as a great, illimitable mine of happiness, a wealth beyond all telling that they were to spend *together!*

She spoke again:

"What time is it, Jimmie?"

And now he answered her.

"I don't know," he said happily. "It was just midnight when the shed back there was raided. Since then there hasn't been any such thing as time, Marie."

"Listen!" she said.

From somewhere across the water, faintly, a tower clock struck the hour.

"One o'clock!" she exclaimed, as though in dismay. "We must be getting ashore. I—I did not think it was so late. And please, Jimmie, I'd like to row the boat. I—I feel quite—quite cold."

He felt her shiver a little in his arms.

"Cold!" he echoed anxiously; and then, as he released her: "All right, if you really want to. It isn't very far. And I guess it's safe now. Pull in and skirt along the shore until we can find some good place to land."

She nodded as she picked up the oars, then turned the boat's head in toward the shore and began to row.

Jimmie Dale moved back into the stern of the boat and settled himself in his seat. He watched her, drinking in the lithe, graceful swing of her body, the rhythmic stroke of the heavy oars. He could not see her face for the night shadows hid it, but he could see the poise of her head and the contour of the full, perfect throat. And he clasped his hand behind his head, and a great happiness and a great peace fell upon him.

It seemed somehow as though the voyage of this little boat in which they had fled out here into the night for safety epitomised a voyage of great immensity that had begun in the very long ago, a voyage of interminable night

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through which his eyes had been straining and his soul had been yearning for a glimpse of the beacon light that should signal the approach to a wondrous Port of Dawn. And now the voyage was almost at an end. Marie there at the oars, and the peace and quiet around them, was the beacon light at last; and they could no more lose their way because the way was charted now to that Port of Dawn where there was no more any strife and peril and sordid crime, and where only love was.

He smiled at his fancy, and suddenly laughed out into the night.

"Keep in a little to the right, Marie," he called. "There's something that looks like a low wharf ahead that ought to do."

"Yes; I see it," she answered.

Jimmie Dale sat abruptly upright in his seat. Perhaps it was only the rasp and creak of the oars in the rowlocks, but it had sounded so *human*—like a short, quick, suppressed sob. He leaned forward.

"Was that you, Marie?" he asked quickly. "What is it?"

He could not see her face. Her voice came back to him steady and untroubled:

"Nothing, Jimmie."

Across the night, far up above them and in the distance, a great bridge stretched from shore to shore, its arc of sparkling lights like a tiara crowning the brow of the heavens. Faintly there came the roar of traffic, ever restless, ever sleepless. A trolley clanged its way unseen somewhere near the shore which the boat was now rapidly approaching; and here, where the lights showed but sparsely, many buildings, small and large, loomed out in queer, grotesque and fanciful shapes.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes lighted. All this was as it always was and always had been—only it was *changed*. It held a promise now that it had never held before. He felt his pulse beat quicken.

The Port of Dawn!

"Here we are, Marie!" he cried.

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The bow of the boat touched the edge of a low wharf—and then Jimmie Dale, like a man stunned, bewildered, his mind and brain in turmoil and riot, was standing up in the stern of the boat. Quick, like a flash, the Tocsin had lifted the oars from the rowlocks, flung them away in the water, and, springing to the string-piece of the wharf, had pushed the boat out again.

"Jimmie! Oh, Jimmie!" Her voice reached him in a low, broken sob. "There was no other way. It's in your pocket, Jimmie. I put it there when—when you were—were holding me."

"Marie!" he cried out wildly. "In God's name, what are you doing, Marie!" He flung himself upon his knees and began to paddle furiously with his hands. "Marie!" he cried again.

A shadow flitted swiftly along the wharf shorewards; it grew filmy and mingled with a thousand other shadows—and was lost.

She was gone! The Tocsin was gone—as she had gone so many times before. He paddled on with his hands, but the act was purely mechanical. Gone! A cold chill was at his heart; an agony of fear seized upon him. Gone—when life in all its fulness . . . Gone! Why? An abyss seemed to yawn before him.

After a time the boat bumped against the wharf. He sprang out and ran madly to the shore. He found himself groping like a blind man amongst buildings, in alleys, along dimly lighted streets. And then suddenly he stood still with the consciousness of stark futility upon him. Had he learned no lesson from the past? It was useless to search for her. He might have known that from the first! He *had* known it, only—only things had seemed so *changed* to-night.

Fear took its toll of him again. It brought the sweat beads out upon his forehead. *Fear for her*. Subconsciously he realised now that something, somewhere, had, after all, gone wrong to-night; that she was still in danger, a danger that she still meant he should not share: No other reason

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save that brave, unselfish love of hers would have prompted her to this.

"It's in your pocket, Jimmie." Her words came back to him.

He searched quickly, and with a sharp little cry of pain drew out a sealed envelope. Under a street lamp in a deserted street, he tore it open. Words that he had never thought to see again danced unsteadily before his eyes.

"Dear Philanthropic Crook—since you *must* be that again," he read. "I do not know under what circumstances you will receive this. I only know that before the night is over I shall be with you, and we will be together—for a little while. And, Jimmie, I am writing this instead of telling you what I must say, because I am afraid of myself and our love, afraid that I would not be strong enough to hold out against the plea of our hearts that at all costs we should remain together, and against your arguments, and perhaps against your physical restraint—for you *are* masterful, Jimmie. I cannot bring you any more into the shadows in which I know now I must live again. I must not, Jimmie; for it might only too well mean your certain destruction, the certain revelation to both the police and the underworld that the Gray Seal and Larry the Bat and Smarlinghue are none other than Jimmie Dale, the Riverside Drive millionaire and clubman. You see, I am writing without reserve, putting upon paper what has never been put upon paper before, because I know that in some way I shall personally place this letter in your possession, and that no other hands shall touch it and no other eyes shall see it save yours and mine.

"I am writing this half an hour before midnight, while I am waiting for midnight to come with its disclosure at the old junk-shop on the East River that Hunchback Joe is Wizard Marre—and Clarke. And only a day or so ago, Jimmie, I wrote you another letter telling you that once Clarke was in the hands of the police I would be safe for always. And Clarke *will* be caught to-night, and you will believe that a new world stretches before us, and that all our hopes and aspirations are to come true at last, and you will be happier perhaps in that moment than you have ever been before. Oh, Jimmie, it is so hard even to *write* this, for I love you so; but it is because I do love you with all my heart and soul and life that I will not, shall not, must not let a breath of suspicion exist that there is anything between Marie LaSalle and Jimmie Dale. God keep and guard you! I shall pray always and always for that.

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And some day, some time perhaps—no, not perhaps, but surely, surely . . .

"Jimmie, I did not mean to write like this. Listen! You know, through the letter to which I referred above, why during all these past months I have 'disappeared.' You know that I was the *only* one who could identify Clarke as one of the leaders of the old Crime Club, and that it was a question of my life or his. You know that he went into hiding, and that there followed attempt after attempt upon my life. And then I 'left the city for an extended trip,' as my bankers informed you. And while you sought to find me, which, for the same reasons that still exist to-night, I could not let you do, I fought Clarke under cover with his own weapons. A few days ago I believed I had won; it seemed only a question of hours. I had placed Clarke in his true person as Marre, the shyster lawyer, and in his other alias as Hunchback Joe. And then suddenly, as though he had never existed, I lost him.

"You now know why. He and some of his band were at work under the bank making that opening into the president's private office that resulted this afternoon in the murder of Jathan Lane. I was too late to prevent that, but almost immediately afterwards I picked up Clarke's trail again. I found out that in some way, to cover their own tracks, to end all investigation, false evidence was somehow to be planted, and that to bear this out another murder was to be added to that of the bank president. Jimmie, what could I do? I could not stand passively aside, even when by so doing my own victory was assured. I had to go on. It was to save a man's life. There was a way to get the information necessary to forestall them, though it involved a risk that I would otherwise never have taken. In a measure I succeeded; I learned how the papers and money, and the blackjack with which the murder was committed, were to be placed in Klanner's, the bank janitor's, trunk in his boarding house, and that the man was to be lured into Baldy Jack's dance hall, where, in a riot staged for the occasion, their victim, apparently an innocent bystander, but with his reputation further blasted by being found in that unsavory resort, was to be shot. A dead man could refute no false evidence! I managed to get word to you, and, thank God, in time. But *I* was caught—and in my own character of Marie LaSalle. I was carried to one of Clarke's lairs, and left there a prisoner. They meant to finish me when the rest of the night's work was over.

"But I must hurry on, Jimmie. It is getting late.

"As I shall have been with you for a little while before you will have read this, you will know of course that I escaped. I have no time now to tell you how. The details do not matter. What matters is this: That while, before, Clarke was the only one

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who had any concern in putting me out of the way, and that for his own personal safety, that enmity is now transferred to an even more formidable enemy—those, and particularly one, who during the last year have been associated with Clarke. They will be actuated by two motives. First, revenge for the trap that will place Clarke in the hands of the police for the murder of Jathan Lane, and revenge for my interference in their attempt upon Klanner; and, second, the fear—a much more potent motive—that I know far more about them and who they are than I really do, the fear that I am in possession of all the knowledge needed to place them too behind the bars of the death house in Sing Sing. I do not know them, Jimmie—except one man, and that man I am not sure of at all. He is a bigger, brainier, far more crafty man than ever Clarke was, and far more powerful. There are times when I think I know him, and times when I am equally sure that I do not. I have come to call him the Phantom. If I am right, he has a score of aliases, a score of domiciles, and possesses the facility of appearing convincingly in each one of a bewildering number of different characters. I said that they had caught me in my own person. I do not need to tell you now, Jimmie, that if I were to go back to New York and resume my life as Marie LaSalle it would but be going to certain death.

"Just one thing more. I do not believe that the bank's papers, valuable as they were, that they took from Jathan Lane in his office, were the sole motive for his murder; indeed, I am not sure that they were the *real* motive. I do not know, of course. But I overheard snatches of something about a safe at Jathan Lane's house to-night at two o'clock, something that was to have its fulfilment later in a rendezvous at half-past three with an old acquaintance of yours, one Gentleman Laroque. I may be quite wrong; it may be that, even if I am right, my escape and Clarke's capture would effectually put a stop to anything further they might have schemed to do; but if there *is* anything in it, and if they go on, there will be others at Gentleman Laroque's who are not expected—the police. I will see to that. And so, perhaps, Jimmie, even to-night, after all, something may happen that will point the way to this Phantom and those with him—and to happiness for us.

"And now you must not be too anxious, Jimmie. In a measure I am safe. They have never penetrated the rôle which I have been playing, and I do not think they ever will. And you are going to help me, too, Jimmie, whenever—oh, Jimmie, those old days!—whenever I can 'sound the Tocsin' without allying you with me in the eyes of those upon whom Clarke's mantle has fallen."

Jimmie Dale raised haggard eyes. The signature seemed somehow blurred. "Marie . . . Marie . . .!"

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— II —

FOR a time Jimmie Dale stood motionless under the light, then he started automatically on along the street. He tore the letter into small fragments and the fragments into tiny shreds as he went along. The world seemed a void. No, not that! It was more as though fate jeered at him ironically. He was exactly, in respect of the Tocsin and in respect of the fulfilment of his hopes and plans, where he had been yesterday and a thousand yesterdays ago.

He walked on. The tiny shreds of paper, a few at a time, fluttered from his fingers and were lost. Mechanically he found himself boarding a street car. Thereafter he sat, his strong jaw clamped and hard, staring out through the window.

Who was the Phantom?

Twice, at long intervals, he changed cars. Finally, far uptown, he alighted, and, traversing several blocks, paused in front of a large corner house in a most select and exclusive neighbourhood. Ostensibly, had any one been observing his movements, he had paused in order that, under the street lamp, he might consult his watch. It was a quarter of two. A smile, half grim, half whimsical, as though he were suddenly aroused from some deep reverie to actual physical reality, flickered across his lips. The house on the corner was the residence of Jathan Lane, the bank president, who had been murdered that afternoon.

Jimmie Dale replaced his watch, and nonchalantly turned the corner; but the dark, steady eyes were alight now, sweeping the side street in every direction. His glance detected

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and held for a bare instant on the black mouth of a lane that showed at the rear of Jathan Lane's house. Jimmie Dale edged toward the inner side of the pavement, still walking nonchalantly. And then, gradually merging more and more with the shadow of the house itself, he came abreast of the lane—and the street was empty. A moment more, and lithe, active, silent as a cat in his movements, he had swung himself over a fence; still another moment, and lost utterly in the shadows of the porch, he was crouching at the basement door of the house.

It was Jimmie Dale, the Gray Seal again, in action now. From under his vest, from one of the multitudinous little upright pockets of that leather girdle where nestled an array of vicious blued-steel implements, a compact burglar's kit, he selected a pick-lock. From another pocket came a black silk mask. Jimmie Dale slipped the mask over his face, and leaned closer to the door. For perhaps five seconds the slim, sensitive fingers were at work, then the door opened noiselessly, and closed again, and was locked behind him.

He stood silent, motionless—listening. There was no sound. Apart from the staff, there should be no one in the house. The papers had overlooked few details in their account of the murder that afternoon. Mrs. Lane was away in Europe, and they had taken the body of Jathan Lane to the house of his married daughter. Under the mask there came again that grim flicker to Jimmie Dale's lips. There were only the servants then—since it was not yet *two o'clock!*

The round, white ray of a flashlight stabbed through the blackness, vanished, and blackness fell again.

"Stairs ahead and to the right," Jimmie Dale confided to himself. "Servants' quarters on top floor probably; only the cellar and storage here."

The flashlight played steadily, impudently now, pointing the way upstairs; and, as silent as the ray itself, Jimmie Dale followed. As he reached the head of the stairs he found a closed door before him. The light went out. He listened again; then, in the darkness, he opened the door and stepped through. Again he listened. Still there was no sound. The

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flashlight winked once inquisitively—then darkness again. He was standing at the rear of the hall. The basement stairs came up under what was evidently the main staircase.

And now a shadow flitted with incredible swiftness here and there; and doors opened, and some were closed again, and some were left open—and there was no sound. And presently Jimmie Dale stood again at the rear of the hall. He could command the open door that led to the basement stairs; and along the hall, where a slight rift in the blackness made by the plate glass panels was distinguishable, he could command the front doors.

He nodded in quiet satisfaction to himself. Jathan Lane's safe was in a sort of private den or office that opened off the rear of the library, and portières hung between the two rooms; each room had a door opening off the hall, and both doors stood open now. A clock struck somewhere in the house. His lips tightened. It was two o'clock.

Alert, tense, he listened—listened until the silence itself throbbed and beat at the ear drums, and palpitated, and made noises of its own.

There wasn't much chance. He knew that. After what had happened that night, unless under extraordinary conditions, Jathan Lane's safe should be the most inviolate piece of property to be found anywhere in New York. And even if any one came, the corollary of whatever held its premise in that safe was to be found at Gentleman Laroque's, and the Tocsin had said that the police would be warned in time. Yes, he understood. She had obviously made no effort to render anything abortive here at the source, for the very reason that she hoped it would but lead to the trap she would have prepared at Gentleman Laroque's. Her attitude had been quite logical, quite plausible. So why was *he* here?

Jimmie Dale's hands clenched at his sides. The answer was simple enough, and yet, too, in its very self seemed to hold a world of mockery and, yes, even futility. He was here to pick up the threads of yesterday and of those thousand yesterdays gone—anything—the grasping at any straw that might bring him into that arena where she was battling

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for her life, and from which, striving to shield him, she sought to bar him out.

He could not very well pick up those threads at Gentleman Laroque's, if indeed there were any threads *to* pick up, for the simple reason that the police would be there! And so he was *here*.

Gentleman Laroque! His brow furrowed. Yes, he remembered Gentleman Laroque—and Niccolo Sonnino—and a certain night that had so nearly cost young Clarie Archman his life. So Gentleman Laroque was in this new combine! Gentleman Laroque had played the rôle of safe-breaker that other night—but Gentleman Laroque had missed his calling, whether as a safe-breaker or as the gang leader that he was. He would have made an infinitely better confidence man, for he was educated, suave, and, when it suited him, polished to a degree; he possessed all the requisites, and, in abundance, the prime requisite of all—a cunning that was the cunning of a fox. Also he, Jimmie Dale, remembered something else about Gentleman Laroque; he remembered Gentleman Laroque's last words to the Gray Seal on that night in question, and now here in the darkness, waiting for he knew not what, with Laroque emerging so unexpectedly from the past, those words, hoarse in their rage and elemental fury, seemed to ring again with strange significance in his ears: "You win to-night, but we'll get you yet! Some day we'll get you, you cursed snitch, you——"

What was that?

The sound came neither from below through the open door of the basement staircase, nor yet from the front doors along the hall. The sound persisted. It was like the gnawing of a rat. And then Jimmie Dale placed its general location. It seemed to come from outside the house, and in direction from the little den or office at his right that contained the safe. He moved stealthily to the doorway, and, still in the hall, protected by the door jamb, peered into the darkness of the room. He could see nothing.

But now the sound was still more clearly defined, and he placed it exactly. Rather than a gnawing, it was a scratching

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at the wall outside and below the window; and as it continued it seemed at times to grow almost human with impatience and irritability as it quickened its tempo.

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale turned his head. Imagination? No, there was another sound—and it, too, now repeated itself, low, cautious, stealthy. Some one was creeping down the third story stairs from the top of the house.

For an instant Jimmie Dale stood without movement, then a hard, quick smile compressed his lips. That scratching sound outside the window, which still persisted, had not been loud enough to *awaken* anybody. It was rather curious, rather singular! His ears, acute, trained to the slightest sound, caught the footfalls coming now along the upper hall, still low, still cautious and stealthy—and Jimmie Dale slipped across the threshold, and in an instant had passed into the library and was crouched behind the portières that hung between the two rooms.

A minute passed. A tread creaked softly on the main staircase; then a form bulked in irregular outline in the doorway of the little den, paused for the fraction of a second, came into the room, closed the door, and glided swiftly to the window. The window was cautiously opened. There was the soft *pad* of feet as a man crawled through and dropped to the floor. A hoarse whisper vibrated through the room.

"Damn it, why didn't you keep me there all night?" a voice demanded angrily. "You didn't go to *sleep*, did you, or *forget* to leave the window of your room open so's you could *hear?*"

Another voice answered. The words came in a choked, broken way, as though with great effort:

"No; I—I didn't go to sleep. Not likely! I heard you the minute you came, but—but I couldn't help it. I had a —a bit of a turn. I came as soon as I could. I—I was sick."

A ray of a flashlight lanced through the blackness. It played on the tall, gaunt figure of an old, gray-haired man arrayed in a dressing gown, and on a face that was drawn and pallor-like in colour.

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Then darkness again.

Behind the portière, Jimmie Dale's face suddenly hardened. There were little gray "mutton-chop" side whiskers, that was the only change. He recognised the man in an instant. It was the "Minister," alias Patrick Denton, one of the cleverest "inside" crooks that had ever infested New York. The man, pronounced an incurable heart case, and even then supposed to be in a dying condition, had been pardoned two years ago while serving a sentence in Sing Sing. Since then he had dropped out of sight; and indeed, generally, was supposed to be dead.

There was a callous grunt from the man at the window.

"Well, you look it!" said the man. "And that's no lie!" He laughed shortly. "And maybe it's a good thing. You could get away with the faithful-butler-mourning-for-his-dead-master stuff without batting an eyelid, if you had to."

There was no answer.

Jimmie Dale's hand slipped into his pocket and came out again with his automatic. So that was it! He began to understand. The Minister was back at his old inside game again—this time in the rôle of Jathan Lane's butler!

The man who had crawled in through the window spoke again—sharply now:

"Well, let's get busy! We've lost too much time, as it is. If a light's safe, shoot her on; we can work quicker that way."

"Yes," said the Minister. "It's—it's safe enough." He stifled a cough. "The rest are all asleep; and on account of what happened this afternoon, I had every shade in the house drawn. I——" He broke off with a quick gasp, as coincident with the faint click of an electric-light switch, a single, shaded incandescent on the desk in front of the safe went on. "You!" he exclaimed. "I—I thought it was to be Hunchback Joe."

The fold of the portière in Jimmie Dale's hand drew closer in against the edge of the wall projection until there was left but the veriest crack. A pucker came and nested in little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. He was not so sure,

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after all, that he had begun to understand. In view of the Tocsin's letter, he did not understand at all. The man who stood there in the room beside the Minister, the man with the cool, contemptuous black eyes, the thin, cunning lips parted in a grim smile, was Gentleman Laroque.

"So it was," said Laroque coolly. "You've got it straight. Hunchback Joe was to come here for the sparklers, smear the trail by bringing them back to me, and then I was going to slip them to old Isaac Shiftel. But Hunchback Joe couldn't come, and as it's a rather fussy job I didn't dare trust any one else, so I came myself. I'll take them direct from here to Shiftel's."

The pucker cleared from Jimmie Dale's eyes. Shiftel—old Isaac Shiftel—the fence! The man was an outstanding figure in the underworld! Yes, he *did* begin to understand. But for once, for the first time since those days in the years gone by when the Tocsin had begun to sound those "calls to arms," the Tocsin was astray. It was not her fault. It was nothing that she could by any possibility have foreseen. Only as matters now stood the police trap at Laroque's would be abortive—it should have been at Isaac Shiftel's! Jimmie Dale's lips pressed together. Well, he knew where Isaac Shiftel lived, and instead of the police, it would perhaps be——

Jimmie Dale's mental soliloquy ended abruptly. The Minister was walking with weak, unsteady steps across the room, groping at the desk for support, and speaking as he went.

"There isn't anything the matter, is there?" he asked anxiously. "I mean nothing's gone wrong with that other thing to keep Hunchback Joe away? He's safe, isn't he?"

An oath fell softly from Gentleman Laroque's lips. He still smiled; but the cool contempt had gone from his eyes, and in its place was a smouldering passion.

"Wrong?" he echoed. "No; nothing's gone wrong, except that the whole plant is blown, the papers pinched by the police, and Hunchback Joe is dead."

"What's that, you say?" The old man swayed on his feet, his face a ghastly white. "Dead! You said—dead? I——"

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Jimmie Dale straightened up involuntarily. The old man was undeniably ill, desperately ill. He had reeled and would have fallen had not Laroque caught him and placed him in a chair.

"Brandy!" the old man gasped. "Over there—on—on that cabinet."

Laroque procured the stimulant. The Minister gulped it down eagerly. It seemed to revive him. He stared anxiously at Laroque.

"How—what—what happened?" he whispered hoarsely.

"The police were tipped off by some one you don't know, and by some one you do," said Laroque between his teeth. "The some one you know was—the Gray Seal."

"My God!" The white face was set with fear. "The police—and—Hunchback Joe dead! We—we can't go on with this—we'd——"

"We couldn't if Joe *weren't* either trapped or dead," Laroque broke in sharply. "Pull yourself together! We've no time to waste. Don't you understand? It's *safer* than ever it was! If Klanner, the bank janitor, had got his, and the fake evidence had been found the way we planted it, this little deal here to-night was all tucked away neat enough. But Klanner's skin was saved, by luck as we thought then, though we know better now, and that put everything up in the air as far as *this* was concerned—until the police copped Joe with the goods, and Joe snuffed out. That gave them the motive again for the murder this afternoon, and gave them the man who did it. The case is closed now tighter than we figured it could be sewed up even in the first place. Get me?"

The old man shook his head. He looked furtively around him.

"I'm afraid," he said huskily. "If the Gray Seal's in this, it—it ain't safe."

"But I tell you the Gray Seal isn't in this," snapped Laroque impatiently. "That's what I'm trying to get through your thick head! He and every one else will think the curtain rolled down on the *last* act when they got Hunchback Joe. It's safe enough! It's so safe there isn't anything to it,

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if *your* end is safe. And you ought to know about that—you've been a year getting the dope."

"I—I ain't afraid of that," said the old man. "There's no one in the world knows how many he had. The family knew he had a lot, of course, and knew it was his hobby, and that he kept 'em here where he could look at 'em instead of in a safety deposit vault—though I guess he figured no safety deposit vault had anything on his—but they just knew he had a lot, they didn't know how many."

A strange light came dawning suddenly in Jimmie Dale's eyes. Had the Tocsin been right in this respect? Was this the *real* motive for the murder—not the bank's papers? Jathan Lane's hobby! It was no secret. Jathan Lane was a fellow member of that most exclusive organization, the St. James Club. Dimly there came back to memory a conversation one afternoon when four or five members, Jathan Lane and himself amongst them, were gathered around one of the smoking room tables, and——

"Sure!" said Gentleman Laroque brusquely. "Well, then, what's the matter with you? There's no sign of any robbery; no sign of any entry into the house, not so much as an unlocked door or a scratch on a window sill; and Jathan Lane, the only man who could know that anything had been taken—is dead. And his death"—Laroque grinned—"occurred in such a way as to make what's done here secure from even suspicion. The bank game's a blind. This is what we've been after, and now it's open and shut. And your share is the biggest haul you ever made in your life."

The old man stared around him. Colour crept into his cheeks and glowed in hectic spots. His eyes, deep in their sockets, began to burn with a feverish light. He pulled himself up to his feet.

"Yes, yes!" he mumbled fiercely. "Rich—ha, ha!—rich! It cannot fail; I am a fool"—he caught his breath, and swayed again on his feet. "Come on! Come on! Hurry!" he choked out.

Jimmie Dale watched them, his lips suddenly tight. They had *passed by* the safe, and were coming directly toward

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where he stood. Another yard and they would reach the portières. His automatic swung silently upward in his hand. And then the old man halted in front of an oil painting that hung from the wall a little less than shoulder high.

For an instant the man stood there breathing heavily, as though even the exertion of crossing the room had taxed him beyond his strength; and then with a quick movement he jerked at the edge of the frame, and the painting itself, as though it were the grooved cover of a box, slid to one side, exposing the wall, which was as bare and as innocent in appearance behind, or, rather, through the frame, as anywhere else in the room.

"Jathan Lane's safe deposit vault," coughed the Minister. He laughed. His cheeks were burning; his eyes were brighter. He leaned suddenly down toward the floor. "This knot in the wainscoting—see?"

Behind the empty frame, a door in the wall swung open—and the light from the room fell upon the nickel dial of a safe.

"That's the boy!" applauded Gentleman Laroque.

"Yes, yes!" whispered the old man. "I'll open it! Wait! A—a long time it took to get the combination, but—but I got it"—his fingers were working at the dial—"there—there it is!"

"Just a second!" said Laroque coolly, as the door of the little wall safe swung open. He glanced around him, then darted across the room to a small, square table on which stood a heavy bronze vase. "Here, this will do!" he said, and laying the vase on the floor, came back with the table. "Shoot the stuff out on this!"

It took a minute, perhaps two; and then upon the table there lay a number of jewellers' cases in both plush and leather, and a dozen or more little chamois bags. Laroque was rapidly opening and shutting the cases, and as he did so the contents of each in its turn, pendants, brooches, ornaments of many designs, all of them set with diamonds, seemed to leap thirstily at the light and hail it with eager

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scintillating flashes before the covers could be shut down upon them again.

"That all that's in there?" demanded Laroque.

"Yes," breathed the old man. "Yes"—he rubbed his hands rapaciously together—"all except the tray he uses to paw 'em over on."

"That's thoughtful of him!" grunted Gentleman Laroque. "Let's have it."

From the bottom of the safe the Minister pulled out and laid upon the table an oblong, plush-covered tray with raised edges.

"Now!" grunted Laroque again. "Open the bags, and dump the whities into the tray."

Jimmie Dale drew in his breath. It seemed as though little rivers of fire had begun to stream from the mouths of the bags. The men were working fast now; Laroque with almost cynical composure; the old man, wrought up, clumsy in his greed, his hands trembling, mumbling, crooning to himself.

Diamonds, unset stones, of all sizes, poured into the tray; they filled it, heaped it to its edges. An inch deep they lay. It was a fortune whose value Jimmie Dale did not dare attempt to compute—a pool of immortal beauty, restless with vitality, flashing, limpid, shifting, iridescent. Here the facet of a stone struck back at the light, fiery, passionate in its challenge; there another lay, soft in its radiance, glowing, pulsing, breathing, alive.

Laroque drew a cloth bag from his pocket and unfolded it. He ran his finger through the stones, separating them into two almost equal portions; the portion nearer him he began to put into his little sack.

"Slip the rest of them into the chamois bags again, and put 'em back in the safe," he directed tersely. "Divide 'em amongst the bags as equally as you can. And those gewgaws in the cases, too, of course—put them back. We can't afford to monkey with anything but the unset stones; any one of those ornaments might happen to be just the one that somebody in the family would remember—and miss."

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But now the Minister hesitated. The hectic colour had fled from his cheeks, only to enhance, it seemed, the fever fire in his eyes; the muscles of his face twitched; his hands, trembling before, shook now as with the ague.

"All!" he whispered fiercely, and touched his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Look at 'em! My God, look at 'em! We've got 'em all here! Take 'em! Take 'em! Let's take 'em all—all the unset stones anyhow! I'll make my get-away with you. Can't we take 'em all?"

Gentleman Laroque continued his work without looking up.

"I've never been in Sing Sing," he said, with a thin smile. "That's why I came here myself to-night. I couldn't trust you or anybody else, except Hunchback Joe, to stand up against the temptation of making the bum play that would land us there. All! That's what Sing Sing is full of! You poor fool, aren't you satisfied with a *sure* thing when the sure thing is a fortune? That's what the half we're taking is—a fortune. And nobody to know that any job has been pulled; and Shiftel with a free hand to dispose of the stones at market value! Would you rather pinch them all, make it next to impossible to sell them for anything like what they're worth, and on top of that dodge the police for the rest of your life? You'd have a rosy chance making your get-away—Mr. Jathan Lane's vanishing butler, alias the Minister, alias Patrick Denton, late of Sing Sing!" His voice hardened suddenly. "As I said, *I've* never been in Sing Sing. Hurry up, now! Put the rest of those stones and all the ornaments back in the safe."

The old man swept his hand across his eyes.

"Sure," he said thickly; "you're right, and I——" A spasm of pain contorted his features, and he clutched at his side and staggered; but as Laroque, with a sharp exclamation, reached out a steadying hand, the Minister shook his head. "I'm all right," he said—and began to return the diamonds Laroque had left on the tray to the little chamois bags.

A strange smile crossed Jimmie Dale's lips. Laroque was right—quite right. And from Laroque's standpoint—safe.

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The scene of the two men at work there beyond the portière seemed suddenly to shift, and he, Jimmie Dale, was again one of that afternoon group gathered around the table in the smoking room of the St. James Club. Jathan Lane, one of the richest men in America, and his hobby! It had been pure pleasantry, the twitting to which they had subjected the multimillionaire. But the banker had answered seriously. "How many stones have I? What are they worth?" he had said in reply to a question. "I am sure I do not know myself, but I am equally sure there are no finer unset diamonds, in mass you understand, in America. I have been buying them, one, two, half a dozen at a time, for years. I love them; I take a pure delight in them; and I indulge myself without stint, since, after all, my hobby is by no means a bad one even in a business sense. At least, and what can hardly be said of most hobbies, the value is always there." "But your family?" the questioner had persisted. "I should think Mrs. Lane and your daughter would be raiding you all the time!" And then Jathan Lane had laughed. "Familiarity and contempt, you know," he had said. "A boy and his bag of marbles. They haven't looked at them for years."

Gentleman Laroque was speaking again.

"That's the idea!" he said more pleasantly. "They may be a little *disappointed,* perhaps even a little surprised that there aren't more, but that's where it ends so far as the family is concerned. No suspicion that everything isn't just as old man Lane left it; no suspicion that anything has been *taken.* And, speaking professionally, therein lies the difference between an artist and a hog!" He tucked the small cloth bag under his coat. The table was clear. "Close her up nice and tidy," he smiled, "and I'll beat it for Shiftel's."

The old man closed the wall safe, and slid the painting back in its grooved frame.

"Fine!" approved Gentleman Laroque. "I'll leave you to put the table back. Come on now, and lock the window behind me."

Jimmie Dale did not move; only his face set a little more grimly as he watched Gentleman Laroque climb through the

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window and disappear. It would be a pity to let Shiftel get out of this scot-free! His mind, alert, incisive, was sifting, weighing, formulating the details of a plan whose germ had taken root there, it seemed, almost from the moment he had begun to watch the men at work. Neither Gentleman Laroque nor the Minister would eventually escape, for they could be found anytime. . . . Shiftel was another member of the gang, an oily, craven little rat, and Shiftel in a corner with his own skin in danger was far more likely to *talk* than either of the other two . . . the Tocsin's letter and the Phantom . . . what Shiftel knew he could be made to tell . . . the *evidence* of this robbery here must be taken care of as soon as the Minister there had gone upstairs again to——

There came a low, dull thud; a broken cry:

"Brandy—I——"

With a sudden sweep of his arm Jimmie Dale brushed aside the portière and leaped forward—too late. The heavy bronze vase, fallen from nerveless fingers that had striven to lift it back on the table, was still rolling across the floor, as the old man, with arms outflung, pitched forward beside it, and lay still.

In an instant Jimmie Dale had reached the cabinet and procured the stimulant, and in another was kneeling beside the prostrate figure—and then, after a moment, in a strangely quiet and deliberate way Jimmie Dale laid the brandy aside.

It was very still in the house, still as the form stretched out there on the rug before him, still as the old, white, upturned face. The man was dead.

The grim, sharp lines that drooped the corners of Jimmie Dale's lips faded away, and something seemed to soften the hard, set immobility of his face as he rose finally to his feet. It was just a crook, just the Minister, alias Patrick Denton, just the end of a vicious, miserable career of crime—but it was also the end of a human life. And life even to this warped soul was as sweet, wasn't it, as to another?—more so perhaps for the very fact that death must have stood with beckoning finger for so long now at the other's elbow!

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Jimmie Dale turned slowly away and walked across the room. Mechanically he slid the painting out along its grooves; mechanically he stooped and found the knot in the wainscoting. Perhaps it was as well, perhaps infinitely better this way, better that the end should come here than behind the steel bars and the gray stone walls where once it had so nearly come. They would not have pardoned the Minister *twice*.

The little door in the wall had swung open, the nickel dial of the safe glittered in the light—and suddenly Jimmie Dale's shoulders straightened, and for an instant his dark eyes studied the closed steel door. Then he leaned forward, his ear pressed against the face of the safe for the tumblers' fall, and the slim, sensitive fingers, the nerves throbbing at the tips, those magical masters of bolts and locks, were at work.

The minutes passed. There was no sound, save at times the faint, musical whir of the dial; then, abruptly, a deep breathed exclamation:

"All thumbs to-night!"

Again the minutes passed; again the dial moved, now with its musical whir, now slowly, with infinite care; and then a sound, so low as to be scarcely audible—the soft thud, muffled within the steel walls, of metal meeting metal, the bolts sliding in their sockets.

The door of the safe stood open.

Jimmie Dale swung around and stared about the room. He was provided with no little cloth sack such as Gentleman Laroque had had; true he had, instead, those little chamois bags, and his pockets might hold them all, but— With a quick stride he crossed the room to the desk, and picked up a black leather portfolio. It was quite large enough, and, used for carrying documents, its flap was fitted with a clasp. He opened it, dumped the papers it contained out on the desk, and returned to the wall safe.

Jimmie Dale was working with lightning speed now. The little chamois bags were tucked into the bottom of the portfolio; the small plush and leather jewellers' cases were opened

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in quick succession, their contents following the chamois bags, the cases themselves being tossed helter-skelter upon the floor.

The safe was empty.

Jimmie Dale closed the portfolio, and cast a sharp, critical glance around the room. He nodded grimly to himself. There was ample evidence now that there had been a robbery, quite ample—everybody knew that there had been *something* in the now empty safe—and it would not therefore be, as Gentleman Laroque expected, so blind a trail now that led to the source of the diamonds with which Isaac Shiftel was to be endowed! Also, for good measure in this respect, some of the ornaments, that were certainly the property of Mrs. Lane, and which Gentleman Laroque had been wise enough to leave alone, would not lack for a speedy identification! And, again, there was the yawning door of the wall safe, and the painting that still protruded so eloquently from its frame!

His eyes softened in their expression as they held now for an instant again on the form that lay upon the floor. Then he shook his head in quick decision. He needed time now before an alarm was sounded that might by any chance reach the ears of Gentleman Laroque, or, more particularly, one Isaac Shiftel!

Jimmie Dale consulted his watch. It was five minutes of three. The electric-light switch clicked under his fingers. The room was in darkness.

Then silence through the house.

And presently a figure crouched again in the shadows of the basement porch, and crossed the yard, and swung itself silently over the fence into the lane—and from here, slipping the black silk mask from his face, Jimmie Dale emerged on the street.

But now Jimmie Dale seemed to be no longer in haste. It was a long way from Jathan Lane's mansion to Mr. Isaac Shiftel's unsavory abode, which was now Jimmie

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Dale's destination, and the subway would be the quicker, but, instead, Jimmie Dale hailed a belated taxi as it passed him. He was interested in reaching Isaac Shiftel's only *after* Gentleman Laroque had been there and gone. He gave the chauffeur an address on the Bowery that would bring him within a block of the tenement that Isaac Shiftel had chosen as his lair, and stepped into the taxi.

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— III —

ONE ISAAC SHIFTEL

THE taxi rolled and swayed its way along. Jimmie Dale sat staring at the portfolio that bumped with the motion of the car upon his knees. In some thirty-odd minutes, at halfpast three to be exact, the police would be paying a visit to Laroque's quarters, and even if the man were not back there by then, the police were patient and would wait! They would get Laroque—but not the evidence. They might even let the man go again—temporarily. It would not matter. Laroque's freedom, if obtained at all, would be of very short duration. The evidence lacking at Gentleman Laroque's would be found within the hour and in abundant measure, together with Mr. Isaac Shiftel himself, at—Isaac Shiftel's!

But that was not all; nor, indeed, that which most vitally interested him. Despite the Tocsin's efforts to keep him out of those shadows, as she had termed it, that seemed to have closed down upon her blacker and more ominous even than before, the night's work had already brought him greater returns than he had ever dared to hope for or expect. He knew three of the pawns who moved at the criminal will of the unknown leader whom she had styled the Phantom. One of the three was dead, but there remained two; and of the two, one was Laroque, and the other was a miserable little rat-like creature, who, under *persuasion*, was not likely to prove over-secretive. And Shiftel's tongue, once made to wag, held promise of almost anything, even the "Open Sesame" to what was now his, Jimmie Dale's, ultimate goal—the Phantom.

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Jimmie Dale's eyes travelled to the window, held there for a few minutes noting the taxi's progress, and then fixed introspectively again on the portfolio.

Shiftel! He knew Shiftel as only the *initiated* knew him, as only those knew him whose ears were attune to the whispered confidences of the underworld's exchanges in the dens and dives hidden away from the light of day, where he, Jimmie Dale, once as Larry the Bat, and now in the present day as Smarlinghue, the broken-down artist and hop-fighter, was welcomed as one of the élite of that inglorious realm. He had even seen Shiftel on one or two occasions—an unkempt, bearded, spectacled foreigner of uncertain age, a cringing little beast, hideously cunning, a master in his own peculiar line of deviltry. Shiftel ostensibly, for the benefit of the police should they ever prove inquisitive, made his living in his two-room, dirty, bachelor apartment, by working on garments which he brought from various sweat shops. If he were rarely at home and too lazy to work much, that was his misfortune, his loss, and his sole personal affair! But the underworld held him in quite other regard—as a "fence," a "shover of stolen goods," who was safe, and in cleverness without an equal. There were few crooks in the Bad Lands but were hungry for Isaac Shiftel's services, but Shiftel was not approachable to all; it was understood, and perforce had regretfully come to be accepted as a fact, that he dealt only with a small and select clientèle of his own choosing, whose personnel was more guessed at than known; and that to break into the charmed circle was a feat attempted by many but accomplished by few. And as far back as Jimmie Dale could remember, as far back as he could remember even Gentleman Laroque, Shiftel had lived in the same miserable rooms in the same miserable tenement.

The taxi rattled on. At intervals Jimmie Dale kept glancing out of the window. And then, as the taxi turned at last into the Bowery, he smiled suddenly, laid his handkerchief on the portfolio, and reached into one of the pockets of the leather girdle under his vest. Shiftel! He took out a thin metal case, like a cigarette case, and from the case, with a

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pair of tiny tweezers that mocked at finger-prints, he lifted out a diamond-shaped gray paper seal that was adhesive on one side, and dropped it on the handkerchief. He returned the metal case to its hiding place, folded the handkerchief carefully, and replaced it in his pocket.

A moment later the taxi stopped. Jimmie Dale alighted, paid and dismissed the chauffeur, and as he swung around the corner, walking east from the Bowery, he looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes past three. It became now simply a question whether Laroque was still with Shiftel, or had gone home.

The street, one of the most shabby of East Side streets, was dark, poorly lighted, and free of pedestrians. Jimmie Dale passed by a tenement whose shabbiness was quite in keeping with its surroundings, passed by a narrow areaway which separated the tenement from another which might have been a duplicate of the first—and halted before the entrance of the second tenement.

The outer door was unlocked. In a moment he was inside the hallway, and in utter blackness now stood motionless, listening. Then again the black silk mask was slipped over his face, and again it was as though a shadow moved. Shiftel's apartment was the middle one on the ground floor facing the other tenement across the areaway.

Jimmie Dale passed down the length of the hall, counting the doors on his right by the sense of touch, and, returning, crouched with his ear against the panel of the door he had selected. From within, so faintly as to be indefinable in any concrete way, there came the sound of movement. Still Jimmie Dale listened, even while his fingers worked silently at doorknob and lock. He nodded his head as he completed his work. There had been no sound of voices. Gentleman Laroque had evidently been and gone. Isaac Shiftel was alone.

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale was on his feet, and in a flash was in the room, the door closed and locked behind him. Through the doorway of a connecting room ahead of him he could see the unkempt, bearded figure of Shiftel as

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the man, with a cry, sprang wildly to his feet from the chair in which he had been seated, clawing, even as he sprang, at the white, glittering array of diamonds strewn upon the table-top before him.

"Who's that? Who's there?" the man called out hoarsely.

Jimmie Dale's automatic covered the other as he moved swiftly forward to Shiftel's side.

"Quite an elaborate collection you've got here, Isaac," he said softly. "First water stones of course, or *you* wouldn't be handling them. And please don't wriggle, Isaac, until I—ah, thanks!" He had laid the portfolio down on the table, and his fingers passing deftly over Shiftel's clothing had whipped out a revolver from the other's pocket and transferred it to his own.

But now Shiftel seemed to have got a sudden grip upon himself. He leaned forward, peering sharply from behind his spectacles at Jimmie Dale's masked face.

"No," he said with a snarl, "I don't know you, because I don't know *your* kind. But you evidently don't know Isaac Shiftel. Those stones, eh? That's it, is it? Well, you may get out of here with them, but afterwards—eh?—do you think Isaac Shiftel's arm is so short as that?"

Jimmie Dale made no answer. He retreated a step, and with his free hand began to unfasten the portfolio.

Shiftel shook his fist virulently now. The first shock once over, he was, through familiarity, apparently quite at his ease again in dealing with—a crook.

"How'd you get wise to this, eh?" he demanded fiercely. "How'd you——" His glance had travelled to the window that opened on the areaway. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "That's it, eh? The shade's down, but like a fool I left the window open. You had the luck to sneak into that areaway." He peered again into Jimmie Dale's face, and abruptly his tone and manner changed. He rubbed his hands together ingratiatingly. "I said you didn't know Isaac Shiftel," he said smoothly; "but you do—everybody in your line of business knows Isaac Shiftel. I'll make a deal with you—a fair share

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—eh? You don't want Isaac Shiftel as an enemy. I'll give you——"

"You're getting in ahead of me, Isaac," interrupted Jimmie Dale plaintively. He coughed slightly—and politely pressed his handkerchief to his moistened lips. "*I* meant to be the first to offer something." With a quick jerk of his revolver hand, he plucked a diamond necklace from the top of the portfolio, and tossed it upon the table. "That, for instance —Isaac."

The ornament seemed to fascinate Shiftel. As if drawn to it against his will, he leaned forward staring at it; and then, as though actuated by a sort of frightened incredulity, he reached out a hand toward it—but Jimmie Dale's hand that still held the handkerchief was the quicker. It fell and gripped like a vise upon the back of Shiftel's hand.

"Just a moment, Isaac," said Jimmie Dale coolly. "There is something else that I want you to have—as a little memento of the occasion."

There came a startled cry from Shiftel. Jimmie Dale had withdrawn his hand, and Shiftel was staring now, not at the diamond necklace, but at a diamond-shaped gray paper seal that was pasted on the back of his hand.

"I'll say it for you!" Jimmie Dale's smile was not inviting. "The Gray Seal! I apologise for the melodrama, but I think it will aid you, Isaac, to see things in a clearer light. You've got a little information that I want, and I imagine it will help to quicken your memory and loosen your tongue to know *who* wants it."

There was no answer. The man, his lips twitching, was still staring at the back of his hand.

With a sudden movement, Jimmie Dale emptied the contents of the portfolio upon the table. He brushed them into a heap with the diamonds already there.

"They belong together," said Jimmie Dale, in a curious monotone, "and I couldn't bear to see them left behind. They'll be *found* together too, Isaac, for I am afraid it will be impossible to make any one believe now that Jathan Lane's safe has never been disturbed." His voice hardened

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suddenly. "You're going up for this, Isaac. I make no bargain with you. The police are going to be tipped off over the phone, and they are going to find you here trussed up in that chair with the diamonds in front of you. But before the police get you, you are going to deal with me. I want to know who the man is you, and those with you, take your orders from. And before we are *through* you are going to tell me, Isaac—all you know."

Shiftel's tongue was circling his lips. He shook his head. He was cringing now, supplicating with his hands.

"I don't know anything," he protested wildly. "You're all wrong. You're all wrong about everything. I don't know anything about Jathan Lane. I don't know where the diamonds came from. I never ask questions in my business. They were brought in here for me to shove, and——"

"That's enough, Isaac!" snapped Jimmie Dale. "The game is up! Your friend, Patrick Denton, alias the Minister, is dead up there on the floor of Jathan Lane's private library, where he——"

"Dead!" Shiftel's hands had ceased their movements. The man stood rigid. Something stronger than himself seemed to have stripped him of further power to dissimulate. "Dead! You—you killed him?"

"Never mind about that!" Jimmie Dale bit off his words. "It's enough for you to know for the present that he is dead. You're not quite so innocent as you were—are you, Isaac? And as for the man who brought those stones here, a friend of mine has kindly arranged to have the police pay a little visit at Gentleman Laroque's at just about this time; to be precise"—he drew his watch from his pocket—"at——"

Jimmie Dale's words ended abruptly. He, too, was suddenly standing tense and rigid. A footstep, guarded, cautious, was coming along the areaway out there. It was coming nearer to the open window—the drawn shade did not *hide* the sound. Instinctively his eyes sought the dial of his watch.

It was halfpast three.

"At Laroque's!" Shiftel, his ears strained toward the

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window, was whispering the words. "The police—at Laroque's!" And then he raised both fists in fury and shook them above his head. "You snitch, you cursed snitch"—the low, whispered words seemed but to accentuate the man's sudden flood of passion—"we'll get you yet for this!"

For an instant Jimmie Dale's brain seemed to reel in turmoil and chaos. That voice was no longer Shiftel's. Those words! Once he had heard those exact words before, and —with a quick step forward, his hand reached out, tearing beard and spectacles from the other's face.

"Gentleman Laroque!"

"Yes, you fool!" said Laroque, still whispering. "So you've tripped at last, eh? You didn't know, and you've brought the police *here*. Well, take the consequences! It's you who's trapped!" He was backing slowly away from both table and window toward the inner wall of the room. "Perhaps *you'll* explain the possession of those stones! You fool, you and that woman with you, you don't know what you're up against, but——"

"Don't move!" ordered Jimmie Dale grimly.

"Just this far," smiled Laroque. "I hear them coming along the hall inside now. Don't forget there's one of your police on guard outside the window, and——"

The room was in instant darkness. The bare fraction of a second passed, not more; there was a faint scraping sound from the direction where Laroque had been standing—and Jimmie Dale's flashlight, whipped from his pocket, was sweeping around him.

The room was empty!

Jimmie Dale's face was set like chiselled marble. Empty! Gone! The man was gone! But that was not all! Voices were ringing that slogan of the old days in his ears again: "Death to the Gray Seal!" He did not need to be told what it meant to be caught by either police or underworld. He, too, heard those guarded footsteps inside the tenement and coming now along the hall. His mind, alert, virile, was working with lightning speed. The doorway was behind him, and Laroque could not have gone that way—nor by the window

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guarded by the police. There must be some secret exit from the room. If so, given but a second, while he, Jimmie Dale, was attempting an escape, Laroque could get back again and secure the diamonds that lay upon the table. And he, Jimmie Dale, was *responsible* for them now!

And now Jimmie Dale in action was swift as his racing thoughts. Whether he could save himself or not, there was at least a way to save the stones. With the flashlight switched on, he propped it on the end of the table, its ray streaming over the gems and playing in the opposite direction from the connecting door.

"If you can hear me, Laroque," he whispered, "I warn you—don't try it! All you'll get off that table will be a bullet, whether I'm caught or not!"

It was utter blackness behind him. He backed swiftly, silently through the connecting door, and across the outer room to the door that led into the hall. His automatic held a line on the table top. He crouched at the far side of the door casing. They were here now. He heard a whispered consultation outside, as his fingers, closing on the key, silently unlocked the door. Queer! His brain was racing again. A queer sight! All blackness back here—and, through the connecting doorway, a light, apparently coming from nowhere, streamed over a shimmering, scintillating mass of diamonds, and ended by imposing itself in a white, luminous circle on a dirty, greasy wall behind! His eyes never left the table; his automatic never wavered in its line. Queer! The Phantom! Gentleman Laroque—Isaac Shiftel! Could it be? Was that a partial answer to the Tocsin's "score of aliases and score of domiciles"? Was Gentleman Laroque the Phantom? Yet how had she taken this for Laroque's home if she hadn't known the two men were one? And she hadn't known. She had said so. But—yes, it was not unexplainable. It might easily have been—just as it had been with him, Jimmie Dale, as Larry the Bat, or as Smarlinghue. She might have seen Laroque come here some evening—and Shiftel might have come out—while she thought Laroque

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remained *at home*. It might easily be that she did not know Shiftel, and so——

"Bust it in!" The words came sharp, incisive, from the hall; then a quick exclamation: "Blamed if the door ain't unlocked! Come on!"

The door was flung violently open. A man swung forward into the room—and halted abruptly, staring toward the connecting doorway.

"For Heaven's sake, sergeant, look at that!" he burst out.

A man behind pushed eagerly forward. And Jimmie Dale, crouching low by the baseboard in the blackness, slipped through the doorway behind the other without a sound, and in a moment was outside the tenement and walking quietly along the street—in a direction that ignored the areaway.

Half an hour later Jimmie Dale mounted the steps of a palatial residence on Riverside Drive. He smiled softly as he stumbled and shuffled so noisily that before he had gained the topmost step the door was opened for him by the white-haired old butler, who had been butler to Jimmie Dale's father before him, and whose proudest boast was that he had dandled his Master Jim upon his knee. It would have been so easy to have slipped in, and passed the old man, and gone upstairs to bed—and broken the old man's heart to have been found out *asleep* at his self-appointed post.

"What!" said Jimmie Dale severely—and used identically the same words he had used on a hundred similar occasions: "Sitting up again for me, Jason? How many times am I to tell you that I won't have it? Jason, go to bed at once!"

"Yes, sir," said Jason. "Thank you, sir. Thank you, Master Jim, sir—I will."

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— IV —

THREADS

TWO weeks had passed.

It was evening; and Jimmie Dale, as Smarlinghue now, the seedy, down-at-the-heels artist, better known as Smarly in the Bad Lands, and still better known again in the ultra-exclusive dens and dives, where the first citizens of New York's crimeland foregathered, as a dope fiend shattered beyond repair, a character shady enough from any angle to entitle him to homage even in that unhallowed circle of the élite, slouched along an East Side street—but the slouching gait was strangely and incredibly swift. He skulked in the night shadows of the buildings like some evil thing that sought darkness as kindred to itself. But at intervals, as he moved along with that strange illusive swiftness, the rays of a street lamp, as though in ironic mockery at his inability to evade them, brought out into sharp relief the disreputable figure whose coat was a size too small for him, and from the short sleeves of which protruded blatantly the frayed and soiled wristbands of his shirt, whose shoulders were stooped, and whose face, what could be seen of it under a battered felt hat, was hollow cheeked, and gaunt with a half starved look.

And now he entered a house that made the corner of a lane, a house that was as disreputable as himself, a dwelling of some old-time pretentions, but with the city's onward march a derelict now, metamorphosed into a mean and squalid tenement. He passed along the dark, musty hallway to the rear room on the ground floor, and, opening the door, stepped inside. He closed the door, locked it behind him, and for an instant stood still, his glance seeming to search

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into the very shadows themselves where they lay heaviest in the far corners of the room.

It was the Sanctuary that for a year now—or was it two?—had housed the character of Smarlinghue, as, in the days gone by, the old Sanctuary, before the fire had destroyed it, had housed the character of Larry the Bat. Through a top-light high up near the ceiling above the French window, which latter, a relic of past glory, opened on a level with the floor, the moonlight flickered in. It disclosed in nebulous outline a battered easel in one corner of the room, and near it, against the wall and strewn upon the floor, a number of canvases of different sizes. A cot bed, its covers in disorder, occupied the wall space opposite the door. For the rest, there were a filthy, threadbare rag of carpet upon the floor, a battered table, a rickety washstand, and two disabled chairs.

Satisfied that the moonlight was the sole intruder, Jimmie Dale nodded shortly to himself, and stepping abruptly forward examined the drawn roller shade on the French window, and particularly a rent therein that was fastened together with a pin. Again he nodded. Then a diminutive gas-jet, choked with air, hissed and spluttered under his match, and supplanting the moonlight, threw a sickly yellow glow about the room. He crossed then to the corner near the door, knelt down on the floor, and after an instant's work removed an ingeniously fitted section of the base-board. From the aperture he took out the carefully folded dinner suit which he had been wearing on the evening when he had last left his residence on Riverside Drive.

He began to cast off the shabby, disreputable garments of Smarlinghue. He worked swiftly. With the clothes discarded, there came another change. The hollow cheeks, the thin, extended lips, the widened nostrils disappeared as little distorting pieces of wax were removed. Before a cracked mirror propped up on the rickety washstand, he washed away the stain that previously had given a jaundiced, unhealthy hue to his face and hands—and with minutest care took stock of the result in the mirror.

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And then the light went out. The rest could be completed in the darkness. Smarlinghue was no longer at home.

It was like a shadow now flitting soundlessly here and there in the streak of moonlight. A minute, perhaps two, passed; and then the pin that held together the rent in the window shade was removed, and Jimmie Dale peered cautiously out into the narrow, squalid, moonlit courtyard beyond. Another instant, and the French window opened noiselessly on its carefully oiled hinges, and closed again. A figure, close hugged against the wall of the building, stole along the few intervening feet to the fence that divided the courtyard from the lane. Here, next to the wall, a loosened plank swung outward. The figure slipped through into the lane—and Jimmie Dale, immaculate and faultlessly attired, emerged upon the street from which, but a few minutes before, Smarlinghue, the dope fiend, had vanished.

He walked rapidly now, heading over toward the Bowery, and crossing that thoroughfare, innocuous now in the early evening hours, continued on deeper into the East Side. A half grim, half whimsical smile was on his lips. His objective was a little two-story, tumble-down house where an old widow by the name of Mrs. Kinsey still kept, as she had kept for more years than the East Side could remember, a small and woefully unpretentious confectionery store. It did not further the one interest he had in life now, this objective of his to-night; it would bring him no nearer to his goal, so far as he could see, though it held a logical and even intimate connection therewith. It was no "call to arms" from the Tocsin that he——

His pace slackened involuntarily, and there was a sudden droop to the broad shoulders that were usually so straight. The Tocsin! Where was she—while he, seeking to reach her, groped and groped in pitiful failure, a blind man, a child in strength, a fool in intellect! He clenched his hands. One of those black moments again! One more added to the thousand through which he had lived in the past two weeks. Was she still *alive?*

He choked back a cry of bitter agony, and quickened his

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pace again; but though his shoulders were once more thrown back, a whiteness had been born into his face.

It was two weeks since she had left him that night in the little boat on the East River, two weeks since the night Gentleman Laroque, alias Isaac Shiftel, had so mysteriously disappeared from that tenement room, and she had begun again to battle alone for her existence, pitting her wits against that unknown super-fiend of the underworld whom she had styled the Phantom. And since that night Gentleman Laroque, both in that character and in the character of Isaac Shiftel, had vanished as effectually as though he had never existed; and there had been no word or sign from her, save a short note that he had found, as once before in the old days he had found one, hidden behind the movable section of the base-board in the Sanctuary—and that was now a week ago. He had destroyed it, torn it for safety's sake into the same minute fragments that he always tore her notes; but it still remained intact, for it had seared itself word for word indelibly upon his brain.

"Dear Philanthropic Crook," she had written. "Oh, why *will* you do it! You do not know your own danger. Apart from the police, there is only one man who could be interested in the secret of Shiftel's room. That's you, Jimmie. They know that. Keep away from the place. They expect you sooner or later. Oh, I beg of you to keep away! It is a trap. Mother Margot, the new tenant, is one of them. She is only there to throw dust in your eyes, and in the eyes of the police.

"As for myself, I am safe so far, Jimmie; but I do not know how much progress I have made. Sometimes I think I have already come far along the road—and sometimes I seem lost again. Yesterday I was sure of the Phantom's identity; to-day I am sure I was wrong; to-morrow I shall be sure again—but it will be of a totally different personality. You think, no doubt, that it is Shiftel, alias Laroque. Well, perhaps, it is; but unless you and I are both swept out of the road, neither in the one character nor the other will that man probably ever be heard of again. And so, oh, Jimmie, be careful—*and remember the trap*. Marie."

The last phrase was heavily underscored. The trap! It brought a grim twist to his lips. He had already been in

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and out of the trap—and, from what she had said in her note, at perhaps the only time when it had been safe so far as he was concerned, paradoxical though that seemed, for he had visited Shiftel's rooms again the night after the murder, and while the police had, so fortunately it now appeared, obligingly done unconscious picket duty for him without. The diamonds found in Shiftel's room had, thanks to the set pieces, been almost immediately identified; and these, coupled with their owner's murder, and the dead butler's identification as an ex-Sing Sing convict, had aroused a veritable furor in the papers. The police had wanted, and still wanted, Shiftel very badly indeed, and so plain-clothesmen for a week had unostentatiously watched the tenement day and night on the chance that Shiftel would return. But he, Jimmie Dale, had been even more interested in Shiftel's erstwhile domicile than had the police; therefore he had examined it, not entirely to his ultimate satisfaction, but certainly unknown to the headquarters men, whom, not being Shiftel, he had had little difficulty in eluding. The result had been—nothing.

Then, again unknown to the police, he had joined forces with them, and he, too, had watched the tenement. On the first of the month, a week after Shiftel's disappearance, the agent had re-rented the two miserable rooms to an old hag-like creature known as Mother Margot. He had been aware of that before the Tocsin's note had reached him. But prior to that again Mother Margot had passed muster with the police, who had thereupon withdrawn their forces, considering further surveillance of the premises unnecessary and their hopes from that quarter at an end. But Mother Margot had not passed muster with him, in spite of the fact that his own investigation of the woman had resulted in the discovery that she was, and had been for a year, a licensed pushcart vendor, a sort of travelling dry goods emporium, who hawked her wares in that ultra-foreign quarter on Thompson Street, just off West Broadway, where she with a hundred others of her ilk cluttered the narrow street until it was well nigh impassable. He knew what the

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police did not know. He knew that Shiftel's rooms held a secret that the man whom he, as well as the Tocsin, had now come to call the Phantom would strive his utmost to protect by one means or another. And so he had watched Mother Margot because logic would not down. The Tocsin's note had but confirmed his suspicions; and though her warning had not gone utterly unheeded, and he had thereafter evaded the "trap," he had kept even a still closer watch upon Mother Margot herself. For days at a stretch now he had lived as Smarlinghue—and that had brought him here to his errand to-night.

Jimmie Dale's face hardened suddenly. His errand! It was dirty, miserable, pitiful work that he had partially uncovered. Sooner or later, he had made sure that Mother Margot would bring him into touch with others of the same breed who owned allegiance to the Phantom. And she had at last, to-night—for it was neither probable nor tenable to imagine that, serving the Phantom, she was allied with any other band, or permitted a divided interest. An hour ago he had followed her to the Wistaria Café, one of the lowest type of dance halls in the Bad Lands, where she had joined two men; one named Little Sweeney, a smooth-tongued, oily little rat, fastidious in his dress, and whom he, Jimmie Dale, already knew in the same sense as he knew by sight and name a hundred other crooks of greater or less degree; the other, whom they had addressed not inaptly as Limpy Mack, a stoop-shouldered, bent-over figure in peaked cap, with unkempt gray hair and moustache, who walked with a distinct limp and by the aid of a cane whose tip was heavily rubber-capped like a crutch, he did not know at all. From the dance hall proper the three had adjourned to a private room in the rear; and anticipating their arrival there by the matter of a few seconds, he, Jimmie Dale, as Smarlinghue then, had adjourned to the alleyway without, and the window raised an imperceptible crack, the roller shade raised an equally imperceptible space above the sill, had afforded both sight and hearing—that is, within limitations, in so far as hearing went. He had seen Little Sweeney hand the man who

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limped a paper which the latter had carefully tucked away in his pocket; and then, as a waiter came in and left a tray of glasses, the three had got their heads together around a table.

Jimmie Dale's brows furrowed now as he hurried along. Again and again the blare of the jazz band had drowned out their low tones. In the ten minutes during which he had crouched there outside the window, he had caught no more than snatches of their conversation; but those snatches had been viciously significant. His mind mulled them over again now; a half completed sentence from one, an interjection from another. It had begun with Mother Margot.

"Mabbe dis Mrs. Kinsey person wid her tin-horn shop ain't got so much!" she had cackled. "Mabbe youse'll lose yer hundred!"

After that a jumble of words from one or other of the three:

". . . Forget it! . . . Never banked a cent in her life. . . . Up in the thousands, that's what; else where's the insurance alone that was a couple of thousand when the old man bumped off two years ago? . . . The Chief never pulls a bone. . . . The old girl's as deaf as a church congregation. . . . She'll lead us to it. . . . Cop the sale to-night. . . . Sure, about bedtime. . . . No night-hawk, though. . . . You watch downstairs, I'll watch up. . . ."

In actual detail he had learned little; but in general he had learned enough to know that old Mrs. Kinsey was supposed to possess a hidden store of savings, whose hiding place they in some way expected to trick her into disclosing. The thought of the police had come to him; that he might in some way with safety and without involving his own personality warn the police, instead of playing a lone hand in this himself. He smiled a little wanly. There was one very good reason why he should not communicate with the police. This Little Sweeney and the man who limped offered new fields for investigation, widened his range of action, and were, indeed, a reward for the days and nights that he had hung upon Mother Margot's trail. They might, or they might not, lead to something tangible; but certainly, for the moment,

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he could not afford to see them in the toils of the police. The alternative was stark enough. He could not stand by inactive and see this miserable, sordid tragedy played out.

And so he had left the three in the back room of the Wistaria Café, and had hurried to the Sanctuary—and Smarlinghue had become Jimmie Dale. That was all. That was why he was here now, why he was approaching that little store on the corner ahead, which, early as the evening was, not more than nine o'clock, had its modest show window already darkened for the night—he had not dared risk "Smarlinghue" here; Smarlinghue, whose position in the underworld, that had literally come to mean life and death to him again, would crumble to dust before the slightest breath of suspicion.

But his visit to the Sanctuary, imperative though it had been, had nevertheless taken time. Against this, however, was the fact that the Sanctuary was not hopelessly out of the direct road between the dance hall and Mrs. Kinsey's little shop; and, besides, he had hurried. He smiled a little grimly. They might, or they might not, have arrived before him; but, in any case, there would not have been time enough for them to have reached here, played out their game, and made their get-away. In that latter respect, at least, it was quite certain—the grim smile deepened—that he could not possibly be too late.

He had halted now on the edge of the curb, the intersecting side street between himself and the small, two-story frame house, where Mrs. Kinsey both lived and transacted her daily business. The house was in darkness, save for a lighted window in a lower, rear room that opened on the cross street. And for a moment he stood here, then suddenly he moved forward again—but this time along and across the side street itself until he stood directly beneath the lighted window. His question had been answered. Even from across the street, and muffled though it necessarily had been, his ear had caught the sound of a voice raised to an abnormal degree from the interior of the house; and now through the curtains of what was a small, plainly-furnished sitting room, he caught a glimpse of a faded little old white-haired woman, in a faded

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little old black dress, whose wrinkled face was strained in earnest attention as she strove to hear through a huge ear-trumpet. Little Sweeney was standing in front of her, his lips to the mouth of the trumpet.

"I said you were never looking better, Mrs. Kinsey!" bawled Little Sweeney.

And then Jimmie Dale was gone.

A moment more, and he was standing nonchalantly at the door of the little shop. There was apparently no other entrance to the house, and if Mrs. Kinsey had admitted Little Sweeney as a caller, as appeared obvious, it must have been through the shop, and the door therefore, in spite of the shop itself being in darkness, should logically be unlocked. And being unlocked it would also have given entrance to one Limpy Mack and Mother Margot, who were both at the present moment undoubtedly hidden in the house.

"I'll watch upstairs, you watch down," repeated Jimmie Dale softly to himself.

It was possible, though scarcely probable in view of the fact that Mrs. Kinsey's deafness practically offered the freedom of the house, that he might run into that *downstairs* watcher skulking here just inside the shop itself. Well, in that case—he glanced sharply up and down the street that for the moment held no near-by pedestrians—the play would come to a very sudden and abrupt end!

His back was turned to the street now. From a pocket in that curious leather girdle around his waist and under his outer garments he took out a black silk mask and adjusted it over his face. And now the slim, sensitive fingers pressed down the door latch without a sound. His logic had not been at fault. The door was unlocked. It began to open. Still there was no sound. And then Jimmie Dale, his hand snuggled over his automatic in the side pocket of his dinner coat, stood inside the shop with the door closed behind him.

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— V —

MOTHER MARGOT

NO challenge questioned Jimmie Dale's entry—there was only the strident voice of Little Sweeney from the rear room. The shop itself, as he had expected, was not the vantage point chosen by either of Little Sweeney's two confederates.

Jimmie Dale stole forward to the rear of the shop, where through an open door there showed a glimmer of light, which, though it seemed to be strangely obstructed, evidently came from some sort of passage that connected the living quarters of the house with the shop; and here, slipping in behind the single counter that the shop boasted, he listened. Little Sweeney was still bawling at the top of his voice.

"I've been thinking it over for the last few days," said Little Sweeney.

"Please speak a little louder." Mrs. Kinsey's voice came plaintively through the darkness.

"Damn it!" said Little Sweeney in low and fervent tones; and then in a veritable yell: "I said I'd been thinking it over! THINKING IT OVER! Our little talk, you know, of a few days ago, about buying out your confectionery business. I promised to come back and let you know what I was going to do about it."

"Yes," said Mrs. Kinsey.

"Well," shouted Little Sweeney, "I've decided to take a chance and buy it, and I've brought you a hundred dollars to bind the bargain."

"But I couldn't think of selling it for a hundred dollars," protested Mrs. Kinsey feebly.

"Not SELLING it, just to bind the bargain," screamed

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