

THE BAND OF FEAR

Clifford Goodrich

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Four men sat in the office of Police Commissioner James Wildcat Gordon. The commissioner himself was not there.

Two of them squirmed under the glare of lights. Fear was mirrored in their eyes. It was more than fear; it was terror that sealed their lips in hopeless protest.

The pair were swarthy, bearded. Their accents were guttural. They were not criminals, they said. They were poor, alien immigrants who belonged to a group known as the Eye of Zion.

Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton strode across the floor. Bolton's small eyes glittered sharply. His long, fingerlike nose twitched in anticipation.

Wildcat Gordon was on vacation. This seemed indeed Bolton's chance to cover himself with glory, perhaps become commissioner himself. For crime was stalking in the city—mysterious crime that defied analysis. Bolton whirled on the two men he was grilling.

"You're both tied up in some dirty smuggling plot!" he squalled nasally. "You're in with Madman Mulay or Rodoc Gorne. And I'm going to find out what you're concealing!"

The fourth figure in the room coughed slightly. He was a large man with ruddy cheeks, snow-white hair. Kirsten Wellman, the importer, was well known for his philanthropy. He shook his head slowly.

"I wish we could get a line on what is being smuggled, Henry," he muttered. "None of the usual contacts give us a thing."

Wellman told the truth. When cocaine, opium, gems or other contraband was being shipped in quantities, there was always a tip-off somewhere. Certain ships and officials were used. But here, there was nothing. Nothing but fear and murder!

Wellman had a reason to be interested in halting smuggling. Smuggled jewels and finery cut into his legitimate business. In addition, he was a philanthropist, was interested in the welfare of new immigrants. If they were guilty—well, they must be punished. If not, Wellman declared he would protect them.

Henry Bolton stopped suddenly in his pacing, shuddered. It was as if a cold draft had hurried through the slightly opened window to grip him. Or as if the eyes of some hypnotic prowler had bored into his body. He whirled toward the open window.

But Bolton was a fraction of a second late. He did not see the pale, colorless eyes that dropped below the sash of the window. The wispy, whitish hair of the intruder blended into the dimness of the night.

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There was nothing to indicate that a prowler had been about. Nothing— but a ghostly, eerie chuckle that might have been the wind. Or might not.

That awesome whisper made Bolton snap erect. The big deputy whirled toward a push button on the wall, poked at it excitedly.

"I've been ready for this," he grated.

Outside, a slight gray figure hurried from his listening post. He scrambled over the roof tops, chuckling softly. He was nondescript little man, half invisible in his drab attire. Wildcat Gordon might have been on vacation, but there was one figure that crooks feared more than they did the dynamic police commissioner.

The Whisperer, elusive, ruthless "supercrook" who preyed on crime, had deemed the foulness on the water front worthy of his attention.

But the gray man had been expected. Bolton's timely jab at that push button brought quick results.

As The Whisperer leaped down to the dim-lit street, two squads of cops bellowed through the gloom. Police revolvers roared. Lead tore through the drab gray clothing.

The dim figure darted back and forth like a rabbit fleeing the hounds. He doubled back, straight into the mob of his pursuers. Bolton's orders had been specific. But they had not been wise. The cops were not spread out. They were bunched.

In an instant, The Whisperer was among them. Firearms were useless. Cop would shoot cop if guns were fired.

It was then that the gray man exploded. Fists flew from nowhere. Hulking cops were bowled over like tenpins. Then The Whisperer fired one shot. It doused the single street lamp with a plop and a clatter.

Cops milled among themselves. Three of them thought that each held The Whisperer. But they merely had their hands on other cops. A motor roared nearby. Then the cops knew they had lost their quarry. They had seen that drab, gray coupe before, knew it had been used by The Whisperer.

The eerie chuckled once more through the night as the gray man roared down the street. The Whisperer's pale eyes glittered strangely as he raced his car around a corner. The gray man had been gentle with the cops. He never killed an officer. For The Whisperer was really Commissioner Wildcat Gordon in disguise!

When crime needed methods that a conservative city administration would not stand for, The Whisperer roamed at large, meting out his own kind of justice to the underworld. His methods were swift, efficient— and unorthodox. Only one man alive knew of that disguise.

The Whisperer knew much of the crime that was now sweeping along the water front. More, perhaps, than Bolton knew. He knew criminals addicted to smuggling had suddenly come into a lot of money.

Criminal minds work in patterns. But this time, the pattern seemed to have been broken. Something was wrong in the deadly set-up. Something that the underworld grapevine could not unravel.

The Whisperer knew the fear that stalked the water front. He knew of the Eye of Zion and the peculiar terror that made its members speechless. And he knew that two stalwart policemen had died trying to find out what it was.

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Names— of Madman Mulay and Rodoc Gorne— ran through The Whisperer's mind as he tore along. Either was a name to conjure with. They were tops in crime. Mulay was the evil brain. But even now, underworld gossip had passed word that Rodoc Gorne had bribed Mulay's henchmen to bump off Mulay and that Gorne had then taken over his mob. It was but rumor, however.

Tonight, though, Rodoc was giving a ribald, raucous dinner to his henchmen.

But The Whisperer did not go the hangout of Rodoc Gorne. An able man— his old friend, old Quick Trigger— was there already, investigating for The Whisperer.

The gray man drove straight to the dingy warehouse that rumor said housed the lair of Madman Mulay, mystery genius of crime. Police had never apprehended the Madman. Five had died trying it.

Those who had seen the Madman said he was a fearsome sight. His face was like parchment, like an inhuman mask. He was ruthless, utterly without mercy. Beyond that, no one knew much about him.

The Whisperer left his coupe a block from the crumbling warehouse that was supposed to hide the den of the Madman. He went the rest of the distance on foot. The huge, rambling structure was an eerie place. Long condemned as a fire trap, it had lain unused for years.

In front of a door that hung crazily on rusted hinges, the gray man paused. There was an oppressive silence in the air. Water lapped softly at pilings below the floor of the building. The warehouse was built well out over the water.

The Whisperer had a date with Madman Mulay; an appointment he believed would be kept. He had dropped a note on the bar of one of the foulest dives on the water front. It had been addressed to the Madman. He knew the crook would get it.

"I cut in— or else!" the note had stated. "I'll call on you at eight to—morrow. The Whisperer.

No criminal, however big, would ignore that note. That date would be kept, even if the purpose were only murder. The authorities had a price on the head of the gray man. But that was mere pin money to the standing offer made by the big—shots of the underworld!

Silently, The Whisperer entered the building. Two queer oversized pistols appeared in his hands. They were supersilenced pistols of devastating power.

Dim lights showed a crazy maze of passageways. Doors opened from everywhere.

A turn in the corridor brought the gray man into a large, bright room. A frightened scream made him spin about. The sight that confronted him was not one that he had expected.

The girl was beautiful, in an almost oriental fashion. Her face was a perfect oval, framed in loose raven hair. Large dark eyes were set in an olive—tinted skin. The Whisperer knew her. She was Beulah Stroff, one of the newest members of the Eye of Zion!

In her hand she held a businesslike .38. Fear burned in her liquid eyes. But beneath it there was determination. Her finely molded mouth was grim, set in a line that would brook no compromise.

"Don't come closer, or I will shoot!" she intoned. "I will talk to no one but Mr. Mulay. He must help me. One of the victims is going to talk!"

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The gray man's eerie whisper brought shudders to the girl. But her hand was steady on the gun. The Whisperer advanced slowly; so slowly, it scarcely seemed that he was getting closer. The girl, he knew, held the secret to the puzzle that he had to solve. She must talk.

Slowly, her finger whitened on the trigger of the revolver. Then her eyes widened. Fear turned to terror. Her eyes were not looking at The Whisperer. The terror was behind the gray man.

Feet scuffed faintly on the floor. Two things happened quickly then: The Whisperer whirled; and guns began to roar.

Five ugly thugs were crouched near the door through which The Whisperer had entered. The first slug caught The Whisperer full in the chest. The fine steel mesh of his shotproof vest absorbed it. But the force of the big slug unbalanced him.

He stumbled. Lurid blue flame leaped from the muzzles of his twin guns. Two thugs fell, blood dripping from lethal wounds in their foreheads. The other three leaped behind the door jamb, pumped lead at The Whisperer.

The hissing voice of the little man ripped out to the girl.

"Run," he said, "or you will be killed!"

Beulah Stroff needed no further urging. She tore out through another door set crazily in one wall of the room.

Slowly, The Whisperer backed. The thugs were wary now; so wary, that it spoiled their aim. But, suddenly, one of them laughed harshly, yanked at a lever in the wall.

The floor dropped from beneath the gray man. A wooden beam, actuated by a spring, struck out as he fell into blackness. The beam crashed against his skull, nearly crushed it. He landed on a rough wooden platform. His body was a limp, senseless mound of flesh.

Consciousness filtered back into his mind a few moments later. His hands and feet were bound. Ratty thugs stood over him, gloating in their triumph.

One of them was a tall, gaunt criminal. He seemed to be their leader. The underworld knew him as Madman Mulay's chief aid.

"Drop him as he is," the gaunt one rasped. "The tide will take his body. Let it come up somewhere else. It will be good for everyone to know The Whisperer is dead!"

"O.K., Rocky," his companions agreed. "You know your stuff."

The gray man tensed once then. There was faint buzzing in one ear. Then he relaxed, rolled slightly as a mighty blackjack crashed against his skull.

He was unconscious when his body splashed into the sluggish current of the river. Great wharf rats scurried along the stringpiece as his body floated silently into open water.

Rodoc Gorne was under a surveillance he did not suspect. But in his present mood, Rodoc would not have cared. His blank, lipless face was as near flushed as it could be. Gorne was triumphant.

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The big barn where he conducted a trucking business as a blind to his more sinister activities was cleared of vehicles. A festive board was stretched out before the dais at which Rodoc sat, hunched over the speakers' table.

As motley a selection of criminals as ever sat down together was gathered around the criminal leader. Gorne had committed most every crime in the book. But he was clever. There never seemed to be enough evidence at hand to convict him.

Right now, Rodoc laughed drunkenly. The laugh disclosed that his gash of a mouth was nearly devoid of teeth. There were only three or four yellowed stumps. His hairless head was adorned by a rude gilt crown, cocked at a crazy angle.

Gorne staggered to his feet. He twisted his mouth into a sly grin, an expression totally devoid of humor.

"Everything is fixed, boys," he rasped, in a voice that made one think of a fingernail being scratched over a snaredrum head. "Now, we got a common front against the law!"

He paused and grinned more broadly.

"Everything's been adjusted," he boasted. "And I'm the boss!"

Gorne's eyes narrowed for an instant.

"There's one racket I'd like to know more about," he snarled. "I don't know what it is. But I do know where the dough is coming from!"

Suddenly, a strident bell jangled on the wall. There was a crash behind the speakers' table. Thugs leaped to their feet. Rodoc Gorne sobered instantly. His face became cruel and cunning. Gorne could do that. It was one reason he had mounted so high the ladder of crime. He turned toward the wall.

"The trap, boys," he grated. "We got ourselves a fish!"

Thugs disappeared. They returned abruptly, dragging a battered figure between them. The man was tall and gaunt. His skull was bald, except for two gray tufts above his ears. His old eyes seemed to squint, as if he did not see the crime king clearly.

But retired Deputy Richard Traeger— Quick Trigger, the friend the commissioner had sent there— saw clearly enough. He saw that he had blundered, and that his career was probably at an end.

One of the thugs rasped out an oath.

"We don't know how long he's been there, boss," he snarled. "He may have heard a lot."

"It don't matter," he rasped. "Take care of him! Put his feet in cement! Over the side of the boat!"

The thug grinned with an anticipation of pleasure.

Old Quick Trigger's eyes showed no flicker of fear. But his strength seemed suddenly to leave him. He collapsed on the floor. That brought much mirth from the assembled mobsters. So much mirth, that they did not see the rapid movement of Quick Trigger's fingers.

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Those fingers tapped in code on one ankle. A tiny portable radio set sent powerful signals over a limited distance. The receiving set tuned to that was also portable. It was a tiny, compact receiver plugged into the ear of The Whisperer!

For Old Quick Trigger was the only man alive who knew The Whisperer was really Wildcat Gordon. He had manufactured the queer dental plates that gave The Whisperer his oddly pointed chin and the eerie, hissing voice.

The thugs straightened the old man out, dragged him toward a double door. They tied him, left him on the floor, while various arrangements were made by telephone.

Just before they dragged him out, a door burst open and the gaunt thug known as Rocky shoved into the big room. He grinned from ear to ear.

"Say, boss," he blurted, "I got the best news yet!"

Rocky told of the demise of The Whisperer. The thugs whooped with joy. Quick Trigger groaned and sat erect. Then they dragged him from the room, said they would make the night a complete success.

The slight body of The Whisperer twisted with the tide that bore him out from under the pilings of Madman Mulay's headquarters. The chill water had one immediate effect. It brought him back to consciousness.

River current mingled with the tide, pulled his body down from time to time. Then the tide would whip it back to the surface.

The Whisperer stretched his neck, bent it. He bit at a dingy wisp that struggled from the buttonhole of his coat lapel. The wisp became a rubber tube.

He struggled only slightly; just enough to bring his head occasionally above the surface. Each time it did, he inhaled deeply. When the current dragged him down, he exhaled forcefully into the rubber tube.

Presently, the current no longer dragged him beneath the surface. With each stout breath, his suit inflated. Carefully constructed rubber chambers in its lining expanded, floated the body. The Whisperer became a tiny boat. He had only to kick his feet and head for shore.

A rusted nail on a dock piling parted the bonds that held him. But all that took time.

He hailed a cab, thrust a ten-dollar bill under the nose of the driver. In less than many minutes, The Whisperer leaped to the street near the hangout of Rodoc Gorne.

The gray man wrung water from his clothing. It was still damp, soggy. But it no longer looked as though he had just emerged from the river. The quaint, round-brimmed hat was gone. He adjusted the dental plates within his mouth. The shape of the chin changed slightly; just enough to alter his appearance. He applied tiny suction lenses to his eyeballs. The eyes became yellow instead of whitish.

In this disguise, the man who edged into the big garage and barn was known to the gang. He was a small-time petty crook often found huddled in a dimly lit barroom, looking for a job. He was known only as D. Smith. The man was of far too little consequence to be dangerous. It was rumored that he had no tongue. D. Smith never spoke.

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D. Smith hunched his shoulders in a way that gave him an appearance of permanent despair. He wedged his way into a small shedlike building that leaned against the main garage as if it were tired.

The breath that issued from between his teeth then, might have revealed that D. Smith was The Whisperer. The radio message he had received told that Quick Trigger was in trouble, had been seized. But now, The Whisperer gasped in fear for his closest friend.

He saw a torn fragment of cloth, recognized it as coming from the suit Quick Trigger had been wearing. The cloth was beside a carefully sawed half of a barrel. The other half was gone. And beside that telltale half-barrel was a concrete mixing trough. The trough was nearly empty now. But fresh concrete still clung to its sides!

D. Smith retraced his steps quickly. Only one thought was in his mind right now. If Quick Trigger was not yet dead, he must save him. If he was, The Whisperer's vengeance would follow quickly. But first, he must make sure.

The expression on the blank face of D. Smith was crafty as he stumbled into the big room. The feast had recommenced. D. Smith looked quickly about him.

Thugs looked up, grinned derisively at the newcomer. But some looked a bit nervous. It had been rumored at times that D. Smith told the big-shots peculiar things he had seen. The Whisperer noticed four thugs particularly.

One of them was the gaunt one known as Rocky. He and three other hard-faced mobsters who sat beside him had been considered members of Madman Mulay's gang, before Gorne had bribed them into his pay.

D. Smith let his gaze rest on those four as he slunk, stoop-shouldered, toward Rodoc Gorne. The four looked uneasy, glanced furtively at each other. D. Smith's yellow eyes glittered queerly. Rodoc Gorne's gaze narrowed. The advent of Quick Trigger an hour before had made him cautious.

D. Smith scraped and bowed as he approached the crime king. He pulled a pad from his pocket. He knew he had to take a chance; a long one. But he played on the uneasiness he had caught in the faces of Rocky and his pals.

D. Smith pointed. Then he wrote, jerkily: Those four double-crossed you. They didn't bump off Madman Mulay, as you ordered them to do. Check up. You'll see.

Rodoc Gorne's first impulse was to laugh. Then he grabbed D. Smith by one arm, twisted cruelly. The laugh left his lips as he searched the face of the gray man. Rodoc Gorne boasted that he was a judge of character.

He knew he saw a mute appeal in the expression of D. Smith; knew that appeal was an honest one. It begged him, Rodoc, to find out if his orders had been obeyed. Rodoc Gorne was right. The appeal was there. But it was not quite what he thought.

The crime king leaped erect with a bellow of rage. He called two of his oldest thugs to his side, whipped out his own flat automatics.

"Get the diver," he roared. "You, Rocky, and your pals— come along. We'll find out what is what!"

Then he looked at the cringing form of D. Smith.

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"And you, my slippery friend," he spat. "If you've lied, you'll get it the hard way. I'll cut you slowly to bits!"

D. Smith was thrust roughly ahead of the mobsters. It was a long-shot gamble; a desperate one. But The Whisperer had to find out if Quick Trigger still lived.

The boat was an old one. The Whisperer recognized it. It explained many things. It was a sixty-foot cabin cruiser powered by twin motors. It had been auctioned off by the police department a year before. And it still bore departmental markings! Two sister boats were still in service.

On many a night this boat might have slipped by the coast guard entirely unsuspected!

The powerful motors thrust the cruiser through the night. She ran without lights, but the helmsman seemed to know just where he was going. Rocky and his three pals huddled in the bow. Two submachine guns were trained upon them.

In the stern, a diver gathered his gear about him. He was a man who had turned to crime when business had become too tough for him.

An air of tenseness prevailed upon the boat. The helmsman spoke quickly to Rodoc Gorne. The crime king went to Rocky, the gaunt thug who had bound The Whisperer in Madman Mulay's crumbling warehouse.

"You better be able to find Mulay's body," Gorne rasped to Rocky. "If you can't, you're all washed up!"

Rocky squinted through an instrument that he set up on the cabin top. He took cross bearings on two shore lights. Then he rumbled orders to the helmsman.

"This is the spot," he rasped. "It's got to be!"

The diver went over the side with a powerful searchlight in his hands.

D. Smith got up from a huge coffin-like box on which he had been sitting. He wandered aimlessly about the boat. Rodoc Gorne watched him closely. But no one paid much attention. After all, he couldn't very well get out and walk.

Suddenly, they forgot the gray man. Bubbles stopped coming from the diver's helmet. The deep-sea man was blowing up his suit, rising to the surface. He broke the water a dozen feet away from the boat.

Quickly, helping mobsters hauled him aboard. Their hands were nervous as they twisted off his helmet. Here was the answer; someone would have to die.

The diver's voice was contemptuous

"The guy is there," he spat. "Knee-deep in concrete! He's battered up a lot. But it's Mulay, all right! He's still got on that funny signet ring he always wore!"

Rodoc Gorne's eyes narrowed. His lipless mouth twisted cruelly.

"That leaves us just two things to do," he said flatly. "The ex-copper we caught tonight and this wise guy here— D. Smith!"

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A booming voice interrupted him. Stentorian profanity that shook the boat roared from the coffinlike box on which D. Smith had been sitting. The lid of the box opened suddenly and the bald pate of Quick Trigger loomed into view.

"Danged fools, if they were goin' to throw me overboard with cement on my feet, should have done it quicker," the old deputy bellowed. "Had a hell of a time getting my feet clear of this wet concrete when they dumped me here waiting for the stuff to get hard!"

Quick Trigger leaped to his feet. Two huge cannonlike revolvers were in his hands. He had not been searched when captured. They boomed like naval guns, scattered mobsters to the cabin.

The thugs with the Tommy guns swung them quickly. But lurid jets of blue flame leaped from the hands of D. Smith. The Whisperer's silenced automatics hissed like the voice of their owner. The Tommy gunners lost interest in what they were doing. Their weapons plopped into the river.

Then a shout went up from aft. Rodoc Gorne suddenly realized that he should have watched D. Smith more closely when the gray man had ambled about the boat. The Whisperer had opened a sea cock.

All hands had been on deck when the diver went over the side. Now it was too late to do anything about it. The water was up to the gunwales.

The thugs milled in confusion. The lights went out in the cabin; the deck was in utter darkness. D. Smith moved silently to old Quick Trigger, handed him a tiny package. He spoke quick words. Quick Trigger grinned, nodded.

D. Smith moved quickly then. He headed for the spot where had last seen Rocky. Halfway there, he was interrupted. A woman's scream split the air. Dimly, he saw a form scamper from a rope locker in the bow. It was Beulah Stroff. She screamed at Rodoc Gorne.

"You've killed Mulay!" she shouted. "I had to see him! There isn't anybody now that I can talk to!"

D. Smith dived quickly. One arm scooped up the girl. His free fist caught Rocky on the chin. The three went overboard together. No one had the time nor inclination to stop them. The boat was sinking fast.

It was every man for himself. The thugs who couldn't swim were simply out of luck. They screamed in fear as the old police boat sank beneath the waves.

Rodoc Gorne growled quick orders. His picked men were equipped with life preservers.

A police boat picked up some of the mobsters. It also picked up D. Smith and the girl. D. Smith was merely a petty crook. He was not watched closely. He disappeared as soon as the boat touched the dock.

It was less than five minutes later that the captain of the marine division got a telephone call from Wildcat Gordon. He was told to bring the girl and a doctor to the commissioner's office immediately.

The girl really belonged in a hospital. Fever raced through her veins. She was delirious, could give Wildcat Gordon no help at all, had she wanted to.

She babbled many things— of her homelife before she came to America, of parties, balls and friends, of her fiance'. But there was nothing of crime, nor of the mysterious Madman Mulay.

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Wildcat Gordon strode up and down the room. There were many things unanswered in his mind. He thought again of Rocky and his pals, of their queer uneasiness. The hard-boiled police commissioner was everything The Whisperer was not.

He was clad in a checkered suit that screamed. With the dental plates removed, his jaw was as square as a chopping block. An army campaign hat was cocked over blue-gray eyes that glinted dangerously.

Wildcat waited for a phone call. Suddenly, it came. He recognized the voice of old Quick Trigger.

"I thought so!" Wildcat snapped. "Carry on as you are. Delay things if you can."

Wildcat Gordon whirled. Suddenly, things began to add up into answers. He rushed into the adjoining office.

Wildcat had noticed the similarity in build between Quick Trigger and Rocky. D. Smith had given the gaunt deputy a compact make-up kit. Old Quick was a master at make-up, and of imitation.

D. Smith had seen that Rocky had been hauled aboard the real police boat. And Rocky had apparently escaped. Quick Trigger was now doubling for Rocky with the gang.

Quick had told Wildcat that Rodoc Gorne was going to the harbor again, this time to raise the body of Madman Mulay. Wildcat remembered several things. He decided that Gorne should not find that body.

The stocky commissioner strode into an adjoining room. Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton was there, much discomfited by Wildcat's sudden return. Kirsten Wellman was with him.

"I hope you can clear this thing up. These poor people seem terrified! I can't figure what this is all about."

Wildcat ignored him, spoke to Bolton.

"I understand there's a body in the river, Henry," Wildcat snapped. "Take a police boat right away and get it. Use a fifteen-foot drag and spot on a forty-five degree cross bearing off the Pine Point and Harbor Basin lights. Make it snappy!"

Bolton sniveled. But he also jumped. Wildcat was obviously in no mood for argument. Commissioner Gordon turned and strode back to his office. Then he gasped a word made of sulphur. The office was empty.

One window was opened wide. Beulah Stroff was gone!

Wildcat smiled grimly, put on his hat. He gave two orders to the desk sergeant. One was for the transfer of a phone call. The other was more peculiar. It called for the actual escape of the gaunt criminal known as Rocky.

This desk sergeant had served in the army under Captain Wildcat Gordon. He could be trusted. His chief gave him a grimy note. He told him it must not be opened, but was to be handed to Rocky before he got away. It was a message from The Whisperer; one Wildcat wanted Rocky to take to his boss.

There was an odd light in Wildcat's eyes as he strode down the street. He went quickly to a dingy section of the city, darted up a dark flight of stairs. This was the private hide-out of The Whisperer.

The dental plates went back into his mouth, once in that room. He pulled dry gray clothing over his checkered suit. Chalky powder was dusted into his reddish hair. The Whisperer thought he'd have a showdown tonight.

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In fact, he was sure of it. Doubly sure!

The phone rang as he finished his transformation. The voice was that of Quick Trigger.

"Gorne went out on the boat," Quick reported. "But the body's disappeared. Gorne is mad as hell!"

The Whisperer spoke quickly, gave husky orders. Then he clicked the receiver, called a number. Rodoc Gorne answered the phone.

"I'm taking over," the gray man husked. "This is The Whisperer! From now on, the Eye of Zion belongs to me!"

The gray man hung up as Gorne choked angrily over the phone. His whispering chuckle filled the room. Then he put on a quaint, round-brimmed hat and went out. He took a drab, gray coupe from a nearby garage and drove to one of the biggest apartment buildings in the city.

When the Eye of Zion had first come into existence, it had possessed enough funds to take a long lease on this sumptuous establishment.

The Whisperer mounted by way of an outside staircase, the modern concealed version of a fire escape. At the tenth floor, he forced entrance to a common hallway that ran between the apartments. Then, more cautiously, he climbed one more flight on the inside staircase.

One door on the eleventh floor yielded easily. The Eye of Zion no longer had much worth stealing.

The huge foyer in which the gray man found himself was unoccupied. But a buzz of voices came from beyond another door. The Whisperer went through it. There were twenty or so members of the Eye of Zion there.

Most of them were bearded, swarthy men. But among them was Beulah Stroff. Her eyes were wide, dilated. She gestured vehemently with her hands.

Then they saw The Whisperer. The gray man spoke softly. He knew these people would not trust policemen. He knew they feared for something far greater than their own safety.

There was one bit of information he would like to have waited for. But he had not been able to await a report from Bolton. He had investigated every member of the Eye of Zion. He had to gamble that his deductions had been correct.

"You have nothing to fear from me," he said. "I believe I know your secret, and I will help you. You are now in the hands of a monster. He will bleed you or kill you."

Beulah Stroff's hands flew to her mouth. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"No, no!" she screamed to the others. "Do not speak! It is another trap! Think of... think of—" She collapsed on the floor.

Shots blared then in the hallway outside. A machine gun rattled and the booming voice of Rodoc Gorne growled harsh orders. The members of the Eye of Zion looked helplessly at each other.

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The Whisperer moved quickly. He knew there would be needless slaughter, if the mobsters burst into the room. He raced to the door, paused a second to scrape a penknife through the wiring of a floor lamp.

There was a sputter as a fuse blew out. The room was plunged into darkness. Then The Whisperer whirled out into the great entrance foyer.

Two dim lights over the outer door still glowed. They were on a different circuit. Gorne's thugs filled the hallway. A Tommy gun ripped up, then dropped again. There were too many in the line of fire.

The gray man spat soft-voiced slugs from his silenced guns. As he did, he moved backward. The gunmen began shooting then.

A huge incinerator door yawned behind the gray man. Fear flickered on his face as he noticed it. At that instant, a slug grazed his skull. He sank toward the floor, half leaning on the door of the garbage incinerator.

That gave Gorne a great idea. He rumbled his extreme mirth.

"He backed right into his own way out!" he bellowed. "Stuff him down! No one'll ever know he's been here!"

Thugs picked up the limp body of The Whisperer, stuffed it down the incinerator chute. The acrid smell of burned garbage drifted from the opening.

Quick Trigger was here with Gorne's gang, disguised as Rocky. He winced with mental pain. But he still knew how to follow orders.

Rodoc Gorne dusted off his hands as if he had disposed of something beneath him. He laughed harshly, strode into the quarters of the Eye of Zion. The group there had scarcely moved since The Whisperer had left. Gorne eyed them with contempt.

"Madman Mulay is dead," he rasped. "The cops may have his body, but they can't prove a thing. From now on, I'm boss!"

Gorne paused to let his words sink in. He ogled the terrified Beulah Stroff and grinned evilly, as if he had just let himself in on a secret.

"From now on, you're going to get more dough up than you ever heard of," he snarled. "You'll get it— or else!"

Tears streamed down Beulah Stroff's pretty face. The men looked dejected, hopeless. Beulah seemed about to speak. A commotion at the door interrupted her. She gasped. But it was not fresh hope. Not now. It could only mean more terror.

Rodoc Gorne whirled. Then his mouth dropped open.

The figure that came in, flanked by a dozen gunmen, was huge. The face was a dead, parchmentlike mask. Madman Mulay had come to life again. He began to speak as soon as he crossed the threshold. His voice was disguised, as if he spoke with a mouthful of gravel.

"You never bumped me, wise guy!" he barked. "My own men sold out to you— so you thought. They sunk a corpse that had already been embalmed; one we stole from a morgue. The boys just put my ring on the old stiff's finger."

THE BAND OF FEAR

Gorne was taken by surprise. He gulped in his astonishment.

"W-Why!" he gasped.

Madman Mulay spat words of contempt.

"This racket doesn't take a gang," he snarled. "All it needs is information. And I'm the only guy who has it. The easiest way to pay off my gang and duck was to let you think you'd killed me!"

Mulay laughed harshly, brought up a heavy automatic. Rodoc Gorne snatched frantically at his own gun. But he was a fraction of a second too late. A fraction of a second at a time like that is just as good— or bad— as an eternity.

The gun of Mulay's belched flame and a little black bug leaped into the forehead of Rodoc Gorne. The crime king dropped, very dead.

Mulay's mobsters spread quickly through the room. They expected little trouble from the henchmen of Rodoc Gorne. Mulay did not notice one man edging around behind him. He thought most of his own men were still coming through the door.

But another sudden idea struck him. He had been tipped about the false Rocky. He whirled toward a man lurking near the wall.

"You rat," he screamed. "You're not Rocky! You get yours, just like Rodoc Gorne!"

Mulay's gun whipped up and fired. The gaunt man across the room jumped. The first slug missed him.

Cursing, Mulay pumped more lead. But his target had gotten into action. A deadly automatic roared from the wall. Mulay drilled the other's throat with a slug. But Rocky kept pumping slugs from pure reflex action. Mulay went down with a dozen slugs in his body.

The man he had killed— and who had mortally wounded him— was the real Rocky. The note given Rocky, when released from jail, to deliver to his boss, stated the Rocky in the mob was a fake. This was the plan of Wildcat's, to cause Rocky's death.

There was a lull then, the calm that follows a storm. Mulay groaned and twisted on the floor. What he saw brought one final agonized moan of surprise.

The "Rocky" who had edged behind Mulay had figured on the possibility of such a play. After being tipped off by Wildcat, he had avoided the real Rocky. He had been ready. Right now, old Quick Trigger was wiping make-up from his face.

The gasp that came from the mobsters was quickly stifled. Sirens moaned outside. The feet of many policemen tramped on the stairs. But up above that ripped the sulphurous tones of Wildcat Gordon!

The Whisperer had inspected the incinerator before his movements suggested it to Rodoc Gorne as an ideal means of disposal. He had made Gorne think of it.

When The Whisperer had paused on the floor below, he had opened the incinerator door there. In addition, he knew that the incinerator fires were kept burning only at certain hours. And those were in the daytime.

THE BAND OF FEAR

"What the devil is going on here?" Wildcat roared, ripping open the door.

Thugs darted for their guns. When they saw the array of cops behind Wildcat, they dropped their hands again.

Deputy Bolton was right behind the commissioner. He sprang to the inert form on the floor.

"Madman Mulay!" he gasped. He pulled at the parchment mask that was now askew, showed itself to be a mere disguise. The dead face of Kirsten Wellman stared up at him! Bolton's jaw dropped open in astonishment.

"Yeah," Wildcat muttered. "His philanthropy must have let him in on too many answers."

Wildcat strode around the room, inspecting everything he found. He halted by the incinerator door. It seemed he found a note.

"This is addressed to you, miss," he said to Beulah Stroff. "Found it here."

Bewilderment on her face, Beulah ripped open the envelope.

"If I am right," the note stated, "your group has succeeded in taking large sums of money from totalitarian States abroad where currency exportation is expressly forbidden; countries from which you had fled. If the authorities there knew you had succeeded, they would take severe reprisals against the loved ones you had left behind you. It is their way of punishment and discipline."

"That money was your own. But you could not declare it to the customs officials here. If you did, your enemies abroad would learn of it."

"Mulay talked you into letting him smuggle in your funds for a small percentage. Then he took them all, demanded more or he would tell what he knew. Your fear for the lives and safety of those you love and had left behind made you an easy prey. You were not avoiding duties here, but protecting other lives. Mulay had a perfect racket— and a foul one."

The fiancé' of whom you talked when you were delirious is safe. Tear this note crosswise twice to show that you believe me. Friends of mine will know then that you no longer fear."

"Your secret is safe with me. The Whisperer."

Beulah Stroff still looked bewildered. But slowly, she tore the note crosswise, twice.

Bolton moaned nasally.

"Now, we'll never know what this all about," he complained. "I want to know!"

Quick Trigger was wandering about the room, snapping handcuffs on mobsters in wholesale lots. He paused to scratch his head.

"Guess we'll never find out," he muttered. "I always did like mysteries."

He peered at the corpses of the two kings of crime.

"Anyhow," he grinned, "we did a good day's work."

THE BAND OF FEAR

Beulah Stroff looked at the incinerator door and burst into tears.