

BULLET BAIT

Clifford Goodrich

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The Whisperer was keenly aware that the girl beside him doubted his ability to stage a holdup. He sat hunched beside her in the speeding roadster. His chin was long-pointed and his blurred hair under a quaint, round-brimmed hat was whitish in color.

Otherwise, The Whisperer was a humble, mild-appearing man with a low, husky voice, hardly above a whisper at any time. Now he glanced over at the maze of railroad switch tracks bordering the highway. The Whisperer emitted a graveyard chuckle.

The girl driving the roadster had good reason to display concern in her pretty but hardened face. Over there on the Lakes Southern, a series of daring car robberies and delays of perishable freight had brought huge losses. Losses that the L. S. was in no position to withstand. And, about to be pitted against the ruthless mob—brainy railroad racketeers—was this mild-mannered man, known to the girl only as "D. Smith."

The girl at the wheel had freckles along her straight nose. She glanced at the hunched figure beside her. The Whisperer was dressed all in gray. The girl's red hair was blowing as she glanced into the windshield mirror. She could see two sets of car lights dancing along far back.

The girl looked ahead and saw the garish light of a tough barroom bordering the highway across from the tracks. She shivered. That bar had been marked more than once for violence and murder. It was certain that a few of the lesser mobsters of the railroad racket made this saloon their hang-out.

Within a few minutes now this humble, whispering man beside her was supposed to stick up that bar; walk in lonehanded, hold up its tough occupants and walk out again. "Why," thought the girl. "I would stand a better chance trying it myself."

She studied the hunched shoulders of her companion briefly. When she had gone to Commissioner of Police James ("Wildcat") Gordon with her story, her belief that the brains behind the railroad robberies and the racket in delayed trains must be somewhere within the L. S. organization, Wildcat Gordon had asked a few questions. Then he had said. "I will send you a man. and we will follow out a plan I have in mind."

This D. Smith was the amazing man she had picked up on Wildcat Gordon's instructions. The girl was June Tramer, daughter of old Bob Tramer, president of the Lakes Southern. When she first saw D. Smith, she had believed there was some mistake. She still believed it.

As the bright light of the highway barroom drew closer, the girl said, "You are sure that Commissioner Gordon told you all that you should know?"

The Whisperer did not look at her. He replied in a low, husky voice.

"I am to stick up that tough bar ahead," he said calmly. "The lights will go out and I may be compelled to shoot one or more persons. I will then seize the contents of the cash register and— But, Miss Tramer, when

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the lights go out, you are to high-ball the hell out of here."

June Tramer shook her blowing, red hair and looked dazed at the calmness of this D. Smith's speech.

"You said 'high-ball!' she exclaimed. "Then you have been a railroad man?"

"I have been a little bit of everything," said The Whisperer without emotion. "But here is where you hold up, Miss Trainer. Dim your lights and wait with your motor running. It must appear as if I am planning to escape in this car. Be sure and don't get in the way of any lead when you start away. And when you leave, it must seem as if you have given me up."

For the first time, the girl caught the shine of light in The Whisperer's eyes. She saw then they were almost without color, but cold. If she had been of the Southwest, she would have known those eyes belonged to Texas, to the old rangers down there. For they were cool, grim eyes.

She said: "But have you thought yourself that you might stop some bullets that come from the wrong places?"

The Whisperer gave her a skeletonlike grin.

"I have often stopped bullets that came from the wrong places," he stated. "And when you make it away from here, you are to go directly to the L. S. offices uptown. Wildcat Gordon has told me that he will have others there within a short time. Here's where I get off."

June Tramer's lips were red and her face was pretty, but her mouth was hard and tight.

"If this impossible plan could succeed, you will be paid more than you ever—"

The gray clad man gave an eerie laugh that halted her speech. He was sliding from the seat of the roadster. Back on the highway, two sets of car lights moved very slowly. The autos might have been occupied by evening pleasure-seekers. But these noisy, smoky, break-up rail yards of the big town were hardly a place to seek pleasure.

"I will soon collect my calling card on Cutter Carson," said The Whisperer. "Remember, when the news of this holdup breaks, you have every official of your railroad in the general offices, no matter what the hour."

Then the gray-clad man was gone, merging with the night mist over the railroad yard, noisy with clanking switch engines. Switching lanterns danced here and there among the black lines of cars. Only along the concrete highway was there the continuous light of road lamps.

The girl pulled the roadster to one side, in a shadowed spot. She was sure she had been unobserved and it would be safe to wait. But two pairs of keen eyes had picked up the movement of the small car. Two bulky men in plain clothes dropped behind a box car and remained a few seconds, watching.

"That dame's waiting for something," growled one of the men. "You keep an eye on her, an' I'll trail the guy that got out. Maybe it's some hook-up with the car gang."

The speaker started along the line of cars, attempting to follow The Whisperer. But gray clothes and soundless shoes in a gray night are difficult to shadow. In ten seconds the man in plain clothes had lost The Whisperer. He swore and turned back, believing his quarry had gone in among the loaded cars.

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The Whisperer followed highway shadows toward the dark spot marking the bar. As he moved, he was saying softly to himself:

"The girl probably will call up Wildcat Gordon. She will imagine he is neglecting his duty. Now if Quick Trigger is on the job, I would guess we are only a few minutes from hell."

As if in answer to his speech, a figure moved swiftly to his side. If it had been lighter, it might have been seen this man was bald-headed, in his sixties, and had deep, peering eyes. He was called "Quick Trigger," but he was Richard Traeger, retired police deputy, with whom Commissioner Wildcat Gordon made his home.

Quick Trigger uttered strange words in a low voice.

"Dammitall, Wildcat," he said. "I don't like this. I wish I never had made that dental plate. I--"

"Have you found a place to cut the light wires?" interrupted The Whisperer. "If so, cut them at the first shot. That's all. Then be sure Sergeant Thorsen carries out the rest of the plan in not less than two hours from now."

Old Quick Trigger groaned. He had called The Whisperer "Wildcat." And The Whisperer was none other than Commissioner Wildcat Gordon himself. Quick Trigger was responsible for the dental plate that changed the contour of his face: for the remainder of a makeup that made him everything that fighting Wildcat Gordon would not have appeared to be.

The small barroom contained a dozen or more tough frequenters of the lake shore and the railroad yards. The amount of money slipping across the wet mahogany from greasy hands, indicated that some of the hardest mugs had recently come into cash. The source of their dollars never could have been honest.

About half the patrons were at the bar; the others at small tables. They slanted narrowed eyes at the humble figure of a gray-clad man with a round-brimmed hat who walked in. He looked as if he might have hitch-hiked this way from the country. Hard grins went the round and the suspicious eyes turned away.

The Whisperer stood at the end of the bar and ordered whisky in a mumbling voice. He fumbled for loose change in his pocket. A burly shouldered bartender with crumpled ears growled, "Well, talk up buddy! Two-bit shot?"

The bartender banged a bottle of cheap liquor down, keeping hold of its neck until he saw money produced. The Whisperer laid a coin beside the bottle. And within that space of time, he had marked the location of every tough occupant of the saloon.

The burly bartender grunted. "Have'er straight or with--"

It was then a weird, penetrating whisper filled the room. Though but a whisper, it had compelling emphasis.

"I'll take it with your hands in sight and your mouth shut!"

The impact of a cracking gun could not have been more startling in the small barroom. Every eye snapped back to tile gray-clad man who now stood with his hands loosely at his sides.

The bartender's huge, red hand jerked back to the neck of the whisky bottle. His small eyes held a contemptuous glare of anger. His shoulder heaved, no doubt with the intention of breaking the bottle over the head of this gray-clad intruder.

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But the eerie, chilling whisper came again.

"Stay where you are, or you will die! The Whisperer speaks!"

Three exclamations rasped through the reeking air of the barroom.

"The Whisperer?" spoke a fear-filled voice, and a big man with a scarred cheek went under a table.

"Nuts! Not that punk!" grated another hard-faced man, and his hand streaked to his pocket.

"Why, you lousy bum, I'll—"

This last came from the big bartender. He had already raised the whisky bottle and it was swinging toward The Whisperer's head. It did not seem The Whisperer had moved his loosely hanging hands. No gun had been visible. Only his hunched shoulders jerked a little.

Two explosions were more like the hissing of compressed air than the blasting of rods. The sound lingered and merged with another icy whisper.

"I warned you! Back from that cash register!"

A few of the big town's toughest citizens hit the filthy floor. Their small eyes bugged. One bullet had smashed the whisky bottle from the bartender's hand. Jagged glass cut his flat face. The hard mug who had streaked a hand for his rod whirled halfway around as a second slug smashed the bones of his wrist. His rod never was drawn.

Then the bright lights of the barroom, inside and out, vanished. It seemed as if the double hissing of the gun might have thrown the switch. All but one of the men in the saloon were crouched under the tables or close to the bar itself.

The name "Whisperer" was being uttered in low voices. For many months, the super-crook with the whispering voice had appeared at odd times to strike terror into the underworld. He had robbed and he had killed, it was said. Wildcat Gordon's own police had hunted The Whisperer without results.

A crunching noise in the darkness might have been a belated swing of the cursing bartender with the broken bottle. The metal drawer of the cash register crashed open. Coins jingled on the floor. More shots came from the queerly silenced guns that only hissed. Bottles and the bar mirror smashed.

Pretty June Tramer, seated in the roadster, could not hear the hissing of The Whisperer's guns. But she saw the lights go out. She looked up the highway and saw the lights of two cars still coming along at slow speed. The girl whipped out a small pistol and fired it twice.

June meshed the roadster's gears and the little car moved. At that instant, the bulky man who had remained beside a box car, yelled:

"Hold it, sister, or I'll give you the works!"

And at this same moment, a double wail of police sirens broke over the noise of the yards. The two cars that had been idling along the concrete were speeded up. They were jammed to a stop on squealing rubber in front of the darkened barroom.

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A police gun cracked and a slug spun off the concrete. It whined close to the girl's roadster.

"Damn!" exploded June Trainer, with an emphasis that came from years when old Bob Tramer had been but a chief mechanic and his girl had been the pet of the line. "You'd think the fools were trying to hit me!"

The roadster jumped to the middle of the concrete, lights flashing on. June's surprise at the closeness of the first bullet was instantly increased. Another gun was now pouring bullets straight into the back of the roadster. This was the booming revolver of the man who had been watching beside the box car.

This man sprang into the highway.

He wore the regulation, square-toed shoes of the railroad police. He was a "bull." His aim was good, and pieces of the windshield went out of the roadster as the girl ducked low and fed the gas.

"First time I ever suspected a dame was workin' with that damn racket gang!" swore the bull, now doing his best to put the girl in the roadster out of business.

Then the bull let out a gratified shout. A bullet ripped a tire and the roadster skidded. The car bounced and turned over on the cinder shoulder. Its top was smashed off as the bull ran heavily toward it. Gasoline caught and flamed.

"Great grief! I ain't wantin' to burn up any dame!" groaned the railroad bull.

But when he reached the blazing wreck, it was impossible to get close enough to determine the fate of the girl driver. The bull stood there a full minute, swearing and hating himself for shooting when he had not been sure.

But June Tramer was not in the burned car. She had been thrown clear in the darkness. A single, long scratch marred her pretty face. She limped, but she climbed a steep bank and went over a fence that enclosed an area of small factories.

June dropped lightly to the ground and started along the fence. A shadow moved and a small, hard hand clamped over her mouth. A voice said softly, "Easy on it, sister. Maybe we can be using you, too."

The girl was suddenly thrown and helplessly taped by powerful hands. Mouth and eyes were closed. June Tramer was thinking:

"Shoot the car out from under me. So that's the nice, little trap Wildcat Gordon fixes up for the racket gang. Now there will be the devil and all to pay."

The girl's captor had her helpless when he spoke again.

"So you're The Whisperer's dame, huh? It's the first time we ever heard of him having a soft spot! Be a good girl and you won't be hurt! But you might be a damned good persuader!"

June had not the slightest idea what the man meant. She had no means of knowing that he was the one man who had not dropped during the barroom holdup. If it had been light, she would have seen that he had a double-crossed scar over his right eye.

He was known as "Scarbo" in the underworld, and he had been quicker than the others in the bar when The Whisperer had entered. He had seen the girl park the roadster near the place, and he had slipped out of a side

door just before the bull shot the car off the road.

Seconds later, June Tramer was being carried to a closed car on another road.

Thus it was that June missed the sudden cracking of guns in the darkness down by the maze of railroad tracks. Men were shouting and cursing in the vicinity of the darkened and robbed barroom. Lights from two police cars sliced across strings of box cars in the yards.

And at the moment June Tramer's roadster was hit, turned over and burst into flame, the gray Whisperer was darting toward a line of box cars. The bright blaze of the car began illuminating a wide stretch of tracks.

Husky oaths burst from The Whisperer. Like the railroad bull, he feared the girl might have perished in the wreckage. But the spotlights of the halted police cars cut The Whisperer off from making toward the roadster.

Tough patrons of the barroom were running from side and rear entrances. But the police pouring from the two cars seemed intent only upon getting The Whisperer. They had his scuttling figure caught squarely in the spotlight beams,

Service guns rattled from the squad cars. One copper got a machine gun into action. Bullets whirred viciously off steel rails. Though a perfect target, The Whisperer dropped suddenly to one knee. The police had somehow missed hitting him with all the fusillade.

The Whisperer held a cumbersome gun in each hand. Apparently, he aimed with deadly purpose. One copper beside the cars cried out. His gun flew from his hand as he pitched to the concrete. A wooden-faced sergeant of detectives cried out, "Cut the lights! Damn such shooting! Block the yards both ways! If he ever gets in among the cars—"

The police car lights blinked out, but not soon enough to save the sergeant. The sergeant groaned and dropped into the highway as The Whisperer's guns hissed.

Given the advantage of a few seconds of darkness, The Whisperer sprang to a line of box cars and swung onto a grab-iron ladder. He was on his way to the tops and safety when a new voice shouted.

"Up here, O'Reilly! Let that damn girl go! I've got him!"

The owner of the voice blasted away with a revolver. He was the railroad bull who had attempted to follow The Whisperer and lost him. The Whisperer emitted a ghostly sound that passed with him for an oath.

Bullets ripped at the edge of the boxcar roof. One glancing slug struck The Whisperer's left arm near the shoulder. He could see the bull who had been over by the burning auto now running to take him on the other side of the cars.

In spite of the numb feeling in his shoulder, The Whisperer made a clean jump of twelve feet from the top of the car. Another slug scored his ribs. But his hard body hit the railroad bull so unexpectedly that both rolled into the cinders. The Whisperer smashed at the bull's head with a tough, right fist.

The bull rolled over and the lights went out for him, just as his partner sliced a flashlight on the fighting pair. The Whisperer sprang up, ducked between the cars and made the other side. By this time, half a dozen coppers had spread out and were firing chance bullets under the cars.

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The second bull was starting to climb to the tops when a wooden-faced sergeant of detectives suddenly caught his legs and jerked him down.

This was Detective Tom Thorsen, former army sergeant, and right-hand man to Wildcat Gordon in the department.

"Want to get yourself perforated, buddy?" rapped out Thorsen. "That mugs already got two of our men! Stick with us, see?"

The face of the railroad bull was a picture of disgust. He was sure he could have filled tile fleeing holdup man with lead. He exploded an uncomplimentary, remark directed at all city policemen.

Another man now was sticking close to Sergeant Tom Thorsen. He had a bald head and wore plain clothes. He was old Quick Trigger.

Quick Trigger said to Thorsen, "It looks like the girl's burned in that car. So it's up to you to carry out Wildcat's plan. You'll have to pull something that will get old Bob Tramer and the L. S. officials to their general offices within the next two hours."

Sergeant Thorsen nodded, watching his squad men still shooting at places where The Whisperer was not. Then Quick Trigger pointed to a fresh, liquid circle in the cinders where The Whisperer had jumped from the car top and knocked out the bull. The dampness was undeniably blood.

"Dammitall, sergeant!" groaned Quick Trigger. "One of the bulls got him! I told him it was a fool idea playing bullet bait! Maybe he's down behind them cars!"

But though blood was oozing from his shoulder, the gray Whisperer was moving faster than his pursuers. He got along the line of cars and well out toward a cross highway.

About this time a closed car glided slowly along the highway. The man with the odd scar over his eye, Scarbo, was at the wheel. He had picked up four of the men who had been tough patrons of the robbed barroom. The big trunk of the car was closed and locked.

Scarbo was talking from the corner of his mouth.

"By hell! Cutter could use that Whisperer! What we've been needing is some mug with guts to handle a rod! This egg's got it! See him bump off them two damned cops and then make a get-away? He headed down this way, an' he put out a railroad bull besides all that! The brains is about ready for the bump-off that would swing the Lakes Southern into the courts, then it's a big pay-off for all of us!"

The Whisperer cleared the end of a long string of cars. Blood was still welling from the wound in his shoulder. He saw an auto coming slowly along the cross highway, the face of a man at the wheel. The Whisperer dropped, rolling into a shallow ditch. Soon a hand touched his arm.

"Easy, buddy," said a soft voice. "I'm on your side. see? The boys call me Scarbo. You've put tile drag on the bulls and cops, but they'll have the whole damn yard wrapped up in five minutes! Come on, I'll help you. The boss may want to look you over."

"To hell with that!" said The Whisperer's husky voice. "I play my own hand my own way! I'm not joining up with any racket! I make my own clean-ups and--"

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"Buddy, think it over," interrupted Scarbo softly. "Maybe you think that moll of yours burned up back in that car. You're wrong. She's all okay, buddy, and she's in the trunk of that car. Maybe you'd like to talk over a little job with the boss."

The Whisperer moved as if attempting to make a quick effort to get to his feet, to resent the implication in the other man's voice. But he groaned and fell back. Half a minute later the closed car moved, with The Whisperer being given a drink of liquor in the back seat.

"This is a big job the boss has on, Whisperer," said Scarbo in his same soft voice. "Many crimes have been laid at your door. But the police have never caught up with you. The boss will like that."

The closed car whirled swiftly away along the lake shore. Half an hour later, it was being driven through the doors of a deserted tannery. The Whisperer permitted himself to be half carried to a bench. June Tramer, eyes and mouth still taped, was taken from the trunk of the car.

The Whisperer's head fell forward, and he seemed semiconscious.

Perhaps an hour after the hunt in the railroad yard was abandoned, more than two hundred railway officials and clerks were in the general assembly office of the Lakes Southern, downtown. Bob Tramer, the "Old Man" of the road, was accompanied by J. M. Crandall, general counsel for the L. S. Among others was Peter Mason, a chief clerk, who, all of the staff knew, was soon to marry June Tramer.

Arthur Severn, a dark and glowering man, general manager of the line, was with Tramer and Crandall. It was understood that Severn regarded Peter Mason as his successful rival, and had made several efforts to oust him from the offices.

It was now after midnight, and the call summoning the officials and clerks had been startling enough. A voice had said that Commissioner Wildcat Gordon desired to have all the L. S. staff assembled at once. At the same time, newspapers were out with extras that two of Gordon's coppers had been murdered during the barroom holdup. The holdup, it was stated, was believed to have been committed by some of the "Cutter" Carson railroad racket mob.

The newspaper story also told of a mysterious girl bandit, at first believed burned to death in her car, but later discovered to have escaped death and the police.

"I can't understand who called Commissioner Gordon and his police into our private troubles," complained Bob Tramer heavily. "Crandall, how much has leaked out about our losses?"

Attorney Crandall fingered his chin and shook his head.

"The newspapers have told of some freight-damage cases and of the car robberies," said Crandall. "But usually the city police do not interfere with railroad business. Our own police have been helpless. If Commissioner Gordon and his men have become interested, perhaps it is a break for us. Unless these losses stop, we—"

"Sure, I know," said Bob Tramer hastily. "We have reached a stage where only my private fortune can prevent the old L. S. from passing into other hands. I'll use my money, if it comes to that. But only our most valuable freight has been stolen, and our highest-risk perishables delayed. Each time the railroad gang has struck, they must have known in advance of loadings, train movements and the most effective way to hit us. That means it is something more than a box-car gang or an ordinary racket."

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Crandall, the attorney, nodded agreement with a grim smile.

"And that's why I would recommend that the city police be given all the facts, and Commissioner Gordon have a chance to act," he said. "I am puzzled to know why we have been called at this hour of the night—"

"Perhaps I can answer your question," spoke a slow, emotionless voice. "I am Detective Sergeant Thorsen. I have been sent here by Commissioner Gordon, who was suddenly called away after having the L. S. officials summoned."

The tall Sergeant Thorsen was accompanied by bald-headed Quick Trigger and two detectives. The sergeant addressed Bob Tramer, but his colorless voice carried to all the two hundred officials and clerks in the big room.

"Commissioner Gordon requests that your railroad police take no extra precautions for a few days," said Sergeant Thorsen. "Even if some minor car robbery might be detected, it is asked that no sudden action be taken."

"But why—what does that mean, Sergeant Thorsen?" demanded Bob Tramer truculently. "Has any one informed—"

Sergeant Thorsen lifted his hand.

"There is an excellent reason, Mr. Tramer," he said quietly. "All of you have read to-night how two policemen were killed in a holdup, and the Cutter Carson railroad gang is suspected."

Sergeant Thorsen smiled a little. Then Quick Trigger spoke boastfully.

"And all you've read is bunk," said Quick Trigger. "This is for you and your own officials to know! Commissioner Gordon has succeeded in putting a supposed cop killer into Cutter Carson's railroad gang! No policemen were killed to-night! The man who staged the holdup is now with Cutter Carson's own men, because they believe him to be a lone-wolf gunman!"

There was a minute of breathless silence. Suddenly, old Bob Tramer looked straight at Quick Trigger.

"That bandit girl, the one who escaped death in the car?" he said. "Where did she fit into this? Was she some one—"

Sergeant Thorsen spoke quietly and quickly.

"The license of the burned car is in your daughter's name, Mr. Tramer," he said. "But I can assure you that she must have been unhurt, for she disappeared quickly. Probably you will hear from her at any moment."

Peter Mason, engaged to marry June Tramer, let out an oath and started for the door. Severn, the general manager, was scowling more than ever. He went out immediately after Peter Mason.

"But this is incredible," stated Attorney Crandall. Then he fingered his chin a moment. "Yet, under the circumstances, Mr. Tramer, I will take immediate action to see that the railroad police lay off for a reasonable time."

The big room was cleared half a minute after Sergeant Thorsen and old Quick Trigger had made their amazing announcements.

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Perhaps about this same time, The Whisperer heard Scarbo's voice on a telephone in the old tannery. He could hear Scarbo speak Cutter Carson's name cautiously. Then The Whisperer understood that Cutter Carson himself would be at the railroad gang hide-out as quickly as he could arrive.

The Whisperer remained half conscious, eyes closed to colorless slits. Fiery liquid poured down his throat. He moved but weakly, and appeared to revive slowly. He could see the taped and bound June Tramer sitting on a bench. It was very apparent that none of this gang had identified her as old Bob Tramer's spirited daughter.

An auto roared up, came in and ground to a stop. A tall, hawk-nosed man strode over, spoke quickly to Scarbo, then walked with him to the side of The Whisperer. The Whisperer did not need to be told the man was Cutter Carson, suspected, but never directly implicated in the railroad racket.

"Scarbo tells me you're The Whisperer?" said Cutter in a nasal tone. "Says you handle a rod like greased lightning, and you've got a couple of cop killings against you to-night."

The Whisperer nodded slowly, as if his senses were still fogged. Cutter Carson barely glanced at the bound and taped girl with the red hair. The tape concealed most of her face.

"Want to make an easy ten grand?" said Cutter.

The Whisperer said slowly, "Not enough for a killing, Cutter Carson."

"Twenty-five grand, and you'll take it or your girl over there will be found some day—ii she ever is—at the bottom of one of the old tannery vats in there," said Cutter. "Take it or leave it. And if that happens, you'll be found in the same tanning vat, or perhaps you won't. The lime in there would be tougher on you than on cattle hide."

The Whisperer lifted his wounded arm. His colorless eyes counted five men in the big room besides Cutter Carson. He moved as if to ease his apparently helpless left arm.

"Putting it that way," he said huskily, "I'll take it. But if I give my word, the girl goes free. I am The Whisperer. I am more wanted by the police than you ever will be, Cutter Carson."

"The words of The Whisperer, of a cop killer, is good enough for me," stated Cutter. "You can take the dame out on some country road and turn her loose, boys."

Scarbo and two men moved over, lifting June Tramer to her feet.

"And your word had better be good, Cutter Carson," said The Whisperer. "I'll have to lay up a day or two to get my strength back. Then I want cash on the line, and I'll have to know the girl is okay. Now who is it I am supposed to—"

"All right, Whisperer!" said Cutter heartily. "You're the guy I've been wanting to find. I'll have other jobs. The man you are to—well, we'll say take care of in this little matter, is—"

Cutter bent closer, but he spoke loudly enough for The Whisperer to hear.

"Old Bob Tramer," replied the chilling, eerie whisper, and The Whisperer closed his eyes and sank back.

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So that was it. The railroad was being deliberately wrecked so that it might pass into other hands. For some reason, the losses by car robberies and damage suits had not been sufficient. Old Bob Tramer himself stood in the way of that.

Cutter Carson turned to speak to Scarbo as June Tramer was being led toward a car. Every muscle of The Whisperer became tense. His big, cumbersome pistols had been taken. But two flat automatics lay so close to his stomach they had not been found, and no search had been made.

The Whisperer chuckled softly. It would be but a matter of time now. For on an order of his own, as Wildcat Gordon, Cutter Carson had been trailed here; would be directly under the eye of Sergeant Thorsen's best men from this time on.

June Tramer was being pushed into the car when rubber tires squealed outside the big doors. There was a heavy, double rap; then, two lighter ones. Scarbo reached the doors, turned back and called out:

"Cutter, come here! It's—"

"Button up!" yelled Cutter. "I'm coming!"

Cutter hurried to the entrance doors in the darkness. In five seconds, the air was filled with wild oaths. Scarbo and three men were coming upon The Whisperer. Two men carried submachine guns.

"Don't move, Whisperer!" commanded Scarbo, and his voice was no longer soft. "So it was a game, huh? And you ain't no more The Whisperer than I am! Okay, boys, the dame knows too much, and they go together! Down to the vats!"

The Whisperer knew the brains behind Cutter Carson had arrived. But a machine gun helped prod him to his feet. The blinded June Tramer was pushed along beside him. The Whisperer knew that his trap had been sprung. But with June Tramer beside him, starting slowly down slimy, slippery, stone steps, a machine gun in his back, there was nothing he could do.

The Whisperer had not figured on June being trapped by the gang. And he had waited a few seconds too long when the brains of the railroad racket had arrived. His own police were not far away, but they had orders from Wildcat Gordon to await his word before acting.

Big black rats scurried away from the slimy stairs. In the darkness below, The Whisperer could see the shine of filthy lime vat water. Perhaps their bodies would be found, but no person could live half a minute in the mixture once used for tanning hides.

The Whisperer's hands were raised, and he could make no move to reach his concealed automatics. A few more steps remained, and the death vats lay on both sides. A hand on the girl's shoulder guided her. She had grit, and she did not cry out.

Then The Whisperer's keen eyes saw a broken step below. His chance was less than one in a thousand. But he permitted a foot to slip, and his own leg concealed the step. The gunman behind him stepped too far and stumbled.

The Whisperer's right fist shot out with the speed of light. His knuckles cracked, for he had hit the gun menacing June Tramer and knocked it to one side, just as its surprised holder tightened the trigger.

BULLET BAIT

As The Whisperer, as Wildcat Gordon, he had well earned the name of Wildcat. Three mobsters, two with blasting guns, were so suddenly caught by smashing blows and deadly, twisting hands that they were hurled from their feet.

Two men let out terrible screams as they fell, gurgling at last into the vats of lime. The Whisperer hurled the third man over his head and the mobster's skull cracked on the bottom stairs. June Tramer found herself caught and held in a steel-like grip. Already the dental plate had come from The Whisperer's mouth. It was the steely voice of Wildcat Gordon that spoke.

"Stay here, and you'll be all right!"

The Whisperer's hands flew over his gray clothing. A folded army hat came out and replaced the other. He sailed the round-brimmed one into the death vat of tannery lime and grinned as he did it.

Scarbo, Cutter Carson and the brains of the racket heard the blasting machine guns. Cursing, they rushed for the stairs. Scarbo, Carson and another mobster held ready rods, but they were not ready enough.

Two automatics spat fire before the crooks saw an amazing sight. Where the gray Whisperer had been led down the stairs to his death, up came Commissioner Wildcat Gordon, clad in a blue suit, yellow shoes and a red necktie, with his army hat jerked down over one eye. The rods of Scarbo and Cutter Carson fell as they whirled with shattered arms. The third mobster went to his face with a bullet in his throat. Another man was breaking for the outside doors.

"Hold it right there, mister!" rapped out the voice of Sergeant Tom Thorsen. A big man stopped, hand rubbing his chin. He turned slowly and looked at Wildcat Gordon. He was Attorney Crandall, general counsel for the L. S., the brains behind the racket meant to steal a railroad.

Cutter Carson was cursing. He said, "We sent the damned Whisperer down there! Anyway, we got him and the girl--"

But the red-headed June Tramer emerged, pulling tape from her eyes. She stared at Wildcat Gordon.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "They've killed the man you sent to help me!"

"Yes. I saw his hat in the lime vat down there," said Wildcat sadly. "They'll never identify him when they get the body out of that stuff. And he was one of my best detectives, Miss Tramer. I figured out having him impersonate the notorious Whisperer, because I thought the gang would fall for that--and they did."

Sergeant Thorsen was locking handcuffs on the wrists of Attorney Crandall --the general counsel who had used his position in an effort to wreck the L. S., and then had judged old Bob Tramer must be put out of the way to prevent him using his own fortune to save the line. The lawyer who had schemed to have his own crowd take over the railroad when Bob Tramer could no longer carry it along.

June Tramer was staring at the jaunty Wildcat Gordon. She had walked down the stairs, blindfolded, with another man. Then all hell had broken loose.

"You say one of your best detectives was with me to-night and impersonated the notorious Whisperer?" the girl said slowly. "That goes with me, Mr. Wildcat Gordon. But as I think I have heard you say, suppose we high-ball for home and put dear dad's mind at rest."

Old Quick Trigger was standing behind Sergeant Thorsen.

BULLET BAIT

"Maybe it would be a good thing if the real Whisperer had a bath in that lime vat down below," he muttered.
"Some day, I'm going to bust up that danged dental plate."