

Death In Black

Clifford Goodrich

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Most any job would have suited Tommy Riker. That is, any job which didn't threaten murder. He hadn't been thinking of murder when Hilding Kent the scientist and medical man, had hired him. Tommy had only wanted a job as a laboratory assistant. He hadn't known there was death in that. The young chemical engineer stood before a mirror in his bungalow. He noticed the queer dilation of his eyes. Dazedly, he realized that he was acting like a drunken man. "I'll tell what I know," he muttered thickly. "Just wait until he gets here. I'll unload a lot!" The young man looked out of a window into the rain-swept night. His movements were slower. Sweat poured down his face. There was nervousness, fear in his movements. "He'll be here soon," he reassured himself. "He said in half an hour." Tommy's words may have reassured himself. But they may have given a timing to the scene to someone listening from outside. There was a sharp ping and a crash of glass. Tommy Riker fell to the floor. A little round hole appeared on his forehead. The door opened then and a hand stole to the light switch. The room was plunged into darkness. The pale beam of a flashlight fell on Tommy's body. A dim figure leaned over him, reached a hand into Tommy's inside coat pocket. The hand came out with a folded letter. "You wouldn't have lived long, anyway," a voice growled. "But it might have been too long, at that. I don't stand for a double cross." The door closed softly then and the room was silent. The killer leaped into a high-powered sedan, turned on his headlights, put the car in motion. At the foot of the driveway, a drab gray coupe swung suddenly across the road. An eerie, whispering challenge drifted through the night. A dim, gray figure leaped from the coupe. Wispy gray hair showed beneath a quaint, round-brimmed hat. The face was white, the chin oddly pointed. "The Whisperer!" the killer growled. This was an encounter he did not relish. Queer, oversized pistols appeared in the gray man's hands. Lurid blue flame leaped from them. But there was no noise. The windshield of the sedan crashed into fragments. Then the driver turned off his lights. He twisted the wheel sharply, took a chance on the ancient fence that bordered the bungalow grounds. The sedan crashed through, cleared a shallow ditch. Lightless, it roared down the highway. The Whisperer hesitated. The little man of mystery, the "supercrook" who preyed on crooks themselves, could have followed the speeding sedan. But there was a possibility that Tommy Riker still lived, needed assistance that only The Whisperer could give him. The gray man stole softly into the bungalow, thinking there were many things here in Thunder Hills that he wished to investigate. His low, eerie whisper sounded as he bent over the murdered youth. Swift fingers went through the young man's pockets. He found one thing the killer had apparently overlooked. It was a card bearing the name of Jules Gruzman. Gruzman, an important patent attorney and lawyer for business men. The Whisperer wondered what Gruzman could tell him about Tommy Riker. The gray man's pencil flash darted about the room. By the telephone, from which Tommy had apparently called him, he found a pad. It was covered with the random scrawlings of a man who waits for a number or for death! There were squares and circles, disconnected words. "Death . . ." The Whisperer made out . . . "Certain death that can't be Traced . . . incredible . . . double-cross means death . . ." The gray man whispered softly, moved out into the rainy night. The Whisperer quickened his pace. He left the coupe where it was. His other business in Thunder Hills could be done on foot. Death that couldn't be traced, that was one thing he wanted to learn more about. There had been several instances he had heard about men who died quite naturally, to the financial advantage of others. Far to his left, lightning starkly revealed a rambling house that was in the mind of The Whisperer. Dr. Hilding Kent lived there. Kent, the employer of Tommy Riker. Kent, the genius of science and medicine. The scientist was working on a sensational discovery, it was said. It was a discovery in which men of brains and caution had already invested

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more than a million dollars. It was known as hydroblast, a liquid hydrogen–oxygen explosive that was believed destined to revolutionize the use of all explosives. It could be useful as fuel, for commercial blasting, or as death weapon in wartime. Secrecy shrouded the development of hydroblast. It was also known by some few persons that Kent had exhausted all his funds; that he had desperately tried to obtain further financing to perform the final experiments that would spell ultimate success or failure. His other laboratory assistant, Conway Gerald, was about ready to make the final tests to date. If—The Whisperer suddenly thought—if he lived. But it was not hydroblast that sent The Whisperer racing through the wet of Thunder Hills. He was on a trail of death; death that left no trace. The gray man ran in a direction away from the rambling mansion of Hilding Kent. He had business first at another home in Thunder Hills, one where he expected to find fear the reigning impulse. Another man of science had sent word that he was afraid. Peculiarly, he was a man who had served in India with Hilding Kent. The second doctor's name was Jared Meldner. He was a queer, hermitlike man of letters. He was well—to-do, shunned contact with the world of business. The Whisperer ran on cautious feet toward the modest house in which Meldner dwelt. Apparently, his caution was not great enough. Another bolt of lightning sent a jagged finger of brilliance through the night. It made The Whisperer plainly visible to a squad of blue-coated policemen huddled near Jared Meldner's driveway. A hoarse cry welled quickly into the darkness that followed. "The Whisperer, boys! It's a promotion if we get him!" The Whisperer, indeed, was the one black mark on the escutcheon of Commissioner James "Wildcat" Gordon. The "supercrook" who preyed on crooks themselves was always able to escape the snares that Wildcat laid to catch him. It appeared that there were more cops present this time than the gray man had anticipated. A nasal, whining voice began to scream frantic orders for the capture of The Whisperer. The lightning flickered, revealed the features of the nasal-voiced commander. His appearance made one understand the whining voice. Deputy Henry Bolton had a long nose like a pointed finger. His eyes were small and he had a fish-like mouth. The mouth gulped. Bolton screamed more orders and tore through the underbrush. His mainspring in life was a desire to have The Whisperer captured, so he could thereby unseat Wildcat Gordon as police commissioner. Another flash of lightning showed Bolton and The Whisperer together. Suddenly, the two seemed to merge in a flurry. It was impossible to tell where Bolton ended and where the gray man began. At that moment, the cops caught up. They had quite a handful. For a moment, it seemed that all they would get out of the encounter was the exercise. Then they used football tactics. They fell on the figure with which they were struggling. One cop got out a flashlight, began to drag the gray figure to its feet. At that moment, an angry, staccato voice harked orders in the vocabulary of an enraged longshoreman. "Where's that fool Bolton?" the crisp tones of Wildcat Gordon demanded. "He was told to interview Meldner, not to play hare and hounds around the countryside!" Wildcat flicked on his own flashlight. The big cop holding the gray figure looked uncertain. Hopefully, he pointed to the man he held. The head hung forward, showed only the round-brimmed hat jammed down over the ears. The cop rasped an oath, snapped the head up with one hand. Then he gasped. Under the gray hat he saw the long, pointed nose of Henry Bolton!

Wildcat Gordon strode forward, complaining about the low mental attainments of some of his subordinates in general and Henry Bolton in particular. Even the dim gleam of the flashlight showed the loud checkerboard suit that Wildcat wore. His yellow shoes gleamed brightly in the rain. The flaming carnation in his coat lapel seemed defiant of the dampness. The cops did not know that their chief had just doffed the disguise that had made him more famous than the office of police commissioner. There was only one man alive who knew that Wildcat Gordon and The Whisperer were the same person! And that man was not present. Wildcat had simply squirmed out of his concealing gray clothing, thrown it over Bolton, jammed the hat over Bolton's ears and wriggled free. The queer dental plates that gave him the oddly pointed chin and the chilling whisper of The Whisperer had vanished into his pocket. Bolton's mouth gaped more foolishly than was normal. He started to stammer explanations. Wildcat cut him off with the suggestion that it was about time they investigated why Meldner wanted police protection.

Dr. Jared Meldner was a short, squat man. A scraggly beard decorated his wrinkled cheeks. He was a man considerably along in years. His voice was low, well-modulated as he asked the policemen to enter the

spacious living room. "I am sorry to have caused so much trouble," Meldner said softly. "But I believe I may need protection." Meldner spread out three typewritten notes. Each carried the same import: There was no specific reference to money, but the threat of exposure was in each of them. "Rangoon, 1926," each missive began. "You have a reputation that should be worth preserving. Even if the cost is high. I cannot delay much longer." Bolton spluttered excitedly, demanded to know what happened in Rangoon in 1926. Meldner's voice did not change its even tone. "I killed a man," he said simply. "I was justified, could not help it. But the fact remains. My family is a proud one and the scandal is something I would prefer to avoid." Wildcat Gordon, while listening to his aids questioning of the doctor, was idly gazing at two black cats at Meldner's feet. Bolton questioned Meldner about the extortion notes. "Who sent them?" he asked. Meldner shrugged. "Only one man now in the city was in India with me," he said. "He is Hilding Kent, my neighbor." Bolton began to get excited. He stammered, "D—did Kent ever ask you for money?" Meldner nodded. "A month ago," he said. "He wanted a hundred thousand dollars to complete his experiments. Said the whole thing might crash if he didn't get it. I refused him. "Right now, Kent's stock is riding high. But if he doesn't succeed in his final experiments, he will be desperate for immediate cash. "I wish to make no complaint now," he concluded. "But if anything should happen to me, I want the police to know. They can consult the attorney to whom I have turned over copies to Jules Gruzman." Wildcat was thinking that Gruzman's name was the one on the card he had found in the murdered Tommy Riker's pocket when the doorbell rang. Wildcat noticed that the servant who answered the ring was a rough-looking man; probably a combination gardener—and-houseman. Meldner called him Jake. The caller who came into the room was gaunt and almost totally bald. His only hirsute adornments consisted of twin gray tufts over ears that looked like horns. Richard Traeger, better known as Quirk Trigger, although a retired police deputy, always managed to make his appearance on most cases. He was old, but tough. Wildcat greeted Quick Trigger, said: "Glad to see you, Quick. Come along. We've got to call on a guy." Then, to Bolton: "We're going to see Kent. You go back to headquarters." With a few words to Meldner, Wildcat and Quick Trigger took their departure.

"That Jake guy," Quick Trigger muttered, as he and Wildcat climbed into his car. "I think I seen him workin' on Kent's estate a while back." Wildcat did not answer. He was busy. In a secret compartment under the dash of Quick Trigger's car, he kept a spare gray disguise of The Whisperer. He donned it quickly, rapping sharp orders as he did. The dental plates, which Quick Trigger had manufactured in a moment of enthusiasm, went back into Wildcat's mouth. Once more, Wildcat became The Whisperer. Quick Trigger shook his head as Wildcat spoke. "I don't like it, Wildcat," he complained. "You're sure as hell goin' to get in trouble. I wish I hadn't ever made those danged dental plates! It'll be the end of you, this time!" Wildcat laughed. The laugh now had the whistling whisper that chilled the blood of crooks. "It's a gamble, Quick," he said. "But it has to be this way." In the heart of the business district, The Whisperer darted from the car. The fire escape up which the gray man climbed was on one of the largest buildings in the city. The palatial legal suite of Jules Gruzman occupied the entire top floor. The Whisperer did not make the error of trying the windows. Gruzman had once been robbed. His windows were now guarded by the latest in photoelectric—cell burglar appliances. The gray man did not know where Gruzman fitted in this picture. But he was going to find out soon. The Whisperer made for a skylight on the roof over the elevator shaft. The shaft was not part of Jules Gruzman's office. It might not be wired. Softly, the gray man padded toward the skylight. His feet made little noise. He stooped cautiously over the frosted glass. Suddenly, the roof under his feet gave way. A section alongside the shaft collapsed. The Whisperer shot, feet foremost, down an inclined chute. The trap was a clever one. A careful prowler would have done just as The Whisperer had. The trap was placed to catch just such a prowler. The gray man's supersilenced automatics leaped into his hands as he fell. But he had no target to use them on. The chute ended in a soft entanglement that puzzled him for just a moment. That moment proved to be enough. An intricate net of stout cords enmeshed his body. The net tightened with a whipping motion, bound the gray man as tightly as an animal snared in a jungle pit. Strong hands seized his guns, ripped them from his fingers. The Whisperer was helpless. Then a blackjack whizzed, bludgeoned him into unconsciousness.

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When The Whisperer opened his eyes, tight cords bound his wrists and ankles. His head felt as if a thousand sledge hammers were using it for an anvil. The heavy face of Jules Gruzman swam vaguely before him. Then the gray man's mind cleared. He distinguished Gruzman's small eyes leering from the puffy cheeks in which they were set. "I just dropped in, Gruzman," The Whisperer said sibilantly, "to find out your connection with Jared Meldner and with several deaths that appeared to be natural. And with the murder of Tommy Riker." Gruzman removed a seventy-five cent cigar from his cruel lips and spat. "It is unfortunate that this had to be you, my friend," he purred. "The information you seek I would like to give to someone. We had hoped you might be that fool Wildcat Gordon. We would have given him the information and turned him loose." Two huge killers hulking beside Gruzman snickered at their boss' sally. Gruzman smiled thickly at his own wit, picked up a phone. "Just so you may learn the uselessness of your visit, my formerly dangerous foe." Gruzman purred, "we shall let you listen." He phoned police headquarters, asked for Commissioner Gordon. When he was advised the commissioner was not there, he compromised on old Quick Trigger. "Meldner has phoned me," Gruzman stated. "So I am informing the police of what I told him. He was ill-advised to come to me with his case. I have refused to handle it. It appears to me that if Kent was blackmailing Meldner, he was doing it in such a manner that it could not be proved. Tommy Riker also came to me with a case I could not handle." Quick Trigger apparently interrupted, told Gruzman how much of a crook he really was. "Tut, tut, you old fossil," Gruzman jeered. "All Kent did was to suggest a month ago that Meldner might want to invest cash in his hydroblast. Of course, Kent might be guilty. But—" Suddenly, Gruzman's voice barked indignantly. There was a sneering ruthlessness in it. "I'm going to do you fools a favor!" he yelled. "I've got some other extortion notes, some that were sent to men who died naturally. Maybe you can trace these to Kent. I don't know. They were mailed to me anonymously." Gruzman's glance turned to The Whisperer. A cruel smile lighted his face. "And, my dear Traeger," he concluded, "I wish I could tell you of something else I am going to do right now to halt crime in our fair city. You would love it! But I'm sorry; it'll have to be a secret."

Gruzman slapped down the phone, leaped to his feet. He lost his smiling demeanor, as he faced The Whisperer. "That means you, punk!" he rasped. "You're going out now on a one-way ticket! You've been making yourself a nuisance." He turned, grinned, as if a new thought had suddenly struck him. "Why, if Conway Gerald's tests tonight are a success, Kent might not need any more money." He turned to his two thugs. "Grab him, boys! Get it over with!" Conway Gerald was the second laboratory assistant of Hilding Kent. The Whisperer thrashed wildly on the floor. He about stood on his head. A new-fangled glass-barreled fountain pen fell from his vest pocket, broke as it struck the hardwood floor. The thugs leaped upon the gray man. They discovered how tough a man can be with hands and feet bound. The Whisperer's feet came up, struck one killer on the temple. The man went down, out. Jules Gruzman cursed, kicked the gray man in the ribs. The Whisperer lay on his back, howled in pain. But that was a stall for time. The acid from the glass fountain pen was doing its painful work. Flesh on the gray man's wrists was seared. But so was the rope that bound him. Suddenly, The Whisperer leaped to his feet. His hands were free. He plunged to Gruzman's desk, picked up a paper weight and hurled it through a plate-glass window. Gruzman's burglar alarm siren wailed out into the night. Startled, the racket lawyer and his remaining husky rushed to the wall to turn the siren off. That was the instant The Whisperer needed. Quickly, he tore the tight ropes from his ankles. Before Gruzman and his henchman had reached the switch, The Whisperer was upon them. One fist smashed with a force unbelievable. It landed flush on the puffy jowl of the racket lawyer. Gruzman sighed, sank to the floor. The thug showed fight at first. Then, suddenly, he seemed to realize he was alone with The Whisperer. He squealed in terror, dived toward the window. The gray man plunged in his path. He saved the thug from a fall to the ground. There was no fire escape below that window. The Whisperer was not motivated by any regard for the life of the killer. But he did not want a body splashed on the street to attract attention. It was vital that Jules Gruzman remain unconscious and unnoticed in his office. Another haymaker, and the second thug was out. From his vest the gray man took another heavy fountain pen. Quickly he unscrewed the top, saturated a handkerchief with a pungent liquid. He applied the dripping cloth to the nostrils of each of the three men in the office. Then he bound them securely. That should hold them for a while. In Gruzman's desk he found the extortion notes Gruzman had mentioned to Quick Trigger. He remembered the names of the men involved.

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All had been wealthy. And each had made unexplained withdrawals from his bank account before he died. Two had died of bronchial pneumonia, another of malaria, a fourth of typhoid. The gray man examined the typewriting. All had been written on the same machine. And he was suddenly sure he would find that the machine was owned by Hilding Kent! Spurring himself to sudden action, The Whisperer whipped out the dental plates, seized the phone on Gruzman's desk. He knew Quick Trigger would have guessed what Gruzman meant by his threatened step to halt crime. Quick knew The Whisperer had gone to Gruzman's office. Wildcat Gordon moved fast now. He had to keep the cops from finding these three unconscious men. He got headquarters on the wire. "Recall Traeger and his squad by radio," he snapped in the crisp tones of Wildcat Gordon. "It is imperative that they return immediately. Instruct Traeger to await a call from me." Then Wildcat replaced the dental plates. The dim gray shape glided once more down the fire escape. A soft chuckle drifted through the air.

The Whisperer wasted no time. He knew every moment was precious; that more lives were at stake. He knew there was a dirtier plot afoot than any he had ever encountered. But there was information The Whisperer had to learn before the picture was complete. He made three phone calls before he was satisfied. The first was to a man in Washington for whom The Whisperer had once done a great favor. In fact, he had saved the life of that individual. The man was attached to the state department. While The Whisperer talked to him, the man used another phone to get the files that he needed. Both Meldner and Kent had been in government service in India. The information was contained in the files. Meldner had killed a man. And his plea that he had been justified was born out by the records. A military court had completely exonerated him! The Whisperer's second call was to a physician in the city, who had reason to believe the gray man was not a crook. A man of more than normal astuteness, he realized that justice must sometimes be reached through paths that organized law cannot traverse. The physician was an expert on diseases of India and the Orient. His information completed the book for The Whisperer. The third call was to Quick Trigger. The retired deputy gasped at the instructions he was given. "It's dangerous, Wildcat," he protested. "This'll be the end of you sure! You'll probably go the way the others did." The gray man hung up. He knew that Quick would carry out the orders, even though he feared the plan. The Whisperer raced to a nearby street. It was a dingy section where squalor and crime found root. This was the neighborhood where as D. Smith, The Whisperer hung out when he sought grapevine information. A small gray coupe was parked conveniently at the curb. It belonged to The Whisperer. The coupe roared out through the suburbs. The gray man knew now that this was the night Hilding Kent's assistant, Conway Gerald, was scheduled to make the final tests on hydroblast for Kent. Gruzman had known all about it. This was the night when Hilding Kent might find out if he did need more money—or if he was fixed for life with a million-dollar discovery. And The Whisperer knew now that it was a night with much more than that in crime's plan of progress. The coupe took corners on two wheels. It roared past the big mansion of Hilding Kent, took a narrow side road. Half a mile down this road was Kent's laboratory, a low squat building that held a secret. The Whisperer's coupe rushed through the gate, screamed to a stop. The gray man leaped to the ground, raced toward the door of the laboratory. The surprise was mutual. The four hulking figures leaving the laboratory did not see The Whisperer until he was upon them. The gray man was moving too rapidly to set himself for the battle. The collision was sudden and complete. An inventor of explosives could well have afforded to watch the gray man work. He practically exploded. One big thug was knocked out by The Whisperer butting him on the jaw with his skull. The Whisperer whipped out his silenced automatics. Two of the three other thugs were busy with a brace of ugly automatics each. The odds were four flaming, roaring automatics against the two guns of the gray man. The Whisperer took a slug through his shoulder, gave two silenced bullets in return. Two killers slumped to the ground, through permanently with crime. There was one peculiar item. The fourth thug did not get in the fight at all. He ran. With him he carried an unusual burden. He had a huge black cat. The animal's feet were tied, and it was incased in a sack of Cellophane. The fleeing thug had a good start. But he tripped on a protruding root. The Whisperer leaped upon him. He slashed a gun barrel against his skull, stepped wide of the bag holding the cat. Then the gray man raced into the laboratory. His eerie whisper drifted through the air. There was regret in that whisper. He knew he had filled his picture in too late. Death had beaten him to this laboratory, would collect within a few hours.

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Inside, he found Conway Gerald, Hilding Kent's second young assistant. Gerald's face was drawn. His eyes were raw, inflamed. He raved in a fever of delirium. "Success," Conway Gerald pronounced thickly. "Success, and Dr. Kent was not here to see it!" A shudder convulsed the young man. Then all consciousness seemed to leave him. The Whisperer straightened. He knew the man would be dead within half a dozen hours. There was little hope—practically no hope, in the opinion of a man who knew the disease from which he suffered. The gray man whirled. He knew that whatever help could be given was already on the way. But he knew also that another life was scheduled to be taken. Probably two more lives tonight—and many others later—if The Whisperer did not expose the evil genius grasping for wealth and power. Not returning to his coupe, The Whisperer raced through the trees toward the mansion of Hilding Kent. The front door opened as The Whisperer crossed the yard. Quickly, he hid behind a tree. The man who emerged from the door was familiar. It was Jake, the servant he had seen in Jared Meldner's house; the one Quick Trigger had seen before as a man working for Kent! Jake's movements were furtive. He looked cautiously around, then retired again into the house. The Whisperer saw a dim light burning in one window. It was where the master bedroom should be located. A trellis led to the window. The gray man climbed it cautiously. He thought he knew why Hilding Kent had not been on hand to see the final triumph of his invention. As he climbed over the sill of the window, The Whisperer heard a voice. The voice belonged to Jake; he was speaking into a telephone. "He got the sleeping powder, boss." Jake growled. "That'll keep him out until you get here." The Whisperer saw Hilding Kent on the bed. His breathing was slow, regular, but he was unconscious. The gray man moved quickly. He lifted the body from the bed, carried it through a deserted hall. There he found a large closet. It was large enough to provide air for several hours. Closing the door of the closet, The Whisperer went back to the bedroom. He eased himself under the bed covers. The Whisperer replaced a man scheduled to meet a sudden, fever ridden death delirium.

The gamble was a desperate one. The Whisperer hoped Quick Trigger would arrive on schedule with reinforcements. He heard the footsteps draw closer to the bedroom. Two men were approaching. He pulled the covers up to his head. Hilding Kent fortunately, also had gray hair. The voice of Jared Meldner came to The Whisperer. There was triumph in his cackle. "It's all over, Jake," he shrilled. "We'll be millionaires in the morning!" Then Meldner changed his voice. He imitated Hilding Kent. He had known Kent many years, He picked up the phone extension in the hall, called a number. The man he spoke to was Kent's main backer in hydroblast, a man who had gambled half a million of his own money. Meldner's voice shook as he imitated Kent. "It's a failure," he moaned. "The formula doesn't do what it should at all. We're ruined." Finally, Meldner put down the phone, resumed his normal voice. "Million, hell!" he gloated. "That stock is worth four times that amount! And tomorrow we can buy it for a pocketful of change! No one else will touch it. They'll all sell out." Meldner came into the bedroom, paused for a moment over the figure underneath the covers. The light was dim, and Meldner had no reason to doubt that his victim lay before him. "Plague for you, my friend," he muttered. "The black death! You shall die unpleasantly. A penalty for being smart!" The Whisperer tensed as Meldner chuckled. This was the moment to strike. The gray man knew that deadly plague germs were used to kill. He had concluded that common house cats had been used to transmit the deadly *barillus pestis*—laden fleas to the victim. Those fleas will not stay with cats, but will leave their temporary host to land on the person scheduled to die. The cats then do not become a permanent carrier; no epidemic is spread to tell the tale. Suddenly, the gray man sat erect, silenced guns in his hands. But other things happened suddenly, things he had not counted on. There was a roar from the window above the trellis. One gun dropped from the bleeding fingers of The Whisperer. Jules Gruzman's voice bellowed a warning to Jared Meldner. "Grab his other gun, Meldner!" Gruzman shrieked. Meldner needed no second order. He took the situation at a glance. Gruzman fired again as he spoke. Blood spurted from The Whisperer's other shoulder, numbed the muscles of his arm. He was in an awkward position, seated in a feather bed that did not give him purchase. Both hands were useless.

Gruzman stood beside the window, automatic leveled at The Whisperer. A brutal sneer spread across his lips. Also, if you're expecting help from the cops, you won't get it. I went by a carload of 'em on my way out. I ran 'em over a fifty-foot embankment as I passed!" The Whisperer's eyes showed no emotion. It seemed that he

had failed completely. There was only one slim chance left—if these two would cooperate. He had to stall for time. It was a chance that would take him with the other two—if he was lucky enough to get them at all. "O. K.," he said. "Bring on your cats." Meldner cackled, moved over beside Gruzman near the window. "There are other ways than cats, my friend" he snarled. "In your case, I simply shook the nice little fleas from a box. It was even more simple. You are by now alive with bacillus pestis! Delirium will strike within an hour. In another you will be comatose. In less than a dozen—dead!" The gray man squirmed. He shuddered, felt his flesh crawl on his bones. It was true. He could feel the sharp bites of the pestilence-laden insects. Meldner cackled again. "It will probably come to light now that plague had been the cause of many deaths," he sneered. "Kent will die, and it will all be blamed on him, what with the extortion notes so easily identifiable. It will seem his own monster turned upon him." Meldner glanced at the typewriter in one corner of the room. The Whisperer knew all the phony notes had been written on that by Jake, the servant. Meldner watched The Whisperer, the light of a madman in his eyes. He must be truly mad, the way he gloated at certain death before him. Suddenly, the gray man laughed as madly as had Meldner. His eerie whispering chuckle brought a sudden alarm to the eyes of Jules Gruzman. As The Whisperer spoke, the crooked lawyer stood entranced, unbelieving, yet compelled to believe. "You are right" the gray man challenged. "A monster is going to turn against the crooks who would use it. Watch! It devours!" Muscular control had returned to one of The Whisperer's arms. That arm shot out suddenly from the covers. A small vial hurtled through the air, crashed at the feet of the two criminals. The explosion let loose with a detonation that shook the earth. Neighbors later said it was heard three miles away. It buried the entire outer wall into the yard. Hydroblast was indeed successful! The two arch crooks were blown to bits. The Whisperer had taken the vial from the dying hand of Conway Gerald, "You got the last of me one time, punk," he rasped, "But this is the Kent's young assistant! The thing the crooks sought most had killed them."

Jake was reduced to a state of babbling flesh when Quick Trigger arrived with the squad of cops. His men had survived the plunge over the embankment, had commandeered another car. Jake was more than a bit alarmed at his own predicament. But Quick assured him he would have lots of time to think it over—behind nice iron bars. The room of the explosion was a shambles. Quick Trigger made no comment on the fact that no parts of The Whisperer's body were apparent. He tried to look calm when Wildcat Gordon stormed in from outside. Wildcat looked considerably the worse for wear. He was smudged and burned; one hand was in a bandage and blood dripped from an arm. He smelled of disinfectant. It was Wildcat who rescued Hilding Kent from the hall closet. And it was Wildcat who pulled out a note he said he found on a mantel in the living room. "It was obvious that Gruzman had a partner," the note explained. "Much medical knowledge was necessary. If he had been working with Kent, the fake extortion notes would not have pointed to him. Meldner's blackmail charge was too transparent; it was merely brought to throw a smoke screen after they learned The Whisperer was on the trail of the natural deaths that were murder. "The rest you can get from any medical authority. There are two types of plague more deadly than bubonic; pneumonic plague and septicemic plague. In each of them, recovery is practically impossible. When not epidemic, early cases are seldom suspected, as diagnosis is impossible without bacteriological tests. "Such tests are seldom used in what appear to be ordinary cases of bronchial pneumonia, malaria or typhoid. Early symptoms frequently appear to be merely acute intoxication. Even in epidemics, the first cases have almost never been diagnosed properly. "I fortified myself with antiplague vaccine, which is sometimes effective. "Sincerely, THE WHISPERER." It was then that Jake remembered the flaming mattress that had walked after the explosion. It had gone down the hall and out the door, a huge ball of flame. Jake got scared all over again when he mentioned it. "H—he might have gotten under a mattress, saved himself—" he began. Then he looked again at the shambles that had been a room. "No," he decided. "It isn't possible!" Quick Trigger grunted. "It'd be a break for me, if I didn't have to put up with him any more," he muttered.