

# **The Ghost of Lin San Fu**

Clifford Goodrich

# Table of Contents

<a href="#"><u>The Ghost of Lin San Fu</u></a> .....	1
<a href="#"><u>Clifford Goodrich</u></a> .....	1

# The Ghost of Lin San Fu

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The venerable merchants put their heads close together. Their tones were guarded, furtive.

"It is to be hoped," the first one breathed, "that the spirit of Lin San Fu will follow his mortal flesh." His companion's straggly beard hobbled in animation.

"Aiee!" he agreed, in a voice filled with fear. "It is most earnestly to be hoped! It belongs in the ancestral land."

Both, then, looked anxiously behind them, padded off into the night of China Hill.

Behind them, a figure moved. It had been scarcely discernible in the gloom. The figure glided even more silently than the two elderly Orientals. It showed but briefly as it turned a corner, climbed noiselessly up a rough brick wall.

The man was slight. He wore a quaint, round-brimmed hat. In the gloom, the chin appeared oddly pointed. The eyes were whitish, almost devoid of color, as was the wispy hair. His clothes were entirely gray.

An eerie, chuckling whisper drifted through the night air of China Hill.

"Aye," it hissed. "It is most earnestly to be hoped." The Whisperer was also interested in the ghost of Lin San Fu – the ghost that had killed five men.

That dreaded "supercrook", The Whisperer, who preyed on killers too wily for the cops to catch, pried open a dark window, stepped noiselessly inside a room. He opened a door, glided onto a sheltered inside balcony.

The room below him was large, almost barnlike. The walls were lined with books and paintings. Odd bits of sculpture stood about in corners. It was the studio and library of a man named Jules Goddard, an Orientologist and sculptor of more than a little note.

Only two figures were in the room. One of them was in a rosewood coffin. Anyone who knew China Hill would have recognized those wrinkled features.

Lin San Fu had lived most of his life on China Hill. He had been a harsh and bitter man in life. Five days before, in a distant city, an automobile had struck Lin San Fu. Now, within as many minutes, those remains would be on the first lap of their final journey. A grave in the garden of his ancestors awaited the rosewood coffin.

The other man in the room was young. His shoulders were slightly stooped. China Hill blamed Lee Su Wo for the ghost of the aged man. Lee Su Wo could have saved his father from the fatal accident, wise ones said.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

It was vengeance for his son's delinquency that brought the angered spirit back to China Hill. So the graybeards gossiped.

The Whisperer moved cautiously along the balcony. Suddenly he encountered flesh. It was flesh that moved, that acted as silently as did The Whisperer.

The wispy gray man recoiled, shot out a fist. A guttural oath came from the other. Hands as big as dinner plates seized The Whisperer by the neck, propelled him through a door.

But suddenly, a light flashed on. It was a glaring ceiling bulb of more than normal brilliance.

The man before The Whisperer snarled. His mouth was a wide angry gash. The forehead was broad, but low. Black, slanting eyes snapped in anger. This was Kung Ghee, the Mongol, whose purpose in China Hill no one seemed to comprehend.

There was a sudden ear–destroying concussion. The room was a sudden ball of flame. It was as if someone had touched a match to a chamber filled with gas.

The Whisperer used his last ounce of strength to fling himself toward the window. The crash of glass came to his ears as if in a dream. Then there was only blackness.

Kung Ghee he did not see at all.

When consciousness filtered back to The Whisperer, he was wedged in a narrow light well that gave onto a cellar window. He had crashed through the flimsy grating when he fell from the other window high above.

It seemed that the ghost of Lin San Fu had reasons for not desiring investigation; thus the blast – to scare away The Whisperer.

The gray man made his way to the street door of the studio– library. The corpse was gone, one its way to the train that would transport it to eternal rest. Five murders had been committed in China Hill since the ghost of Lin San Fu had been talked about.

Three of the victims had been servants of the man now dead. The other two had been men who knew him well. There was one peculiar thing they all had in common; each of the victims had been found with a tiny object in his hand. They were miniature golden crocodiles.

Somehow the ghost of Lin San Fu was tied to the golden crocodile. And that was no mere matter of personal vengeance. There had been sixteen murders in the Chinese sections of half a dozen cities within five days. And in each case, the miniature of the golden reptile had been found. Chinese tongues were bound by a silence born of fear.

The Whisperer moved down the street. His path was clear. Earlier in the day, he had overheard a remark that told him there was no time to waste. "The ghost of Lin San Fu will speak again tonight," a man had said in Cantonese.

But The Whisperer had heard it through a door that was closed and locked. When he got through it, the speaker had disappeared.

Now, the gray man chuckled softly. He must follow that elusive ghost, find out what made it murder. Three times it had struck on the palatial grounds of Lin San Fu's mansion at the edge of China Hill. With it had

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

come a warning – an eerie trilling cry that had made all the servants flee for their lives.

The Whisperer drifted into the shadows of the night. Soon, he saw the high board fence that surrounded the mansion of Lin San Fu. Then he saw something else that brought a harsh chuckle to his lips.

The broad back of Kung Ghee, the Mongol, went over the fence with the agility of a squirrel.

The Whisperer followed silently. Then he stopped. Icy fingers seemed to play with his wispy hair. This was the thing– the sound – that had thrown chill hands of terror into China Hill.

The sound came from nowhere. Flutelike, fleeting, it filled the night air and was gone. It was the cry ascribed to the ghost of Lin San Fu.

Softly, the gray man crept forward. His eyes stared hard, tried to pierce the gloom. He saw nothing. The night was deathly in its stillness. There was only a faint breath of incense in the air. Incense and the more pungent smell of China Hill itself.

Then it came again – a whirring, whistling cry. It was everywhere about him. It died and again was gone. Cherry blossoms rustled on the trees. Invisible feet seemed to patter near the great house that Lin San Fu had left behind to his mortal heirs.

At that moment, The Whisperer found Kung Ghee.

With a curse, the stocky Mongol hurtled from the branches of a high tree above the gray man. He landed astride The Whisperer's shoulders. A snarl rent the gloom and a knife flashed briefly. Gray cloth ripped. Blood trickled to the walk beneath The Whisperer.

A growl rolled deep in the Mongol's throat. The Whisperer twisted free. Kung Ghee may not have known the identity of The Whisperer. It was difficult to guess just what the Mongol did know, or what he was doing in China Hill. He had recently appeared unannounced, from the plains of Northern China. Death had coincided with his arrival.

Kung Ghee raised his knife again. But he wavered. An eerie, hissing challenge issued from the lips of the gray man. A compact fist shot into the Mongol's belly. Kung Ghee grunted, leaped away. The Whisperer plunged toward his assailant. He clutched at the Mongol. A pocket ripped away.

The gray man lunged again. But he was not destined to reach his antagonist.

A sibilant command in Cantonese murmured from the darkness. Guns roared as red flashes stabbed the blackness of the night. Leaden slugs tore through the air, tugged at the gray clothing of The Whisperer.

The little gray man whirled. Queer, oversized pistols appeared in his hands. They spoke with the sound of a serpent's hiss. A high-pitched Oriental scream testified to his accuracy.

But The Whisperer did not shoot again. The concrete walk gave way beneath him, dropped him into a pit of blackness. The heady odor of the poppy swirled around him as he fell – fumes of opium so heavy they would rob a man of consciousness.

The Whisperer looked up quickly, saw the sidewalk trap swing shut. Then he landed on a concrete floor in a tomb of blackness.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

The Whisperer wondered, as his brain whirled dizzily, if opium were in back of the terror on China Hill. Old Lin San Fu had once trafficked in the brain-destroying drug. But that had been years before. Opium had been stamped out in China Hill. The Whisperer was sure the old Chinese had dropped that rotten source of revenue.

In fact, Lin San Fu had not died a wealthy man. He had left little that was known about to attract the unscrupulous into terrorizing his remaining kin.

A fan whirred dully as The Whisperer lay on the concrete floor. It sucked the numbing fumes of opium from the trap that confined him. A dim light flickered on. Faint, oriental laughter lilted and a door swung back.

Four hard-faced Chinese glided into the cavernous chamber. The Whisperer lay a shapeless huddle on the hard concrete floor before them. A pool of blood spread out from his shoulder.

"The fox in a snare is as harmless as a rabbit," one Chinese intoned in his native tongue.

He stooped over the inert form of The Whisperer. That proved to be an error.

The Whisperer came erect like a striking cobra. He had breathed deeply before the sidewalk trap had shut off outside air, had held that breath even though the lungs felt that they would burst.

He sprang now, seized the loose gown of the Oriental with both hands. The Chinese screamed once, felt himself whirled into the air like a sack of rags.

The Whisperer flung him broadside into the bodies of his three companions. Before they could recover from their astonishment, the gray figure hurtled through the door. His chilling eerie whisper floated behind him.

"When the fox feigns sleep, his bite is more often fatal," he reminded in the dialect of Canton.

A ladder showed dimly ahead of the gray man. He scrambled up it, out of a trap in the center of the white pagoda. The Whisperer leaped across the grounds. A great crashing issued from one end of the spacious estate that surrounded the old house of Lin San Fu. The gray man did not know what the crashing was. But he had no wish to tarry here. He could return when he was not expected.

He bounded across the soft grass, skirted a giant white rose bush. The unexpected impact with which he struck another man sent him hurtling to the ground.

The Whisperer twisted to his feet, seized the clothing of the other. He saw the white, strained face of a man he knew.

Jules Goddard was no Oriental. He was an historian and ethnologist, a scholar in the ways of China. He had also been a good friend of Lin San Fu. It was in his study that Lee Su Wo had bid farewell to the remains of his father.

Jules Goddard screamed at the sight of The Whisperer. His thin face seemed to drain of blood. Terror gave him strength his gaunt body did not really possess. He jerked away, raced off into the night.

But other footsteps were crowding close to The Whisperer. Violent curses blasted in good American anger. A police whistle shrilled. The gray man turned. He was surrounded. A flashlight flicked on and a nasal voice screamed orders:

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

"The Whisperer! Grab him, boys! You'll all get promotions!"

That voice belonged to Deputy Commissioner, Henry Bolton. Bolton was an unpleasant person who had but two ambitions. One was to catch The Whisperer, the "supercrook" whom Commissioner James "Wildcat" Gordon was steadily unable to apprehend. The other was to replace Wildcat as police commissioner.

Three blue-coated cops converged upon the gray man. The Whisperer exploded into arms and legs. One cop sailed over The Whisperer's shoulder. The gray man darted out of the beam of light. But he couldn't get very far. The place teemed with cops.

The whispering challenge of the gray man hissed into the night. Cops raced toward the sound. At last, the gray marauder was cornered.

Hastily, The Whisperer tore down the concrete walk. His footsteps sounded loudly. He paused in the center of the pagoda. The trapdoor in the walk through which he had fled the underground cavern slammed once.

The bluecoats pounded up, gloated at what they saw. Half a dozen of them crowded down the trap. Others stood above, played their flashlights down the hole.

None of them was looking up in the air.

The figure perched atop the pagoda had little time. But his transformation was a swift one. The gray clothing was quickly discarded. It revealed a checkered suit that would have made a minstrel man blush.

A quick motion removed peculiar dental plates from the mouth. The jaw became as square as a paving block. A flick of one hand brushed gray powder from hair that was really a reddish hue. Gray spats came from brightly yellow shoes.

Police Commissioner "Wildcat" Gordon was the opposite of The Whisperer in appearance. Wildcat made no sound as he leaped from the pagoda to the soft grass. But after that he was heard a-plenty.

"Henry, what's goin' on around here?" Wildcat roared. "Why am I not notified of raids like this?"

Deputy Bolton straightened from beside the trapdoor hole. His anteater nose quivered with embarrassment. He had a small mouth that made motions as if he were blowing bubbles.

"O—one of the men heard shouting here," he stammered. "We almost got The Whisperer."

"Almost doesn't make good reading!" Wildcat snapped. Bolton winced. He was very conscious of possible publicity for Bolton in the public prints.

The cops who had gone down the trap began to clamber out. They growled that there wasn't anything at all down there. Just a big room that didn't go any place. And certainly not The Whisperer.

There was a look of relief on the face of the last one out. He was a tall gaunt man with a pate as devoid of hair as a crystal-gazer's ball. Two gray tufts of hair above his ears gave him a slightly funny appearance. But it wasn't funny to crooks who had tried to oppose him.

Retired Deputy Richard Traeger, better known as old "Quick Trigger" was relieved because they hadn't found The Whisperer. He had been the first to go down, in the hope that he might be able to cover up if he found the gray man.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

For Quick Trigger was the only man alive who knew that The Whisperer was really Wildcat Gordon. He should have known. A master at disguise, he had made the queer dental plates that created the oddly pointed chin and the eerie, whispering voice of The Whisperer.

He sidled now toward Wildcat. Gordon was paying no attention to his cops. He was examining two small objects in his hand. They had been in the pocket The Whisperer had torn from the clothing of Kung Ghee, the Mongol. This had been his first opportunity to examine them.

The first was a slip of paper. It bore the name and address of the Yat Sen tong.

But that was not the one that bothered Wildcat. The other was a tiny golden crocodile, a golden crocodile such as had been found clutched in the hands of Chinese murdered in half a dozen cities; in the hands of those who had heard the ghost of Lin San Fu. That miniature struck a chord of memory in Wildcat. But the chord throbbed only faintly.

There was one thing of which he felt fairly certain. He should get information at the headquarters of the Yat Sen Tong. Hong See, the unofficial mayor of China Hill, was a leader of that mighty tong, and Gordon's friend.

Once before, Wildcat Gordon – and The Whisperer – had saved Hong See from a dirty racket. Hong See owed him much. And Wildcat didn't think much would be found on the grounds of Lin San Fu, at present.

"Have four men search these grounds and return to headquarters!" Wildcat snapped. "We will call on the Yat Sen tong!"

Quick Trigger rumbled in agreement.

"I think the newspapers are right about this one, Wildcat," he growled. "It looks like a tong war. And a big one!" Wildcat Gordon didn't answer. He didn't agree. The police had splintered quite a hole in the high board fence. Wildcat strode through it to the narrow street of China Hill.

Feet pounded suddenly behind him. The commissioner turned, saw a white disheveled figure racing over the grounds. It was Jules Goddard.

Goddard babbled incoherently, moaned that he had been struck on the head.

"What were you doing here?" Wildcat demanded. "I came because Lin San Fu was my friend," Goddard spluttered. "And because I am a friend of Lee Su Wo, his son."

"What did you expect to do?" Wildcat snapped. "Explode the story of the ghost of Lin San Fu," Goddard explained. "It is causing great grief to Lee Su Wo. China Hill believes the paternal ghost has returned in vengeance because Lee Su Wo could have prevented the old man's death. Such is the ancestor worship of the Oriental."

Jules Goddard faltered. Fear returned to his face.

"I saw two men who mean no good," he said. "One was The Whisperer. The other is known as Kung Ghee, the Mongol. Kung Ghee slugged me and fled. I do not know where The Whisperer is."

Wildcat Gordon's eyes went hard. He climbed into a waiting police car.



## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

"Come!" he said. "Perhaps we should get to the Yat Sen Tong before Kung Ghee has the chance.

The Yat Sen tong maintained its headquarters on Poppy Street. Normally, it was a quiet thoroughfare. It was bedlam when Wildcat Gordon drove through it.

Frantic Chinese darted over the sidewalks. Some fled in terror as guns roared. A submachine gun poured leaden death from the windows of the Yat Sen tong headquarters.

Wildcat opened the siren of the police car, whipped to a halt at the curb. He lunged out and up the stairs to the tong headquarters.

Figures loomed on the landing above him. Guns blasted down. Wildcat's Police Positives barked their answer. Two shadowy Orientals lurched forward in death. Then Wildcat was in the room of the tong.

The place was a shambles. Tables, chairs were strewn about. A filing case of records Wildcat had seen before lay on its side. The safe door was open. Wildcat saw one face he knew. Charley Hong was a nephew of old Hong See. He lay on the floor. But his lips moved feebly. Wildcat leaned over him.

"I – tried – warn them –" Charley Hong's breath was labored. He did not have far in this life to go. One hand was clenched tightly. Slowly, it relaxed. A tiny golden crocodile fell to the floor!

"Tried to warn Hong See away –" Charley Hong muttered. "Will be more murder – They got me – Fan – Fan Li –"

He shuddered once and was still. Wildcat Gordon stood suddenly erect. Fan Li! The Circle of the Golden Crocodile. The gap in his memory was bridged instantly. He saw the thing he had been trying to grasp for days.

Fan Li had never prospered in the United States. It had been a mysterious controlling society in the opium trade years before. Whispered stories said it had died with the dissolution of the legal Shanghai Opium Monopoly way back in 1917. But in those days, it had been a force that struck fear into the hearts of Chinese all over the world.

Wildcat Gordon whirled on Deputy Henry Bolton.

"Get to the Kai Ling tong immediately," he snapped. "Surround the place. Let no one either in or out until you hear from me!"

Wildcat stamped out, motioned to old Quick Trigger. He remembered that twenty years before, old Lin San Fu had been in the opium trade. Lin San Fu would have known of the Fan Li, perhaps would have been a member. Ideas were forming rapidly in Wildcat's brain.

He saw two things clearly. He remembered a night he had watched the sunset on the China Wall at Old Peking. He thought it told him much about the ghost of Lin San Fu. And he saw sudden possibilities in the power of the Fan Li, the Circle of the Golden Crocodile.

One thing bothered him. That was Kung Ghee, the Mongol. Kung Ghee did not yet fit into the picture Wildcat was painting.

He spoke rapidly to old Quick Trigger. The gaunt retired deputy shook his head.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

"I don't like it. Wildcat!" he muttered. "This'll get you into trouble!"

A mirthless grin parted Wildcat's face.

"If the ghost of Lin San Fu speaks again, he will speak to The Whisperer," Wildcat said. "You do your part as a safety check."

Wildcat looked at his watch, drifted toward a telephone. As he did, another figure moved in the gloom of the street. It was a squat figure. Wildcat would have recognized Kung Ghee, the Mongol.

Wildcat called long distance, spoke to the chief of police in a distant city. He smiled as he replaced the receiver. When he went out of the booth, he found an excited Henry Bolton.

"The Kai Ling headquarters were raided before we got there," Henry exploded. "Ten men were dead! All the cash and records have disappeared!"

"Go back to headquarters," Wildcat snapped. "Wait for further orders."

Quickly Wildcat Gordon strode off into the night. He found a gray coupe parked in a convenient spot. He climbed in and drove toward the outskirts of China Hill.

The figure who got out of the coupe was that of The Whisperer. The gray man melted into the gloom of night. The high towers of Lin San Fu's mansion lowered behind the wooden fence.

The mansion of Lin San Fu was a masterpiece of weird adaption. Originally, it had been a gem of Victorian architecture in the 1890's. With the passing years, each addition, each repair had been strictly Oriental, Lin San Fu had acquired it when he was still wealthy with the profits of the opium traffic, when his name had been feared by his enemies.

A term in a Federal prison had been the factor that determined Lin San Fu to get out of opium and stay out. He hadn't liked it.

The Whisperer glided silently up the steps. The house was no longer the one Lin San Fu had bought years before. The front door was teak from the forests of Indo-China. The Whisperer went in a window.

Searching, he found a servants' ancient stairway. It was a dark spiral leading into darkness. Silently, he crept upward, passed the second floor, and the third. Above him, he knew, was a great flat roof surrounded by weird spires and turrets.

Suddenly, he tensed. For the third time that night he heard the eerie voice of the ghost of Lin San Fu. It welled tunelessly in the air, seemed to come from all directions.

The Whisperer plunged the last few steps upward and burst out onto the flat roof in the center of the mansion. A flutter of wings beat against him. The Whisperer knew he had been right.

Once as he had watched the sun set north of old Peking, he had watched the pigeons wheel in the dusk. The tiny whistles tied to their feet gave weird fluted sounds as they chased away the devils with the setting sun.

The voice of Lin San Fu's ghost was the announcement that a carrier pigeon had arrived!

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

The Whisperer lunged across the roof. Another door opened on the other side. A masked figure shot through it, yelled in high-pitched Cantonese.

Ignoring the other, The Whisperer flung himself at the bird that had just alighted. Tight beside the tiny whistle on the pigeon's leg he found a message. He had no time to read it now.

Angry red flashes stabbed from the other side of the roof. Lead knocked The Whisperer's round hat from his head. He ducked. This was no time to fight. His adversary would soon have reinforcements. The gray man dived for the door through which he had come, hurtled down the stairs.

But he did not get far. The stairway was not as he had left it. There was a wall where none had been before. Only one direction was open. Straight along the third floor of the mansion.

The Whisperer took that exit. His supersilenced pistols leaped into his hands. The corridor was queerly twisted. It turned at crazy angles. Patches were illuminated dimly. Others were as black as night itself. Cries welled up all over the building. They were cries of warning, in Cantonese.

Suddenly, The Whisperer saw a man in the passage. It was the squat form of Kung Ghee, the Mongol. Kung Ghee was straight ahead. A knife, half as large as a cleaver was in the Mongol's hands, held high. One quick motion would bring it down, send it straight toward the breast of The Whisperer. Behind Kung Ghee other furtive figures crept. Ugly smiles were on their faces.

The Whisperer squeezed the triggers of his pistol. Lurid blue flame leaped from them. Then glass crashed. The Whisperer was shooting straight into a cleverly placed mirror! Kung Ghee was not actually in front of him at all. But the gray man's shooting told exactly where he stood.

There was a sudden rumble of machinery. The floor beneath The Whisperer gave way as if it hadn't been there at all. His feet struck a steel-lined chute. The Whisperer sped toward the bowels of the weird mansion – then lower.

It seemed to The Whisperer that he fell many miles. The chute ended in a pool of slime. The gray man struggled to his feet, flicked on a flashlight. A long, vaulted corridor of ancient brick loomed ahead of him. The ceiling was round. Even The Whisperer was forced to stoop.

Many years before, the city had built a sewer system that had proved a useless thing caused by graft in politics. It had been used less than a year before a more practical disposal system had been installed.

The Whisperer's nostrils dilated. The dank smell of years underground came mustily to his senses. This must be part of the old, forgotten system. The Whisperer crept down the old brick sewer.

If he could avoid capture for a little while, he might yet solve the rest of his problem. The ghost of Lin San Fu was only part of the maze he had to fathom. Fan Li – the Circle of the Golden Crocodile – was the real deadly menace behind the increasing murders.

Fan Li and whatever it was that the master minds were after. The Whisperer thought now that he knew what that might be. If he could only stall disaster for thirty minutes –

Wildcat Gordon had given Quick Trigger instructions to wait that long outside the old mansion. Then if the Whisperer did not reappear, Quick Trigger was to take a picked squad of men and invade the grounds, tear down the mansion itself, if need be.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

Suddenly, The Whisperer came to a junction of the sewer. It fanned out into a roomlike cave. Then the gray man felt invisible fingers pluck at his sleeves. He whirled, twisted. But the fingers became many. like a spider spinning its web, stout silken strands were dropped from some unseen place above him.

The more The Whisperer twisted, the tighter the meshes were. He was like a fly in a spider's web. Completely helpless.

Laughter accompanied his distress. Figures materialized from nowhere, prodded him in the back with sharp instruments. The gray man had no alternative but to go ahead. He stumbled along, prodded from behind.

At one point, the old sewer pipe was broken. A rude doorway had been hewn into its walls. The Whisperer was thrust into a great underground cavern. The sight that met his eyes made him blink with amazement,

Crude torches flared redly, gave a weird unreal light to what he saw. Against one earthen wall lay the huge figure of a golden crocodile! Massive chains seemed to fetter the monster to the wall. The ugly thing of gilt must have been more than thirty feet in length.

The Whisperer idly thought that it was a remarkable likeness to the original. He recognized it as the *Crocodylus Porosus*, the triangle-snouted menace of the South China waters; one of the types that really are man-eating crocodiles. They will devour anything they can overpower.

Two figures lowered in the center of the chamber. They wore the hideous masks of the Chinese war god. A dozen other figures were in the room. The Whisperer recognized them as law-abiding merchants of China Hill. They were prostrate before the golden crocodile. One of the masked leaders spoke to them in Cantonese.

"You know not how you got here or where you are," he intoned. "Go back with the message from Fan Li. Do as you are bidden, or the golden crocodile will devour you and all your sons!"

The Whisperer was prodded again from behind.

"Aiee!" a voice whispered in Chinese. "The gray one will make an impressive sacrifice. He and the other two as well. Our power will become tenfold!"

Then The Whisperer noticed two startling circumstances. The first was the gaunt form of old Quick Trigger, huddled near another side of the cavern. Quick Trigger was bound tightly. There would be no reinforcements for The Whisperer! And beside Quick Trigger, and also bound, was Kung Ghee, the Mongol!

The other thing The Whisperer noticed was the golden crocodile. The creature moved! It was alive, no thing of papier-mache or plaster! The huge jaws clicked hungrily.

An eerie whisper of amazement burst from the lips of the Whisperer. There had once been a story that the Fan Li had imported a crocodile as their horrible emblem. But the society had been stamped out so quickly, it had been given scant attention.

Now The Whisperer wondered if Lin San Fu had kept this beast in the subterranean chambers below his mansion for more than twenty years! It would have been possible. But what force could have motivated him to do such a thing? It was incredible!

Incredible as it may have been, the beast was ready for The Whisperer. The gray man was shoved brutally toward the center of the cavern. An electric motor whirred. An endless belt at his feet began to move. It led to the jaws of the crocodile.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

The Whisperer was to be fed to the beast slowly. That would make the maximum impression on those who were there to be impressed.

The gray man was hurled upon the belt. His feet were securely tied and his clothing was searched. One of the masked leaders found the message The Whisperer had taken from the carrier pigeon on the roof.

"You will not need this more," he hissed in Cantonese. "There is nothing for which you will have further need!"

The Whisperer rolled, strained against his bonds. They gave a little, but not enough to do any good. The crocodile opened wide its cavernous jaws, snapped them together with a click. The beast was restless. That was a sure sign of hunger. The creature's legs were linked to the chains that held him by bolted shackles.

The electric motor hummed. The distance to those horrible jaws shrank from six feet to four. Then to three. The Whisperer fought with his bonds.

Dry chuckles came from the masked leaders of Fan Li. Even if he could free his hands, he could not get his feet cleared in time. The ankles were made fast to the moving belt itself.

Old Quick Trigger moaned.

"Wil- oh damitall!" Quick Trigger was close to calling out Wildcat Gordon's name. But even though death approached, he had sworn not to reveal that identity.

Suddenly The Whisperer's arms were free. The yards of silken cord had given. But at the same instant, the belt that snared his feet bore him relentlessly towards the jaws of the crocodile. The great beast opened its jaws once more, clicked them shut.

The tenseness in the room was electric. Breathing seemed to stop.

Then smoke suddenly seemed to pour from the clothing of the gray man. It billowed out into the room. He was seen to move once. Then the belt took him straight under the jaws of the monster. The smoke obscured him.

Chemicals carried in The Whisperer's pocket could be used as a protective smoke screen when necessary, simply by rubbing them together.

The masked leaders darted forward, then checked themselves. The beast thrashed against his chains.

But an eerie, chilling whisper hissed across the chamber. "The Whisperer speaks but once to warn you!" the voice grated.

There was a clank of falling chains.

"The beast is free!" The Whisperer challenged. "Your only chance now lies in flight!"

Immediately, the spell of the Fan Li was broken. Wild screams of fear filled the chamber. Torches fell to the ground. Suddenly, the pall of chemical smoke thinned. The snout of the golden crocodile thrust into the center of the chamber.

## The Ghost of Lin San Fu

One of the masked leaders tripped as he raced toward the door. He stumbled against the gilded sides of the huge reptile. Gilt paint rubbed off. At first, the beast's great snout seemed tightly closed. He swung it in irritation toward the man in the war god's mask.

In his terror, the masked one sealed his own doom. He struck out at the snout, tried to thrust it from him. Had he known how The Whisperer conquered the beast, he would not have done it.

The gray man knew that a crocodile has no muscles of any strength to force its jaws open. With a noose formed of the bonds that had held him, he had encircled that huge snout in a fraction of a second that it had snapped shut. He had drawn the noose tight under the screen of the chemical smoke he had created, had wound more silken strands around it.

But the masked leader did not see those strands. When he thrust out to push the snout from him, he knocked the silken cords from the snout. The huge jaws gaped open, seized the man. The hungry crocodile was fed!

The scream was not that of an Oriental. The crocodile crunched hungrily; the war god mask fell to the floor. Blood ran in a torrent, as Jules Goddard died in the jaws of the monster he thought he had controlled.

The Whisperer was busy. He whipped the bonds from Quick Trigger. Kung Ghee had already freed himself, and disappeared.

"Run!" The Whisperer hissed. "We've got to make time if we're to wash this case up."

Quick Trigger struggled to his feet.

"What's it all about?" he demanded. "It doesn't make any sense to me."

The Whisperer didn't answer. He tore through the ancient sewer until he found a stairway. It led to a trapdoor in the grounds of the old mansion. As The Whisperer raced along, he shed his disguise, became Wildcat Gordon again.

Wildcat's first stop was a phone booth. Again he made a long-distance phone call. His eyes sparkled as he turned away.

"It is as I thought," he snapped.

"What's the racket?" Quick Trigger demanded.

"It's extortion!" Wildcat explained. "The tongs were formed originally for protection of their members in business. It was legitimate protection. Even so, it made them rich. One of the two big tongs alone is worth eight million dollars by actual accounting."

"Lin San Fu had been building toward this for many years. The Fan Li was the only force that could have brought every Chinese in the country groveling with his money. But first, they had to have the membership lists of both the major tongs. They could force Chinese here not only to turn over their own savings, but to steal and murder to get more. The tongs would become defunct, powerless to intervene."

"B—but how about Jules Goddard?"

"He knew more about China and the Fan Li, probably, than old Lin San Fu himself," Wildcat rapped. "And when I figured out what that whistling sound was, I knew he had been to the mansion for a message earlier

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tonight. That – and one other thing I have learned."

Wildcat whipped his coupe to a stop in front of the library and studio of Jules Goddard. He slammed through the door. And he was none too soon.

BLAM! – Blam–blam!

Staccato shots rapped out as Wildcat hurtled into the barnlike room. Kung Ghee was there. He sagged toward the floor, blood dripping from his side.

Two figures waved guns, slammed lead at Wildcat. One was Lee Su Wo, son of Lin San Fu. He still wore part of the war god costume he had used in the cavern of the crocodile.

The other man was Lin San Fu!

The old Chinese aimed his automatic at Wildcat. His face was a frozen sneer of hatred. Wildcat's hand scarcely moved. He fired from the hip. A round hole jumped into the forehead of Lin San Fu.

"This time," Wildcat rapped, "he'll really go to meet his ancestors!" Quick Trigger had taken care of Lee Su Wo. Kung Ghee sat erect, held his side.

"I thank you, honorable one," he murmured. "It has been difficult, not knowing who is friend and who is foe. My country has been enjoying sympathy and support from your countrymen. The presence of the Fan Li would quickly end that. That is why I have been sent here. I was to find out who was behind it, and expose him. Please tell me what you learned."

Wildcat staunched the flow of blood coming from Kung Ghee. "The ghost effect was to frighten the servants," he explained. "Messages could be received then with greater safety. Lin San Fu did the killing in other cities. He was safe. He was supposed to be dead."

"The old man was afraid of the wrath of his countrymen if he were unmasked in Fan Li. So he conveniently killed someone else, had his son identify the body as himself. The death certificate was made out there, where no one knew him."

"Goddard was a master sculptor. He made a moulage corpse for public display here and to be shipped to the Orient. I had that one intercepted on its way to the coast. The last message the pigeon brought from Lin San Fu was for a rendezvous here with Goddard. They took the message from The Whisperer. But he had read it and I found out what it said: 'I will return tonight at headquarters'."

Kung Ghee sat erect.

"Ah, The Whisperer," he said sadly. "I did not know who he was and tried to kill him. He saved the life of this one," and he pointed to Quick Trigger, "and myself. I should like to apologize for my conduct and thank him."

Quick Trigger snorted.

"Don't bother," he grunted. "He'd just get you into some kind of trouble!"