



Fatal initiations!

THE DEATH CLUB

By George Harmon Coxe

CHAPTER I.

INITIATION.

GARAGE doors locked securely, George Dunlap said, "All right," and started across the lawn in back of the square white house which stood in the center of a five-acre plot.

Walt Harper fell in step behind Dunlap and followed him through inky shadows to the narrow walk that skirted the darkened house. Heels clicked hollowly on the concrete, echoing out from the side of the structure until the two men swung around the corner and up the front steps.

Dunlap unlocked the door. Harper unbuttoned his coat so he would have free access to his left armpit, and pressed in through the doorway behind his companion.

Dunlap snapped the light switch as Harper shut the door. A yellow glow bathed the spacious, luxuriously furnished hall.

Harper said, "I'll go up with you."

Dunlap nodded, stepped forward, and ascended the wide staircase. At the second floor landing he turned right, and Harper followed him down the thickly carpeted corridor to the last room on the left. Harper reached in front of the other man, threw open the door and stepped into the darkened

room.

A switch clicked, light flooded the bedroom. From a position flat against the near wall a thin, pasty-faced man with a pointed nose swung a blackjack.

Harper moved with the click of the switch, moved sidewise away from that wall. But he was unable to move far enough. The blackjack glanced from the side of his head, and he stumbled as he reached for his gun. From the left a burly figure catapulted into him and knocked him to the floor. A third man grabbed Dunlap and yanked him into the room.

Harper rolled to his knees. He slugged the pasty-faced man with his free hand, but the burly man clung to the gun wrist. Harper got to his feet, pulling the other man with him. The fellow lowered his head and charged. Harper backed two steps and fell over a chair. The gun was torn loose from his grasp. Four hands jerked him to his feet and slapped him back against the wall.

Standing there, Harper made a high, narrow figure against the cream-colored paper. The well-tailored suit which lent a deceptive slenderness to his well-knit figure was bunched at the shoulders. A dull glow of hate sprang from his brown eyes as they flicked across the room, and the lips below the

trim mustache were flat against his teeth.

The thin man with the blackjack glowered at him, but on the burly one's face was a grin. He had something of the ape about him. He was bowlegged, his arms were long, his fists knotty. His face was flat, and thick muscles tightened the sleeves and shoulders of his suit.

He turned and tossed Harper's gun to the third man, a thickset blond with eyes too small for his face who stood with his hand on Dunlap's wrist.

Harper's left lashed out, caught the bowlegged man on the cheekbone. The thin man swung the blackjack. Harper took it on the shoulder and hooked a right to the face. The fellow cursed and the bowlegged man pulled his chin down on his chest and came forward.

Harper bounced a left and a right off that lowered head, trying to reach the jaw. He took four short-arm jabs to the face and body in return. He sidestepped a looping right, spun about, reached for a heavy bookend on a bedside table. Then the thin man used the blackjack again.

Harper went to his knees. The man said, "Lemme polish him off now, Slug."

Slug laughed. "Don't be silly, Leo. This guy likes it." He pushed Leo to one side, reached down and jerked Harper to his feet. "Don't you like it, baby?" He put all his weight behind the next blow and smashed his fist to Harper's mouth.

Harper staggered, but kept his feet. He shot another left and right, which connected but lacked power. He was out on his feet, but he avoided Slug's next punch, pivoted and lashed out at Leo.

Over in the corner of the room the bald, spindly-legged Dunlap stood white-faced, wide-eyed. The blond man left him and stepped toward Harper.

"Come on, Slug," he said. "We got things to do."

"O.K. Just a minute." Slug grinned and his little eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "For a private dick he can take it. I ain't had so much fun since—"

He broke off as Leo, bleeding at the lips from Harper's punches, swung the blackjack. It connected behind the ear where Harper's dark hair was flecked with gray.

Harper's head rolled and he fell forward.

Slug said, "You're a heel, Leo." He bent over, grabbed Harper by the lapels, and yanked him to his knees. Then, holding him upright with his left, he leaned far over and smashed his right, backed by his entire weight, into Harper's face.

Harper's head bounced back against the wall. He fell over on his side and lay still.

WHEN Walt Harper recovered consciousness he was alone. He rolled over on his back and groaned. Then he crawled laboriously to the bed on his hands and knees, drew himself erect. He steadied himself with his left hand on the end of the bed, lurched toward the closed door. Near it he stumbled and went down on his knees, but his left hand, thrown wildly out, caught the knob and he pulled himself to his feet again.

He stood there for some moments before trying to open the door. There was a lump on his forehead, another behind his ear. One eye had a cut over it, and blood had trickled down to mat the dark eyebrow; the other eye was swollen partly shut. There was a gash on one cheekbone, both lips were split and the lower jaw was lumpy.

Harper turned the doorknob and the door swung open as he lurched against it. He staggered into the hall, headed for the stairs, checked himself with his hand on the banister. From somewhere down the other end of the hall came a muffled groan. He stood there, weaving back and forth on his feet like a punch-drunk fighter, then started down the hall, his hand feeling along the wall for support.

He stopped opposite the second door on his left. From behind the panels the muffled tones sounded again. He swung into the room and groped for the light switch. He found the button, pushed it, and the resulting glow showed another bedroom, done in yellow with dainty, feminine hangings and pale-green furniture.

On the bed, fully clothed and with hands and feet securely bound, lay a girl. Blond hair fell about her shoulders. China-blue eyes, wide under penciled brows, stared out of a flushed face. A twisted towel had been thrust across an opened mouth and tied around her neck.

Harper seemed to stiffen. He moved unsteadily to the bed, picked at the cord binding the girl. He thrust trembling fingers into a vest pocket, took out a small penknife. He managed to open a blade and cut the ropes.

The girl sat upright as he untied the towel and began rubbing her wrists.

Harper dropped on the bed beside her and said, "Whisky."

The girl's eyes never left his face as she got up from the bed. She continued staring at him for a

second, the look in her eyes a mixture of pity and revulsion. "I'll see," she said, and left the room.

Harper was still sitting upright on the bed, bracing himself with his hands, when the girl returned. She carried a glass and a square brown bottle. She drew the cork and poured an inch of whisky into the glass.

Harper tossed it off in one gulp. He coughed once, then reached for the bottle. The girl gave it to him, and he poured another third of a glassful. This he drank quickly and drew back his lips as the alcohol burned the cuts.

The girl dropped into a straight-backed chair, her eyes still on Harper. He returned the gaze, looking through the bloodied eyebrow without lifting his head. Finally he said, "How long have you been tied up here?"

"Over an hour. I was downstairs reading. When I went to answer the doorbell the three of them rushed in."

"Where's the housekeeper?"

"She stays with her mother one night a week. Tonight's the night." She leaned forward in the chair, rubbing her wrists absently. "Is—is uncle all right?" There was fear in her voice.

"I don't know." Harper told what had happened, and as he finished the girl uttered a frightened cry, as though some forgotten memory had accused her, and sprang toward the dresser.

"They left a note," she said, at the same time picking up a piece of paper propped against the mirror. She glanced quickly at it, handed it to Harper.

He looked at her for a moment without reading the note. One hand strayed to his face, explored with gentle fingers the bruises and cuts. Then he dropped his eyes, read:

If your uncle's life means anything to you, don't call the police. We will get in touch with you later. Don't be alarmed if you don't hear from us for a week or ten days.

Harper tossed the note to the bed. His mustache twitched above a bitter smile and his voice was hoarse, unemotional. "I'm going back to your uncle's room, get fixed up. I'll want to talk to you."

The girl got to her feet. "Let me—bathe those cuts—"

"Afterward." Harper moved toward the door, paused with his hand on the knob. "I'm going to take a cold shower. When I come back you can

stick some adhesive tape where it'll do the most good."

WALT HARPER'S appearance was considerably improved when he finished dressing after his shower. There was no longer any blood on his face and the cuts were clean. He gave a final tug to his tie, lighted a cigarette, turned away from the chest of drawers, and looked slowly about the room.

He inhaled deeply, blew out smoke in a thin stream. He righted the overturned chairs, walked over and opened a closet door. He pawed over a half-dozen suits, looked down at the shoes, the portmanteau and Gladstone bag in the far corner. Coming back to the chest he began at the top and examined the furnishings that filled the drawers.

There was a leather-covered wastebasket at the foot of the bed. He stepped to it, pulled out a newspaper, picked up the single envelope that lay beneath. It was empty and postmarked

Boston, Mass. June 17 1933. 6:30 P.M.

Harper turned over the envelope in his hands. He stuffed it into his pocket, stood motionless, his brown eyes thoughtful. He rubbed his mustache with the index finger of his right hand, reached back into his pocket, took out the envelope and stared at it.

"Mailed Saturday," he said softly, "and today's Monday." He grunted, turned on his heel, and went back to Aileen Reynolds's room.

She had recovered her composure now. Her blond hair was neatly done and her skin was pink and fresh-looking without makeup. The corners of her mouth were still red where the pressure of the towel had left its mark. She had a bottle of iodine, some cotton, gauze, and adhesive tape, and she started to work as soon as Harper sat down.

When she had finished there was a strip of plaster across Harper's eyebrow, another across his cheek bone, a third on his forehead. His left eye, blue-circled, was about half-open.

Harper poured another drink, stepped over to the straight-backed chair and eased into it. "How are you fixed for money?" he asked. And when the girl's eyes widened he added, "I mean, were you dependent on Dunlap?"

"No. When father died he left me about two hundred thousand in trust."

Harper's figure stiffened in the chair and his voice was sharp as he spoke. "In George Dunlap's bank?"

"No. The City National."

Harper leaned back in the chair. "Your uncle's had some threatening letters from depositors since his bank closed. You know, of course, that I've been hired to see that none of these threats are carried out."

"But what will we do now?"

Harper surveyed the tips of his shoes. Then he looked at the girl and said, "I don't know—yet." He hesitated and his voice was level as he continued, "As far as I know, George Dunlap was not to blame for the crash. Was he hard up?"

Aileen Reynolds caught her underlip with firm teeth, loosed it. "I let him have some money a week ago."

The plaster on Harper's eyebrow lifted. "Much?"

"A thousand."

The plaster dropped back in place. "He was paying us a hundred a week to act as his bodyguard. But he was afraid of those letters and he offered a bonus of a thousand if he got through this first month without being smeared." Harper's eyes clouded. "I'd like to find out what it's all about."

"I'll pay you whatever you ask if you will," said the girl. "I hardly know what to do. The police—that note—"

"Never mind the police just now." Harper stood up and his voice was frigid, deliberate. "You sit tight until I tell you different. And there will be no charge for my work—just expenses. If I get him back I'll hit him for that thousand bonus."

CHAPTER II.

THE SECOND BODY.

WALT HARPER was an enigma even to his partner. When pressed for information about Harper, Tom Munn had to admit his ignorance. The two had been together in Belleau Woods, had been given adjoining beds in the base hospital. Four years previous Harper had drifted into town as an agent for the Department of Justice. Munn had been a sergeant of detectives with the local police. Two years later Harper came back. He had some money. He propositioned Munn, and the two had set themselves up as private detectives.

That was all Tom Munn knew about Walt Harper except that he liked the game, that he was without sentiment, and that once on a case he stuck to it with the dogged determination of a bulldog.

At eleven o'clock of the morning following the kidnaping, the partners sat in their private office. The puzzled frown which creased Munn's wide, weathered forehead bore testimony to the fact that Harper was still an enigma.

Harper slouched in his chair, crossed his legs, and blew out a cloud of smoke he had been cuddling in his mouth. "What'd you find out about Dunlap?" he asked.

Munn grunted. "You call up at eleven o'clock last night and expect me to—"

"You've had all morning." Harper rubbed first one side of his mustache, then the other. He was dressed in a neat gray flannel suit, his blue shirt was fresh, and his black oxfords were polished to a mirror-like perfection. Except for the three small patches on his face and a slightly discolored eye, his dark, handsome features bore no trace of his beating.

"Both hours," snorted Munn. "But"—he sat up in his chair—"I got most of the stuff. So far, Dunlap is clear with the bank examiner. Up till now, the failure of the State Street Trust was due to just one of those things—frozen assets.

"Dunlap is about broke, according to appearances. The clerk in the safe-deposit vaults is still on duty. He says Dunlap was in to open his box a week ago, and again yesterday morning. But what's this idea of going to Boston?"

Harper uncrossed his long legs, stretched them out in front of him. His chin rested on his chest and he looked up at Munn without raising his head. "That's where Dunlap is," he said calmly.

"Yeah?" Munn scowled. "What makes you think so?"

"A hunch that started with the envelope I told you about. After I called you last night I called Bob Brooks over at the airport. Two strangers chartered a plane for New York yesterday afternoon—so Brooks said. Dunlap left with them last night."

HARPER hesitated a moment while he ground out his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk. "So I went over and had a talk with Brooks."

"Well?" pressed Munn.

"I found out that the pilot expected to come right back, getting in here around seven in the

morning. He did. His customers changed their minds. They went to Boston and gave him a century to say he'd been to New York. The pilot's hitting the hay now. He's gonna be ready to take off with me at noon."

"Who the hell's gonna pay for it?"

Harper's mustache twitched above a flickering smile. "Miss Aileen Reynolds."

"That's different." Munn grinned, slipped a cigar from his vest pocket. He bit off the end, flicked it from his mouth with a snap of his tongue and lighted it. "How much is in it for us?"

"Our expenses."

Munn jerked upright in his chair, his cigar shooting up at a sharp angle from the corner of a mouth clamped like a vise. "So business is picking up?"

"Look at it from another angle," said Harper levelly. "We get hired on a routine job; some outsiders gang me and snatch Dunlap. How's it going to look when the papers break it over the front page? Anyway, if he's alive, we still get our grand."

Munn got up from his chair, paced back and forth across the floor twice, then stopped in front of the window, his back to the room. Harper's eyes followed his partner, seemed to take in the shapeless hang to Munn's wrinkled brown suit.

"You ought to get yourself a new suit," he said thoughtfully, "and keep it pressed."

Munn spun about. He opened his mouth twice before he spoke. "You keep slicked up enough for both of us," he growled.

"But I'm gonna be away for a few days." Harper grinned. "It's up to you to keep the firm dressed up."

Munn came back to his chair, dropped into it and puffed his cigar so hard it began to burn unevenly.

Harper reached into his inside coat pocket, pulled out a folded sheet of paper and tossed it across the desk. Then he took a gold knife from his vest pocket, opened up the file blade, and began smoothing his fingernails.

Munn grunted, took the cigar from his mouth, placed it on the edge of the desk and picked up the piece of paper. He unfolded it, read it. When he finished he looked at Harper; then he read the paper again.

"Special investigator for the district attorney?" he snorted. "How the hell did you wangle that?"

Harper reached out with one hand, took the paper, tucked it away in his pocket, and continued with his nails. "For one month," he said. "I made a deal."

"With what?"

"With the Dunlap story."

"You tipped off the D.A.?" Amazement flooded Munn's weathered features and his eyes went wide. "The cops'll raise hell with this; they raise hell with every kidnapping."

"No doubt," said Harper, unruffled. "But this isn't a kidnapping."

Munn spat out an oath.

"Keep your shirt on!" Harper's voice took on a thin, metallic ring. He put away his knife and sat up. "This job was pulled on the one night the housekeeper was away. While they were ganging me, Dunlap had plenty of chance to run for it. I called the girl this morning. One of his small traveling bags is missing. And since when do they snatch supposedly bankrupt bankers?"

Munn waved his cigar in an arc of jerky impatience. "You think it was a frame?" he snapped. "What'd you tell the D.A.?"

"I told him what happened last night. That's all." Harper glanced at his wristwatch. "The cops have not a single lead. They won't know about the airport unless they stumble on it. Aileen Reynolds will tell them only what happened to her. They can't put the bee on me because I'm on my way. So if you don't spill things, what'll they have?"

Harper walked over to the desk, took from a drawer what looked like a nickel-plated pencil and clipped it to his vest pocket. He picked up a suitcase and said, "Sit tight till you hear from me."

HARPER swung out of the red, four-place monoplane at the Boston airport at four o'clock in the afternoon. He shook hands with the pilot, then walked across the runway to the administration building. Without waiting to make any inquiry, he summoned a taxi, piled in and said, "Barker House."

He rode across the East Boston ferry without leaving the cab, and five minutes later was entering the School Street entrance of the hotel. He registered, asked for a room on the top floor. As soon as he was alone he opened his bag, took out a pint of rye. He poured a drink, tossed it off, stepped into the bathroom for a swallow of water. Then he got busy on the telephone.

He made three calls and sat down to wait. He had two more drinks while he waited, and ten minutes later three knocks sounded on the door. He called, "Come in," and watched a big, lazy-looking man with a round face and a heavy nose swing through the door.

Harper got up, offered his hand and said, "Hello, Charlie."

"Hi, Walt." Charlie pumped Harper's hand. "Last time I saw you, you were with the Feds."

Harper waved Charlie toward a chair by the window. He got a clean glass from the bathroom, offered this and the half-filled bottle. "How's the agency business in Boston?"

"Rotten." Charlie poured himself a drink, but set the glass on the windowsill while he lighted a cigar and puffed it into life. He gulped the whisky, sucked his lips a moment, and thrust the cigar between discolored teeth. "Who carved their initials on your face?" he asked.

Harper's dark eyes flashed. "A couple of your local boys."

"So—"

"Yeah." Harper leaned forward in his chair. "I've made a couple calls since I been in. A sergeant down at Station No. 3, Joy Street, who I used to know in Washington, has been giving me a little information. He tells me Captain Galpin down at headquarters is a pretty right guy."

"He's so honest it hurts, and the politicians don't bother him—much."

"O.K. Now who's the biggest shot in town?"

"Louis Wyman."

"What're his rackets?"

Charlie waved his cigar idly. "For the public it's restaurants, warehouses, the trucking business. For himself, he cuts in on most everything that's got any gravy."

"Plenty of connections?"

"Plenty."

Harper leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his neck so that his elbows paralleled the floor. For a moment he was silent, his face somber, but otherwise expressionless. "I've got a couple little jobs for you," he said finally. His voice was soft and he spoke slowly, thoughtfully.

"Go over to the airport. A Robin pulled in here last night—or this morning—around three o'clock. Find out if a car met the three men who got out, what kind it was and anything else you can. If it was a taxi, find the driver and get his story."

HARPER had dinner in the hotel. At eight o'clock he got a taxi, rode down Tremont Street through the evening theater traffic to Stuart Street and police headquarters. Although only a few blocks from the noisy life and movement of Tremont Street, the section in front of headquarters was quiet. A few drops of rain were beginning to fall.

He paid the driver, and a minute or two later was upstairs sitting across a desk from a square-faced man with a red nose, deep-set gray eyes, and a shock of unruly, iron-colored hair. Harper waited until Captain Galpin had read the authorization from the district attorney and returned it. Then he leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and waited for Galpin to speak.

Galpin took the half-smoked cigar from his mouth and without looking up said, "Well, what's the story?"

"One of our local bankers disappeared last night," said Harper. "He'd had a couple threatening letters and had hired a private detective for a bodyguard." Harper gave an outline of the story without mentioning his own connection with George Dunlap. "These snatchers," he concluded, "came here in a plane early this morning."

"I believe some word came through on the teletype this afternoon on that," said Galpin. "Naturally, we'll keep our eyes open." He paused to retrieve his cigar. He knocked off the ashes with a match, lighted it again. Before he could continue, Harper interrupted.

"I understand," he said levelly, "that three local men have disappeared in the past four months; men who were in some way connected with defunct stock houses, men whose boom-time structures collapsed, leaving the public holding the bag."

Galpin took the cigar from his mouth, blew out the match, and looked at Harper from under wiry brows. His eyes narrowed slightly, and he said, "Those men were not kidnapped. They just disappeared."

Harper's eyes were opaque and his voice was as difficult to read as his eyes. "That big shot from Chicago, that public utility king from Cleveland were traced here, weren't they? And there was a judge from New York that headed this way before they lost trace of him."

Galpin's square jaws clamped on the cigar butt. "Go on," he growled. "Speak your piece."

Harper uncrossed his legs, then stretched them

out, surveyed his polished shoes. "I was just wondering why all these men in the same sort of boat, came this way?"

"What about it? Your man was kidnapped."

"Possibly." Harper looked at Galpin without lifting his head. "But I was just wondering. This might not be a bad place to jump from. It's a good port. You could ship for almost any place from this harbor. It's reasonably near Canada."

Galpin remained silent, but his gray eyes were thoughtful.

Harper looked back at his shoes, smoothed down his mustache with his index finger. "And about a month ago, I understand you picked up a man who had been so thoroughly beaten his face was unrecognizable. I understand his body was identified only through his dental work, and I understand he was one of your missing Boston brokers."

Galpin snorted and got from his chair. He walked across the room like a caged lion, paused to stare down at Harper who still stretched easily in his chair.

"Maybe there's something to it," said Galpin. "But I—" He broke off as a telephone on his desk shrilled to life. He jerked it up, slapped the receiver to his ear. He listened for several seconds, said, "O.K.," and hung up the receiver.

Galpin turned to Harper. "I've got to go out. Where you stayin'?" Harper answered and Galpin continued, "I'll call you. I want to talk with you some more."

THE body sprawled beside a narrow asphalt road which the rain had made into an oily black ribbon stretching off into the marshes. An ambulance, a police car, and a small sedan were parked, one after another at one side of the highway. Two policemen were holding a tent-like blanket over the body, while the medical examiner made his inspection. Two other plainclothesmen, Captain Galpin, and Walt Harper hovered around the blanket.

The body was that of a man of medium build. The face was like pulp. It lay face up, and although the rain had washed most of the blood from the face, it was still unrecognizable. It was dressed in new overalls and a jumper. One arm was twisted under; one leg had buckled backward from a fracture so that it seemed to hold no relation to the rest of the body.

Galpin chewed on a cigar that was out. He wiped drops of rain from his chin and turned to Harper who wore a light slicker and a felt hat turned down all around. "Lucky you came in to see me tonight. I called you because it sounded over the telephone like that other fellow we found last month. I thought maybe this might be your man."

"No," said Harper. "My man was bald and that's one thing you can't cover up." He fell silent as the examiner spoke.

"All right," he said, and straightened up from beside the body. "Might as well move him."

"What's the verdict?" asked Galpin.

"I'm not ready for my report yet," snapped the examiner. "But it looks like this fellow was beaten to death. If there were any gashes on his body I'd say he was struck by a freight train—hardly a major bone in his body not broken."

In the police car Galpin sat beside Harper. He grunted, said, "These two killings hook up. Faces smashed—"

"Dressed the same way?" interrupted Harper. He took his hat off, shook it, put it back on his head and reached for a cigarette.

"Exactly—no underwear and new overalls." The reflected light from the dash showed Galpin's face grim, his eyes narrow.

Harper lighted his cigarette, puffed silently. In the dim light his brown eyes were black pools, unblinking and steadfast.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE GOLDEN QUAIL.

WALT HARPER, in pajamas, was having breakfast in his room. His gray-flecked black hair was smooth, his injured eye was nearly normal and he had removed the adhesive tape from his face.

He was sitting in front of the window, idly watching a squatty tugboat pull four barges through the blue-green waters of the harbor toward Charlestown, when Charlie came in and said:

"Pretty soft for the visiting fireman."

"Yeah." Harper's smile was genuine, but thin. "What'd you find out?"

"Not much." Charlie went over to the table, picked a half slice of toast and crammed it into his mouth. "A taxi picked those fellows up at the airport," he muttered through the toast, and crumbs sprayed the floor. "For a wonder the guy on duty at

the office noticed the number.”

“Yes?”

“It was a hot cab.” Charlie drained what remained of a glass of water.

Harper got up and started to dress while Charlie slid into the vacated chair and stared out the window.

When he was satisfied with the set of his tie, Harper went over to the telephone table by the bed. He pawed through the directory, then put in a call. A moment later he was talking.

“Weather bureau? . . . I’d like to find out if it was raining the night of May 15th?” He waited for a moment with narrowed eyes fixed on the opposite wall. “Yeah? . . . It was? . . . Rained all night, and quite hard, eh? . . . Thanks a lot.”

He stepped over to the dresser, slipped his watch, chain, and knife into diagonally opposite vest pockets. He felt of his fountain pen and pencil, stepped over to his traveling bag, lifted out a lightweight shoulder holster and a .38 revolver. As he adjusted the holster, Charlie lifted his eyebrows and said:

“Goin’ calling?”

“Yeah.” Harper slipped the gun into the holster, drew on his coat. “Where’ll I find Louis Wyman?”

Charlie’s eyes popped a little and he whistled softly. “We’ll probably find him at the Golden Quail,” he said, and gave an address off Washington Street.

“The ‘we’ is out,” said Harper.

“But that guy is poison,” sputtered Charlie, coming to his feet.

“The ‘we’ is out,” repeated Harper. “This is just a social call.”

THE electric sign that outlined the squat quail looked ridiculous in the daylight. Walt Harper opened the green door under the sign and passed into a deserted foyer. He pushed aside the curtains at the end and stepped into a rectangular room with a balcony at the far end. There were tables on both floors; all were vacant except one.

Two men, sitting at this table, got up when Harper came into the room. They were both young and white-faced, and their dark suits made them look thinner than they were. One of the men walked over to Harper.

“What’s on your mind?” he said, and his hostile gaze shifted up and down Harper’s slender height.

“I want to see Wyman.”

The man hesitated, then walked over to his companion. They talked in low tones for a moment, then the first man came back. “Sit down,” he said. “Give me your name and I’ll see if he’s in.”

Harper dropped into a nearby chair and hooked his feet over the rungs of another one. “Harper’s the name,” he said.

He took a cigarette from his pocket, and watched the man walk along one side of the room and up the stairs. He circled the balcony to a door in the shadows.

Harper rose quickly and started for the stairs.

The other man at the table stood up and said, “Hey!”

Harper reached for his .38, slipped it into his side pocket. The man at the table took one step after him.

Harper picked his way hurriedly between the tables on the balcony. The door swung open as he reached it. He tried to squeeze past as the man came out, but the fellow grunted angrily and grabbed his arm. Harper swung sidewise, shook off the hand. The man stumbled, regained his balance and shot a clumsy right at Harper’s chin.

Without taking his hand from his gun, Harper stepped inside the right and hooked his own left to the man’s stomach. The fellow gasped loudly, clamped his hands to his belt and doubled up. Harper slipped through the doorway, shut the door and stood with his back against it.

The room was spacious and cool-looking; the rug on the floor was ankle deep. There were two steel filing cabinets, a safe, a water cooler, four chairs, and a flat-topped desk.

The man at the desk scowled and stood up. He was about the same height as Harper, but thirty pounds heavier. His brown hair was combed straight back, his eyes were pale blue and small; his teeth were so perfect they seemed false.

Harper remained motionless by the door. His dark eyes caught the blue ones of the man at the desk for a moment, then flicked to the apish-looking fellow with the flat face, bowlegs, and the long, powerful-looking arms.

“Hello, Slug,” Harper said.

“Well, I’ll be—” Slug’s remark was vile, but after his moment of surprise, his ugly face broke into a grin. “My pal.”

Wyman dropped back into his seat. Hate masked his face and he controlled his voice with an effort born of much experience. His tone was cold,

suave. "Very neat—very. And you've got plenty of crust, plenty."

"You said it, boss." Slug jerked his thumb toward Harper. "He's a tough baby. And does he like it? He's the swellest private dick I ever skinned a knuckle on and—"

"I just wanted to make a short social call," interrupted Harper. He walked to the center of the room. "I didn't expect to run into the bruiser. But at that, I'm certainly glad to see him."

The door of the room was jerked open and the two men who had been at the downstairs table rushed in. Harper swung about, but Wyman's command stopped the charge.

"Hold it!" He came around the desk and his blue eyes held a crafty look. "Now that you're here, you might as well sing your song." He glanced at the two men, who were glaring angrily at Harper, and jerked his head toward the door. "Blow!" he rapped. "Stick outside."

WYMAN went back to the desk and sat down. "Grab a chair," he said, and looked at Harper questioningly. "What's on your mind?"

Harper smiled coldly. He backed into a chair so that he faced Wyman and Slug, who stood to one side and slightly behind the desk. His hand was still in his pocket as he spoke.

"I'm looking for George Dunlap," he began. He reached into an inside pocket. Without making mention of his connection with the district attorney he took out a card which read:

HARPER & MUNN
Private Investigators

Wyman took it, but he did not look at it. His eyes, like pale-blue disks, were on Harper. "Who's George Dunlap?" he asked.

"Slug can tell you."

"And where do I fit?"

Harper smiled. "That's what I've been wondering about. A half-dozen rich men who've been in a jam have come to Boston. George Dunlap was one, and Slug brought him here. There might be"—Harper leaned back in his chair and stroked his mustache idly with his free hand—"some connection between these men and the body the police picked up last night; between that man and the one they picked up a month ago.

"I was wondering if maybe there wasn't some

sort of racket back of it all. It would take somebody pretty big to swing it, I should think; somebody who knows his way around and has connections. That's why I came to you."

Wyman's face was impassive, but his nostrils dilated slightly as he glanced down at Harper's card. He looked up again and smiled deliberately.

"You think of things, don't you?" He fell silent for a moment, then continued, "I never saw a private dick yet that wasn't sticking his nose in other people's business and trying to chisel out some gravy. You stuck your nose in my business and, well"—Wyman paused—"well I don't like trouble. How about a trip to Europe?"

He leaned over on the desk, rested his weight on his elbows and forearms. "I might have a little job for you to do over there. It might take you a couple months and it might be worth about five grand and expenses."

Harper uncrossed his legs and stood up. "Sounds good," he said. "Maybe I'll take you up on it—after I find out what happened to George Dunlap. I think he gypped me out of a grand, and I want it. I'll stop by in a few days and have a talk with you." Harper backed toward the door.

Wyman looked at the detective a moment, then his flashing eyes flicked over his shoulder to Slug. He nodded his head toward Harper, and without raising his voice said, "All right, Slug."

Slug grinned and lurched forward on flat feet.

Harper took one backward step, stopped and whipped out the .38. "Stay there, Slug!" he ordered. "Stay there and keep your hands where I can see 'em." He glanced at Wyman. "That goes for you, too!"

Slug stopped and his grin turned to a scowl of anger. He took a half-step and glanced questioningly at Wyman, his hands clenching convulsively in impotent rage.

THE detective took another backward step, turned so his eyes took in the two men and the edge of the door toward which he moved.

"Drop it!"

Harper stiffened. For a second he held the gun on Slug. Both he and Wyman held their positions, but on Wyman's face, a knowing smile began to curve over his perfect teeth.

"Drop it, punk, or—"

The voice came from the wall behind Harper. There was a faint twitch of his mouth, a tightening

of the lips. Then he let the gun fall from his fingers. He turned around.

From a spot midway between the ends of the room, and above the safe, a picture had been pushed aside so that it hung askew. There was a seven-inch hole behind this, and from the circular cavity a heavy automatic protruded.

Wyman repeated his command. "All right, Slug."

The man moved toward Harper, who stood motionless, his hands at his side. Slug feinted with his left, shot a vicious right to Harper's chin. The detective slipped the punch, pivoted as Slug lurched off balance, and shot his own left behind the man's ear. Slug stumbled under the blow, spun about with a curse on his lips. Wyman's voice stopped him.

"Never mind that stuff, stupid!" he said. "There's time for that later." His laugh was a grunt. "At that I think he might take you." Wyman got up from the desk. "Get his gun."

Slug obeyed and Wyman took it. He said, "Now clear out of here. Stay outside the door; I want to talk to this dick alone." He swung his gun on Harper, glanced at the man behind the circular hole in the wall and said, "All right, Leo. Go back downstairs."

Slug's little eyes took on a hurt expression. "Don't I get a chance to work out on this baby?"

Wyman snapped, "Blow!" And to Harper, "Sit down!"

Harper dropped into a chair. He stretched his legs, and hooked his thumbs in his upper vest pockets.

Wyman said, "You were out with Captain Galpin last night. I was going to call on you, Harper; but this makes it better." When Harper responded to this by nothing more than a slight raising of his dark eyebrows, Wyman continued. "I want you to call Galpin. I want you to tell him you're on your way to catch a train for Montreal, that you've got a new lead on Dunlap."

Wyman leaned well over on the desk, so that his gun and his eyes were scarcely two feet from the detective's head. "Then I want you to wire your partner. Tell him you got a new lead and are taking the *Honoric* for Havre at midnight."

Harper sat up in his chair and his dark eyes stared into Wyman's blue ones with a careless, bland expression. "Then what?" he said quietly.

"Then we'll arrange a little trip for you."

"That's swell." Harper smiled with his lips only, and slipped his metal pencil from his vest pocket. "Got a sheet of paper?"

Wyman blinked at the sudden acquiescence. Then an expression of crafty guile suffused his handsome face. Without taking his eyes from Harper he reached down to a side drawer, took out a sheet of paper and slid it in front of him.

Harper pulled the paper toward himself. He turned the pencil idly in his hands and asked, "What am I supposed to say?"

"Say—"

The one word was all Wyman spoke. His mouth was open when Harper flicked the clip on the pencil with his thumb. There was a faint click, then a louder click as the .38-caliber gas shell exploded in Wyman's face. The man coughed, dropped his gun, and clawed at his eyes and nose.

Harper leaped from the chair as the white cloud of smoke-like tear gas enveloped Wyman's head. With catlike quickness he snatched up his gun, slipped the now empty pencil into his pocket, and sprang toward the door.

He jerked it open. Slug, who must have been half-leaning against the steel panel, stumbled inward. Harper, the gun held flat in his hand, slapped it against the side of the man's head. Slug kept right on falling. He hit the floor and was trying to get up when Harper turned toward the other two men who had been standing near the door.

He jammed the gun into the stomach of the nearest man, said, "Back up, Jack!"

The fellow drew back. Harper withdrew the gun, reached out with his left hand, grabbed the shoulder of the other man. He spun him about like a top and stuck the gun in his back.

"Let's go!" he said softly. "Tell your pal to lead the way. And if anyone should make a pass at me, guess what's gonna happen to you."

The procession of three moved quickly along the balcony, down the stairs and across the lower floor.

CHAPTER IV.

NINE OR TEN?

I'VE been doing some newspaper reading this afternoon." Harper sat in Captain Galpin's office at nine o'clock that evening. A cigarette hung from one corner of his mouth. "Back numbers." He looked up at Galpin and smiled. "There's about

thirty thousand in reward for our missing rich men. Could you use half of that?"

Galpin waited until he had lighted a fresh cigar before answering. Then he said, "I could if it's on the level, and it comes my way."

"You haven't identified the man we found last night?"

"No. We got in touch with New York, Chicago, Cleveland. It'll be another day before we get anything definite."

Harper nodded, flicked the ash from his cigarette. "I found one of the birds that came here with Dunlap."

Galpin jerked upright in his chair. "Where?"

"I went calling on Louis Wyman. It was one of his men."

Galpin's jaw went slack. His eyes widened. "You mean—"

Harper smiled and nodded. "I've had a funny hunch ever since I started digging on this thing. And the more I dig, the more I think of the hunch." Harper spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "I think these disappearing rich men came to Boston because somebody sold them an idea.

"Most wealthy men have cash and bonds put aside in safe-deposit boxes, so they'll have an anchor to the windward. I'm wondering if somebody didn't sell them on the idea of a rich man's hideout. A place where they could drop out of sight; where those who were in danger of cranks could be safe; where those who might tangle with the D.A. could wait until they knew which way the wind blew."

"It sounds crazy," Galpin grunted.

Harper shifted his gaze from the ceiling to Galpin and smiled. "But," he said, "the facts are crazy, too. You picked up one Boston broker—dead. You picked up another one last night. He'll be one of those missing men just as sure as you're sitting there. We know Dunlap came here—after being to his safe-deposit box."

"But who's knocking 'em off, and why?"

Harper's voice took on a chill quality. "I don't know," he said, "unless they've been kept until they were milked dry of their funds, and then tossed out for the city to bury."

"Rats!" Galpin got up, chewed on his cigar, sat down again.

"Maybe. But that's how I happened to call on Louis Wyman. I had no hunch about him, understand. Only I figured it would take somebody

who was big, who had connections in other cities, to sell the proposition for a cut.

"The biggest shot in Boston is Wyman. That's why I went to him first. It was just luck I happened to run across Slug."

"Slug?" shouted Galpin. "Is he the guy?" He reached for the telephone, but Harper checked him.

"Don't bother. I don't think you'll be able to pick him up tonight. And if you did it would be tough to pin anything on him without Dunlap."

Harper got up from his chair. He went over to the desk, leaned forward so his eyes were less than two feet from Galpin's. "Could you get a search warrant for Wyman's warehouse out in Dorchester tonight?"

Galpin scowled. "I doubt it. He's got too many friends. Tomorrow maybe."

"Tomorrow's too late." Harper felt of his pencil, of the .38 under his arm. "He knows my guessing is getting hot."

"But why the warehouse?" asked Galpin, puzzled.

"It's the one place he owns that's made to order. I had a friend of mine drive me around a bit this afternoon. I stopped there, put up a bluff, flashed a badge and looked the place over."

"What'd you find?"

"Nothing definite."

"Then—"

"Will you stick around here for a couple hours—wait for a call from me?"

"Sure. But the warehouse—"

"The warehouse is ten stories high—according to those little windows outside." Harper moved toward the door and stopped to face the captain. "The elevator, when it reached the iron covering at the top of the shaft, *had only passed nine floors.*"

Galpin's face twitched, but he did not speak.

Harper went to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob. "Did you ever see a man who'd fallen from a high building—say ten stories?"

"No," said Galpin thickly.

"I think you have. The fellow you picked up last night, aside from his face, looked like a man I saw who'd tumbled out of a twelfth-story window. The rain would wash away any trace of where the bodies landed—on both nights."

TEN minutes later a sedan stopped on a dark, deserted street in a neighborhood of wholesale establishments, and loft buildings, extending along

a railroad spur.

Walt Harper said, "Turn off the lights, Charlie. Leave the buggy here."

The two men got out, turned past a plumbing supply house, walked down a dead-end street which was swallowed up in the blackness of barren lowlands. They passed an alley, walked by a wholesale paint company, whose windows were like shiny black paper, and stopped at the alley which separated this from a tall, thick-looking building unrelieved by any light except a dim glow at a center door on the street floor.

Harper said, "Maybe we can do a job on the watchman."

The two men moved slowly along the barren brick wall, stopped in front of a wide metal door. Harper cocked his head and looked up the bare, severe façade to the two small, turret-like corners. Four narrow, iron-barred windows on each floor gave the place the appearance of a fortress—or prison.

"O.K.," said Harper. "Knock." As he spoke he slipped his gun from the holster, and drew back against the front corner of the wall so that he faced the street.

Charlie raised a big fist and pounded on the door. He waited a few seconds, pounded again. There was another half-minute of silence; then a clank of metal, like the drawing of a bar, sounded inside the building. The door was opened an inch. A faint reflection of light from the office made an orange crack. And from this jutted the ugly muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun. Behind this, as the door swung open, was the shadowy outline of a man.

"Stick 'em up!"

Charlie raised his hands and the voice continued, "That's better. Now what the hell do you want?"

"I've got some stuff stored here," said Charlie quickly. "I've got to get some of it out tonight."

"You're outta luck, buddy."

"It's just a couple small things. Won't take a minute. I can carry 'em in my arms. Come on, gimme a break."

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Come in the office till I see who you are and what you want. Keep those hands up!"

Charlie sidled past the shotgun. Walt Harper came around the corner of the doorway in a quick, silent movement. He lunged toward the guard. His

right arm made a swift, chopping motion as he went forward and the barrel of his .38 whipped down on the man's head.

He stepped forward and slipped his hands under the fellow's arms, supporting him as his knees buckled. As if by prearranged signal, Charlie spun about and grabbed the shotgun before it clattered to the floor. Harper heeled the door shut, remained motionless with his burden as Charlie moved the few feet to the office door and swung into the dim glow with the shotgun held ready.

"O.K.," he said.

Harper dragged his burden into the small office and lowered the man into a chair in one corner of the room. He went back to the outer door, slipped the heavy metal bar in place securely, and returned to the office.

THE unconscious man in the chair was slender, an inch or so shorter than Harper. He wore a gray cap and trousers, and a brown suede jacket.

Harper said, "Help me get this jacket off." Charlie held the man while Harper pulled off the garment. He slipped out of his own coat, put on the jacket, substituted the cap for his hat. He stepped past a small desk to a door that opened into a closet. Rummaging there for a moment, he came back with a short length of rope and a piece of insulated wire.

In another minute the man was securely trussed and gagged. The two detectives carried him to the closet, shut the door, and turned the key in the lock.

"Now what?" Charlie asked.

Harper didn't answer for a moment. He let his glance drift about the room. He took his coat, folded it up, placed this and his hat in a lower drawer of the desk. Then he sat down in front of the desk and picked up the telephone directory. He found his number, marked it with his index finger, looked up at Charlie, and said:

"There's a fellow by the name of George Dunlap out in our town that gypped me out of a thousand bucks. I want it. Maybe I'll get it tonight. Anyway, I got an idea and I'm going to try it."

He picked up the telephone, gave his number. A moment later he said, "Louis? . . . They want you down at the warehouse right away. . . . Yeah. . . . In the office on the ground floor." He hung up the receiver.

Charlie's round face was somber. The color in his fat cheeks became a shade paler. "It's all right

for you to stick your nose in a mess of trouble," he said slowly, "but I live here. This guy Wyman's liable to cramp my style."

Harper's eyes were thoughtful. He caught his underlip in firm teeth, looked down at the desk, then back at Charlie. "Yeah," he said, "that's right." Then he smiled. "But I guess I can keep you out of it."

The telephone bell shrilled. Harper's grin was thin as he picked up the receiver. "This'll be Wyman calling back."

He said, "Yeah? . . . Sure I called you. . . . I don't know. They just told me to tell you to come to the front office." He hung up, cutting off a clicking in the diaphragm of the receiver that told of a voice which was still talking.

HARPER waited a minute, then gave another number. He said, "Galpin? . . . Harper. I'm down at the warehouse. You don't need to worry about that warrant. Bring about a dozen men down here. Charlie Buckley'll be waiting for you. He'll tell you what to do."

Harper leaned back in the chair, fell silent while he brushed his mustache with an index finger. Then he said, "Stick here till I frisk Wyman—if he comes. You can stay behind the door so he won't see you. Then go out and meet Galpin. He won't crash this place without a warrant. Have him put about four men in front, a couple more in back. There may be another way out of here, so tell him to string a couple men on the corner and on that other street. He don't have to bust in here unless he hears some shooting. But be damn sure he doesn't let anybody out."

A silence settled over the little office as Harper finished; a silence that continued, unbroken, until a knock sounded on the steel street door.

Harper jumped to his feet, picked up the shotgun. "Get out your roscoe, Charlie! You open the door for me—stay behind it until I line 'em up!"

The two men went quickly into the hall. Harper stood about four feet in front of the door and raised the shotgun; Charlie stepped forward, pulled back the bar, and drew the door inward, keeping behind it.

Louis Wyman and a short, heavysset man stood in the opening.

Harper said, "Hello, Louis. Put 'em up!"

Wyman's hands went up immediately. The

other man hesitated an instant, staring at the gaping muzzle of the shotgun. Then he withdrew his hand from a bulging pocket and lifted both arms. Harper backed up, and without a command the two men stepped in, took three steps forward and turned into the office.

"Up against the wall," said Harper, and his voice was cold. "And if I were you I wouldn't turn my head."

Charlie came up beside Harper, who handed him the shotgun. Then Harper stepped forward, slid his hands over Wyman's body. There was no weapon on him, but he found a .45 automatic on the short man. He stepped back and motioned Charlie from the room. The outer door clanged shut.

Wyman said, "You're certainly digging a grave for yourself, Harper."

Harper said, "You can turn around if you want to."

Wyman turned slowly. His eyes were like ice and his jaws were white at the corners. But it was evident, from the calm way he reached into his pocket for a cigarette and lighted it, that he had been trained in emergencies. "Now what?" he said, and smoke came out with the words.

Harper smiled with his lips only, and the lips were thin. "Let's go upstairs," he said. "Galpin's bringing a dozen men to keep anyone from getting out." He motioned with the guns in each hand. "Come on. Let's try the elevator."

CHAPTER V.

THE ROOF.

LIGHT from the elevator shot pale-yellow into the corridor on the ninth floor that revealed an electric switch and a half-dozen doors on each side of the hall before it was lost in the shadows. Walt Harper motioned the two men ahead of him, stepped out on the concrete floor and pushed the light switch.

The three men walked through stale, musty air to the end of the hall where a narrow, barred window looked out into the night. They turned sharp left here and climbed steep stairs that cut back and up toward a narrow steel door.

Harper jammed his .38 in Wyman's back. "Knock," he said. "And don't let your tongue slip when they open up."

Wyman knocked, waited, knocked again. There

was a scratching noise on the door. A circular slide moved from a peephole and a three-inch shaft of light focused on Wyman's face.

"All right, Joe," he said hoarsely. "Open up."

The short man stepped into a thickly-carpeted, well-lighted hall. Harper crowded forward behind Wyman. When he passed the thin man who had opened the door, he whipped out with the automatic in his left hand. The barrel crashed behind the man's ear and he dropped with a groan.

The hall was long; on each side were four gray doors, spaced equidistant and locked by a sliding bolt on the outside. At the far end of the hall could be seen a richly furnished room.

Keeping Wyman and his bodyguard ahead of him, Harper moved to the first door on the right. He whispered a command to halt. His dark skin seemed pale now and his lips were tight. The two men stopped. He reached out and slid the bolt to the door, threw it open.

The room was in absolute darkness, and for a moment there was no sound or movement. Then, from somewhere in those shadows, came a throaty cackle, followed by a rapid string of high-pitched gibberish. A skinny, chalk-faced, gray-haired man who was naked except for his underwear came catapulting headlong through the doorway. He bounced off Harper, threw him back against the wall, started for the door to the ninth floor.

Wyman shouted. He and the short man threw themselves flat on the floor. A loud *crack* reverberated along the narrow hall. The fleeing man continued three more steps at full speed. Then he pitched forward and slid along the carpet on his face.

Harper spun toward the sound. A faint blue haze hung around a rifle barrel that was thrust through a slit above the arch leading to the front room. The rifleman made the hall an avenue of death.

The rifle cracked again. A slug tore through Harper's fingers, jerking the gun from his left hand as he fired twice, rapidly, with the one in his right. For just a moment did he hesitate. Then he dove through the doorway into the darkened room, slammed the door after him.

He shifted his gun to his left hand which, though bleeding, still had most of its strength. With his right hand, he fished a small flashlight from his vest pocket, snapped it on and wiped sudden sweat from his gray face with the back of his hand.

THE room was small with bare, gray walls. There was a bed, a dresser, and one chair. Overhead was a square, barred skylight, steel-shuttered from the roof. There was a light in the ceiling and a switch on the wall; Harper pressed it without results.

He stuck the gun in his hip pocket and dragged the dresser over to the door, which had no lock on the inside. He pulled the bed to the dresser, upended it so that it tipped against the door. He went back to the far corner and crouched on the floor.

He had not long to wait. In less than three minutes the steel door began to bounce against the dresser and the bed as weight was thrown behind it. Seconds later there was a two-inch crack through which light streamed in a yellow ribbon. Harper waited until the crack widened slightly, then sent two slugs through the opening. Silence followed this. The assault on the door ceased.

Harper waited on; waited until there was a movement overhead. Metal scraped. The steel coop which covered the skylight was withdrawn. There was no glass in the skylight. A dark blotch appeared in the opening. Harper fired twice. A curse rang out followed by the low mumble of voices.

Almost immediately something dropped to the floor of the room and exploded with a *plop*. White mist enveloped the room, spread quickly. Harper coughed and scrambled to his feet. As he leaped toward the door and snatched a sheet from the bed there was a second *plop*, followed by a third.

Harper went back to the corner, gasping for breath. He drew the sheet across his nose and mouth, but he could not stop the coughing. Tears filled his eyes and streamed down his face, blinding him.

A minute later and the door of the room began to beat against the barricade. Harper fired once, wildly. The pounding continued until the door was open halfway.

A voice said, "Throw that gun out!"

Harper uttered a choking curse, fired his last shot, and threw the gun in the direction of the door. He slipped his right hand to his vest, removed the metal pencil and shoved it up his sleeve so that no bulge revealed its location.

WYMAN took the cigar from his mouth. "Tear gas is great stuff. That evens us up for this

morning.” He waved a manicured hand. “How do you like the layout?”

Walt Harper, his wrists handcuffed behind him, looked around the spacious front room, then back at Wyman. “Not bad,” he said. “You keep the windows and skylights covered at night, eh?”

Wyman grinned expansively and his too-perfect teeth flashed.

Harper said, “You got imagination to think of a setup like this. What’s the initiation fee?”

“Well, that varies.” Wyman continued to smile. “You see it wasn’t hard to find men—rich men—who wanted to lay low. And it is hard to put on a disappearing act alone. We got a line on some of these birds, and sold ‘em the idea of a nice, comfortable rich man’s club—”

Harper was tight-lipped, but a thin smile creased his gray face. “You mean death club.”

“Have it your way,” said Wyman easily. “But we told ‘em they could get it for a thousand, plus a moderate monthly fee, and stay as long as they liked.”

“I suppose,” grunted Harper, “after you got the first two or three, you made them give you testimonial letters.”

“We did just that. And we had some pictures taken of this room to make it look even better.”

“And after you got them here?”

“After that we just found out how much money they could lay hold of, and made plans to get it.”

“And when you got it, you tossed them off the roof on rainy nights after beating up their faces so they couldn’t be identified.”

Wyman shrugged. “What else could we do? If we let ‘em go they’d squeal; we couldn’t keep ‘em here forever—too expensive. Why?”—Wyman waved the hand holding the cigar in a careless sweep and lifted his eyebrows—“we only got twelve grand out of that first guy they found. Of course”—he hesitated and smiled—“our average was better than fifty, and we had eight at one time. We’d been picking them up gradually for over six months, and if you hadn’t come sticking your nose in—”

He broke off as Slug entered the room and said, “We got all those guys dressed.” He looked at Harper, grinned, said, “Hi, pal.”

Wyman said, “O.K.” He stood up, put the cigar in his mouth, took it out again. “The cops’re outside; we’ll go this way.” He stepped over to an upright piano against the wall, pushed a button

behind one leg. The piano swung slowly out, disclosing a narrow passageway. “Our private elevator’s down this hall, Harper,” he said, “and it connects with a tunnel that comes out in the plumbing supply house down on the corner.”

A quick gleam of satisfaction lighted Harper’s eyes, but his voice revealed nothing as he said, “Neat.”

He turned toward the hallway and watched six men, well dressed but with terror-stricken eyes, approach the room. They were accompanied by four tight-lipped, narrow-eyed men with automatics.

One of the well-dressed men was bald. He looked up as he stepped into the room, and his eyes fell on Harper. The eyes widened with recognition and hope. He stepped forward, “Harper—” The word died in his throat, the eyes went dull as a guard pulled him toward the opening in the wall. Harper turned away.

Wyman said, “Three of you take these birds down to the corner place and wait. Lefty”—he turned to a husky fellow with yellow skin and a crooked nose—“you’ll have to carry the stiff in the hall. We want this place all cleaned up. Leave the elevator door open.”

He nodded his head to Slug who took Harper by the arms, and said, “Come on, baby. I want to see you do your dive.”

THE flat, gravel-covered roof crunched under Harper’s shoes as Slug piloted him between the mushroom-like skylight covers to the two-foot parapet. Overhead the stars glistened. To the left and in front winked a network of city lights.

Slug stopped at the parapet and said, “Say when, boss.”

Wyman, holding an automatic, stood up against the wall about two feet from Harper. He said, “Take those cuffs off first. I don’t want any slugs in him, nothing that might look too funny. The mashed hand won’t matter when they pick him up, and nobody can prove he didn’t fall by himself.”

He turned to Harper, who stood motionless in the darkness with only his black mustache visible in the pale oval which was his face. “You have cramped my style, plenty. But at that, I’ll be clear when we get rid of our club members.”

He chuckled softly and continued, “When you bounce down on the alley, the cops are going to be busy picking you up. Slug and I will use our

elevator. All the cops'll find is an empty clubhouse—let the D.A. try and build a case out of that.”

“All right, Slug.” Wyman’s voice was decisive. “Take off the bracelets.”

Slug, standing behind Harper, fumbled with the handcuffs. He slipped them off, started to say:

“O.—”

Harper kicked backward with his heel. Slug yelled as the sharp edge bit into his shin. Harper spun toward Wyman, crouching. The automatic went off a foot from his chest and the flash of fire revealed a gray, tight-lipped face and livid eyes.

The crouch saved his life. The bullet tore through his chest, but it was high. The shock of the slug spun him sidewise as his hand jerked the pencil from his sleeve. There was a click, a burst of white vapor around Wyman’s head as the tear-gas shell exploded.

Harper’s body rocked as Slug’s fist struck the top of his head.

Cursing, Wyman dropped the gun. He coughed, rubbed his eyes. He staggered against the wall, paused there, mouthing oaths, trying to see. Harper shot a straight left to Slug’s mouth, stepped sidewise toward Wyman. Slug lowered his head and charged, both hands swinging.

Harper dropped like a shot, landed on his hands and knees. Slug’s charge carried him blindly forward so that he tripped over Harper’s kneeling form. The wild, swinging right fist swished through space for a foot, then connected solidly with Wyman’s shoulder an instant before Slug himself fell forward against the man.

Wyman screamed as Slug’s charge knocked him hard against the wall. For a moment he sat there on the parapet, his hands swinging, clutching frantically at empty space. Then he lost his balance and slid backward. The scream rose in pitch, became one long, drawn-out wail that became

weirdly fainter and finally choked off short.

Harper cursed softly and rolled from under Slug’s legs. He gained his feet instantly, stooped, snatched up Wyman’s automatic. He jumped back, covering Slug. But there was no fight in the man now. He came to his feet slowly, weaved back and forth like a drunken man, shivering violently.

“All right,” he said hoarsely. “I won’t argue.” He waved his hand toward the spot where Wyman disappeared. “I won’t argue, after that.” He shuffled off across the roof toward the yellow square that marked the stairs to the floor below.

GALPIN and five men were entering the door at the end of the hall when Harper emerged from the front room. Harper said, “You got men on the corner?” And at Galpin’s, “Yes,” continued, “Take this guy with you.”

He drew them into the room, showed them the door to the elevator. “The rest of them have gone—they’ll be in the plumbing place on the corner.”

Harper waited until Slug and the policemen had disappeared through the hole in the wall. His face was still gray. His eyes were dull and his shoulders had a tired, unnatural sag as he walked across the room to a stand holding a half-filled whisky bottle and some glasses.

He picked up a glass, turned it over in his hand, and stared absently at it for several seconds. Then he poured whisky into the glass until it was half-full. He drank quickly, without stopping. Reaching toward the tray, he dropped the glass the last few inches.

He went back to an upholstered chair. He dropped into it, stretched out his legs in front of him. His hands hung down from the chair arms; he let his fingers relax. The gun dropped to the floor, and he stared up at the ceiling until he heard Charlie come pounding down the hall.