



Burton waited split seconds, then pulled trigger

THE LOTTERY RACKETEER

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

When Burton answers the call of his reporter friend Prior, he runs into a mysterious nest of rackets within rackets!

A COMPLETE BLACK BURTON NOVELET

CHAPTER I

Death of a Friend

THE DISTANT but nearing wail of police car sirens filled all the air after the local train pulled out from the small station. An instant afterward the police sirens had company in the fire sirens. The people coming off the late train went along unheeding. Some got into taxis, some into cars.

As the whine of the police siren grew louder a shiny new coupe drove to a stop, sprinkling gravel. A man got out hurriedly,

slammed the door, and asked, "You'd be Burton?"

Burton saw a tall well-dressed young man with a brief mustache over a full mouth. About twenty-eight, he might have guessed. He nodded in answer. "My name's Scollard," the man said, and put out a hand. "Tom Scollard. Personal secretary to the mayor, now on lend-lease to the sheriff and police chief. Knew you were due to meet Joe Prior when you came in. Prior's a friend of mine."

Burton nodded acceptance. He stood dark and lean in tweeds that could not have been cut anywhere west of London. Under the slouch brim of his Borsalino his face showed

dark, very dark, and his eyes were black and inscrutable. He looked like a man nobody could surprise. "Prior's a friend of mine too," he said, "Why isn't he here?"

"Held up a little—work. He asked me to meet you. But first, maybe you'd like to check in, if that's your idea—then come along with me to see Pendexter. Pendexter's sheriff here. I'm his secretary and boy Friday. Tall job, if you get me, because Pendexter just about runs this town."

"Where's the mayor?" Burton mused.

"In Miami as usual," Scollard said. He hastened, "Joe Prior's got something he wants bad to pass on to you, only he was held up. He's reporting on the City Hall beat; you maybe know that."

"Has he a room for me at the hotel?" The fire sirens had died down but the town showed indifference still.

"Oh yes! I know all about that. There's no train back to town tonight so maybe you better check in there. But meantime how's about taking a look into Pendexter's office? You might get a better idea of the setup to start with; but I'm warning you, there's no welcoming committee!"

Burton nodded. "I hardly expected one, in a one-man town. What are all the sirens for? Nobody seems to pay any attention to them. Are they usual here?"

SCOLLARD'S good-looking dark face clouded. "Maybe that's one of the items Joe wanted to take up with you," he said. "I guess he must've told you most of it. But there's more than sirens making noises in this burg. There's murder and bombs and incendiary fires. And—it's not too healthy for strangers."

Black Burton failed to comment on that. He might have said that no town was completely strange to him. He had lived almost everywhere. He had been a gambler on the Mexican Border; he had pursued his own particular ideas of adventure past New

Orleans to Havana and London and Paris and Monte Carlo and he lived in Manhattan. Alone.

He was well aware that being what he was known to be, professional gambler, he was regarded with suspicion by the underworlds of the cities which knew him, chiefly because of his association with the police. His best friend was Ned Dalton of New York, a lieutenant with Homicide, and that was known too well.

Scollard had been driving while they talked and presently he drew up in front of a small hotel on the main street. "You can check in," he said. "I'll wait and we'll go on to the hall."

Burton took only a minute to register in the small gloomy-looking hostelry, ordered his bag sent up to his room, then returned to Scollard. Scollard said, "Joe had a room reserved all right, didn't he?" and when Burton nodded he pushed out from the curb. Lights were coming on all over the city and it looked pleasant, like a comfortable town inhabited by comfortable people; with evening the recent sounds of explosions became hard to credit as true.

"After you've seen Pendexter we'll have some dinner," Scollard said, and led the way from his car up into a three-storied building which announced itself past ivy covering on its facade as *City Hall—County Offices*.

A door down a gloomy corridor was marked: *P. Pendexter, Sheriff*. Pendexter himself was an overly-large man with no hair at all on the front of his head, beetling, white bushy eyebrows and heavy jowls. A low light glowed in the office, an office marked simply and significantly by the door lettering: *Sheriff*.

Another of his stamp was in the room with him when Burton and Scollard entered. After he had made introductions Scollard dropped a little to the rear; and Pendexter, his heavy face jutting forward, said, "So you're Black Burton! Heard of ya. Gambler, hanh?"

Burton nodded. These men knew of his association with Dalton of Homicide,

probably knew too that he didn't have to gamble but that it added zest to living for him. Tall and dark, with scarcely a muscle in his face moving except for his lips, he said carefully, "I heard there's a kind of racket going on here. Lotteries. To a gambler it might be interesting."

Tahen, the last man in the room, had been introduced as chief of detectives in the city; now he began to edge in, a bulldog sort of man with pepper-and-salt hair clipped short, heavy of face, with cold ruthless eyes. Tahen said, "Maybe nobody told you but we can take care of our own rackets. And we made it a point to clean all gamblers outa town long ago!"

Burton mused at him, "Lotteries too?"

Pendexter snapped, "What would you know about any lotteries here?"

"I know," Burton said, "that they are run and they've caused some deaths and that the police are doing nothing about them—except to say they don't exist!"

"Joe Prior says that, hanh?"

"I haven't seen Joe yet," Burton pointed out. "You were careful to intercept me at the station. Joe's a friend of mine, though. Scollard here met me and brought me along. Said you wanted to talk to me . . ." He let it trail, then added: "First."

Tahen snapped, "We did all right! We wanted mostly to tell you to get back where you come from—fast! We wanted to say we didn't need your help, or your pal Dalton's, and if we ever did we wouldn't yell for it. You get out of town on the next train tonight, or else—"

"Or else what?" Burton finished softly, into silence, and there was a chill in the room stressed by the distant weird diapason of a fire siren.

All of them knew of him. All of them were aware of his exploits, even though they had never been publicized. A gambler, as was known, but a square gambler, and he had made a personal war on crookedness. When

crookedness involved murder, as it had done often in the past, he never hesitated in choosing sides. They all knew him as dangerous, and he knew they knew.

The sirens howled again. Scollard stirred. Tahen said softly, unmindful, "I'm chief of detectives here. I don't make threats. I'll tell you, as the law in this town, that you'll be healthier back in Manhattan. If there's a lottery racket here you can tell your friends we got it under control. Understood?"

Of them all Scollard looked uncertain, and a little embarrassed. Burton nodded. "I heard you," he said. And as he reached the door, "Good night!" He went out.

He ascended the rattletrap elevator to his own room on the third floor and entered the room alone. It was a clean and tidy place, even if barren, and it boasted a bath. Prior, he remembered, liked Scotch, and he went to the wall telephone to order some, with ice. He was just hanging up the instrument when the knock sounded on the door.

"It's open, Joe," he invited, and turned back.

Prior entered, closing the door after him. At that instant the flapping shade before the fire escape came battering inward and the snout of a big ugly automatic intruded.

Prior saw it first; his thin lips opened on a cry. Burton's back was turned as the gun began roaring. In a single leap he twisted from the wall phone and went to one knee behind the shoddy desk.

Cordite stung his nostrils as his gun came free. Across his eyeballs the flame from the killer-weapon was crimson.

Burton fired—once.

Then, as there was no target further, he reached up to snap off the light. He waited a bare second before gliding to the open window. Dark had possession out there. The fire escape showed nothing. No pad of running feet. Nothing at all. Two floors below a window curtain flapped back and forth listlessly—but if the gunman had come from

there, Burton knew with a weariness born of knowledge of the game, the man had taken the room temporarily and the place would be empty by the time anyone got to it. He turned back to Prior.

Prior was already beyond help. His eyes were glazing. His babyish and yet thin lips twisted in a grimace of mortal pain. Blood drooled over his lips. He was gasping—

“Get to ‘em, Burton—now! Scollard, he can—”

Red bubbles formed, broke over his lips frothy with stain. Burton, eyes cold, leaned closer to breathe, “Scollard? That’s Pendexter’s secretary, isn’t it? Can he help?”

There was no answer. The reporter’s body arched once, he coughed—and died.

IT TOOK barely minutes for the law to assume control. Almost on the heels of the excited voice from the lobby desk came the pound of feet in the hallway and the room was filled.

Tahen came first, big-shouldering his hard way in. Pendexter followed, removing a Panama hat and wiping at his bald shine. Scollard hung at his chief’s elbow. A burly blue coat and a plain clothes man pushed past. A doctor bent over the body and the room was in a clamor. Tahen was suddenly in front of Burton.

“Satisfied?” he snarled, glaring. “Anyway, you had plenty of warning! Now—”

“Yes,” Burton pointed out, “but I wasn’t killed. Remember? That’s Joe Prior on the floor there.”

An ugly light was in the big man’s eyes. “I s’pose with your connections you’ve got a permit for that rod o’ yours—just the same I’m having ‘em check on the rifling on the slug they take out of Prior. Why was you meetin’ him here?”

Pendexter had heard and he looked up thoughtfully. He heard Burton say, “He was going to tell me some things you people don’t think should be told. You knew he was

coming. Somebody made sure he never got to tell me.”

Tahen cursed. But Pendexter moved his bulk past the stretcher on the floor and came in close. “You don’t leave much to the imagination, Burton,” he said. “But I’m calling you. We’re going to go to work on you and see if maybe there was some other reason why you’re in this town—and with a murdered man.”

Burton said, “Right. But meantime we’ve got a murder. And it’s your one-man town. Have you forgotten?”

Tahen jerked with anger, but Pendexter shook his head, moving toward the door along with the stretcher. “Stay on here, Scollard, till it’s clear,” he said. “C’mon, Jerry—” to Tahen.

He went out and Tahen trailed him. The covered body followed. The room became still again and the curtain began flapping petulantly. Scollard said at last in an easy voice, “We’d better get out and eat something, Burton. Don’t mind my boss too much. Maybe Joe was wrong in starting to talk about his ideas. Did he—did he manage to—say anything?”

“Not enough to help any.” Burton’s voice was weary. Joe Prior, eager, sincere, a good newspaperman, had been a sacrifice to his profession. He’d lit on something hot. It must be still there! “He mentioned your name, that’s all. I had the idea he was trying to tell me you might be able to help.”

“When Joe began on this I wanted to get to you first, anyway,” Tom Scollard said. “After he told me he knew you. The dope he had, most of it, I think, he got through me. No question there’s phoney lottery tickets in this town. But what’s worse—at least that’s what Joe thought—is the racket behind ‘em.”

“Phoney lottery tickets. What else?”

“Whoever is behind the idea seems to be forcing the small, poor, mostly foreign-born shopkeeper to be doing his dirty work. Making those poor birds market the tickets I

mean.”

“By threats? Have they carried any out?”

“They sure have! Those sirens you heard! Probably some poor little guy who wouldn’t place tickets in his window. A small Hollander got his shop windows blown in last week when he wouldn’t carry the tickets. Killed his mother, sleeping in back of the store. Joe knew of others; but how much did he tell you?”

“Not much.” Burton lit a cigarette. “There’s no proof of anything; I gathered that. If it weren’t for Joe I’d get back to Manhattan. But I liked Joe. I’d like to know where to look next. They’ll hit again—fast now. They’ll have to, if I stay.”

Scollard hesitated. “You’re determined to stay?”

Burton nodded. Scollard shook his head and then spread his hands. “I know two places,” he said. “Guess at ‘em anyway. The idea is those shopkeepers are told to display lottery tickets in their shops. Joe got on to the idea. He probably told you. These poor birds are offered a percentage, so they told the police, on sales.”

“Are there any sales?”

“That’s it! The lottery doesn’t pay off but they’re expected to produce money for the tickets anyway! So they must pretend some of ‘em sell, and deliver cash. If they yell they get hurt. A couple of ‘em got balky and they got the works; the police know; it’s on the record but they won’t acknowledge it. There’s a shop on the other side of town made a stink, and I think they might be the one to get the works next.”

Burton squashed out his cigarette. “We’ll see it. Meantime, maybe we’d best eat. If you’re not busy—”

“I’m not,” Scollard said. “But don’t bank too much on Pendexter as your suspect.”

“I’m not. He and Taken look too guilty.”

“The Tavern’s the best place to eat,” Scollard said, grabbing his hat. “There’ll be people there too. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER II

Young Man in the Know

TOM SCOLLARD was typical of a number of young men of his station that a newsman might be expected to encounter. A home product, sent away for some years to receive a partial education, his family always on the fringes of politics or City Hall. Faintly contemptuous of his fellow-citizens yet pleasant, he was regarded as a young man in the know.

The Tavern, when they reached it, proved to be an inn of the better sort. Scollard piloted his guest to the grill. Past the grill an orchestra pounded out low rhythm and couples danced. The high-backed booths and tables all seemed comfortably occupied.

Scollard nodded to two or three acquaintances, let himself and his guest be led to a table by a smiling, bowing waiter; when they were seated and drinks had been ordered, he said,

“If Joe’d only waited till you took over.”

Burton watched the drinks as they were set down. “I suppose news of that scene in Pendexter’s office reached him and he probably felt he had to move pretty fast.”

Scollard, sipping his cocktail, said, “He moved too fast. I kept warning him! Can’t you see it, Burton? He was goin’ off half-cocked even as it was. The dope he had, the dope he was piling up, most of it came from me! I’m glad nobody but you heard what he said when he died. I’d be next.”

Burton said carefully, “No one did. I’ve told you because he said what he said. Does it all mean you’re willing to chance something like Joe’s finish—and help, Scollard?”

“Joe didn’t—die easy, did he?” The words came low. “I don’t think they suspect me—yet, Burton. I’ll help, yes. If you want me. But my advice to you is—clear out. You can’t possibly buck this outfit. I’m telling you

straight. Get out!”

Burton pulled a crumpled, many-times folded sheet of gaudy paper from his pocket to smooth it out on the tablecloth. “What we have here is one of the phoney lottery tickets, one gathers? Prior sent it to me.” They both spelled out:

ROME CITY’S
GREATER BENEVOLENT
Police and Firemen’s Aid Fund
50c No.0452833

On the reverse of the shabby paper, when it was unreeled lengthwise, for it was perhaps fifteen inches in all, was printed in careful script:

This certifies that the holder of this coupon has purchased one share in the benefits deriving from the Rome City Police & Firemen’s Lottery, to be drawn Dec. 25th.

“You’ve probably seen these things before, Scollard,” he drawled. “Also noticed that there’s no mention of where the drawing is to be made, nor of prizes. The police and fire lads couldn’t do wrong, so if it comes under their auspices it must be okay. The purchasers are told what the prizes are, we’ll say. Everybody repudiates them. But we knew it was phoney before I got here.”

Scollard was nodding, his eyes eager. “Sure I’ve seen ‘em before. The chief just laughed ‘em off.”

“And still he’s got all the killing in hand! What I want to know is how our racketeers collect.”

Scollard flicked cigarette ash. “You’re ahead of me, Burton. The small shopowners, the little lads, are too submerged to have adequate protection. They’re forced to buy these things from whoever presents ‘em. Right? Then they hang ‘em in their shops and cough up when the time comes—or else!”

Burton nodded. “Simply a protection racket with frills. Now we’ve got to locate our

distributors. It’s not piker stuff. Not many to share in it—collectors, supposedly. Maybe no more than one or two. The big shots at the top never need to show and if Taken, for instance, had something on some birds in this town he could make ‘em take orders. Behave too.”

Scollard nodded agreement and then turning suddenly jerked in his seat. Two newcomers to the cafe saw him and Scollard got to his feet as they veered from a proffered table and came toward his booth.

The woman was young, in her early thirties at most, and she had a slimly languid, rather tired beauty. She was pale, and her mouth was very red. Her eyes, deeply violet, held shadows.

The man trailing her was very tall and thin. Once he might have been handsome. Now his hollowed cheeks revealed an inner, chronic weakness, and even his well-tailored clothes could not conceal the way the form they covered had wasted. As they came nearer, Scollard told Burton, “You’re looking at Pendexter’s girl, Tessa Parnell. Pretty smart for a suburb, eh? But me, I got a claim and—”

TESSA PARNELL was sinking down into the seat alongside Black Burton. She looked frail but there was an exotic vividness about her, striking. As if she were tired, and did not want to surrender to tiredness. At first glance she was of the stage but not blatantly so. Her clothes were simple and tasteful. She wore a single bracelet with a jade-set ring to match it; that was all.

Her companion was introduced as Philip Savoy. Tessa Parnell explained, “Phil and I have worked together in the past. Vaudeville; legit too. He couldn’t get any work in New York and I wrote him to come on here. I have—a few—friends here.”

Burton understood. A “few friends” meant that Pendexter was her protector. The big bachelor boss of the town took what he pleased and certainly this dainty, fragile woman was the most desirable thing the

gambler had seen since his arrival.

Philip Savoy relaxed, once drinks were brought. The spots in his cheeks burned higher. A few years before he must have been a very good-looking man; the evidences were still there. Now he was wasted.

"I fancy I shall be able to pick up something good fairly soon," he confided to Burton, his eyes on his glass. "Meantime I've got odd jobs. The firemen wanted to put on a minstrel benefit and Tessa was able to swing it for me to produce it, last fall. Then they had a pageant in connection with the centennial. I got the advertising hookup for the programs. Mr. Pendexter was good enough to see it came my way. That helped." He smiled a really engaging smile.

Tessa Parnell and Scollard had their heads close together. The girl flushed as Scollard's well-kept fingers left the slender wrist they had been resting on. Scollard laughed, low. He looked at Burton, then at the others, and explained.

"Our friend Burton here stepped in, and if he takes my advice he'll step out before the night's over. It's this lottery racket that Joe Prior had in his bonnet."

The girl tasted the rim of her glass and said, "I heard about Joe Prior. I knew him fairly well. Liked him. I think that what happened was—horrible."

"A good guy," Scollard agreed. "If he'd listened to me he'd be with us tonight. Maybe I know what he knew. Who can tell? But I'm not stirring up smoke about it, and it's not enough to put me on a spot." His eyes shot a warning at Burton.

The waiter appeared just then and spoke to him. With a hasty touch of a napkin to his lips Scollard got up. "A phone call," he said. "I'll be right back."

When he sped away there was a space of silence. The girl's glass remained untasted further. She glanced into the hall to where an empty telephone booth stood, got up. To her escort she made a swift apology as she moved

from the table. She took two steps, then came back. To Burton she said in a voice without intonation, "Take Tom's advice. Get out!" She turned as quickly as before and threw over her shoulder, "Can we leave when I get back, Phil?"

"Right!" Savoy said to her retreating back, and looked relieved.

He studied the patterns on the tablecloth for a moment, then looked up quickly. "I—I say, Burton. I don't like it a bit but Tessa told me to tell you this while she was out. I think she should keep her hands off all this—this undercurrent of rough play here. Lotteries—we all know! It's murder by the numbers! She told me to urge you to get out—tonight!"

"A lot of people feel that way," Burton said.

"Well, with her—it seems she's in things, whether or not she wants to be. Did you know her—her rent is being paid by your friend Pendexter?"

Burton smiled. "Did she tell you to tell me that?"

"You'd have learned it anyway. There's more, though. Pendexter's got a home, family. He doesn't see much of them. Tessa gets to know what she does know from Scollard. Not Pendexter. Do you understand?"

"I'm trying to. You're out of the picture?"

"I—I'm an old friend, that's all. What's left of me, anyway!" The actor hurried on, as from two directions their erstwhile companions came converging. "Tessa'd like you to know she's fed up with all this. She wanted to warn you. But if you won't take a warning she thinks she can help you. This afternoon—it did something to her, I fancy. I could tell that even Tom saw it; he was watching her. So if you want to see her, alone, she'll be home immediately after we leave here. I wish you'd keep her out of what's coming, though."

"It looks like I'm a little late as far as keeping her out is concerned," Burton said. Scollard was back and the girl moved in to her

chair.

Scollard, paying the bill and waving away change, said almost absently, "Maybe I should lay off before I get burned too, Burton. I've just got word. One of those little shops we talked about failed to cough up its lottery tax this week. Old Swiss, the other side of town. One of those I had my eye on. He went to Taken after receiving a telephone threat. I happen to know that. It was this morning."

"What happened?" Burton asked. But he knew.

"Grenade just caved in the whole front of his store. They've rushed him, Detweiler, to the hospital. Concussion. That leaves a motherless kid, about thirteen. It's kill—by the numbers. No numbers in the window—kill! We're finished here. Want to run over and take a look?"

"Definitely," Burton said and got to his feet.

HE STAYED grimly silent in Scollard's swift little car on the way out. It was past eleven but there were still a few people abroad. Police on beats and two traffic cops they passed waved Scollard on.

Twisting the wheel at length Scollard said, "Yeah, this old fella come into the office once, I remember now. He'd seen Taken first. He spilled then. Not but what we know a little."

"Pendexter laughed him off along with the rest?"

"He couldn't, quite. You see Detweiler had a fistful of those lottery slips. You can't laugh them off."

"But no action?"

"They told him to go home, they'd see he wasn't bothered. Tonight's the answer to that one!"

Scollard's voice rasped. He drove recklessly. After another interval he grated, "That's why maybe it's best for you to get out after you've seen this, Burton. You can tell your friend Dalton what you saw; you can't do much alone. After all you're only one gambler

facing a gambling racket. Prior's kill shows you plenty you're tabbed, don't it? The game is pretty near over at that, I'll make a guess, anyway."

Burton mused. "Maybe not. It's an easy racket. Somebody's banking a thousand or two weekly with no overhead except some sheets of cheap printed paper. Maybe a second-hand printing press. And guns and Mills bombs of course." He added, "If I stay they'll know they've got to crowd it. I want that."

Scollard was silent. They angled around a corner and were in the process of slowing up behind a block of cars. Police lights bobbed. A fire engine had drawn up.

Scollard pulled to the curb, twisted the ignition key and got out. Burton was a little behind. He wanted to be a little behind.

He saw that the whole of the small shop had been blown almost completely away. An abortive fire had been conquered and only wisps of gray dragging smoke coiled free to tint a drab scene. Beyond where a door had been yawned a black pit. There was a feeling of mob hysteria, repressed, in the air.

Fear had its grip on these poor shadowed groping people. Half-dressed, haggard, evicted by shock into the open and new terror, they stayed close each to his neighbor. Two or three dialects beat on the ear—hushed, fearful.

Burton bent down. He picked up the blackened, ruined stump of a half strip of lottery tickets. The strip had been hanging, more than likely, in the ruined shop. Or else the old man who was the racket's latest victim had hurled it away in a gesture of defiance. These strips hung in braids, like those in the Cuban lotteries, Burton saw. More attractive that way, perhaps!

Suppose Prior, himself, had been in on this and had been double-crossed because he had become fearful? Prior had all the essentials of an excellent contact man, his job taking him into the streets a good part of the time, with no questions asked. Suppose Joe had recognized,

as the killers must have recognized, that the game had to end soon? Whoever had been associated with him must have been compelled to silence him.

Only—the poor devil was dead. He had been dead for hours before orders could have been given for this freshest outrage. Yet even so, he might still have been part of the organization. The scheme involved more than one.

Burton did not like the thought, but his mind rested on it. It was more important because if such a supposition were true he was at a completely dead end, except for what Scollard might offer. Scollard came back just then, his face grave.

“What I’m thinking about is what the stink’s gonna be,” he said. “Newspapers. Joe’s sheet.” Burton followed him back into the car. “This is starting to smell bad. Hello, Gyp!” he broke off. “What you doing here? Looking at sights?”

Burton turned to see a small dark man at his elbow. The man wore a turned-down fedora and he was clean-shaven and pasty-faced. He had dull unintelligent eyes.

“Naw! Got me stuck. How’s for a lift, Mr. Scollard?” A short cigarette limped up and down in his mouth.

Scollard reached across Burton and opening the side door said, “Hop in. Burton, this is one of the boys on the payroll. That is he is—along election time!” A harsh laugh went with the name. “Gabriel Hayden. It’s easier to say ‘Gyp’.”

The thin man knifed into the space and said, “This was just luck, boss. My bus is stranded on the back street there, front of the girl friend’s shack. Broke down; looks like a cracked cylinder. Thought I’d amble over and try and pick up somebody goin’ back to the center of town. Then this thing happens.”

“Did you see anything?” Burton asked quietly.

“Sure! I see a car come tearin’ down Main with no lights, for about two blocks. Then I

see her swing over here, pull in a bit and go on. And then there’s the explosion!”

Scollard gave a short laugh. “You better be sure that girl is still there on the next street, Gyp! May be some questions.”

The passenger laughed back. “Who? Me? Would I pull a job like that and then wait around for somebody from City Hall to come and pick me up and ast me where I was?”

They relaxed. Burton had placed Gyp easily. A hanger-on at the Hall, a handy man for the politicians here.

CHAPTER III

Dead Women Sometimes Talk

AS THE car drew up in front of the small hotel the place was dark. The street was black and vacant too. Scollard leaned out to say to Burton, on the curb, “I’ll be checking you up sometime tomorrow. By then maybe you’ll be willing to tell me you’ve signed off.”

“I’ll think about it,” Burton said, as he turned away.

He went through the dark lobby, accepted his key, and on the way up the stairs touched the butt of the .38 under his coat. He could not have told what he expected, but he knew the night was not over.

His room, though, was empty. He stepped to the telephone book on the wall and thumbed through it for an address. When he had found what he sought he stepped to the fire escape outside the window, the same fire escape that had aided a murderer once that day.

Fifteen minutes later he was sounding the buzzer in the lobby of the small but well-kept apartment house for the third time. He turned to a pleasant-looking foyer where dark entrance doors stood grilled and quiet. Frowning, he turned from the white steps so inviting past the potted palms and made a circuit of the building. He found what he sought, a short emergency ladder below the

bottom level of a fire escape. He balanced it carefully, and went on up.

The apartment building was a good distance from the center of town and in the opposite direction from where mills and factories flourished. It bordered the residential section.

Burton came to the window he sought. Belowstairs he had noted the floor numbers and he had counted steps. He stopped. The window was up, but the shades had been drawn. Past the curtains glowed a sort of nebulous light but it was a light that might come from any distance. He raised the shade gently, his fingertips first encountering light draperies, then parting them.

A moment later he had vaulted a dead radiator coiling and his feet were on parquet flooring in a dark room that smelled overwhelmingly feminine. The light was coming from a room past here. A door between was half closed. He could not see clearly at first but he had the impression that he was standing in a bedroom and that the bed was empty and rumpled and unmade.

His gun was free as he moved forward. When the door gave he stepped back. His dark face took on new bleakness; his dark eyes were murky.

Tessa Parnell lay half on and half off the big Empire couch in the room. Glistening blood splotted all over her and her wide eyes were fixed in a sightless stare at the ceiling.

Burton knew a glimpse of a quiet room, thick-carpeted, a big grand piano in one corner with photographs on its free flange, two or three small water colors on gray walls, flowers in a Tuscan vase.

He bent down beside Tessa Parnell.

It was far too late to help her now. A cruel weight had struck her across her faded pretty face, glancing past her temple from above the left eye. A gun must have finished the job. It must have been held very close too, for her negligee was scorched and the taint of burning lace mingled with cordite scent.

Burton raised his head. The cordite smell in his nostrils, he turned toward where the bathroom must be, aware only then, that he had been listening to the sound of a running shower.

Savoy! Some part of his deductions had been right, anyway. Savoy would be able to talk about this!

But Savoy wouldn't, he knew an instant later. The shower spray in the bathroom was playing down merrily. As it cascaded it was rivuleting crimson down the drain. Underneath the clean spray of it Phil Savoy's still half-clothed body lay, his face upturned to the spout in hopeless appeal. Water jetted in and out of his mouth, gleefully macabre.

THE next was a sickening task but Burton went ahead. He managed to get the body out of the porcelain tub, to stifle the awful sonata of the hissing shower, to stretch his burden as best he might on the bathroom mat.

Savoy had been shot twice, at close range, once in the back and once just below the heart. He must have been in here, over the washbasin perhaps, when the killers came.

The murderer must have been known to both, then—for there had been no sign of confusion, no indication even of a scream from the woman.

Burton left the man's body momentarily and went back to the girl. It was very still in this room. Still—yet no one had to warn him that the quiet was due to be split wide open by the scream of a police car siren, the challenge of snarling local law guns.

Discovered anywhere in this vicinity by Taken or his men Burton knew he could be shot to earth and silenced out of hand like the maddest dog. No one would explain.

And suddenly he understood that it was intended he should be found here!

The scene as it was set would find him guilty of armed entry into a woman's apartment, of possible bullying and threats, of a murder into which he had been goaded and a

second murder to silence a witness. The scene would absorb such a story.

His immunity as a friend of New York Homicide wouldn't help here. Rather it made it more dangerous. The killers would want him dead, so that he could never talk!

He looked automatically at his wrist watch. If he could get back to his hotel Scollard would account for most of his evening—that is, if he could get to his room undetected. But it was still a long chance.

Tessa had wanted to talk. She knew the inside of the lottery racket; that had been plain. It was why she had summoned him. Savoy must have had a hand in it, else why was he here? Savoy might have made a good contact man to pick up the phoney lottery collections.

Why not? Savoy had to live, some way.

Seconds counted. Burton went back and bent over Phil Savoy's slender wasted body. It was a gruesome task and he had no liking for it; but if Savoy had been in this thing—and it was certain now that he had been—there might be a clue.

Curiously, as he retrieved it, he watched a little piece of metal roll in his palm. It was ink-smudged, and it had been in Savoy's waistcoat pocket.

Lifting it to his face, he smelled of it, eyes clouded, then alert with understanding.

The lottery tickets had to be printed somewhere! The piece of metal was ink-smudged and smelled of printers' ink if anything ever did.

It was, Burton saw, a small slug used to brace type in a form. He had seen them before.

Tucking the slug away he proceeded with his ghoulish examination. In the distance sirens hooted.

A telephone bell shrilled somewhere near at hand.

Savoy's pockets were at length emptied. Personal letters, a bill, some scribbling on its back, an erased telephone number.

But the letters bore Phil Savoy's current address!

As Burton straightened at last a whistle pealed out sharp and shrill below. It was joined a second later by another in the distance. A nightstick beat peremptorily on pavement. Burton stood frozen, knowing.

Seconds passed and then came the scream of a police emergency car headed indubitably this way.

As he stood over the stiffening body of the girl he heard a sound, a sound like that of a door being softly closed. He reached for his hat on the floor beside her body.

Then he froze. The Borsalino had been pushed under the divan, he was willing to swear!

He grabbed it and stood up. It meant that someone had come in here or else that someone had been here all this while. Other eyes had known his movements.

But there had been no alarm!

Tahen and his crew had him red handed. Outside, either the police were closing in on a baited trap or the alarm was the result of some aroused tenant—scarcely to be counted on.

In any case police were nearing and he knew without going over it again what shrift would be in store for him at the hands of Tahen and his crew. Suppose Pendexter was innocent after all and Tahen and his partners had gone in for this lottery racket—well covered! Tahen would not want anyone with any knowledge alive.

Burton left by means of the fire escape. When he dropped off onto the cement he judged the police cars were about two blocks away.

He walked at a cool gait up a tree-lined street. Lights were ahead. He had studied a street map of the city before coming, and he knew about where he was. Behind him arcs from car headlights cut inimical white swords through the dark as the squad cars whined to a halt.

A taxicab was too risky a proposition just then; he had discarded the temptation before coming out here. Burton walked, keeping toward the general direction of the town's hub and examining each dark motor car he found parked along a curb. The first one was a sedan with locked windows. The next two proved not much better choices. The keys had been removed. But farther along, as he was getting dangerously close to the better-lighted part of town, while sirens still complained eerily through the dark, he halted to inspect what in happier days had been a good and high-priced car but which was just then a weather stained hulk with a motor.

There were keys and even a grinding starter that worked protestingly. The supply of fuel had to be chanced. He got in, pointed the nose of the hulk in a half circle, approving the still-powerful motor, to avoid the better-patrolled streets.

It was too late to return to the hotel. He thought of Tessa Parnell's crumpled figure and it made his trigger finger itch. That was apart from what he had come for.

He was not trailing woman-killers!

The address on the envelope he had taken from Savoy's pocket was in his mind; he could place it. Even so, getting there entailed crossing two or three well-lighted streets.

Once he pulled in to wait while the shrill whine of police alarms passed in the next street. A clanging bell shrilled almost at his elbow. Out of the darkness a policeman materialized, on a run for a corner call box.

CHAPTER IV

The Sheriff Gets Wise

BURTON drove on. A wild cry sounded behind. Burton stepped on the accelerator, and the heap responded gallantly. He watched the dial figures register forty-three which was all he had hoped for. He knew where he wanted to go and there were

things in his way. Forty-three would not be enough.

The night seemed alive with ubiquitous alarm. No car showed behind yet but he had no hope of reaching the goal he had set without pursuit. That policeman who had raced for the call-box had had a quick idea and it had been good.

The heap almost overturned at the last corner. He believed he knew his way now. Behind, the street, car-tracks just beginning to glisten under pallid lights at intervals, was still empty. But even as he swerved off the broader thoroughfare there was the raucous sound of a siren almost in his ear.

Then new whistles shrilled, feet pounded.

Blam! One front tire blew out with a hideous burst of sound and the heap careened into the curb and over it. Burton reached for the door, slammed out. As he moved off swiftly he had a last impression of the faithful monster quivering and steaming.

Kosciuszko Street—Number Twelve.

Burton brought up. Number Twelve, the address from Savoy's pocket, seemed to be a cavernous maw sinking between two low frame buildings, one a grocer's establishment and the other a combined shoemaker's and notions store. The stores, like the street, were in complete darkness.

The sirens screamed again, vengefully close. Burton plunged into the dark court between the two shops and moved on through a cluttered yard of sorts that must, behind the frontage of the street, be Number Twelve. This was all in darkness. He made for where he knew some sort of entrance should be; and then he located the light gleam. He stopped.

The light glimmered, moved, disappeared. It came again an instant later, to vanish once again.

Burton shook off the accumulation of rubbish that had adhered to his ankles in his passage across the yard, forced open the door carefully, and pushed his way in.

He found himself in a black, narrow

hallway that held the inescapable odor of a printer's shop. Ahead of him the light came on again, like a jack-o'-lantern's light, to blot out. But by that time he was moving toward it over rough board flooring, feeling a way along the wall to his left, as his eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness.

He heard a voice, a voice he recognized. He let his hand move toward his shoulder-holstered .38. Someone snarled, "Okay, okay; that'll do it! Now you get out of here and tool that jalopy of yours you left out front to where I can take a flyin' leap at it. Get the motor hot. We scam fast. Matches? More paper over here, a lot of paper!"

A match flared, went out. Kerosene reeked. Burton drew deep of the odor with one breath, snapped erect, and then gun in hand walked into the farther room.

It was one of a disorderly set of three or four rooms on the ground level, one of which, rearward, had undoubtedly been used one time as a kitchen. Off it was a bedroom in darkness.

Dull, ugly furnishings littered the scene. A cheap lithograph hung askew on the wall. Stained wallpaper had begun peeling long ago. The odor of newsprint and printers' ink was heavier. A large bulk that Burton immediately recognized as a hand press had been shoved into a corner and disordered papers piled about it shoulder high. Back of it, draped over it, flung every way, long streamers of gaudy lottery tickets lay where they had been flung and discarded.

The reek of kerosene mingled nauseatingly with the smell of printers' ink. Kerosene had been sprayed lavishly.

As a match flared Burton's voice came, hard, "If you blow that match out, Scollard, you're going to live longer!"

Tom Scollard whirled with a curse. The match shook in his hand, even its flame angry. His companion whirled with a snarl; Gabriel Hayden was digging for a pocketed gun.

Then powder flame came lancing to tear the tiny place apart. Hayden knew but one law

and he was taking his own way out. He came shooting.

He went down that way, legs threshing grotesquely among the heaps of old paper.

Tom Scollard had dropped back, his eyes flickering green in the yellow light from the pale shaded lamp over the hand press in the corner. His mouth was working. He flung the burned-down match from him with a thick curse, and it arced into the piled-up, saturated papers.

Instantly a sheet of flame lifted into life. Under cover of it Scollard flung himself sidewise, grabbed for his gun and was shooting—cursing and shooting.

Burton felt lead breathe past his cheek. Through a sudden belch of smoke there was Tom Scollard's stare, his eyes those of a man who has left reason behind.

THEN he came on, kicking a way through the impeding mountains of paper as he came, shooting, cursing. Burton let him come, standing in partial shadow, waited split seconds. At last he pressed trigger. Into the cloud of belching smoke Tom Scollard went plunging head foremost, his sleek body threshing as he went down amid the churned piles of paper.

Close by, a police whistle sounded; there was nearing clamor and a volume of cries. Burton hesitated. The smoke was blinding him. Then he sheathed his gun, bent to corral Scollard by the back of his coat, and staggered with him toward the open.

A second later Taken came charging across the roused courtyard, a gun in his fist. In back of him other shapes were reeling toward the scarlet flames now bursting from the doorway.

Taken pulled up. His gun wavered over Burton, but with no conviction. Burton was wiping at a scratch of blood on his cheek and he said, tight-voiced, staring at the stain on his handkerchief, "We seem to meet each other a lot, don't we, Taken? I imagine that old motor

I had to take led you here. Do you understand yet? If your firemen get inside there in time they can get all the evidence needed on your local lottery before the flames eat it up. I've done your work for you; it's all yours now."

Tahen was no fool. He bit his lip. "The alarm's in," he said. "What's the rest of it?"

Behind him two of his men were waiting, guns thirsty. Burton shrugged. The smoke lay tight in his lungs and breathing was difficult. The place was going up like dry tinder.

"If any of your brave thugs want to take a chance, maybe win a Pendexter medal, they'll find another man in there, maybe still alive. Even if he's not—Hayden I mean—I'm pretty sure Scollard will talk before he dies, though I think that won't be long now."

Tahen gave swift orders. His air of bluster had evaporated. He seemed to have realized something astonishing and to be adjusting himself. Then, before he could speak, out of the billows of smoke emerged the big figure of Paul Pendexter, jowls quivering, eyes flashing.

Pendexter reached the spot in time to hear his lieutenant saying, "I don't know just how but we've got to take it that you tracked the press and phoney lottery tickets to here. And there seems to 've been a scrap. I guess the fire boys 'll save most of the evidence at that. But Scollard—was Scollard?"

"I can tell by the way you say that that it's no terrific shock to you, Tahen," Burton said. "Yes. Tom Scollard. He staged his first kill of the night tonight when he got Joe Prior before Prior could talk to me. There's this Gyp Hayden too. I don't know how many Scollard used in his organization, but not many. He wasn't a big racketeer.

"He probably picked up men to work for him when he could get 'em, then left them to drift or kept them disciplined in his own way. I even suspect that the lottery scheme might have begun on the level and that he saw its possibilities as a 'protection' idea later on. He was safely on the inside and being where he

was he knew he could lay his hands on whatever men he needed as he wanted them."

Burton shook his head. There was something of hurt, he could see, in the blank blue eyes of Pendexter. Pendexter was just standing there listening. It wasn't like the man.

"So Tessa was playing, on the side, with Tom," he managed at last.

Burton didn't like the rest. He didn't like the hurt he saw in those usually domineering eyes.

"Maybe not," he suggested. "Her concern was for her former partner; she was trying to help Savoy and the game got too big for them. At the end she knew how dangerous it was. Maybe Prior's murder clinched it for her. Tonight she wanted to tell everything she knew, to me. Somehow Scollard guessed it. I see you must have been to her place."

TAHEN'S big jaw muscles bit down on a "Yes." Pendexter said nothing. "We found her. Somebody called the police and we beat it, knowing it was her joint. We found Savoy too."

"I don't think Savoy was any crook at heart but he had to clean up what he could while he still lasted so he could get west. But he was the front Scollard needed. An address, a shop, a place for storage. Scollard probably approached him through Tessa and this place here—in Savoy's name—is the result. Both Tessa and Savoy balked when they found where the racket was leading them. They weren't in on the killings but they were still part of the organization. They couldn't talk. And then I was on the trail, after Prior."

"You figure Prior knew?"

"He knew something; that's why he asked me to come out here. We'll never know whether he had facts or not. He was about to tell me what he did know when Tom Scollard, who knew all about the meeting, shot him this afternoon in my room. I thought when he tried to speak to me, dying, that he meant Scollard

would help.

“Well—” Burton’s laugh was mirthless—“he did! Tonight, after events began piling up, I knew we had someone on the run. I knew we didn’t dare wait for more evidence because the killer would be all for destroying any evidence as fast as he could. Scollard was scared. You, were at Tessa’s flat, Taken? I was, with only a fifty-fifty chance of getting out alive.”

“How come?”

“I wasn’t alone there at the end; I knew that. My hat had been moved. I figure Scollard was still there. He’d sent his man Gyp downstairs to see all was clear maybe. Left alone Gyp would probably have drop-shot me from hiding. But Scollard’s idea was neater. I was to be left alive to face a frame. If your cops didn’t get me first.”

“Gyp Hayden? You figure he was there too?”

“Yes. But he just took orders. It was probably he who called Scollard at the Tavern tonight, when Scollard and I were there. He got his orders then. Then later Scollard picked him up when he and I were in his car. That was ‘fingering’ me, if you get it. Hayden must have done his job a few minutes back, and now he was to be assigned another. It missed.”

“But nobody showed while you were there?”

“No. They had their chance. But I reason that Scollard pulled Hayden off; Scollard perhaps reasoned that if I did get clear, by the time I was free from explaining everything, about what I’d seen and what I knew, he’d be clear. A last kill, my murder, would have started a new angle of investigation; he knew that must be squashed.

Smoke still wisped about. The fire detachment was laboring. Two white-coated men worked over a figure on a stretcher nearby. A police cordon had been flung out.

Burton tried a cigarette. It choked him, but he persisted. “I gathered,” he explained, “that Prior must have been getting wiser all along. And I almost had a suspicion of him once. Not for long though! He tried to tell me about Scollard; I didn’t understand what he meant till later.”

Pendexter nodded, his gaze distant, as he turned away. “Nice job, Burton, and I needn’t tell you I’m sorry Taken and I tried to ride you. I had—things on my mind.”

Burton said quietly, “Yes. I know. I’m sorry, too, Pendexter. But I suppose mostly I was sorry for a friend of mine. Joe Prior had to have somebody to pay his bills.”