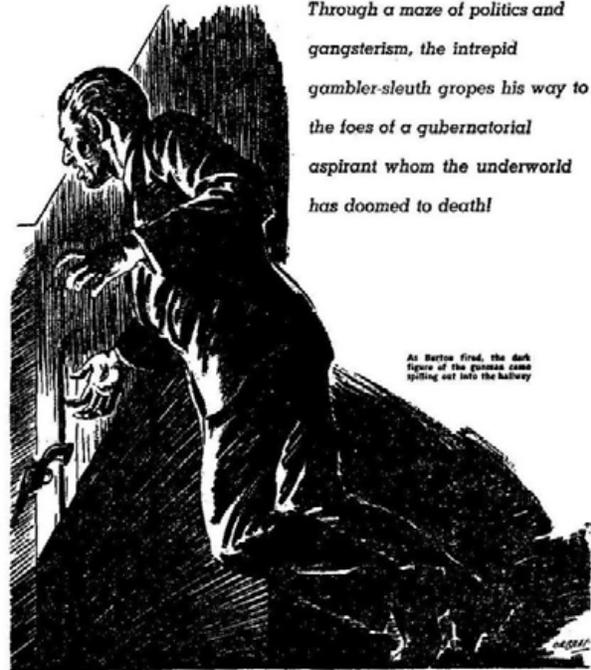


CANDIDATE for MURDER

a Black Burton Novelet

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN



CHAPTER I

Forced Interview

BLACK BURTON, in dressing gown and morocco slippers, had just found the fresh shirt he needed in the bureau drawer—his black tie and wing collar were laid out—when he felt a draft behind him. He had been alone, and it needed only a glance to show him that his gun and holster were too far off to do him any good just then. So he sighed, straightening, said as he turned:

“Yes, of course. Pete Nougat! Didn’t anybody ever tell you about a Sullivan Law? And you less than five months out of the Big House!”

From under heavy black eyebrows, bushing under a short brow, Pete Nougat’s slanting slate eyes tightened and below there the gun in his hairy fist jerked. In the eyes was a fanatic light. A killer’s eyes, with a puff of heroin to make them brighter. Pete Nougat’s nostrils flared.

“Been watchin’ all day, Burton. Job I like. You helped to send me up, last time. You and

your pal, Dalton. Timed it when that valet of yours went out; had him tailed. He’s safe.” The smoky killer eyes flicked to the gun and holster once more; the lips smiled. “Keep on gettin’ dressed. I’d like to wear clothes like that. I’m here for an escort. Merlehan wants to make talk with you. Sorry! He told me to bring you in in one piece, and undamaged. But he didn’t say what I was to do if you didn’t behave nice. Even he knows about that draw of yours. I don’t figure to risk it—not yet.”

“You will, Pete, you will,” Burton mused, and continued dressing.

Attired in the dark black of evening wear, with a black tie and the copper light burnishing from the ceiling, he looked younger than he was, a tall man with black hair that was glossy and well groomed, gambler’s eyes that never showed what was behind them. He picked up a slouch Borsalino and when it was on his head, he turned to meet the watching eyes of the gunman, eyes that had been following his every move, nodded.

“I was showering,” he mused. “So you must have got in then. But who had the key?”

Nougat grinned. “I got keys ‘ll fit any

lock,” he said. “One of me accomplishments. You should remember. You ready now? No perfume in that hankie here in your coat?”

“I’m ready,” Burton said. He looked at his shoulder-holster and gun. Nougat grinned again. He crossed to the .38 automatic so snugly encased, snapped out the clip and shoved it in his pocket, snapped back the top to make sure the chamber was empty, then said, “Put it on. I’ll hand you the clip, though, after we part; after we’ve seen the boss.”

WITHOUT comment Burton adjusted his harness. A gambler, he knew when to accept the breaks. When to wait for them. “You work for Merlehan now?” he mused. “Still?”

“That’s right. Ready?”

Burton regarded the gunny, with a look that was like measuring him for a shroud. Under the regard the man squirmed a little. He had a gun tight in his fist and Burton was disarmed—but after all it was Burton. Pete Nougat had reason to know all about him. Most criminals in New York City did—and some other cities too. A professional gambler who worked with the police, whose best friend was a dreaded lieutenant of Homicide, Dalton: target of the underworld and yet with friends there too.

Burton might have made a move and he might have retrieved his clip of cartridges. It would have been a risky move, for Nougat was addicted to dope and he was hair-triggered. Even so Burton had outwitted men like him before. He did not make the move though, and that was because of one consideration: he wanted to know what Merlehan wanted of him. He had no fear of Merlehan, a big-time gambler owning two places in Manhattan and with greedy fingers in political pies. Merlehan was a dangerous man but as yet not an avowed enemy. Burton needed to know, in the light of what he already knew, why Merlehan should be using this method with him. There was no quarrel

between them that he knew of.

He saw Nougat push the gun into a little bag he carried, then nodded as Nougat motioned him to the door. He proceeded the gunman out. Nougat’s .45 was nudging his side as they went down the stairs and to the curb where a big sleek black sedan purred, with a stoney-faced individual behind its wheel.

There was no conversation as they purred uptown some distance to swing toward the East Side, the newer section that was a conglomeration of fine smart apartment buildings and old tenements. One of Merlehan’s many houses, Burton conjectured, as they drew up under a dark port-cochere without the least noise of brakes.

Nougat backed out warily, holding Burton’s spiked .38 under his left arm, his right hand bulging his side pocket where his own gun was. He gestured with his chin. Burton, stepping onto the cement curve below the door and regarding the imposing entrance, said:

“Your boss is doing himself nicely. Only dabbles in politics, too. Becoming a public spirited citizen, I hear.”

Nougat cursed as the door swung open inward. Light spilled out as Black Burton turned easily toward him. But Burton’s face was a mask; his lips scarcely moving as he said:

“I don’t know where this leads, Nougat. I want to find out some things and that’s why I let you bring me along. In case you were surprised! But don’t forget, there’s a time coming when you won’t be behind me. That’ll be payoff time!”

He went striding past a tall butler with mutton-chop whiskers, a man out of a Wodehouse gallery, and the man said tonelessly:

“Mr. Merlehan is waiting for you, sir. This way, please.” Exactly as though there had been no gun behind the guest. Nougat edged at Burton’s heels, close, and they were shown

into a room the like of which Burton had seen only a few times before. It lay behind a richly carved ornate door of oak.

Merlehan arose quietly from behind a wide heavy desk. The rich room contrasted his appearance, a bulldog jaw and a thatch of grizzled hair never straight, a man in his early fifties with aggressiveness marking every line of his strong features. His steel-blue eyes were hooded and calculating. After a moment of silence while Merlehan stood measuring him, Burton smiled a tight smile. His host broke the silence with:

“What would that be for, Burton?”

Burton replied: “You remind me a lot of Haviland. Did anyone ever mention that before?”

Merlehan thrust a cigar into his big mouth and said: “What’s Haviland payin’ you, Burton? What’s your cut there?”

Burton said, “First I want to know why I’m here. You’re not paying me, are you?”

“It’s an idea, Burton,” Merlehan said. “Sit down.”

BURTON dropped into a chair. Merlehan went to a cabinet and brought forth Scotch wrapped in gold foil, a pail of ice, glasses and soda, which he set on the desk edge. Then as he squirted soda into two glasses he said casually:

“I got the idea you’re not too fond of Pete Nougat.” And he pushed the glass toward his guest.

Burton touched the glass, nodded over it. “Nougat’s a killer. I helped to send him up once and you got him out. He’s breaking the Sullivan Law right now. They say you can get a liking for strychnine; maybe I could like Nougat if I tried hard.” He drank. “Do you realize that my presence here can be turned into a kidnap rap?”

Merlehan shook his head from side to side in a fatherly way. “That’s not the idea, Burton. I wanted to see you and knew you’d be shy of me. So I took this way. You’re not kidnaped.

Your gun’s emptied, that’s all. This is only a conference.”

Burton drank. He still wanted to know the reason for all this. Politics had little to do with it, of course. Yet the wealthy Grover Merlehan, who sat opposite him now, was not a politician.

Burton could figure backward, and he did. Harvey U. Haviland was running for the Governorship. He was Merlehan’s open enemy. He had got where he was by the most ruthless means, and by the use of his wife’s great fortune: he was her second husband. But he walked in fear of his life. Still, he could purchase loyalty. Burton knew why Haviland had cultivated him; Haviland knew the gambler was straight, knew he could shoot—and knew Burton’s presence would keep the underworld from him to some extent.

“What’s your tieup with Haviland?” the big gambler inquired, after a moment of silence.

Burton said, “I don’t have to tell you but I will. First, I’m curious. That’s one of the reasons why I’m here right now; Nougat could never have brought me in if I hadn’t been curious.”

“I know that,” Merlehan said, and waited.

“The second is—I’m a gambler. Harvey U. Haviland is paying me for lessons, professional payments, in bridge and contract—with some poker.”

“That all?”

“That’s all you’re going to know. I know he’s out on his ticket to do away with gambling houses; it’s on his program.”

Merlehan breathed deeply through his nose. It was a sigh. He moved something on the desk, kept his eyes lowered, said:

“Haviland is going to be murdered. He’s announced himself as a candidate for murder. He wants you because he knows your guns. I want that murder to go through, even though I’m not arranging it. You got to take my word for that: I’m not. Even if I do want him dead.”

“How do you know he’s going to be killed

if you aren't in on it?" Burton asked.

"I know. And I wouldn't lift a finger to stop it. He's got an appointment for it. I'm out of it. I just wanted to see if I could get you out of the way—for a price. It means a big price to me."

Burton stood up. "Not enough," he said. "I'm no hired gunny but I took a job and if the job means trouble I'm in. You haven't got the price, Merlehan. Is that all you wanted?"

"That's all." Merlehan sighed. He pressed a button under the desk and the door opened. "Sorry, Burton. You might be unlucky, too."

Burton said, "I might. You think you've got Nougat at your heel?"

"I bought him out."

"And he'll sell you out," Burton said. "I don't know why I'm handing you information, but he's highest bidder stuff. Tell him to return my gun—and then to keep out of my way!"

He got his gun while Merlehan never moved and Nougat said nothing. He went out, and on the next corner managed to flag a cab. He gave the address of Haviland's super deluxe hotel apartments and in the taxi strapped on his .38 again.

CHAPTER II

Hovering Death

IT HAD not needed Grover Merlehan's assurance to convince Burton that Harvey U. Haviland walked in hourly danger. It had not even needed that to tell him that was the reason why Haviland was paying for his services. The trick of paying a high bonus for bridge and poker lessons was a transparent pretense. Burton knew that Haviland had angered the gambling element in the state and that his election, if he backed his promises, would ruin it. He might back his promises too. He was beyond bribery because of the wealth into which he'd married. Therefore, fanatic or whatever anyone wished to call him, he was a

menace to certain dishonest elements and those elements had stood for grave danger in other eras.

There was a big party on, running all through the two expensive floors of the luxurious hotel, when Burton entered. Haviland's step-son and step-daughter were going on with their usual affairs, laughing at their step-father's ambitions and ignoring the danger that menaced him.

Those step-children! Ronald and Gayda Haviland! Ronald was always in debt, and Gayda barely succeeded in concealing her contempt for her mother who, by means of wealth, had tried to buy her way into wealth and society.

Burton went on to Haviland's private suite.

A private detective on guard at the door offered:

"Ulysses has been raising cain wondering why you didn't show up, Burton. We told him we had everything covered but that wasn't enough. Boy, is that guy scared!"

Burton answered, "He doesn't want to give them a chance to assassinate him. He knows he's made himself a candidate for more than the Governorship—for murder."

The guard tapped a cigarette and lit it. "Yeah. And that Gay kid, she's been all over the hotel lookin' for you personal. What a party they're throwin'!"

"They call it tea," Burton said, smiling, and turned away.

Gayda was the biggest problem to the gambler. She was beautiful, young, and vivacious. She wanted new experiences. When Burton had first appeared, she had liked his looks. He'd told her he was married and the fact that he was not living with his wife had made him all the more interesting. Burton had represented a marked change from the crowd she knew, the hectic, always-moving nightclub gang that found bed at dawn only to arise for cocktails at noon. Gay had unmistakable allure.

He encountered her almost as he stepped into the first room of the magnificent suite. Haviland maintained two top floors of the hotel for his own apartments and entourage. Supposedly the suite was shared with his wife. The floor below was occupied by the brother and sister and the friends they might choose to accommodate from time to time. Mrs. Haviland had her own retiring quarters—and it was known that it was there she spent her time—in rooms of the lower suite.

The room Burton had entered was crowded with people. He halted. Gay saw him and caught his arm.

About Haviland's stepdaughter there lingered always the heavy odor as of new-cut gardenias: she seemed perennially fresh, always alive. That her manicurist, her couturier, her French maid adept at Swedish massage, lotions, creams and astringents—that all these contributed Burton was full aware, had been since he first knew her. But even the knowledge could not serve to deny her young thrilling attractiveness; she was dangerous! Her painted lips were arched provocatively and her bronzed hair shone as she shook it back, catching the gambler's silk lapel.

"We've missed you, Noir, we've missed you!" she exclaimed, using the name she had chosen for him. "Where have you been?"

He smiled down at her and evaded: "I'd like to see your father right away. I've been—busy."

She half released him. "Of course! But you've met Captain Lamonte, haven't you?" And she nodded casually to the tall slim man who had come ranging alongside her.

Lamonte only gave a cold bow. Burton said, "Yes, we've met. Good evening, Ronald," to the girl's brother, before bustling away.

LAMONTE! Well, at least Ronnie had not brought back a foreign wife on his last trip abroad. No. Instead, this Lamonte gentleman. Lean and bronzed and with a

distinctly Continental air, Lamonte had been over a period of weeks an intimate in the lavish Haviland household. One newspaperman had labeled him as Gayda's fiancé, had spoken of manorial estates in Kent.

But the stepfather did the dictating for them all and he was a hard man. His wife had known it for some time. His stepchildren, spoiled though they were, faced it with resentment and bitterness. And his death, which Merlehan had spoken of, would release a huge fortune and freedom for three persons.

Crossing the rooms where the party was in progress, Burton nodded to two or three acquaintances, noting that Haviland's bodyguards were quietly present. They knew him. He knocked at an oak door, received a short command bidding him enter, and stepped into the magnificent library of the suite that Harry U. Haviland retained for his own. No one violated the great man's privacy here; here scarcely a breath could penetrate from the world without. The walls were lined with expensive and unread books; the carpets were so thick as to deaden all sound; a Napoleonic desk dominated a room made for a dictator or a Czar.

Haviland was in his middle fifties. He had a mane of shaggy gray hair that he would push back from time to time in one of those leonine gestures of which he was so fond. His blue eyes were hard and icily commanding, and his jaw was scarped blue granite. There was distinction in him, unquestionably. And yet behind his eyes lay continual fear. He rapped out, before Burton had a chance to speak:

"I've been trying to get hold of you for an hour. Where have you been?"

Burton smiled. "Delayed. I've been with Grover Merlehan."

"What?"

"With Merlehan. He wanted to see me." Haviland started from his chair.

"You're telling me you went to see Merlehan? Because he wanted to see you? Am I crazy or you? It's been less than three days

since Merlehan was quoted as saying that humanity would be better off if I were dead. Only he didn't mention me by name. What—what does this mean?"

Burton said, "Merlehan sent one of his gunmen after me, and the gun was an invitation to come across town and see him. I went. Even though I don't like to have a gun pulled on me. Merlehan made me an offer, gave me an opportunity to get away from you. He—" Burton paused "—he wanted to give me the same chance he'd give any rat to get off a sinking ship."

Burton had spoken quietly. But the words made the big man who so feared death sink back into the great imperial chair.

There was silence in the big room for a long moment. The clock ticked loudly. Then at last Haviland drew himself together. In the voice that the outside world knew, lacking its harshness and its tremor, he rasped:

"Then why did you come back, Burton? I imagine he had a price? You expect me to jack it up?"

Burton said, while his eyes gleamed, "I came back because I had an appointment here. I don't think, from what Merlehan said, that there's any intention of trying to get at you—with his men. He hates you but I'll bet on that. He warned me, though. You're in danger, but I think we've both known that for a long time. I didn't imagine I was being paid to teach you bridge!" Abruptly: "That party tonight?"

"It's on. You saw that. Shall I—"

"We've been warned, so we can consider ourselves ready. Stearns Warren is coming, I hear, to your party. He's supporting you politically but he's not to be trusted. If you want to trust him that's your business. He controls the state but he's got a lot of irons in the fire, and one of them is the fact that he doesn't like your anti-gambling measure, the one in your platform."

"I'll handle Stearns Warren!" Haviland snapped. He was regaining his courage. In

Burton's calm there was a cooling draught. But Burton said thoughtfully:

"Sometime tonight Warren is going to name you outright for the Governorship, isn't he? Tell your men to see that he has the opportunity. There'll be trouble and I don't know where it will come from."

"You'll be here, Burton?" Haviland was suddenly limp, fearful.

"I'll be somewhere in the suite," Burton said. There was a click as the door opened and he let himself out.

IN THE outer rooms they were still at cocktails. Burton paid his respects to Haviland's wife, pitied her fading washed-out prettiness: But if she had used her large fortune to augment Haviland's rise and to minister to his ambitions she might have been prepared for what she was getting; so he reflected.

Of late, though, he mused as he turned away from her, she had taken on a little color, an added vivaciousness. He wondered idly if the presence of Captain Lamonte had anything to do with that.

The foreign captain who was the house guest and Ronald's familiar moved to bend over the back of his hostess' wing chair, if Mrs. Haviland was actually the hostess, and not her children!

There was a gay chatter all about the rich, smoke-congested rooms and, as Lamonte straightened at Burton's presence, a flush was staining Mrs. Haviland's doll-like cheeks. Lamonte looked disturbed, annoyed. Burton looked and thought of the rumors.

What a fortune and what emotions stood waiting to be released if the death of Harvey U. Haviland came to pass! This pretty pale woman, his wife, would be free again, with millions to toss away. The wastrel son and daughter would come into their shares—and quickly dissipate them, without doubt. But the crude facts were there to be estimated.

It was getting late. Soon the biggest moment would be due—the mention of Haviland's name for the Governorship, from the lips of Stearns Warren. The party was accelerating. Rare jewels shone. An ambassador came in, two Congressmen, the bigger men of the Press.

Gay caught Burton as he was going through the foyer. By now the cocktails she had been drinking had flushed her lightly tanned cheeks and added a new, avid brilliance to the wide hazel of her eager, hungry eyes. Her curving red lips were moist, still thirsty, more scarlet and more provocative.

She stopped him with, "Noir! No drink?"

"Later, Gay," he told her. "Evening's young. Why don't you drop that glass and get into a shower for a few minutes before things begin?"

She laid a hand on his arm as she had done before, said, "They told me you had a wife. She's not around, is she? If I take a shower, will you help me?"

"No," he said. "Take it anyway."

"Are you that way always?" Quickly, impulsively, as was her way, she came to her decision. "All right! But when you're not too busy—maybe when this alleged party is over—I'd like to show you things. You know where my suite is. I'll be alone."

Burton quirked an eyebrow. "Not Captain Lamonte?"

"Alone," she repeated. "In my own place. No one comes there unless I tell them to. I'm inviting you." Her hand went out and he felt a ridge of metal come into his palm: her door key. Before he could say anything she had turned away.

Over her shoulder she said:

"As to Lamonte—it might look as if it's I and the papers who might talk—but Mamma's the one!"

Burton watched her go and then turned, eyes opaque, to where Lamonte and Mrs. Haviland still remained together. Lamonte

was looking more than devoted. Even as he watched Gayda's voice was back, in his ear, breathless:

"In case you didn't understand, it might be me, would be—if the money was mine. I'm in a class with Ronald, who'd like to see something happen—and soon. Mother still has some of hers. Plenty! But Captain Lamonte can't live on caviar and champagne alone, you know. Neither can my brother. He's got to have polo ponies!" Then, with a "'Be seein' you!" Gay was really on her way out, the bitterness in her voice trailing her.

Burton felt the key still in his palm. Somehow, he thought, whatever the answers, he didn't want to see Gay hurt, even though she was the way she was. He didn't care about the rest.

CHAPTER III

Dead Man in the Doorway

THE murder occurred at ten minutes past midnight. The big ballroom had been floodlighted and the orchestra swung into what was termed the "Yacht Club Number." When the lights faded from their various distances in the walls, other lights—as of portholes on a ship—took their place. Overhead there was only a segment of a papier-mache moon coasting against the ceiling's high arch.

Burton had stopped to talk with one of the many guards in plain clothes and he was far from the shooting.

But the echoes of the shots were there to tell him; instinct made him smooth down a palm over his coat lapel. A scream came and immediately all the lights were on. But the lights came too late to save the life of Harvey U. Haviland.

The millionaire and gubernatorial aspirant was lying half in and half out of one of the combined lavatory and lounge rooms for gentlemen guests. Out past him was a high

terrace. Stunted artificial firs grew in green tubs out there. But Haviland was noticing them, nor his domain, no longer.

The chief of his bodyguards, Jack Humphrey, was standing in an attitude of complete bewilderment above the fallen body. Blood was coming in slowing spurts from Haviland's mouth. His eyes had already begun to glaze. He had been shot twice and at close range. Once in the chest and once—evidently he had been falling forward when he met the second charge—in the throat.

Other men were crowding in. Two women screamed in unison. Burton turned to meet Humphrey's eyes.

"Get Lieutenant Dalton of Homicide on the phone right away," Burton said. "See that nobody gets out of the place without a check."

"Sure! But a doctor—"

"There are three doctors in that crowd outside but none of them can do Haviland any good. Pass the word for them to come in. Get moving!"

Humphrey said, "Sure, sure!" and moved.

Burton found himself nearly alone with the dead man. Tragedy had come as promised and the man who had been host was clay. Stearns Warren came in and stood hovering, ineffectual as always, wiping at his thin mouth. When he began to mumble Burton turned to him with expressionless face and said:

"You'll have no stooge for a candidate now, Warren. What does your crowd know about this?"

Warren put away his handkerchief, achieved a certain momentary dignity, and retorted:

"I wasn't here to look after him, Burton. He had men—and you. He trusted you, I know. Somebody might have offered bigger pay as the way to get to him. He's really dead?"

Burton took another look, without answering stepped inside the French windows and returned with two big Turkish towels,

which he eased under the bleeding head.

"Quite," he said. He reflected that he had been offered a big price to be elsewhere tonight, so that, as Warren had suggested, somebody could get to the gubernatorial aspirant. Somebody had.

Suddenly, as he was turning back to the lighted indoors, he caught the glimpse of a shadow. At first he did nothing to indicate that he had observed it. Somehow, in spite of every precaution, a killer had got inside here. Now the quick alarm had held up the killer's chances for a getaway. That might be his shadow beyond there!

He snapped, "Wait!"—and slipping his gun free, he went outside.

They remained where they were. There was something of unhurried competence in the gambler's movements, as though he never could be hurried and as though there never would be need. They knew him, knew of him.

A spiteful jet of flame came licking at him. Something whined off the edge of the French windows opening inward, ricocheted. Inside a woman screamed again.

Burton's eyes were blank and black as he moved after his assailant, a shadow. A new shot cracked at him but it went wild. Even so he could hear it whine past him. The door at the farther end of the terrace—the big fire door—slammed open, then shut, and he wrenched at its metal handle, got it open.

A DIM figure past there was vanishing ahead of him on the cement stairs, the same elusive shadow. He threw himself toward it, flattening himself against the wall as a new shot came. This time the charge and the sound of it went banging and clamoring back and forth in that enclosed space.

The shadow was making for the floor below. That would be the extensive suite occupied by the Haviland ménage; Haviland himself had slept mostly in the suite on the terrace floor.

Another heavy steel fire-door slammed.

Burton wrenched at a new iron knob and fell back as he threw the door open, waiting for a shot from past it.

The shot came, flaming at him. This hallway, before the turn it made beyond, was quite dim and he could not even locate the source of the shot. He heard feet padding, went on.

He was trying to keep as close as he could to his man. But the fugitive had gained. He had vanished. In some inexplicable way he had become lost behind one of that line of blank-looking doors facing the corridor.

But the end of the corridor was in sight. Shadows fastened there too. Burton flattened himself against the wall and crouched as a head and shoulders appeared before his narrowed eyes, a dim light-edged a gun barrel.

Burton knew that his man might not be the one he had originally set out after. He was aware that the other man had somehow disappeared behind one of those close-shut doors. But he knew, too, that he was on the track of one of them, and that the one he was following now meant to kill.

Shots blasted, the echoes of them crashing against the eardrums back and forth in that narrow way. Burton felt lead pluck at his shoulder, heard it go singing its angry song down the corridor.

But then he saw ahead of him the result of his own shooting. The dark figure came spilling out from its shelter, the shelter that the corridor angle made, crumpling as it flopped down.

A gun dropped first, a .45 revolver. Burton sped to the side of the body. Yet even as he bent above his victim he was turning warily to search out the way he had come.

He frowned. He had made his kill and it meant nothing to him. "Chips" Fogarty was a gunman he knew as for hire anywhere. But in death he could never be made to tell who had made him an accomplice in this night's revelry.

In Burton's ears, as he got himself erect,

were battling sounds. The police would be arriving by now, of course.

His eyes narrowed. Gun in hand he made his way down the corridor. There had been another man and before the police took over—he wanted him!

He had a pass-key. But after a futile three minutes he abandoned the job he had set himself. Two men! Yes, but one of them had been wise enough to get out of his way, and had slipped out behind him while Fogarty had been left to carry on the battle he had been paid for.

That other man was still loose. It might be anyone of those among the guests on the second floor!

With reluctant tread he made his way back to the fire steps and back up to the apartment that had so recently been the scene of gaiety and triumph. Humphrey met him, face white and strained. Burton said tight-lipped:

"You'd better get down below stairs and tell your boys to watch fire-escapes and inside stairs. I suppose the police will have the elevators by now. No news?"

"No! But that means nothing! You realize that mug could of got up here as a waiter, by the service stairs, anyway at all? There was an extra staff on here tonight."

"You'd better check," Burton said. "Do that with the house detective. See who the new ones were. A gunny might even have bribed one of the extra staff lads and come in. Go down and check thoroughly."

THE Haviland apartment was hushed now. No music. People were still there but they talked in whispers. The police had arrived, and Lieutenant Dalton, of Homicide, a friend of Burton's for many years, roused himself from taking a last look at the body before the morgue men took it away. Dalton was heavy, hard-packed, a man who had come up to his present job via the pavement-pounding route. His eyes were cold. He said to Burton:

"You got anything to contribute?"

Burton shrugged. His eyes brooded.

"No, Ned. Nothing much to contribute right at the moment. But there's a dead man who missed while he was gunning for me, on the next floor. Your boys can find him. With all this sound-proofing you didn't hear the shooting, I suppose. There were two. One I got."

"Who was he?" Dalton was narrow-eyed.

"You know him: Chips Fogarty. But we don't know yet who he was being hired to gun for. Nor who sent him."

"If it's Chips Fogarty, he could be bought for a couple of century notes," Dalton said. "But you'd know. Two?"

"Yes. One got down the fire stairs and somehow lost himself in the apartments below. I took care of Fogarty. But by the time that detail had been attended to, the other gungel had the chance to get away in any direction, except straight in front of me. It was somebody who knows his way around well."

Dalton's eyes were frosty. His lips were tight. They opened for him to say: "Well, the place is sewed up tighter than a drum right now. And if Fogarty's dead it's no loss. But what I'm thinkin' of is what I been hearing about you."

"Serious?"

"Maybe. You paid a call on Merlehan today, didn't you?"

"Merlehan would appreciate that way of putting it! He sent one of his hoods up—you'll know him: Pete Nougat—with a gun to carry his invitation for a conference. Merlehan wanted to talk."

"What about?"

"About," Burton breathed, "throwing over a man who was paying me for instructions in gambling, and coming over to his side of the fence. Merlehan mentioned Haviland was due for the works but he didn't mention where it was coming from. He was a candidate for murder. I gathered that Merlehan had wires out and that he knew someone had been hired to do the job. But I'm pretty sure he didn't

know who it was."

"I suppose, then, he made you an offer and you weren't buying?" Dalton said.

"That's about it. But our killer is still in the building somewhere, if you've got the place sewed up. Aren't we wasting time?"

"Where would he be, as a guess?"

"I'm not guessing, and it's a big place. I do know he was let in, though. He had to be. But right now I'm busy—unless you want me for something more."

"No." Dalton shook his head. "But I don't like it any way it's played, Burton."

Burton said, "Neither do I. But I'm playing it out." When he turned away Dalton caught his arm.

"Does that mean," the big Homicide man said, "that you're on the prod after Merlehan and his bunch?"

Burton shook his head. "No. I think if it was Merlehan's job, he'd have worked it differently. Even if he did want Haviland out of the picture—and bad."

He freed his arm gently from Dalton's grip and moved away. Dalton caught the eyes of one of his men on him from across the room, and he gave a barely perceptible nod. But that signal would have been no news to Burton. He knew he was going to be trailed from then on. He didn't mind. He knew Dalton, who was his friend—a baffled, befuddled friend at the moment.

HE FOUND the family in the small study. Mrs. Haviland was in one corner, sitting stiff and erect. There had been tears in her faded eyes but they were dried now. Her face was like marble. The incongruous rouge stood out on her lips flauntingly.

Gay was at the buffet and her brother and Forsythe Lamonte were beside her. Lamonte had just said something but at Burton's appearance he went quickly away and stood beside the newly-made widow's chair. Bending down solicitously over her, he made a gallant Byronesque figure in this moment of

tragedy.

Gay turned with a champagne glass in her hand. Ronald was swishing whisky and soda around in a tall glass and he looked as though it might have been his fifteenth. His eyes were bloodshot but there was a gleam in them, a new gleam. Complacence.

From the shadows Stearns Warren was speaking, in a rich platform voice properly subdued:

“We must bear it, madame. Even in this dark hour we must recall that the Police of this metropolis seldom let a terrible crime like this go unpunished. There will be a clamor from the newspapers, from the giant public. And Merlehan—”

Burton did not listen to any more. Gay’s hand was on his sleeve, in the intimate, proprietary gesture she had come to have. Her beautiful eyes were dry.

At his level disapproving look, she brushed cigarette ash from the tube in her hand, sipped, said:

“I know, *Noir!* You want me to look sad. You think we should pretend to show a grief I—none of us—feel! You know what he was. Can’t you see that now—we’re free?”

“You mean your money will be released now. Your mother’s, yours—your brother’s?”

“Mostly that. Ronnie and I hadn’t a thing to do with it, *Noir*, but I’ll admit that sometimes we—yes, we even talked of it. But neither of us are more than perfunctorily sorry. You—did you have trouble—awhile ago?”

“I wasn’t hurt. I must say good night to your mother. I’m going—for a time.”

“Will the police let you?” Then, as he smiled a little, “Don’t forget you’ve got a key, *Noir*. I shan’t sleep. And when you get outside try and remember: he wasn’t our father, Ron’s or mine. Just—just a big man who used our mother’s fortune to make—a czar of himself.”

He nodded. The key burned in his pocket. Gayda looked quite gay just then, flushed and ardent, with eyes that swam in promise. She

started to say something more when Lamonte came in, to announce:

“Her brother and I thought we might take Gay out for a bit later on. It’s too thoroughly depressin’ here.”

“Yes, it is,” Burton said, and went off.

Mrs. Haviland was dry-eyed. A glass of champagne was at her elbow and on the other side of her Stearns Warren was still mouthing platitudes in the same flat voice. She smiled as Burton came up, said eagerly, wistfully:

“You’re going, I know. We shall miss you, even if it is only for a little. You found nothing?”

In spite of the tragedy, she looked younger. “You want to find the murderer, don’t you, Mrs. Haviland?”

Again that wan smile. “But naturally! Only we’re leaving that to the Police, and you. I know you’ll do what he would have expected of you.”

Pompously Warren broke in with, “Look around Merlehan’s dives. Though what evidence there is I can’t imagine. An out-of-town killer could have been hired for a thousand dollars and a getaway, by a man who knew his way around.”

Burton nodded. “To be sure. But there were at least two on this job. Two that I saw. Maybe more. Someone was here on the inside to see that your stranger had his opportunity, to cover him. The private operatives covered everything—”

“But not quite everything, Burton, eh?”

“Apparently not. Everything—except the inside, we’ll say. That leaves us with quite a few suspects! From the *inside*, Mr. Warren!”

Then he bowed and turned away.

There was a pleading, longing look from Gay as he passed her, a frozen nod from Lamonte, a jerk of the head from Ronald. He found an elevator and went downstairs.

CHAPTER IV

Burton Pays Off

YET in spite of the hour Merlehan was still up. The same stony-faced manservant, still impeccably attired, answered the doorbell. Burton gave him a curt nod and pushed past him with no more than that; he stepped quickly into the study that he had left only a few hours before.

Merlehan was not alone. As Burton came in he caught sight of a new face across the room, half in shadow: a bleak hatchet face with cruel eyes set close together behind a high beak of nose. There was a cigar in Merlehan's hand and he slowly lowered it to the tray in front of him, his hard eyes narrowing coldly.

"Just a little social call, Burton?" he said in his easy voice. "Or did you come to collect what was due to the man who burned Haviland down? Of course we've heard." He flicked a hand, a big diamond winking, toward the tall thin figure in the shadow. "By the way, this is Sims. Arty Sims. Newark."

He seemed suave, in control of the situation. But after all Merlehan was a gambler on a big scale. Burton merely slid his eyes off Sims, disregarding him while aware of the other man's keen regard. The radio behind Merlehan, turned down low, gave evidence of how he had learned the news—if it had needed that!

Burton spoke in a low controlled voice. He said, "Merlehan, I don't think even now that you did that job. But I am sure that one of your hired rats did it. Or had a hand in it. Where is Pete Nougat and when you tell me that I want to know his alibi for the time of the murder."

Mild-eyed Merlehan turned to his henchman. "Where did Pete say he was going—maybe an hour or so back?"

"Late movie," Sims returned glibly. "I seen the picture and told him about it and he wanted to see it himself."

"Yes," Burton said. "As long as he knows all about it and can produce a ticket stub that's all that's necessary." He swung on Merlehan.

"I didn't think you'd go to this extreme, but it's been done as we know. Nougat and this terrier here, out of your sight—they'd double-cross their own mothers at the rustle of a Treasury note. Nougat is the man I saw—and missed—in the hallway. And he got away through one of the suites. But if he hasn't had a chance to change his clothes, he'll still have a souvenir I made in his coat sleeve."

Sims was glowering, his shoulders hunched. "Let me—" he began hoarsely.

Merlehan held up a hand. "Be quiet!" Then, "This man, Black Burton, is not crazy; get that! Want to wait here for Pete Nougat, Burton?"

"I only want him."

"What for? Just what?"

"Maybe to take him down to have a talk with Lieutenant Dalton. These days there are such things as ballistics experts, Merlehan."

Merlehan considered. "Yes." Then thoughtfully, "Well, I'm afraid you've given yourself a trip for nothing, Burton. Only thing is they'll try and tie me up with this, and—"

"They're already doing that!"

"And I haven't had a thing to do with it," the big gambler continued carefully, disregarding the interruption. "I'm not sorry, of course, even if I do send flowers. Don't pretend I am. He'd have wrecked my kind of gambling in this state. But there it is." And the hand with the cigar spread out to match its mate.

There followed ticking seconds of silence. Sims stirred at length. He was closer to Burton now. Hand ready for the draw due in any succeeding second. Merlehan's voice came in a sudden rasp:

"Show him out—safe, Arty!"

Then his big body settled itself deeper into the chair. Sims chuckled, deep in his throat. Burton paused, nodded, went to the door. Sims kept a pace behind him.

At the outer door, while fog swirled in from the river, to cloud the entrance way, Burton turned a little.

“Your pal was in that tonight, Sims; we both know it. He was one of two men in the upper hallway. He picked that hood Fogarty and used him for a cover-getaway. But what I want to know is, who paid Pete?”

“I thought you asked Merlehan!” His was an animal snarl. The door slammed hard as Burton left and the fog took him in its clammy embrace.

FARTHER down the lights of a drugstore beckoned through mist and Burton made for them. It was an all-night place and there was no curiosity directed toward him, even with his evening clothes, when he went to a booth and made his call. Gay’s voice answered him, over her private wire:

“So you didn’t go out with the boys,” he said. “Are you alone?”

Her voice came back with a lilt in it. “I told you I’d be here. I’m waiting.”

“Is Lamonte due before daylight? In the suite, I mean?”

“Maybe in his own place. But not here.” The voice took on acid notes. “You see Mother has all the purse strings now!”

“You mean they might get married?”

“Leave it like that. Anyway it’s a few millions to whomever makes the grade!”

Burton said carefully, “I’ll be up. I want to talk to you.”

“Is that all—*Noir*?”

“Probably—for tonight.” He hung up. Outside the pharmacy he hailed a new cab.

Gay stood waiting in purple negligee when he came. By way of deserted rooms and suites he knew, he got to her apartment and let himself in quietly. She seemed more excited, more than ordinarily seductive. About the deep, luxurious apartment there lingered the trace of some heavy, languid perfume. The lights were very low.

The murdered man’s step-daughter moved across the room with that slim, lissom grace that had always been hers, said softly:

“I’m glad you decided to come, *Noir*.

There’s whisky and soda. You look like you might need it.”

He squirted himself a drink, back to her, without answering, drank a long sip, then said, “I did. Where’s the boy friend?”

“Out. Maybe with mamma. I don’t know.”

“Not coming back?”

“No. Take your coat off. There’s hours till morning. And if you really intend to remember you have a wife we can spend the time talking.”

He ignored that, crossed to her and bending over, grated, “Did you let anyone know you expected me here? About now?”

In her scarcely perceptible hesitation he read the answer he had expected. She hastened to say: “No! But no! Do you think I’m a fool?”

“Perhaps—a little.” He smiled more easily. “I might even have business in here, mightn’t I?”

“I hope you have and wish you’d stop—”

“Where would Lamonte be right now?”

“I don’t know.” She broke off. “He’s—”

His hands caught her shoulders. “Stay here!” he commanded. His voice was metallic.

He did not hesitate then. He went to the door and let himself out of Gayda’s room. Then he was standing in the palatial drawing room of the suite. He crossed the thick rugs there with a light step.

The guards were all in the outer corridor, he observed. Here he was undisturbed. Beyond the drawing room lay Mrs. Haviland’s suite. He hesitated only an instant, hand brushing the slight bulge his gun made under his jacket, then threw open the door in front of him.

He saw what he had come expecting to see. In the back of his eyes was a dull sense of understanding. Forsyte Lamonte was at the edge of the low divan that took up one angle of the room. Mrs. Haviland was in bed, faded and pretty in her doll-fashion way, sitting up in her cloudy negligee. The room had a lot of smoke in it and there was a whisky bottle and

a siphon with an ice bucket on a tray. It was an intimate scene.

LAMONTE'S white tie was undone, his hair was ruffled. That was all, except for his eyes, and the wild look in them. He sprang to his feet with a thick curse.

Burton stopped short. He said quietly, "sorry, I thought someone came through here, and there's still a murder to be answered for." There was a single inarticulate cry from the frail woman among the mass of pillows, then it was stifled. Mrs. Haviland arose, threw back her hair. Burton said, "You wanted the killers, didn't you? Maybe I've trailed to the wrong room. Maybe not. But Lieutenant Dalton will still want to know, tomorrow."

He ignored Lamonte. Mrs. Haviland's hands were making fluttering motions. The light caught at the jewels on her transparent fingers and flashed mockingly.

"But—" she started to say.

He interrupted. "This man here let them in, by the outer way. There may be one or two of them left in the suite right now. Didn't you know that?"

The pupils in her eyes distended. She looked at Lamonte. All of Lamonte's polish and suavity was gone. His eyes had begun to fill with an insane rage.

"Forsyte! It isn't true! You didn't—"

Lamonte had backed to the door. Then something snapped and he cried hoarsely to a shadow behind Burton:

"Now! The beggar! Now!"

Burton whirled in time. He was not entirely surprised when he saw the crouching figure of Nougat in the corner. There had come the echo of a cry from the girl's room only an instant before and he had noted it. Nougat and a second man had obtained entrance by Burton's route.

There followed in the next instant the roar and flashes of continuous volleys. Guns licked and spat across the half-dark room.

Burton felt a shock, knew himself knocked

into a corner, saw the face of Pete Nougat close by, monstrous, apelike and nightmarish, livid with vengeful cruelty. He saw Lamonte's gun and the other man's.

"So you never went back to Merlehan's, Pete!" he said. "You even double-crossed him!"

He fired at Lamonte, swiveled. A new shot came crashing out just as Nougat was perfecting his aim for a second charge. Nougat's companion went down. Nougat reeled, brought up his gun once more.

Burton moved into a crouch; he knew the value of careful shots. Shooting didn't help, unless the shots told. He fired twice. The thunder of the echoing reports was stunning to the eardrums, but there were fewer ears to hear them afterward.

Nougat folded, clutching at his middle.

In the doorway Ronald stood, pale and white, a smoking revolver in his hand, eyes wide and pupils distended. He stood staring at the man he had dropped in the doorway. He was in a brocaded dressing gown and his black tie hung loosely about the collar of a stiff shirt wilted from spilled wine.

He gasped, "Did I do that?"

"Not all of it but enough to help," Burton said, then swung about as a cry came from the other end of the chamber. The place still seemed to be rocking with the detonations, yet that last pitiful wail from a woman who had been cheated out of her youth and had tried to regain it, who had come face to face with failure and tragedy in her try, who knew she could not meet the shame of the world when the world came to know—that cry made them all start, froze them all.

The French windows were open. Before either man had a chance to reach her Mrs. Haviland had stepped out.

Ronald, a man in a daze, passed a hand across his bloodshot eyes. He didn't go to the window. It was too high up. There was no need to look. Even the girl suddenly swaying there in the doorway knew without being told.

The girl became white-faced and pitifully small of a sudden, the rouge on her lips and her cheeks making her look like some fantastically painted Chinese doll. She was sobbing, but the sobs were inside her. . . .

LATER Dalton was grim about it all. But he played his role.

“So Mrs. Haviland, due to shock and the grief over her husband’s murder, committed suicide,” he said in a flat voice. “Will that suit you, Burton? It ought to. For a while you were in a tough spot yourself.”

“It’s fair enough, Ned,” Burton replied. He was wiping absently at a blood-smear. “You need the rest of the answers?”

Dalton had arrived only minutes after the last tragedy and a squad car had brought him there as if by magic. “I think they’re pretty plain, aren’t they?” he said. “Mrs. Haviland and the kids had nothing to do with it, but this Lamonte guy was busy playin’ hole-cards with both mother and daughter. He paid off to get Haviland killed, hiring Nougat and figuring the blame would go to Merlehan and the gambling crowd. He arranged to get his hoods inside easy enough. He was a guest! He knew the politics angle would cover him—he hoped!”

“He wasn’t so stupid there either,” Burton contributed. “He managed to locate Nougat on his own and only we know that actually Pete must have two-timed his own employer for the sake of what Lamonte was due to pay him when he married the Haviland millions. Of course he could have got his workers in here at any time and concealed them in his suite. But from Nougat’s angle it would have built into a rich blackmail income for the rest of his life, no matter what he was paid for this job.”

“What about the kids, Burton?”

“I was afraid Gay would get hurt in what I knew had to come, after I’d figured it out. I

knew they’d want her next. I didn’t want Gay hurt. She’s not a bad child.”

Dalton grunted. “So it’s that way then. Lamonte figured to marry the mother after the others were taken care of. That would have been a cinch. I guess—getting them, the way they carry on. Only Mrs. Haviland didn’t savvy. The rest?”

“I think you have it by now, Ned. The murderer simply had to come from *inside*—inside here. After Lamonte let him—or them—in, he hid ‘em in his place. No one from outside could have got by the private detectives stationed around. But a man introduced up here by a guest was already *in!* There was nothing then to prevent him, with an accomplice, from getting out through this suite and up along the fire stairs outside. We knew that much when I ran down that first torpedo. What I didn’t know then was—who smuggled him in and where he had been hidden.”

“Well, I guess we know now,” Dalton said. “This’ll be a tough newspaper break for the kids, though, even with all the dough they’ll come into.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Burton said carefully. “That’s up to you. There’s a small fortune in jewels in this suite. Thieves could have seized the chance of this particular night for a haul. Lamonte could have been killed leaving Ronald’s rooms—maybe defending the valuables, we’ll say. Mrs. Haviland—suicide it was and it will have to stay that way, but with grief for the reason. That won’t be too far wrong at that.”

Dalton sighed. “All right, we’ll play it that way. I’m glad you were here though.”

Burton nodded. As he turned away, he said, “I wonder if I’m glad. Take care of Gay.”

And he went out.