



The Baron tried to duck, but the club caught him squarely across the head

THE BARON PRACTICES MALPRACTICE

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

There's no use telling "Baron Munchausen" Tolliver to make no bones of a case involving a dead girl and a phony claim!

THREE fascinated girl clerks crowded around the small, cluttered desk of Bill "Baron Munchausen" Tolliver in Imperial Casualty's Claims Department.

"The object in blackjack is to have your cards total as near twenty-one as possible," the Baron was saying. He ran a lean, nervous hand through his unruly mop

of mouse-colored hair. "Since that night I broke the bank in the back room of Mangione's place, I don't get any chance to play. They know I can't lose so they're afraid to let me in the game."

"You can't lose?" one of the girls asked curiously.

"It's just as if I could see the cards right through the pack before they're dealt.

Something in my brain.”

Baldy Leigh’s grinning face popped up suddenly behind the girls.

“Don’t worry about your brain, Baron,” a Baldy advised. “Nothing to be alarmed about. Save your tall tales for some newcomer. Right now the boss wants you but quick.”

The Baron’s eyes sought the wall clock above the office switchboard.

“Five minutes after quitting time! I should have scrambled out of here when I had the chance.”

The girls squealed.

“Oooh, is it that late?”

They scattered.

The Baron went toward the glassed-in cubicle which was the sanctum of Ellis Mehary, District Claims Manager for Imperial Casualty.

Behind a wide expanse of walnut laden with folders, Mehary sat hunched as if the troubles of the universe were heaped upon his broad, powerful shoulders. As the Baron entered, he raised his shaggy, gray head. A deep furrow grooved his bushy brows.

The Baron’s eyes shifted to the man in the leather-upholstered visitor’s chair across from the Claims Manager. A man smaller than Mehary, but soft and paunchy. With difficulty the Baron restrained an exclamation of horror.

The visitor’s face was a gargoyle mask. Criss-crossed with raw, red lines. White scar tissues at the edges of the healing cuts had twisted the whole face out of shape.

“This is Doctor Atlee Seward, Tolliver,” Mehary said.

The Baron had never met Dr. Seward, but he knew the man well by reputation. One of the most skillful surgeons of all time. In spite of his harassed expression, Mehary’s voice was smooth and unruffled,

as it always was with anyone except his own office people.

“Doctor Seward has a malpractice endorsement on his personal liability policy with us.” The Claims Manager slid a folder across the desk to the Baron. “Now it appears a suit is being brought against him. You’re to handle it, Tolliver.”

The doctor broke in excitedly.

“This is a terrible thing for me, gentlemen. My practice can be ruined. My reputation—”

The Baron’s eyes were still riveted on the surgeon’s scarred features. “You must have been in an accident recently, Doctor.”

The doctor frowned heavily.

“I didn’t come here to talk about that.”

“Of course not,” Mehary soothed. He gave the Baron a threatening look. “This claim is very serious, Tolliver. The claimant is asking forty thousand dollars.”

The Baron grunted. With an annual premium income of eighty-five million, he knew Imperial Casualty would still be far from the brink of receivership.

“Who brought the claim?” he asked. “And why?”

“Rosalie Compton,” Dr. Seward said. “A dancer. At the notorious Lucky Seven Club. I treated her about a month ago for injuries received in an automobile accident. Tendons of her upper arms were cut badly. She suffered permanent partial disability amounting to about ten percent loss of use of the member.”

“She blames this permanency on your treatment?”

“Yes. She’s been to another physician who estimates fifty percent disability. My operation is blamed.”

“Have you seen this girl recently?” the Baron asked.

“Yes.”

“Well how about it?”

DOCTOR SEWARD pursed his lips. The gesture even more distorted his repulsive features.

“Miss Compton now has fifty percent loss of use of the arm,” he admitted. “But that doesn’t mean it was my fault.”

“Maybe,” the Baron suggested bluntly, “the smart thing would be to settle out of court.”

Mehary cut in instantly.

“Tolliver, I want you to dig up evidence to support a counter-charge of fraud.”

A bright flicker gleamed deep in the Baron’s dark eyes.

“Naturally the doctor wants to cover a bad mistake. But a settlement out of court would—”

The surgeon drew himself up with affronted dignity.

“Young man, I resent your implication that I performed an incompetent operation. Furthermore, I absolutely prohibit you people from making settlement out of court.” He glared across the desk at Ellis Mehary. “I’ve read my policy. It contains a clause which protects a professional man’s reputation by prohibiting the waiver of any suit without consent of the insured. And I most emphatically refuse consent.”

Mehary was oily. “You are perfectly right, Doctor. I’m sure we will be able to prove that the entire claim is phony. Just leave everything in our hands and you’ll have no cause for worry.”

After bowing the indignant surgeon from the office, Mehary glowered at the Baron.

“What’s the big idea, Tolliver? Why did you insist this case be compromised? You practically insulted a valuable policyholder.”

“Valuable?” The Baron raised a quizzical eyebrow. “I don’t follow you, boss. Malpractice coverage is rotten stuff. If it weren’t that Sales is always being

needed for more business, we wouldn’t have such headaches.”

“Stop it, Tolliver!” Mehary bellowed. “Doctor Seward has one of the greatest reputations in the medical profession. It’s quite incredible he could bungle an operation of such comparatively simple nature.”

“Seward rubbed me the wrong way,” the Baron grumbled. “Not what he said particularly, but his manner. The whole thing strikes me wrong.”

“Listen, Tolliver,” Mehary snorted, “I’ll strike you myself only it won’t be wrong! Get this case cleaned up without our paying. And without hurting Doctor Seward’s reputation.”

“Maybe I can get the claimant to pay us,” the Baron suggested with heavy sarcasm. “What do you expect me to do, boss? If we can’t consider a compromise settlement—”

“Go see the girl,” Mehary roared. “See Rosalie Compton! Get the facts to show her claim is phony.”

The Baron’s expression changed magically. “See the girl,” he beamed. “Why, sure! That’s the first thing to do. Of course! At the Lucky Seven Club. That’s Mangione’s place.”

He turned to look pointedly at the clock across the now empty outer office. “This is once I don’t even mind working overtime. In fact, I wonder you don’t handle this yourself.”

Mehary looked on the verge of a stroke.

“Yeah? Well, get this straight, Tolliver. If you go into that famous back room and try any of the wild systems I’ve heard you spouting about, it’ll be your own funeral. Your wild yarns may have earned you the nickname of Baron Munchausen around this office, but that’s all they’re going to earn you. Now get the blazes out of here!”

"Sure, sure!" The Baron was chuckling to himself as he left the office. "What a break! This is one case I'm really going to enjoy. That old buzzard must hate to hand me such a juicy assignment."

Rosalie Compton was all the Baron expected. And more. Tall, blond, with the luscious figure which was her principal stock in trade. The Baron noted that she handled her right arm woodenly, but he could see nothing of her injury since she wore a white satin blouse with long sleeves.

She flashed him a demure smile, but her eyes were wary. Cold green, slightly almond-shaped, they were frankly calculating.

"You look like the kind of fellow I can get along with," she told him with a bold look. "I'm sure you'll agree I should be compensated."

The Lucky Seven Club would not be going full blast until much later. But early patrons were already getting up steam. The long, low-ceilinged basement was smoky, filled with the drone of many voices.

"Better come where we can talk without this confusion," Rosalie said.

"Lead on, beautiful." The Baron smiled as if she were Little Red Riding Hood. "I'll follow."

They went through a gloomy hallway and up narrow, cupped wooden stairs. The Baron was still smiling as the dancer pushed open a door at the right of the stair landing.

His smile faded as he saw the man behind the battered desk in the dingy, cluttered cubicle. The Baron had seen Mangione before, but only at a distance. Close up the club owner looked more formidable. A chunky individual, his weight was muscle, not fat.

The Baron swung to Rosalie Compton.

"What gives? I thought this conversation was between you and me."

The dancer's surprise was patently synthetic.

"I didn't suppose you'd object to having Mr. Mangione sit in."

"I simply want a preliminary statement," the Baron began.

"And I'm simply looking after Miss Compton's interests," Mangione broke in. His voice was as harshly arrogant as his face. "I don't like insurance men. I don't trust them."

"And I don't like—" The Baron bit off his words. He'd get nowhere with these people by antagonizing them at the start. Soft soap was indicated.

"Sure," he said. "If that's how you want it. Let's take a look at that injured arm."

"What are you, Tolliver, a doctor?" Mangione interrupted.

"Of course not. But I have to give the company facts."

"Then check the medical angles with Doctor Willard Norman," Mangione said. "He has a complete record of Miss Compton's case,"

The Baron tried another tack.

"I don't need to tell either of you that something more important than money is involved. Doctor Seward's career is—"

"You can say that again, chum!" Mangione snarled. "This means plenty to Seward. He couldn't get a job bandaging a sore thumb if this got into the papers. We'll settle for forty gees on the line. Without publicity."

THE Baron uttered a short, hard laugh. "I guess you would." It was time to take the buttons off the foils. "My company wouldn't even consider that kind of a payment. Seward wouldn't allow it anyhow. And in accordance with his policy provisions, the doctor has to approve any settlement."

"Then you better go see that

sawbones,” Mangione said. “Quick. And get him to okay forty grand. And listen, chum—don’t bother to come back here until you do!”

Three minutes later the Baron found himself outside the Lucky Seven Club. Mehary would blow a fuse when he learned Mangione was in the picture, too.

Where, he wondered, did Mangione fit? Was Mangione trying to frame Dr. Seward with the dancer’s help? Or was the beetle-browed gambler simply sweet on the girl?

Briefcase under his arm, he muttered to himself as he walked slowly to where the company puddle-jumper was parked. Instead of an anticipated interesting evening with a glamorous dancer, here he was simply working overtime.

Abruptly the Baron’s small, leathery features crinkled into a smile. Maybe his plans in regard to Rosalie Compton had been a washout. But he wasn’t licked yet!

He wondered why he had not thought of Dot Rochelle the moment Dr. Atlee Seward’s name was mentioned. He and Dot had been on more than one date together three years ago when she worked in Imperial’s industrial accident clinic.

Dot was a nurse and a good one. Good enough so she had been offered a job with Dr. Seward at nearly double what Imperial had paid her. She’d accepted the offer. The Baron had not seen her since. Tonight he would remedy that omission.

Dot was home when he called from the nearest drug store pay-station.

“It’s been way too long, darling,” he admitted cheerfully over the wire. “But I’m yearning to warm myself at the old flame. Furthermore, I’m working right now to keep your Doctor out of a nasty jam and you may be able to help.”

“I’m so glad you called, Baron,” she answered. Her throaty contralto held a note of odd strain. “I’ve been very much

worried about Doctor Seward. Afraid of something perfectly terrible. I need to talk with someone about it right away.”

“Am I flattered!” he continued, simulating injured feelings. “You want to talk to someone about your beloved doctor and I just happen to be handy, so—”

To his surprise, she cut him short.

“Let’s not waste time kidding over the phone, Bill. This is deadly serious. Please get here as fast as you possibly can. Hurry!”

And that was that. Had his line gone sour on him, the Baron wondered? Yet the queer urgency in the girl’s tone worried him. Something sounded very wrong.

The apartment house where Dot Rochelle lived was less than two miles uptown. The Baron drove there without a stop. He pressed the ivory button at the side of the door which bore her card. No one came to answer.

He could hear the shrill of the buzzer inside. At first, also, he thought he heard cautious footsteps. But the door remained closed.

He jiggled the button again, impatiently. Certainly Dot would not have urged him to hurry here and then have gone away herself.

He palmed the knob. The door was not locked. He stepped directly into the small living room of the apartment. The lights were on.

Dot Rochelle had not stood him up. She was right here in her modest home. But she would not welcome the Baron. And she would never tell him the things she had so urgently wished to say.

She lay on the floor, with her bright auburn hair spread fanlike on the pale green rug. At the back of her head, a brighter hue of red had stained the carpet. Blood!

Horrorified, the Baron stepped closer, dropped on one knee beside the girl. He

saw then that she was dead, stabbed to death with one deep, clean thrust at the base of the brain.

His eyes moved swiftly in search of the murder weapon. But at that same instant a faint, furtive sound of movement at his back brought him leaping to his feet, whirling, just as the lights went off. And just too late to avoid the completely unexpected, vicious attack from the rear.

He had only a vague impression of a dark, hulking form. Then came the downsweep of some heavy, flail-like object. He tried to duck. The club caught him squarely across the forehead. Half-blinded, dazed, the Baron struggled to keep on his feet, to close on his attacker.

The heavy object struck him again. The Baron's knees gave way. He pitched forward on the soft green rug beside the body of the pretty, dead young nurse.

When he came to life again, the room was still in absolute darkness. He got to his feet wavering, sick at his stomach. He located the light switch, flipped it up. In a long, gilt mirror over the davenport he caught a glimpse of himself. Blood from a deep gash in his forehead had made a sticky, red mask of his face.

He stood for a moment looking down at the quiet form of Dot Rochelle. Unconsciously, his hands balled into fists. Whoever had done this thing was going to pay for it, if it were the last act of his own life.

With his handkerchief he carefully wiped the door knob before letting himself out of the apartment. To be implicated in the slaying of the nurse would not help her.

THE Baron walked into his office. "You're early this morning." The redhead at the office switchboard gave the Baron a curious glance.

"I heard you were out on a hot date last

night. But you look more like you'd been in a concentration camp."

"Just practicing for the Golden Gloves," the Baron said. "Is Mehary in yet?"

"He phoned he'd be delayed until ten," the girl replied.

"Good. Gives me a chance to go through my mail and get out before he nails me. But be sure to tell him I was in."

He started to move away.

"Oh—there was a call for you, Baron," the girl continued. "It was Dr. Seward. Wants you to come over and see him first thing this morning. Sounded as if it were important."

"Okay, thanks," the Baron said. He went to his desk, put in a call to a former Imperial Casualty sidekick now employed on one of the big city newspapers.

"Do me a favor, Walter," he begged. "I need all the dope you can dig up for me about the auto accident last month in which Rosalie Compton, the dancer, was hurt. I'll call back later. Thanks."

Half an hour afterward the Baron limped into Dr. Atlee Seward's clinic. As befitted the surgeon's reputation, the place looked expensive.

He expected, of course, that the doctor's call had reference to Dot Rochelle. When she hadn't shown up this morning, Seward would undoubtedly have learned about her death.

But to his amazement, another white-clad nurse-receptionist was behind the desk in the doctor's waiting room. An extraordinarily pretty girl. The cute, cuddly, brunette type which appealed to the Baron in a big way.

"Mr. Tolliver? Yes, indeed. The doctor left orders you should go right in to him." She dropped her voice to a whisper, glanced around quickly as if to make sure she would not be overheard. "How about taking me to lunch this noon? I've

something to tell you before you settle Doctor Seward's claim."

"Suits me, baby." The Baron decided he would not mention Dot Rochelle. First he would see what this new girl had on her mind. Perhaps it was simply her technique in getting a free meal. At that, she would make a nice luncheon companion, regardless of the importance of what she had to say.

Dr. Seward looked haggard and worried. But apparently he knew nothing yet about the murder of his nurse.

"I've been doing some thinking, Tolliver," he said. "I had a threatening phone call last evening. I think we'd better make the settlement they demand."

The Baron's jaw hardened.

"If you mean Mangione, his crowd of hired thugs don't scare me. I'd see Mangione and the Compton girl both fry before I'd pay out a nickel."

"I wasn't asking your advice, Tolliver," the doctor said curtly. "I was telling you what to do."

The Baron stared. His eyes narrowed.

"Doctor, do you realize you're practically ordering me to toss away a career you've taken years building?"

The surgeon drew himself up: He looked as if he were about to burst. But he spoke calmly enough.

"I've finally decided the girl may have a legitimate case against me after all. I've hardly been myself lately." He touched the scars on his face. "My accident. I'm not a well man."

The Baron tried again.

"But listen, doctor! Forty thousand dollars!"

"So what? My policy with your company carries a hundred thousand limit. Pay the forty. Get rid of the case. The amount involved isn't important."

"Maybe not to you," the Baron sighed. "But the company will have to put a new

ceiling in Mehary's office when I tell him about this. He'll go clear through it."

"I've told you what I want," Seward declared coldly. "Further conversation won't change my mind. Just draw up the necessary papers."

The Baron shrugged hopelessly.

"You realize that a forty thousand dollar claim can't be handled like you'd settle for a bent car fender."

"I don't care how you do it, but I want action. Fast action!"

The Baron was very thoughtful as he went out. Seward's abrupt reversal made it appear that the dancer, and/or Mangione, might be able to collect. If the doctor were willing to confess professional incompetence, nothing much would be left for Imperial Casualty but to pay.

The Baron wondered if this mysterious phone call which had scared the doctor were linked in any way to Dot Rochelle's death. But what reason would anyone have had to kill the nurse?

The Baron halted at the girl's desk on the way out.

"Where shall we put on the feed bag, baby?"

"Meet me at twelve," she whispered. "Corner of West and Sixteenth. I don't want Doctor Seward to see me talking with you."

The Baron was there with the company car at the appointed time. The girl arrived breathlessly five minutes later.

She seemed very apprehensive as she got into the car.

"Where to?" the Baron asked. "Have you decided?"

"Let's just drive around," she said. "I can talk to you then."

"But what about lunch?"

"I'm really not a bit hungry."

The Baron was now a bit more amazed than ever.

"This is serious," he began

banteringly. "You're the first pretty girl I've ever met who didn't want to eat. All right, then, baby. You'd better spill whatever's on your mind."

"I'm afraid," she admitted. "I think Doctor Seward is losing his mind."

The Baron let the car drift out into the traffic.

"I had a somewhat similar thought this morning. But what gives you that idea?"

"I've only had this job with him about a month," she said rapidly. "The girl before me—Dorothy Rochelle—is my best friend. Seward let her go after he had the accident. She'd been with him three years when he fired her. It was Dot's idea apply for the job. She thought I might find out why he treated her that way."

SO THAT explained why Dot's absence from the doctor's office had gone unnoticed this morning.

"What was this accident the doctor suffered?" the Baron asked.

"Why . . . he fell in his private laboratory. Face downward into some beakers and glass tubing. He was lucky not to blind himself."

"Did you find out why he fired your friend?"

"No. But the man has queer habits. For instance, there's the articulated skeleton he keeps in his private office. Often I see him watching the thing. With a look in his eyes that gives me the creeps. It scares me."

"Maybe just imagination."

"There are other things," the girl went on hurriedly. "He hasn't paid a single bill since I came to work with him. Yet I know he has plenty of money; I keep his checkbook. But when I make up checks for him to sign he puts them in a desk drawer. He says he sprained his wrist at the time of his fall. But I went into his office unexpectedly the other day and he was writing."

"Hmmm." The Baron was thoughtful.

"He can't remember the names of his longtime patients, either. Seems to avoid them. Tells me to say his engagement book is full, when it really isn't."

"I'm glad you told me all this, baby," the Baron said. "It changes things. And the way to play it is to keep your mouth shut tight and your ears open wide."

After saying goodbye to the nurse, the Baron went straight to a pay station, called his newspaper friend.

"Anything for me yet on Rosalie Compton?"

"She was out that night with a man by the name of Ed Dachen," Walter informed him. "Dachen must have had a snootful. He managed to wrap the car around a lamp post. They were both treated at Emergency Hospital. The girl's arm injury showed up serious on the hospital records, so I guess there's no doubt you've bought yourself a nice claim."

"Tell me more about this man Dachen," the Baron said.

"Don't know any more."

"I hate to keep bothering you, Walter," the Baron went on, "but I'll have plenty of chances to repay the favor. If you can get any dope on Dachen, it will be a big help."

The Baron drove next to Emergency Hospital. He didn't learn much there. Ed Dachen had suffered severe face lacerations in going through the car windshield. He had been three days in the hospital.

The Baron put the company car in the parking lot near the office. He phoned the office from the Live-and-Let-Live Lunchroom, just around the corner. He instructed the clerical supervisor to have a release drawn on the Seward claim in amount of forty thousand dollars.

"And listen, Ruth," he said. "When it's ready, send it to me over at the lunchroom, will you? And don't say anything about

this to Mehary.”

Mehary, he knew, would froth at the mouth over a forty grand settlement. Furthermore, even Mehary lacked authority for such a large payment without Home Office approval. But the Baron had no intention of handing the release to Rosalie Compton.

When the girl finally brought him the papers, the Baron drove back immediately to Seward’s clinic. He gave the papers to the pretty brunette nurse, whose name was Jeanne Harper.

“Get the doctor to sign each copy,” he instructed. “And I’ll be seeing you later.”

The Baron went back to the office. This time he barged in boldly, went to his desk. Mehary was busy in his private sanctum. In half an hour the Baron’s phone rang. The girl’s voice at the other end of the line was so low he didn’t recognize it until she gave her name. Jeanne Harper.

“The doctor is doing something very queer,” she informed him. “I thought I should inform you right away.”

“Good girl.”

“That release,” she said. “Seward took it and stuck it in his desk with those unsigned checks. But I happened to walk into his office a moment ago. He had it up against a windowpane. Looked as if he were tracing a signature.”

The Baron felt a sudden surge of excitement, mixed with alarm. “Did Seward see you?”

“I don’t think so,” she whispered. “I backed out very quietly.”

The connection clicked off abruptly. The Baron jiggled the hook. The line was completely dead. Immediately he set the receiver back on its hook, the phone rang again. He picked up the instrument.

“This is Walter, Baron. Your man Dachen has a police record. So I had no trouble getting that dope.”

“Yes? Spill it. Quick!”

“The man comes from the Middle West,” Walter told the Baron. “Went to a third rate medical school. Turned into a disreputable quack and was thrown out of the Medical Association. Served two years prison term for illegal surgery. Strange thing, though, Dachen’s half-brother, Atlee Seward, is one of our own best doctors.”

“What!” the Baron yelled the word so loud clerks across the general office looked around amazed.

Mehary’s bulk appeared at the door of his private lair. The Baron pronged the receiver with a bang. He leaped to his feet.

“Can’t stop for you now, boss,” he called over his shoulder as he sprinted for the door.

In the hall on his way to the elevators, Mehary’s bull bellow floated after him. Mehary was telling the world in no uncertain terms that Bill Tolliver was no longer on the payroll of Imperial Casualty.

That didn’t worry the Baron. But he was badly worried, nevertheless. The new facts he had just learned threw formerly puzzling angles of the Compton case into clear focus.

He feared that something much more vital than a forty thousand dollar payment was involved. More killing seemed imminent.

He hoped he might move with sufficient speed to prevent the death of Jeanne Harper. So far as Dr. Seward was concerned, he felt certain he was already too late.

The reception room of the clinic was vacant as he barged in. Jeanne Harper was not at her desk. The Baron flung open the door to the surgeon’s private office. That was empty, too.

Drawn venetian blinds shut out the rapidly fading daylight of the waning afternoon. As the spring door swung

silently shut behind him, the Baron found himself enveloped in murky gloom. Gloom in which something moved stealthily with a dry, rustling sound.

The Baron whirled, heart pounding heavily at the noise. Something white stood in the corner behind him. Breath burst from the Baron's lips in a stifled gasp of relief. It was only the skeleton Jeanne Harper had mentioned to him. Draft from the closing door had rattled the dead bones to momentary, tinkling life.

Another door at the far side of the office led into a narrow corridor with stairs at the far end. The Baron stepped out onto the terrazzo floor on tiptoe, allowing the door to shut quietly behind him.

No windows opened from the hallway. Soft light came from indirect lighting fixtures in the ceiling. The Baron was halfway along the corridor toward the stairs and the upper floors when these lights went out.

HE STOPPED stock still. It was black as the inside of an ink bottle. Somewhere behind him he heard the faint click of a door latch. Then the Baron caught the almost imperceptible sound of someone breathing near him in the dark.

He went rigid. He couldn't seem to locate the direction of the breathing. Swift realization swept across him that the person who had turned the lights off knew exactly where he was standing. Even now, the killer might be slipping up on him in the blackness.

The Baron moved. Even as he stepped aside to get his back against the wall, the blow fell. A single smashing blow against the side of his head.

The Baron fell, out cold for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. He didn't know when the ceiling lights came on again.

Consciousness returned with the awareness that his skull was like a "butterfly bomb," ready to explode at the slightest movement. The pain of it kept the Baron lying quiet a moment. Then, when he did attempt to move, he discovered himself to be securely tied; hand and foot.

He was still in darkness, but not the total darkness of the inside hallway. Faint, gray light penciled the rectangles of windows across from where he lay. And with the spidery lines it etched something tall and white looming nearby and above him.

The Baron knew then where he was. The white figure would be the skeleton. He had been dragged back into Seward's office. As his eyes accommodated themselves to the gloom he could distinguish the massive oblong of the doctor's desk, the higher, more slender bulk of filing cabinets.

The fact that fading daylight still showed at the windows, told him he had not been unconscious very long. Even so, a short time could have been enough to mean death for Jeanne Harper.

Fully alert now, galvanized into action in spite of the protesting throb of his head, the Baron wriggled painfully toward the dim white outline of the skeleton. He knew he must work fast if he had any hope of saving the girl. Or himself.

He dug his fingers into the carpet, pulling himself inch by inch until finally he was able to touch the bony feet of the skeleton. The feel of it almost made him sick. For those dry bones, he felt quite certain, were not old. Only recently they had been covered by the warm flesh of a living man!

The Baron's fingers closed about the skeleton foot. He jerked hard. The vertebrae framework rattled above him like castanets. He knew the sound might

summon the killer, but there was no other way of escape.

He jerked again, rolling at the same time. The skeleton, pulled free from the wires on which it hung suspended, dropped. The Baron's own body muffled the sound of its fall. He found himself tangled in a crazy jumble of bones.

WITH one tethered hand he wrenched at them, levering with the weight of his body. A bone let go with a brittle snap. The Baron fought against insistent nausea.

Using the jagged edges of the broken bone as a file against the fettering cords was a matter of patient, tedious labor. Actually not more than ten minutes elapsed before he crawled painfully to his feet, free from his bindings.

He stooped, wrenched the big thigh bone of the skeleton free from its wires, hefted it in his hand. The Baron was armed now. The heavy femur bone made an excellent club.

From beyond the windows he could hear traffic in the street. But inside the clinic was only silence. He crossed the room on tiptoe, eased the door to the corridor open soundlessly.

On the second door of the clinic, soft overhead lights were on. As the Baron reached the top of the stairs he heard the faint drone of a voice from beyond a door marked Physiotherapy. One voice, muffled, carrying on a monologue. He crept closer.

The Baron pressed his ear against the door panel as he began to turn the knob with imperceptible slowness. His other sweating hand clutched the thigh bone tightly.

The voice inside the room was going on. An implacable voice, with a note of gloating triumph. ". . . every time I look at his skeleton it makes me feel good. It was a pleasure to kill him. Because I could

have been a great success, too. But after our mother died, my stepfather gave him every advantage. I got nothing."

The tone changed, became almost regretful. "If you'd minded your business, this wouldn't have happened. Now I can't let you live, of course. Any more than I could afford to have the Rochelle girl alive. I shall simply have to acquire two more skeletons. Yours and that of the insufferable insurance man—"

The unoiled doorknob let out a sudden squeal. The Baron stiffened. The voice inside the room had stopped instantly.

There wasn't a split second to lose. The Baron flung the door wide, sprang inside.

The room was a big one, filled with physical therapy apparatus. On a rubber-tired hospital stretcher under a bright light near the center of the room, lay the pinioned nurse. Jeanne Harper's wide, dark eyes stared up with horrified fascination into the scarred face of the man known as Dr. Atlee Seward bending above her.

The surgeon held a hypodermic syringe in his right hand. It was filled with some clear, colorless liquid. His thumb rested on the plunger.

His head swiveled toward the door as the Baron burst in.

Recovering from the initial shock of surprise, Seward dropped the syringe. It shattered on the terazzo floor. The man's hand slid inside his coat. But before he could get the gun free, the Baron hit him, putting all his strength behind the downsweep of the heavy thigh bone.

The pudgy surgeon raised his hands feebly as if to ward off the attack. The Baron hit him again.

"This will help even the score," he grunted. "You'll have the headache this time."

The doctor folded up, sank to the floor

like a deflated balloon.

The Baron rushed over to the pinioned girl, ripped the gag from her mouth, slit the cords that bound her.

The girl's eyes were enormous.

"Thank God you got here when you did," she breathed. She motioned toward the senseless man on the floor. "He—he isn't Doctor Seward at all. He—"

The Baron nodded.

"I know," he said gently. "I learned about it just after you'd called me. This man actually is Ed Dachen, Seward's worthless half-brother. He got those scars in an automobile accident and was planning to cash in on his brother's reputation for all the money he could get."

His bright, black eyes flickered to the bone he still held in his hand. "Retributive justice," he grinned. "His own victim was the cause of his ultimate downfall."

The girl shrank away from the bone.

"But how terrible! How absolutely awful!"

The Baron's triumphant grin faded.

"Isn't it! To remove the flesh from his victim's bones. The same fate we might have suffered."

Overcome with sudden revulsion, he dropped the late Dr. Atlee Seward's leg bone on top of the unconscious slayer.

Dashing his spoon vigorously into his cup of steaming coffee, the Baron grinned across the table in the Live-and-Let-Live Lunchroom into the inquiring faces of Walter and Baldy Leigh.

"First crack at this story is your reward for digging up past records for me," he told his newspaper friend. "When you gave me Dachen's name, you provided the key that unlocked the crime. Dachen's facial disfigurement. Dachen was superficially the same size and build as his half-brother. His injured face gave him the chance to pose as Seward without immediate exposure. He made up the fake

accident story of a fall in the laboratory, of course."

"WHERE does the Compton girl come in?" Baldy asked.

"Rosalie actually did go to Doctor Seward after the crash. Then Dachen sold her the idea of bringing the claim. I suppose they were going to split the take."

"And Mangione was in on it, too," Walter said. "That means—"

"Mangione was not really involved at all. He has a crush on Compton. He thought he'd help her. He didn't call the doctor and make any threat. That was just another of Dachen's lies. Dachen first ordered us not to pay, so any vestige of suspicion against himself would be averted.

"Dachen knew no insurance company would expect a top-flight professional man to throw his own career away deliberately. Then he found that Dot Rochelle had been talking with the Harper girl. Dot suspected. She went to see her former boss and realized then that the man was an imposter. Dachen followed her and stabbed her to keep her from talking."

"He sure came pretty near getting away with the whole thing," Baldy said thoughtfully.

The Baron sighed. "Yes. If it hadn't been for the two girls." His bright black eyes burned with a sudden change of mood. "Listen, pal," he said as he turned eagerly to Walter: "When you write this up, you ought to put in about how I'm an expert on bones. If I hadn't known my os innominatum, my fibula and tibia, as well as my own name, this thing might have ended very differently."

Baldy's smile was mocking.

"Outside the company doctor's reports, Baron, I'll bet you'd confuse a fibula with one of your own fibs!"