



THE BARON DUCKS AN OILY DEATH

By Curtiss T. Gardner

*Bill Tolliver Settles an Insurance Complaint
and Runs Head-on into a Case of Murder!*

CHAPTER I

Two Claims

FROM his glassed-in private cubicle, the chunky form of Ellis Mehary, District Claims Manager for Imperial Casualty Company, lumbered out to the small single-bank desk in the outer office where claims adjuster Bill "Baron Munchausen" Tolliver sat talking into the mouthpiece of a dictaphone.

Mehary rested the palms of his big hands on the Baron's desk top, and leaned over.

"Josiah Dingle is in my office, Tolliver," he said. "I want you to come in and help me get rid of him."

An expression of dismay clouded the Baron's lean, leathery features.

"Dingle! That guy is the worst pest in our whole long list of policy holders. He's had everyone in this office jumping through the hoop for him one time or another. What kind of special service is he after today, Boss?"

"It's a collision loss, Tolliver. I'm assigning it to you."

The Baron craned around to look at the clock on the wall over the switchboard near the office entrance.

"Aw, have a heart, Boss! I planned to catch up on my dictation this morning and it's ten-thirty already. Can't Baldy Leigh or one of the other boys attend to it?"

"You're the only man available right now," Mehary said implacably. "And your time is less valuable than my own. Dingle's wasted half an hour for me already. Unless I assign the case right

now, he's likely to be here all day."

The Baron ran a swift, nervous hand through his unruly mop of mouse-colored hair as he pushed the dictaphone aside and got reluctantly to his feet.

"Of all the ear-aches we have to suffer, this guy Dingle's the worst," he complained.

"For once I agree with you," Mehary admitted. "But the assured has a lot of money, even if he is as tight as the skin on an onion. He's influential. We can't afford to antagonize him."

The man in the visitor's chair beside Mehary's desk was better than average size, though considerably smaller than Imperial's massive District Manager. Middle-aged, Dingle had thinning gray hair; small, sullen gray eyes; and he wore an expensive gray tweed suit, the vest of which bulged over a flabby round stomach.

DINGLE acknowledged Mehary's introduction of the Baron with a curt nod. He started to talk instantly.

"I expect a prompt and generous settlement, young man, without quibbling and waste of time."

"We're busy people too," the Baron said bluntly. "The quicker we can dispose of your claim, the better we'll like it. What kind of a car do you have, Mr. Dingle?"

"A Nineteen-Forty-one Packard Clipper, four-door sedan."

"What damage was done?"

"Quite a lot. The front fenders are crumpled, the radiator smashed, the windshield broken and the body dented."

The Baron whistled. "You must have smacked a truck!"

For no apparent reason, Dingle seemed angry.

"I didn't hit anything," he said shortly.

"Then how was the car damaged?"

"If you'll give me a chance to talk, I'll

tell you." "Dingle's tone took on an edge of heavy sarcasm. "I left the car parked in front of my home last night. It was raining, but I hardly think the raindrops could have done the amount of damage I discovered when I came out this morning. Some drunk evidently plowed into the car."

"Maybe hard words did the job," the Baron suggested. "How much do you expect us to pay?"

"I'll take the car around to the Packard people," Dingle said. "In addition to the body damage, the car will have to be repainted. I like a special shade of gray." His tone became smooth, as if he were trying to do a sales job. "After such an accident the car may never be right again. I was thinking maybe I should trade it in and—"

"Maybe we should arrange to have the horn jacked up and run a new car under it?" the Baron interrupted innocently.

Dingle drew himself up, offended.

"I don't know that I like your attitude, young man. Do you know anything at all about cars?"

"Who, me?" The Baron pretended enormous surprise. "Why, I'm probably the top expert on car costs in the whole country. Let me tell you how the biggest automobile manufacturers of America tried to retain me as a consulting—"

"Not now, Tolliver," Mehary broke in hurriedly. "Can't you see Mr. Dingle is in a hurry to get away?" To Dingle he said, "Where can Tolliver see the car?"

"At my home. I left it right where it was. If he can come with me now—"

The phone on Mehary's desk rang.

"Excuse me."

The District Manager picked up the receiver. He spoke for a moment, jotting notes on a scratch pad as he did.

"That was another important claim, Mr. Dingle," he explained, when he hung up. "I'll have to talk with Tolliver about it

before he goes to view your car. But he'll be out during the day without fail."

Dingle went out, muttering to himself about delay and red tape.

"Just because your tall tales have earned you the nickname of Baron Munchausen," Mehary said angrily, after Dingle was beyond ear-shot, "you don't need to inflict your wild imagination on everyone, Tolliver. You knew I was in a hurry to get that man out of here."

"Who's wasting time now, Boss?" the Baron asked calmly. "What was that new grief?"

"Currie Singleton called," Mehary said. "You know, the owner of the Excello Oil Company. One of their tank trucks went into a ditch last night just beyond the city. We've got a fussy sort of property damage claim as a result."

"Why fussy?"

"It seems that fuel oil from the tanker ran out into a brook and from there into a pond where a farmer raises prize ducks. The farmer is raising particular Cain with Singleton. I want you to hop out right away, Tolliver, and see if you can get a release before we run into a lot of extra complications."

THE Baron looked at Mehary quizzically.

"How about Dingle? Have you changed your mind about dropping everything for his benefit?"

"Get onto the Excello Oil matter first," Mehary decided. "We have their fleet and a lot more is involved than with an individual auto owner, even if Dingle is important. But you ought to clean both items out of the way before afternoon, if you'll shake out the lead."

"This job is like sweeping back the waves of the sea," the Baron lamented. "Maybe if I were an octopus with eight arms and legs, I could catch up with

myself sometime."

Mehary's shaggy head bent over the reports on the cluttered desk.

"It's very inconsiderate of these people to have losses, Tolliver," he said. "But if they didn't, you'd be looking for another job. Did you ever think of that?" He ripped off the sheet of scratch paper on which he had been scribbling. "The farmer's name is Joe Keene. Here's his address. Now get out of here and let me have some peace and quiet."

CHAPTER II

Mystery Crash

ABOUT three miles beyond the city limits out the new Bay Highway, a painted finger pointed into a gravel road and neatly lettered words read:

BREEZEWAY FARM

As the Baron wheeled his small, battered company car into the side road he saw the wrecked oil tanker on its side in the ditch a few hundred feet farther along the highway. A wrecker crew was busy trying to get it out.

The farm buildings stood back not more than five hundred feet from the road, neat and well-kept in appearance. In front of the large new-looking barn, a sizable pond was filled with white ducks. More waddled, quacking, around the yard adjoining.

Joe Keene was a tall, raw-boned man with a hog caller's raucous voice. He hitched up his work-stained overalls and said to the Baron:

"Step over here a minute, mister."

The Baron did. Keene pointed. The water in the pond glistened with iridescent oily streaks.

"Run down that there brook," the farmer said. "You can see it still a-comin' in. My ducks is goin' to be ruined."

"Is that so?" The Baron was extremely polite. "I always thought ducks were waterproof."

"Yeah. But not oilproof, mister. Oil and ducks is like oil and water: they don't mix. When they get their feathers soiled it makes 'em unhappy."

"It would be too bad to have a pond full of unhappy fowl," the Baron said gravely. "But the problem involved for me is a tricky one."

The farmer was busy working, on a back molar with a matchstick. He regarded his visitor with suspicion.

"What's tricky about it, mister?" he demanded to know.

"How to make a settlement with you," the Baron explained, "when no actual loss has been suffered other than the injured feelings of the ducks."

"It's goin' to cost cash money," Joe Keene declared. "If them ducks is unhappy they won't breed and they won't lay eggs. And a lot of 'em will up and die. Somebody's got to pay, and it ain't a-goin' to be me, mister."

"I see your point," the Baron admitted reasonably. "We should be able to work out some satisfactory solution to the problem. What would you consider a fair price for your release of a possible future claim?"

Keene chewed the end of his match reflectively.

"That there oil is goin' to soak into the ground and my pond will be spoiled for keeps," he finally said. "Tell you what, mister. If your company will build me a new pool—a concrete one—and do it right away before my ducks die, I'll forget about askin' for any money."

The Baron grinned good-naturedly. "I guess you would. Why it would cost a thousand dollars or more to build an artificial pool. Cheaper to let the ducks die and pay for them."

An angry light came into the farmer's eyes.

"I think a heap of them ducks, mister. They're like part of the family. If your company won't build a new pool it'll be the same as if you murdered 'em."

"Murder is rather a drastic term," the Baron observed. "Since they're headed for the oven eventually anyhow. But my company always wants to be fair. Tell you what. I'll give you a hundred dollars cash on the line, right now, to sign a release."

"A hundred bucks!" Keene snorted. "Nothin' doin'. Them big insurance companies is all the same. Always tryin' to chisel the poor man. Why, them ducks is prize winners! They're worth a heap of dough. Lot more than a hundred bucks."

"You're squawking before you're hurt, brother." The Baron kept his temper with an effort. "You could easily put up some wire to keep the birds away from that water if it's likely to injure them. For a hundred dollars—"

A black expression settled on Joe Keene's homely face.

"You heard me, mister. I ain't goin' to settle for no hundred bucks. You can go back and tell that there oil company I'm goin' to sue for plenty."

"The way you say that sounds like blackmail! You haven't lost a thin dime—yet. And you don't have to lose anything."

The farmer turned his back to the Baron and moved away.

"Don't care what it sounds like to you," he said over his shoulder. "If you don't want to make a square deal with me you can get off'n my property."

The Baron swiveled on his own heel. His good humor was gone.

"I'm on my way, brother. You're like your name, a wise guy. You'd better think over my offer. It still stands."

BUT as he backed the company car out of the farmer's yard, the Baron was worried. This nuisance claim could mean trouble and loss of time entirely disproportionate with the claim involved. Mehary would certainly throw a fit over spending a lot of the company's money when no actual loss had been incurred.

On the other hand, it would not do to involve a desirable policy holder like Excello Oil in a legal wrangle. From past experience the Baron sized up Joe Keene as the type who would worry the assured to death about his claim until he was satisfied.

The Baron shrugged. Maybe Keene would be more reasonable after he'd had a little time to think things over. In the meantime, it would be wise to make a thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding the ditching of the tank truck. So his files would be complete if the farmer followed his threat and started legal proceedings.

As he drove back the short distance to the highway, the Baron craned from the window watching the course of the short brook. He could see the green-blue of oil along the whole course of the little stream. Where the gravel road joined the paved highway, the brook passed through a culvert.

The Baron ran his company car onto the road shoulder just before he reached the wrecked tanker and got out.

The wrecker crew had placed timbers in the ditch beside the ditched oil truck and were jacking it into an upright position before attaching chains to drag it back to the pavement. The Baron stood for a moment watching the work, then stepped down into the ditch himself.

His sharp black eyes studied the ground carefully. Beside the tanker, long grass was gummy with oil. The remains of what had evidently been a deep pool of the

stuff was still draining down the gentle slope of the ditch to the culvert and the brook.

Stepping gingerly, to avoid getting oil on his clothes, the Baron moved to the edge of the culvert. Large brown burrs caught on his pants legs. He stooped to pick them off. On the rocks at the edge of the running water were whitish objects. Feathers, soft and fluffy.

From Joe Keene's ducks, the Baron remarked mentally. Undoubtedly the birds wandered at times from their pond. So far, at least, along the stream as the culvert. He climbed out of the ditch and walked up past the wrecker.

Diagonally opposite the ditched tank truck, a macadam feeder road entered Bay Highway. The Baron did not miss the skid marks on the concrete pavement which showed where the truck had swerved and skidded before landing in the ditch. Nor the fragments of broken glass on the other side of the roadway. To his experienced eyes, the picture presented by these details was quite clear.

As he walked back past the wrecker to his own car, the tank truck was coming up from the ditch. With interest the Baron noted streaks of gray scored deeply into the black fenders of the truck. The windshield was not shattered.

His mental picture of the accident was clarified in detail as he drove away for the headquarters of the Excello Oil Company.

The company was a comparatively small concern whose business was confined to fuel oil sales for home heating and industrial use. Currie Singleton, a neatly dressed man of about thirty-three, greeted the Baron with the smile of a professional salesman.

"Sorry to cost your company money, Tolliver," he said apologetically. He ran a hand over his smoothly plastered black hair. "I think my fleet record is still

profitable for you though. This is the first claim we've reported in a long time."

"Accidents are our reason for being in business," the Baron said with a grin, remembering Mehary's words. "It's only that this farmer, Keene, seems a pretty unreasonable customer. I don't want him to be worrying you. I thought maybe it would be best to talk with your driver who had the accident, if you don't mind."

"I'm a little embarrassed, Tolliver," the oil company owner admitted. "It happens I'm the one you want to see. I'm short of help and my men have begun to complain about long hours. One thing I want to avoid—if I possibly can—is labor trouble. So I took out that truck myself last night to make some rush deliveries."

"I visited the scene of the accident," the Baron said. "Just want to check my own impressions. You sideswiped another car, didn't you?"

"It was the other fellow's fault," Singleton said quickly.

THE phrase was familiar to the Baron. Seldom in his years of claims work had he ever found a case which was not the other fellow's fault.

"I'd just made a delivery at Frank's Trailer Park, a mile farther out Bay Highway," Singleton went on. "On my way back to town this car cut out of the side road directly opposite to me. He didn't hit me very hard, but when I swerved to avoid him, the truck went off into the ditch."

"Did you get this other guy's name and license number?"

"No, Tolliver. Unfortunately I didn't. The fact is, my head hit the windshield frame when I went off the road. I was knocked out for a few minutes. When I came to again, the other car had gone. He must not have suffered much damage."

"You were lucky," the Baron said

dryly. "You might have gone through the glass and cut your throat. Maybe you can still give us a lead. You must have seen the other car before the crash?"

Singleton tilted in his desk chair, fingering his small black mustache thoughtfully.

"It all happened so quickly, Tolliver," he said. "All I remember is a gray car looming suddenly. A big sedan. I think it was a Packard, but I wouldn't swear to that."

The Baron got to his feet. "Well, thanks. That's a help. We may try to check the repair shops for a car of that description. Maybe—"

He left the remainder of his thought unfinished. Ideas were beginning to associate in his restless mind. Josiah Dingle with a gray Packard which had been mysteriously damaged. If Dingle had hit the truck, he would have been protected for property damage, but could not have collected for his own loss under the collision clause of the policy.

Odd, if investigation of the duck claim should tie in with the troublesome, tightfisted auto policy holder who had stormed out of Mehary's office.

His next step, the Baron decided as he left the Excello Oil Company's office, should be to check Singleton's story at Frank's Trailer Park. Leg work and interviews at this stage of an investigation frequently paid unexpected dividends when a claim came to the point of litigation, as this one seemed likely to do.

CHAPTER III

Woman in the Closet

FRANK'S Trailer Park was a sun-baked, almost treeless tract of land off Bay Highway, where a number of wooden buildings had been erected and a motley

collection of trailers were ranged in straggling rows between a series of parallel dirt roadways.

Half-way through the camp, an unlighted, red neon sign proclaimed: "Eats." Across the road from the lunchroom, a dingy frame bungalow bore the legend, "Park Office." The Baron knocked at the door and soon found himself talking to Frank, a heavy-set, crotchety individual who hobbled with a cane on account of two cheap artificial legs.

"Don't talk to me about the Excello Oil Company," the man grumbled in reply to the Baron's question. "Fine service! They let us run dry of oil, until we couldn't even heat our showers. Do they think my customers are Eskimos? Just because people live in trailers they don't want to cut a hole through ice to take a bath."

"Didn't Excello make an emergency delivery last night?"

Frank banged his cane angrily on the porch floor.

"Got me out of bed at one in the morning, they did! Cost me an hour's sleep. So today my stumps hurt like a toothache. I can even feel my toes ache and I haven't had any toes for more than a year."

"That's tough," the Baron sympathized. "How did you lose your legs?"

"Fell under a train. Might better have been killed than go on like this. Everything's sour."

The Baron glanced up at the cloudless sky.

"Cheer up!" he urged. "At least it's a beautiful day."

"What's good about it?" Frank demanded. "Since last evening my Number One spot's messed up. And Nina ran off leaving me in the lurch."

"Your daughter?" the Baron asked with polite interest.

"Nina Mansfield is a bleach-blond adleplate!" Frank sounded vindictive. He raised his cane to point to the lunchroom across the road. "I depended on her to run my eating place and help me with the camp. Without her I'm sunk. I knew she'd been running around with some guy for months. Last week she told me she'd found out he was married and she intended to put the bite on him for a lot of dough. Instead of that she's checked out with him in the night without even telling me good-bye."

"That does sound like a headache," the Baron admitted. He turned to go. "Well, it's been nice talking to you. I'll be around again."

But Frank was not going to let him escape so easily.

"See that big elm tree yonder?" Frank asked. He took the Baron by the shoulder with a vise-like grip while he pointed with his cane. "That's my Number One spot. I've got a steady customer who comes for a month's fishing every year when the blues are running in the Bay. Insists on that particular space account of the shade. So I spent yesterday afternoon getting it all cleaned out nice for him. Then what happens? Someone pulls that gray trailer in during the night and sets it under the tree without saying a word to anyone. Now I'll have to pay to have it dragged out."

"Why not get them to move it themselves?"

"It's locked," Frank said. "And the owner hasn't showed up. Makes me want to choke someone. You know, I even saw that gray Packard pull in with it about two a.m., but didn't know what was happening."

The Baron's attention was suddenly arrested.

"A gray Packard?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. I couldn't get back to sleep after the oil delivery, so I got up to take one of my pink pills. I saw the sedan, but cars are always coming and going here and I had no idea it had dropped off the trailer at that time of night."

Leaving Frank, the Baron decided his next call should fulfill Mehary's promise to Dingle that he would look at the claimant's car before the day ended.

Dingle's home was a large brick house set back in a spacious lawn. As the Baron drove up he expected to see the damaged Packard parked in front, but it was not there.

Josiah Dingle was his usual disagreeable self.

"Took you long enough to get here, Tolliver," he greeted the Baron coldly.

"You're getting extra special service for someone to call the same day your claim was reported," the Baron replied shortly. "Let's see the crate now."

Dingle insisted upon being nasty.

"It's insulting that you people won't take my word about the damage," he complained.

The Baron grinned. "You shouldn't feel that way. Even a hundred-million-dollar insurance company could go broke in a year if they didn't investigate claims before paying out." He added slyly, "Everyone isn't honest—like you."

DINGLE appeared to be stymied by that last thrust. Without further conversation he led the way around the big house to the garage in back. A gray Packard stood in the driveway.

With smashed fenders and broken windshield it was quite as sorry-looking a sight as Dingle had implied.

Note-book and pencil in hand, the Baron circled the car, checking each item that obviously needed repair, jotting it

down. At the rear of the car he stopped, peering at steel angle-irons and a two-inch steel ball which had been welded to the chassis just below the wide chromium bumper. He got down on his knees to look up under the car.

When he got to his feet, he said, "How about the trailer, Mr. Dingle?"

A blank expression came over Dingle's flabby face.

"What trailer?"

"You've put helper springs on this car, I see," the Baron said. "And a ball-hitch. You wouldn't have those without a trailer."

Sudden comprehension seemed to strike Dingle.

"Oh, that. Fact is, Tolliver, I had my car rigged that way because I've been considering a trailer for a trip to Florida next winter."

"You believe in taking time by the forelock," the Baron observed dryly.

Dingle drew himself up stiffly. "I pride myself on my foresight, Tolliver."

"I believe that." The Baron's inflection was curious. "Well, don't forget, when you do buy that trailer, have it added to your policy. Otherwise your car insurance would be void. That's one of the 'standard exceptions' to the automobile policy."

"I'm aware of that, Tolliver. I always read my insurance contracts."

"Then you're one in ten thousand," the Baron said. "Most people take protection for granted, and that means trouble. By the way, weren't you out Bay Highway direction last night?"

Dingle's expression did not alter in the slightest, but a change came into his sullen eyes that the Baron did not miss. "Bay Highway?" he repeated. "Why, no. I haven't been down toward the shore for a long time."

The Baron put the note-book back in his pocket. "Well, I guess that's that. I'll

get in touch with you in twenty-four hours or so about having the car repaired.”

Dingle jumped as though he had been stung.

“Why that’s outrageous, Tolliver! I need my car. Why can’t I have the Packard people come after it right away?”

“These things take a little planning,” the Baron evaded. “But we won’t delay a moment longer than necessary, I promise.”

Dingle was complaining bitterly as the Baron drove away, but the Baron grinned to himself.

“I’m burning plenty of Imperial’s gasoline today,” he remarked to himself. “But there ought to be a handsome profit in the deal for the company.”

By now the afternoon had commenced to wear thin. His stomach as well as the settling dusk reminded the Baron he had eaten nothing since morning but some coffee and sinkers before his call at Currie Singleton’s office.

He remedied the difficulty at a small restaurant before heading back clear across town to Bay Highway. After his meal he went on for his second call of the day at Frank’s Trailer Park. Leaving the company car parked off the road shoulder shortly before he reached the camp entrance, he walked the remaining distance.

By now it was quite dark. Lights had blossomed in the windows of many trailers in the long rows. The gypsy life of the place floated out to him on the faint night breeze in odors of cooking food, snatches of radio programs, and the bark of dogs.

No lights or other signs of life were evident, however, in the big gray trailer under the elm tree as the Baron approached silently, circling to the trailer door on the side away from the camp. He stood listening for a long moment before starting to work on the lock with the little

steel gadget he always carried on his key ring.

That this was breaking and entering, he was well aware. Same as if he were making an unauthorized entrance into someone’s house. But in his mind small things, unimportant in themselves, were beginning to add. Inside the trailer might be the sum total he needed. To attain that end he felt the risk was justified.

The trailer was neat, compact, reminding him of a Pullman drawing room. He had come in the kitchen entrance. His hand hesitated near a lamp over the electric hot plates and sink. But a light might attract Frank’s attention. The pencil flash clipped to his inside coat pocket would be safer.

THE thin beam showed him a folding divan in the living room at the other end of the trailer, a built-in chest of drawers, and a small knee-hole desk. Between kitchen and living room, as he stepped forward, a built-in clothes closet attracted his attention. On impulse he pressed the latch down, pulled the door open.

With the light in his fingers, he had a swift impression of hangers with a few odds and ends of clothing. And of a mass of loose flying hair gleaming brassily in the reflected flashlight beam. The girl’s eyes, below the blond hair were blank, distended and already glazed.

She was dead!

Even as the body started to topple toward him from the shallow closet, the Baron felt the trailer tremble from a footstep behind his back. He whirled, ducking instinctively. But not quickly enough to avoid the glancing blow on the side of his head which sent him sprawling to the linoleum-covered floor with the girl’s body on top of him.

Specks of light incredibly far away swam before the Baron's uncomprehending eyes. As he stared dazedly, they moved slowly into clearer focus. Actually he could reach out his hand and touch them. On the dashboard of the automobile in which he was sitting.

He groaned and moved, touching something soft and yielding at his side. Reflex pulled him around involuntarily. Shock clarified his brain.

This was his own company car. On the seat beside him the body of the dead woman from the locked gray trailer had been propped. His fingers sought the light switch. His headlights sprayed the edge of a sloping bank at his right, covered thickly with tangled underbrush. To his left ran the white width of a concrete pavement.

A lighted Christmas tree growing steadily closer was an approaching truck. With a sudden surge of apprehension, the Baron turned his lights to the dimmers. It wouldn't do for him to be found with a corpse in his car.

When the truck had roared past, he flipped on his inside light. He could see then the excessive rouge, the mascara, the whole blatant artificiality of the girl. She wasn't so young as his first impression had led him to believe, either. Or maybe dissipation had penciled the hard lines around her too-red mouth, and darkened the skin beneath her staring eyes.

The Baron reached over to unfasten the heavy woolen scarf knotted loosely around her throat. Something stabbed his fingers. He drew back with an involuntary exclamation. Then he saw the cluster of brown, spiny burrs caught in the weaves of the cloth. And something else—a large dark stain on the side of her dress nearest him. Blood, he thought instantly. But it was not. It was black, instead of brownish-red. And greasy rather than sticky, as he tested it gingerly between his fingertips.

Then the scarf came away and he saw how she had died. Red-purple welts along the line of her plump throat where deadly choking fingers had shut off her breath. And her life.

As he leaned closer, a splotch of white in the brassy yellow of the woman's bleached hair caught his attention. A downy white feather. The Baron picked it off.

As he stared at the bit of fluff, he was recalling the culvert near where the Excello tank truck had gone into the ditch. And the rocks along the brook where Joe Keene's prize ducks sometimes wandered.

CHAPTER IV

Fiery Finish

THE Baron turned off the dome light, sat silently for minutes while a picture formed in his mind. A sketchy picture. Nothing photographic. Not plain enough to stand up in any sort of court room, but quite vivid enough to convince himself.

Each heartbeat sent a wave of pain through the Baron's skull. He explored with gentle fingers, found a hard, exquisitely sensitive lump. When he put on his hat again, even the pressure of the felt was painful. The dead woman's scarf, folded several times and packed inside the hat crown helped a little.

After a while he turned the headlights up once more, started the engine. He could not sit alongside the road all night with a corpse as his companion. A few hundred yards showed him he was on the Bay Highway, headed away from the city. About three miles farther out than Frank's Trailer Park. He made a U-turn, drove back.

No light showed from the gray trailer under the elm as he passed the camp

entrance. But the windows of Frank's office-residence were yellow oblongs, and the red neon sign of the camp restaurant winked on and off at fifteen-second intervals.

The Baron kept going. Back into the city. Across to the commercial section of the south side. He drew up in front of a small brick structure, left the dead woman in his car while he used the steel gadget on his key ring for the second time that night. Then he came back to the car.

Carrying the dead woman was surprisingly hard for him. His legs felt weak, his head pounded unmercifully. Breathing heavily by the time he got her inside the office which the building housed, he set her down in a swivel chair behind a big flat-top desk.

By the light of his pencil flash he consulted the telephone directory, then dialed a number. He could hear the pulsating buzz of the phone at the other end of the line, but no one answered the ring.

Suddenly lights flashed on in the dark room. Blinking in the unexpected glare, the Baron turned. Just inside the door stood Currie Singleton. The oil man's dark, handsome face wore an expression of amazement.

"What is the meaning of this, Tolliver?" Singleton demanded.

The Baron set the telephone receiver back gently on its breaker bar.

"I was just trying to call you."

"Why?" Singleton's head nodded toward the dead woman in the chair. His features registered revulsion now instead of surprise. "Who is—that?"

"What I was going to ask you," the Baron said. "I thought you might have seen her near the place where your truck was upset last night."

Singleton crossed the room to his desk, bent to look at the face of the corpse.

"What made you think that, Tolliver?" he asked.

"There's oil spilled on her clothing and—" the Baron said.

He broke off abruptly. Singleton had whipped open the top desk drawer. When he straightened, he held a pre-war model .38 Colt revolver in his hand.

"Go on, Tolliver," the oil man commanded. "What else?"

"She's Nina Mansfield, isn't she, Singleton? You've been playing around with her for quite a while. Then she found you were a married man with some dough, and tried to blackmail you, so—"

"So I made sure her mouth would stay shut." No ingratiating salesman's smile hovered on Singleton's thin lips now. "You haven't been very smart yourself, Tolliver."

The Baron knew Singleton spoke the literal truth. Things had not gone at all as he had planned. After phoning Singleton to come to the office, he had expected to hide where he could watch the man's reaction upon discovery of his victim. To trap him, perhaps in an attempt to dispose of the corpse. But now it was Singleton's advantage.

"What you told me this afternoon about your accident was true, except for certain details."

As the Baron spoke he moved slowly nearer Singleton. He was talking for time, measuring the distance between himself and the other man, gathering himself for swift, explosive action. But Singleton still had almost the width of the room between them.

"You picked up Nina at Frank's camp after delivering that oil," the Baron accused. "You choked her. Then, before you'd had a chance to dispose of the body that other car forced you off the road. But you weren't knocked out, like you told me. The driver of the other car was the one

who got the bump.”

The Baron edged closer by another foot.

“You didn’t mention that the gray Packard had a trailer hitched behind,” he went on. “The trailer gave you a chance to dispose of Nina. You carried her inside before the other driver regained consciousness. You knew he was at fault, and wouldn’t report the wreck if you didn’t make a claim against him. If it hadn’t been for that farmer’s damage claim you might have been able to get away with murder.”

SINGLETON’S lips were a hard, straight line beneath his small black mustache.

“I won’t bother to deny that you’ve reconstructed things pretty well,” he said coolly. “But you’ve made one wrong statement. I’m still quite in the clear. It should be obvious I can’t afford to let you live after this, Tolliver.”

The Baron tried bluffing, “I phoned the police just before you came in here.”

The bluff didn’t work, “That’s a lie, Tolliver,” Singleton declared. “I followed you closely. You hadn’t time. . . Stand back!”

The last words were shouted as the Baron launched himself forward in a headlong dive at the oil man’s legs. His clutching arms missed their hold as Singleton stepped back quickly. The long barrel of the revolver swung down savagely. It missed a clean hit, but clipped the Baron a glancing blow on the side of the head.

Sharp pain surged through the Baron. Nina Mansfield’s scarf, folded in the crown of his hat, broke most of the blow’s force, but he still was knocked groggy by the added injury to his painfully swollen scalp. He rolled, made a feeble attempt to get up, and found himself looking into the

round black hole of the business end of the gun.

He dropped back on the floor, groaned, and let his eyes close. He made no resistance while Singleton tied his hands and feet with stout cords. Breathing with slow regularity, he continued to feign unconsciousness when he was lifted, carried outdoors, and hoisted up into a hard seat. He opened his eyes as Singleton’s feet crunched gravel, moving away.

He was on the seat of an oil tanker in a garage shed behind the brick office building of the Excello Company. In a few minutes Singleton returned, lifted the body of Nina Mansfield, and propped it stiffly beside the Baron.

“Your company will have another claim tomorrow,” Tolliver heard Singleton remark. “Excello’s good fleet record is going out the window. This time a fire loss. My truck got out of control, crashed off the road and burst into flame. Unfortunately you came along with me to discuss the other claim. And I stopped to give some unknown girl a lift.”

The Baron gave no indication of having heard. His life, he knew, depended entirely upon how well he could keep up his deception. If he could fool the man, he might have a chance. For the cords which bound him would have to be removed before the truck was allowed to burn. The killer’s story of unfortunate chance passengers would never stand up if charred cords were discovered along with the bones of the cremated victims. Singleton was smart enough to know that.

The truck started noisily, backing from the storage yard. For what seemed to the Baron an endless time, it rumbled through night-silent suburban streets before reaching an open road and gathering speed. Meanwhile the Baron’s mind was busy.

Finally the truck stopped. Singleton spoke again.

“Here we are, Tolliver. Nice spot for a bonfire.”

The Baron made a sound like a sodden snore. He hoped Singleton would think he had a fractured skull.

A stinging blow caught him unexpectedly across the face. He clamped his teeth tightly to restrain a cry. Singleton was making certain, testing to make sure he was unconscious before running the tanker off the road. If the man should hit him again with the gun barrel, the Baron knew his last remaining chance to live would be gone.

Singleton didn't hit him. A small spot of light appeared. Through narrowly slitted eyes the Baron risked a look. The man was lighting a cigarette. When the oil had spilled, undoubtedly he would toss it into the pool to start his fireworks. But wasn't the man going to cut him loose?

Singleton fumbled in his pockets for a knife. The cramping cords let go, one at a time, as they were slashed. Carefully Singleton gathered them up as they fell. Finally only the ones which secured the Baron's wrists remained.

Singleton leaned closer with the knife, bending across the dead girl's body. As the Baron felt the last strand start to give, he lunged with all his strength, butting with his head at Singleton's chin, regardless of the dizzying pain that tore through his own lacerated scalp.

He heard the snap of a broken jawbone and the click of the man's teeth coming violently together. Singleton gave a strangled yell. His foot struck the clutch pedal and the tank truck lurched forward into the ditch.

The Baron threw himself to the side, free of the ponderous, falling vehicle. A small red creeper of flame blossomed as Singleton's cigarette came into contact

with spilling oil. In another moment the whole truck was a roaring pillar of fire. . . .

ELLIS MEHARY was waiting impatiently near the railing when the Baron came into the office next morning. The Baron cast an involuntary glance up at the wall clock.

“You're on time for once,” Mehary admitted. “But our friend Dingle came in even earlier. I expected you to keep him out of my hair, Tolliver. Why didn't you let him send that car to the shop? He's threatening all kinds of trouble.”

“Let me talk to him, Boss.” The Baron sounded grim.

Dingle started to talk the moment the Baron and Mehary walked into the private cubicle.

“This delay on my claim is outrageous! I'll write your Home Office. I demand—”

“No need for further delay,” the Baron said quietly. “Get your car fixed, Dingle. Anywhere you wish. Buy a new one if you like. Spend as much as you like on it.”

Dingle looked surprised and relieved. A dark expression settled over Mehary's massive face. He opened his mouth to explode, but the Baron beat him to it.

“He'll be spending his own dough, Boss, so we don't care.”

Dingle's jaw dropped. “My money!”

“Sure.” The Baron spoke to his District Claims Manager. “This man is a chiseler of the first water, Boss. He bought himself a house trailer but was too tight to pay insurance premiums on it. Decided to take a chance. It caught up with him when he rammed the Excello Oil truck. He knew his policy wouldn't cover under the conditions, so he real quick dropped the trailer at Frank's Park without saying boo to anyone. Then he had crust enough to try making us pay his own car damage.”

“You can't prove that!” Dingle

exploded.

“I hope you have as big a headache as you gave me last night, Dingle,” the Baron interrupted, “when you followed me to the camp and conked me.”

A frightened light came into the stout policyholder’s sullen eyes.

“I had nothing to do with that woman!”

“I know that. And I can appreciate that you must have been scared green when you saw her. But it was my head you smacked.” His tone was rough, quite different from the usual way he spoke to a

policyholder. “You should have known you couldn’t get away with your chiseling, Dingle. You had to go back some time for your trailer unless you wanted to lose it. And that would have cost you more than it will to build a new concrete pool for Farmer Keene’s ducks.”

“Ducks?” Dingle was frankly bewildered. “I don’t know anything about ducks.”

“You will, Dingle,” the Baron promised happily. “You will! You’re going to have just the duckiest time I can imagine.”