



Like an angry hornet, the bullet droned past the Baron's ear

THE BARON MAKES A PHOTO FINISH

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

Bill Tolliver, Insurance Investigator, Comes Up Against Some Mighty High-Class Conniving Before He Finally Unearths a Girl's Legacy!

THE redhead at the switchboard disentangled her phone jacks and turned back to Bill "Baron Munchausen" Tolliver, who was leaning toward her across the railing near the entrance to the office of the Imperial Casualty Company.

"So some of us girls are pooling our money on the races at Pimlico tomorrow,"

she said. "We thought maybe you could give us a hot tip, Baron."

"Tip!" the Baron echoed. "Say! I have a mathematically exact system. When they were running at Tropical Park I hit the winner on the nose each race for ten days in succession. It's a scientific formula."

A heavy gray-clad figure appeared in the doorway of a glassed-in space on the

far side of the broad general office.

"Tolliver!" a gruff voice bellowed. "I want you!"

The Baron glanced at the wall clock which stood five minutes before quitting time. He muttered something.

"Why, Baron!" the redhead at the switchboard exclaimed.

A deep scowl creased the Baron's small sharp features as he barged into the private office of Ellis Mehary, District Claims Manager of the Imperial Casualty Insurance Company. It smoothed magically, to be replaced by an ingratiating smile as the Baron pulled up short just inside the door.

It was the girl seated beside Mehary's big walnut desk who caused the rapid change. A demure little thing with wide, lustrous amber eyes and soft chestnut hair. The smile on her face was warm, her eyes friendly as they rested on the Baron.

"This is Miss Laura Billings, Tolliver," said Mehary in the calm, unruffled tone he reserved for policy holders. "We have a Fine Arts Floater policy on a collection of race horse pictures which belonged to her father. She reports that one of these pictures has been stolen."

The girl nodded. "Last week someone stole ten prints. They're mounted ten prints to the frame. And last night whoever it was tried to take another set. Only last night I happened to be home. I'd gone to bed quite early on account of a bad headache. A noise, like something falling in the living room, wakened me. I went to investigate and in the dark someone knocked me down. I screamed and the burglar ran out the back of the house."

"Why didn't you report the loss of the first picture at once?" the Baron asked, his black eyes intent.

The girl hesitated. "I just didn't think of it," she admitted. "The pictures have more of a sentimental than a money value

to me. They were Father's pride and joy, and since that automobile accident—since Father was killed—" She faltered, then her chin came up and she went on. "This morning Mort Thomas, he's my cousin, reminded me of the insurance and suggested that I ought to come by your office."

"Quite right, Miss Billings," Mehary said. "We always want to pay our legitimate claims. But I called Mr. Tolliver to hear what you had to say because I want him to investigate and recover your picture, if possible."

The Baron grunted.

"How'd you know the burglar went out the back of the house, Miss Billings, if it was dark?" he asked suddenly.

"Because Mr. and Mrs. Howard rang the doorbell only a moment later," the girl explained. "And they hadn't seen anybody."

"Who're the Howards?"

"The Belden Howards. He has a position with the Jockey Club—one of their auditors. The Howards were Father's friends."

"Was anyone else around?"

"Yes. Mort's been staying at my house. Trying to straighten out Father's affairs for me. Mort had been reading in his room. He heard me scream and came into the living room right away. But all we found when we looked around was one of Father's pictures on the floor with the glass and the frame broken. Apparently nothing else had been touched. It puzzles me, and scares me, too."

"What would you consider a fair settlement for the one that was stolen, Miss Billings?" Mehary said casually.

The girl seemed uncertain. "Mr. Tomara offered me five thousand dollars for the whole collection. Of course, the prints are more valuable as a collection than they would be individually. But

still—”

SHE was interrupted as the office door was opened unceremoniously. The young man who strode in would have been handsome except for lines of obstinacy around a loose-lipped, weak mouth. He wore smartly tailored English tweeds and an expression of habitual petulance. The Baron's eyes were drawn at once to his bandaged left hand.

“Ready to go, Laura?” the young man asked, nodding slightly to Mehary and the Baron.

“Hello, Mort,” Laura said, smiling. “This is Mr. Tolliver. He's going to try to find my picture.”

Young Thomas ignored the Baron's outstretched hand.

“Get in touch with Frank Mullins then,” he told him curtly. “I've just hired Mullins to protect Laura and guard the rest of the collection.”

The Baron's black eyes were cold as agates. “Cut your hand, Mr. Thomas?” he asked.

Thomas' eyes dropped involuntarily to his bandaged hands.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondered if perhaps you'd cut it on broken picture glass?”

Thomas gave the Baron a frigid stare. “It so happens I cut it on the broken plate of a wall switch,” he said precisely. “But what, please, has that got to do with paying off on your insurance claim?”

The Baron shrugged. “Maybe a lot. We require a proof of loss, you know, before handing out any dough.”

“Is that an insinuation?” Thomas demanded. “I don't think I like your attitude, Tolliver! You'd better see Mullins if you're going to go through a lot of technicalities. Mullins is one of the best detectives in town.”

“In a pig's eye he is,” the Baron said

rudely. “That guy'd have a tough time finding George Washington's picture on a dollar bill.”

“I'm afraid,” the girl broke in quickly, “we've started a profitless argument. You know where to reach me, Mr. Mehary. I'll expect you to honor my claim promptly.”

Ignoring the Baron entirely, she swept from the private office, followed by Thomas.

Mehary turned on the Baron, glowering.

“A fine diplomatic way to deal with policy holders!” he accused. “If you've lost us that account I'll have your hide stuffed and mounted.”

The Baron grinned. “I don't see why the underwriting department ever wrote the account in the first place. Didn't you hear the girl mention Tomara? Don't you know who that girl Laura is? She's the torch singer at Tomara's Club Romaine. I've seen her there. Sure, she's a cute little number all right and I could go for her myself. But anyone hooked up with that chiseling sharpshooter Tomara must be crooked as a swamp cypress.”

Mehary brought the flat of his hand down on the desk top with a crash.

“Listen, gravy-brain! Before you blow through your whale spout you'd better learn a few facts. The girl may sing at Tomara's place but she's the daughter of “Long Shot” John Billings. The big shot race horse owner who died last month. Billings must have been worth a million or more. That girl's a deb!”

“I read the papers, too,” the Baron said coolly. “Like all gamblers, Billings died broke. It's obvious to me that little Laura and her fancy-pants cousin are out after some ready cash—at the expense of Imperial Casualty. They're finagling the pictures to collect insurance. Or else Thomas is doing it by himself to build up the estate so he'll get more when he

marries the girl.”

Mehary drew in his breath and swelled like a bullfrog.

“The boys call you Baron Munchausen on account of your wild yarns,” he growled. “But don’t try your imagination on me. I want facts, not moonshine. Now get out there and see if you can counteract the bad impression you’ve given those people.”

The Baron was talking to himself as he went down in the elevator.

“Always it comes at quitting time! Never fails! Policy holders never think about their insurance except after four in the afternoons or near noon Saturday.”

In the lobby he met “Baldy” Leigh and two other men from the office staff.

“Come on, let’s eat,” the Baron suggested. “Maybe we’re slaves of the dear old Imperial Casualty and have to work twenty-five hours a day. But we don’t have to do it on empty stomachs as long as the old swindle sheet holds out.”

They ate at the Live-and-Let-Live Lunchroom. It was dusk when the Baron turned his company puddle jumper into the short driveway of the Billings’ place.

A CAR whipped out and tore past him. In the dim light the Baron caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver. No mistaking the fat, ugly features. Pete Tomara, owner of the Club Romaine.

“Now what the blue blazes would he be doing out here?” the Baron muttered to himself. And immediately answering his own question, he said, “Helping raise the ante on those pictures, I’ll bet.”

There were lights inside the trim white bungalow, but no one answered the Baron’s ring. After three attempts he tried the door, found it unlatched, and went in.

From the entrance hall he could see the whole living room. There wasn’t a living soul in it. Young Mort Thomas was there,

but he wasn’t living any more.

The Baron was in the room with a single bound. He stooped quickly. But it was useless. The knife buried in Mort Thomas must have brought death instantaneously.

The Baron was still bending over the body when someone came into the room behind him. The Baron whirled, then relaxed. He recognized Hogan of the Homicide Squad. With the city dick were two cops in uniform, who stared at the dead man in open-mouthed surprise.

“Well, well if it ain’t my old friend the insurance man,” Hogan said, bobbing his shaggy head with ponderous sarcasm. “And now you’ve got a swell chance to use that great imagination in figuring yourself an alibi. I suppose you just landed by parachute.”

The Baron straightened. “Don’t be a fool, Hogan. I walked in not more than a minute ago and found—this. How’d you happen to come here?”

“One of the neighbors phoned,” Hogan said. “Said they heard a scream like someone getting killed. It’s a good thing I beat it out here fast. In time to get you red-handed.”

At just this moment a heavy-set man, who wore a derby and looked exactly like the movie version of a private detective, appeared in the doorway. He couldn’t see the dead man because Hogan’s wide bulk blocked his view.

“What’s this—a convention?” he said gruffly. “I’m in charge of this dump. What are you guys doing?”

“We’re playing ‘who-dun-it’, Mullins,” the Baron said softly. “Want to join us?”

“Listen, you,” Mullins said, advancing into the room truculently. “Nobody’s cutting in on my—” He broke off suddenly as his eyes snagged the motionless form on the rug. His mouth fell open, revealing

a row of gold teeth. "Heh! What—"

"Yeah! What? I'll bet ten gallons of gas that you know the answer."

Mullins blinked, took a quick step backward.

"I don't know nothin'," he protested feebly. "Might have been the Billings dame that did it. She and this Thomas guy didn't get along."

"You mean they had a fight?" It was Hogan who spoke.

"Naw," Mullins corrected. "She's one of them wise babies."

"What's going on here?" asked a new voice from the doorway. Everybody swung around and stared.

A small, but broad-shouldered man of middle age stepped into the room. Neatly dressed, he wore a pince-nez attached to a black ribbon. He looked like a prosperous professional man.

The Baron looked at Hogan and grinned.

"Maybe Mullins was right about it's being a convention," he said. "We'd better order up a keg of beer." Then turning on the latest arrival, he said, "You're Howard, I'll bet."

Howard nodded. "I'm looking for Miss Billings," he said. "Where is she? She phoned my wife this afternoon and said she was coming over to spend the night with us. But she hasn't showed up, so—"

His eyes popped as they came to rest on the murdered man. He recoiled, his face contracting into a horrified grimace.

"It's Mort Thomas!" he gasped. "What—how did this happen?"

Suddenly the phone rang. Hogan stepped over and plucked off the receiver.

"Huh? Who? Yeah, he's here."

The Homicide man handed the phone to Howard.

"For you. A dame."

Howard reached for the phone.

"Oh, hello, Laura," he said. "I was

wondering where you were." He listened for a moment, a bewildered expression on his face. Finally he said, "But did you know Mort Thomas has been found dead—murdered? You might be suspected . . . hello—hello!"

HE JIGGLED the hook, then started to put the receiver down.

Hogan sprang forward. "Don't hang up! I want to talk to that dame."

Howard finished pronging the instrument. "She hung up on me."

"What did she say?" demanded Hogan. "Where is she?"

"She asked me to arrange closing up this house for her. Said something had happened that makes it necessary for her to go out of town." Howard shook his head, puzzled. "Said she'd make arrangements to send for her things later."

"See!" Mullins spoke up. "It's plain as the nose on your face. The gal knocks off her cousin and then lams."

"Never mind my nose," Hogan cut in. "Maybe it's plain, but I can smell with it fine. And I say your theory smells, Mullins. I'm arresting Tolliver for murder. I caught the guy still bending over his victim."

"Wait a minute!" the Baron implored. "Don't go off half-cocked, Hogan. You'll get me in even worse with Mehary. There's a lot behind this. Where was Miss Billings, Howard?"

"She didn't say," Howard replied. "Just hung up when I told her about Mort Thomas."

Hogan took the Baron roughly by the arm.

"Come on, wise guy. You aren't going to talk yourself out of this in a hurry."

The Baron followed Hogan toward the door. Suddenly he swung his right leg sideward. Hogan stumbled over it. The Baron raised both hands instantaneously,

put them on Hogan's shoulder and shoved violently. Hogan sprawled squarely into the other two cops and they all went down on the floor together.

The Baron didn't wait to see what happened after that. He sent his flivver roaring out the driveway, took the corner on two wheels. . . .

That night the Baron slept in an obscure uptown hotel. He spent the next day mainly in a dark movie house.

The morning papers showed that the heat was on for him, strong enough to melt an iceberg. Hogan had the whole police force on the qui vive. Mehary was quoted as fearing that the Baron's mind had given way.

After reading the remarks of his District Claims Manager, the Baron muttered angrily and hurled the paper the length of the room.

"If I hide out any longer, I'm cooked," the Baron mumbled. "The guy who killed Mort Thomas might have left some clue. Hogan won't get it, of course. And it'll be stone cold before long. Maybe if I can get a look at Laura Billings' pictures and study the lay of the land I can get something to go ahead on."

It was late in the afternoon when he ventured out. He headed straight for the Billings' home. First thing he saw when he drove into that block was a big moving van. Men were bringing furniture out of Laura's house.

"And Hogan won't be far away," the Baron thought even before his sharp black eyes had spotted the police car parked a little ahead of him along the street.

The Baron tooted his company car to the curb. With his hat tilted to obscure his face, a newspaper held in front of him, he waited until the van had finished loading and pulled away.

When the police car had picked up the van's trail, he followed at a respectful

distance.

The van went directly to the huge downtown terminal of the Atlas Transportation Company where it turned in and parked. The Baron stayed in his car until Hogan's man had left the garage. Then he went in. The manager was busy on the loading platform. He cut the Baron's question short.

"I just got through chinning with another guy about that truckload of stuff for Miss Billings. There wasn't any destination given. Miss Billings left word she'd call us later and say where she wanted it delivered."

The Baron thanked the manager and started out. Nearing the door, he gave a last glance at the loaded van. Hanging on the rear was a package which had been labeled "Broken." He shot a quick glance around, then turned and slid back of several vans until he came to the rear of the one he wanted.

He slipped loose the ropes holding the package and carried it behind one of the empty vans.

He had been right. It was the picture which had been broken the night of the second robbery at the Billings' house.

THE BARON carefully studied each of the ten photographs mounted under the broken glass. They were scarcely the sort of things to attract a burglar. Certainly nothing which could lead to murder. Only a racing fan would want the pictures at all. There was a series of dates and autographs on each horse's picture and some extremely queer markings. .

The Baron got a thrill for a moment as he saw them. He recalled the story Baldy Leigh had told him, how Billings had a really deadly system of winning on long shots. Maybe these odd signs were the system.

He drew the mounting out, because the

broken glass hid part of the writing. As he did, the pictures slid loose. He picked one up, turned it over and whistled soundlessly.

For pasted to the back was a fifty-dollar mutuel ticket!

The Baron hastily examined the others. And on each was a ticket for the same amount.

For a moment, the Baron figured they represented Billings' losings, but his intuition told him they didn't. No real gambler saves losers.

He whipped an envelope and a pencil from his pocket, rapidly jotted down the numbers and dates of the ten tickets. Then he studied the hieroglyphics and wound up making a rude noise with his lips. Finally, he rewrapped the picture and replaced it under the ropes.

From the garage he headed toward the Imperial Casualty office. The downtown streets were clear. He parked in front of the office building. He was opening the door to get out when a big man with a gun slid into the opposite side of the car.

The man, swarthy and vicious-looking, nudged the Baron in the ribs with his revolver.

"Keep driving, pal," he said, "and don't stop till I tell you."

The Baron drove. At the gunman's order he stopped finally in an alley behind the Club Romaine. With the man at his heels still poking him with the revolver, the Baron went through a rear entrance into a dirty corridor which reeked of stale liquor, and to Tomara's private office.

Tomara's fat, oily face brightened.

"Good work, Gus," he commended the gunman. Then to the Baron, "Don't get haired up, Tolliver. All I want is to make you a little business proposition. Those race horse pictures of Billings. I'm willing to pay five grand for a look-see at them. What say?"

The Baron's face was wooden. "Why pick on me, Tomara? They're not my pictures."

Tomara laughed. "No, they ain't yours, but you got 'em. And I guess five Gs won't hurt your feelings none."

"How're you going to payoff after they tag you for murder?" the Baron suggested. "I saw you last night, Tomara. You were plenty in a hurry, too."

"Yeah, I know," Tomara agreed. "I saw you, too. And I saw Thomas, only he was already dead. Then I got word you and Howard were handling things. The pictures are gone and I've had Howard followed all day. I know he didn't take 'em so that leaves you. But forget the murder angle. It's not my line."

"What is?"

"Don't be funny, Tolliver. If I pay you five Gs you don't care. See?"

"Reminds me of when I was offered fifty thousand dollars for the Mona Lisa, the time that painting was stolen from the Louvre in Paris. I found Mona all right, but I figured an art treasure like that belongs to humanity, so I wouldn't take the money."

The smile was gone from Tomara's lips.

"What're you trying to do, Tolliver?" he demanded threateningly. "Kid me? Don't be slinging me all that malarkey. Are you going to play ball about those pictures or aren't you?"

"I haven't got the pictures," the Baron said.

Tomara looked at Gus. "Better give this guy a few memory lessons from your course."

For such a big man, Gus moved fast. He feinted with his left and, as the Baron tried to block, caught him on the chin with a hard right. The Baron took a step backward, stumbled over a chair and Gus clipped him flush in the mouth before he

could recover.

AS the Baron sprawled across the floor, Gus kicked him in the head.

The Baron was sick on Tomara's nice green carpet. He sat up weak and shaky, a trickle of blood running down his chin from his cut lips.

"That's only a sample, Tolliver," Tomara said. "Maybe you remember now where those pictures are?"

"I told you I haven't got them," the Baron repeated.

Tomara jerked his head toward Gus. "Give him another assignment."

Gus grabbed the Baron with a viselike hand and pulled him to his feet. The Baron lashed out at the man and caught him a hard blow under the ear. It was like hitting a rubber dummy. Gus simply shook his head and waded in. He forced the Baron back against the wall, shooting rights and lefts into the Baron's stomach. When he was finished, the Baron slid down limply to the floor and stayed there.

"Where are those pictures?"

The Baron had trouble in speaking through his swollen lips.

"Curse you! I told you I don't know."

Tomara beckoned Gus and the two men left the room briefly. When they came back Tomara said:

"All right, Tolliver. I guess you don't know after all. My mistake. No hard feelings."

The Baron staggered to his feet and stood there swaying.

"No hard feelings," he muttered. "But, boy, will I pull wires to be a witness when they fry you for killing Thomas."

The Baron called Baldy Leigh from a drug-store phone booth. He cut short his friend's eager questions.

"You're a racing fan, Baldy. You can help me . . . Aw, nuts! I'll admit I don't know a thing about the racing game . . .

Yeah. Okay . . . Now I've got to get a look at the records of the Jockey Club. Can you fix it for me . . . Who? Owen Sterling, the Club Secretary? Swell. No. No. It won't wait until morning. We've got to do it tonight. This is red-hot and so am I. That thick-skulled Hogan is likely to pick me up any minute and then I'm sunk. Tell Sterling he'll be helping solve a murder and also helping Laura Billings. Billings was one of Sterling's pals, I believe. I've seen their pictures together in the papers."

The Baron waited in the store until Baldy called him back.

"It's okay," Baldy informed him. "I'm picking up Sterling right away. Meet us at the downtown offices of the club in half an hour."

Sterling was a distinguished-looking man of late middle age, with clear sun-tanned skin and a cockatoo crest of bushy pure white hair. He shook hands with the Baron.

"This isn't at all according to Hoyle," he said, "but anything I can do to help Laura, I'll do."

Baldy Leigh was staring at the Baron's battered features.

"I didn't know you'd been in the retreat from Burma," he observed.

The Baron fingered his jaw tenderly.

"I was too little," he grunted through puffy lips. "And too late. But I scored a great diplomatic victory." He turned to Sterling. "I have here a list of fifty-dollar mutuel tickets. I want to find out what they paid and when."

Sterling took the list and went to a long row of steel file cabinets. He thumbed through the papers inside.

"I feel awfully sorry for Laura," he said. "Everyone thought Long Shot John would leave her nicely fixed. In fact, only a week before he died, he told her he'd made sure she'd never be in want the rest of her life. And yet when he was killed his

stable and horses were mortgaged to the hilt and there wasn't a thin dime—" Sterling broke off and said with a note of surprise, "Why this ticket was never cashed!"

He went on through the files again, rapidly. Finally he turned to the Baron.

"Where did you get this list?" he asked. "All these are uncashed tickets. They go back as far as five years. They're on horses from Billings' own stable and the total amount involved would make you gasp."

The Baron grinned. With his cut and swollen lips he looked like a gargoyle.

"Then my hunch was perfect. Tell me, Mr. Sterling, are these tickets cashable now?"

"I'll tell the world!" the Club Secretary said. "The Jockey Club will pay out on any ticket, no matter how long they've been outstanding. Identification isn't necessary, just the tickets themselves."

"Then there's Laura Billings' legacy. There are plenty more of those tickets where these came from." The Baron grinned. "The girl's old man was foxy." He whirled toward the door. "Thanks, and I'll be seeing you fellows later. Now I've got to run."

"Hey!" Baldy called.

STERLING echoed the cry. But the Baron was gone.

He stopped for a moment at the drug store on the corner, put in a call to the Atlas Transportation Company. Getting the manager he said:

"Don't let anyone move that van with the Billings' furniture."

"Don't let anyone move it!" the garage man shouted back. He ripped out a blast of profanity that threatened to crack the receiver. "That truck disappeared an hour ago! And none of our drivers took it out! And you say don't let—"

The Baron didn't hear the rest. He had hung up and was on his way.

The Baron jammed the gas pedal to the floor boards, skidded corners and his puddle jumper roared ahead like an Indianapolis Cup Race entry. He was racing against time now. For once somebody got those uncashed tickets, nobody in the world could prove ownership but the holder.

He covered all of fifteen miles before he swerved from a main thoroughfare into a quiet side street. He switched off his lights as he made the turn. Then he cut the motor and coasted silently in darkness.

Half-way along the block, a driveway led back toward a small dark house set in a wide expanse of lawn. The huge bulk of a moving van with lowered headlights was partly hidden by the trees. The Baron let out a great sigh of relief. His second hunch had not come a cropper.

He pulled his car to the curb a hundred feet farther down the street, leaped out silently and went back on catlike feet.

The driver of the van was around in front of the truck. In the feeble light the Baron could see that the man had Billings' collection of race horse pictures in a heap on the ground. He was busy sliding the backs from the frames.

In the darkness a piece of broken glass snapped under the Baron's feet. The van driver dropped the picture he was holding. He crouched, and almost simultaneously whipped up a gun and fired. Like an angry hornet, the bullet droned past the Baron's ear.

The Baron's body was sore, aching in every joint from the beating Tomara's strong-arm man had handed him. But there was no time now to coddle his bruises. The Baron leaped to the tail of the van. Swiftly he circled, coming around to the front on the other side. The driver was waiting, hunched over and alert. With his

battered muscles shrieking protest, the Baron leaped over the fender in a headlong dive.

The man whirled. The gun belched flame just as the Baron connected. He felt a red-hot finger slide along his ribs as he and his opponent did an upside-down rhumba on the concrete driveway.

His gun knocked from his hand, the man's arms snaked out and fastened around the Baron's body. The Baron rolled, trying to break free, but the man rolled with him and wound up on top.

The man's knees were granite slabs as they crushed down on the Baron's arms. Viselike fingers were at the Baron's throat. They grabbed, dug in, and squeezed. The Baron's Adam's apple felt as if it were caught in a cider press. He tasted blood again as his cracked lips reopened.

Fighting for his breath, the Baron managed to jerk one arm away from his antagonist's pinioning leg grip. He struck upward with all his remaining strength and his fist found bone. The van driver's head snapped back, cracked dully against the bottom of the truck's radiator. A limp mass dropped over the Baron. The man was out cold.

The Baron staggered to his feet and looked down. The man was Belden Howard. But the Baron didn't show any surprise. Without a second look, he headed across the lawn to the house.

He found Mrs. Howard waiting for him in the hall. The small, pearl-handled pistol she held blazed as he swung through the door. The slug made a neat hole in the jamb alongside his head. The Baron didn't let her try again. He was beside her in a stride, slapping the gun from her hand.

She started screaming and leaped on him. Raked at his face with long, blood-red nails sharp as the claws of a jungle cat. They tore into the Baron's flesh. Blood oozed from a dozen furrows in his cheeks.

"Where's Laura Billings?" he demanded as he grabbed at the woman's flailing arms.

The woman just glared and tore at him again with her flesh-ripping nails. Without the slightest compunction, the Baron knocked her cold.

L AURA was on a bed upstairs. She was gagged and trussed securely. The Baron untied her, pulled off the gag. He grabbed the phone, called Headquarters, asked for Hogan. After telling the Homicide man where to come, he hung up and faced the girl.

She was sitting up on the bed, rubbing her arms where the tight rope had cut into them. Her eyes were a mixture of emotions—gratitude, fear, complete bewilderment.

"You!" she stammered. "You—why you're the insurance man! How did you get here? What's happened? Who—"

"Wait a minute!" The Baron laughed. "Everything's going to be all right, but let me ask a few questions first. How come you ran out at your house and came here to the Howards?"

The girl's eyes swung up to his.

"I didn't. I was upstairs and I heard somebody cry out. I rushed down and saw Mort lying on the living room floor. He'd been stabbed. Then Howard stepped out of the dark and grabbed me. I accused him of killing Mort. We fought. The lights of a car came up the driveway. Howard hit me with something. Next I knew I was here, all tied up. It was morning."

The girl stopped for breath, smiled wanly.

"Mrs. Howard came in several times and looked at me," she went on, "but said nothing. Later in the afternoon, Howard came in and made me call the Atlas people and order my furniture picked up. He told Mrs. Howard the police would follow the

truck, but he said he had a way to fool them.

"They left the room, but I heard him telling her he intended putting me in the truck and running it over an embankment. I'd be killed and it would look as if I were trying to skip out after murdering poor Mort. He said he'd get an old cap and coat to leave in the truck so it would look as if I'd hired somebody to drive me and the driver had jumped." She shuddered. "It was horrible!"

The Baron swore under his breath.

"Then it must have been Mrs. Howard who phoned your house yesterday," he said. "It was Howard's plan to get himself put in charge, so he could get the pictures himself. But Hogan broke that up. I figured you might be here and that Howard had forced you to call."

"But why all this?" she asked. "What good are Dad's pictures to them?"

"Plenty!" The Baron told her about the uncashed tickets.

"Evidently," he said, "Howard, working as an auditor at the Jockey Club, noticed the large number of fifty-dollar tickets not cashed. He found they covered your father's horses that had paid long-shot prices. He must have mentioned it to your father and learned about the odd legacy.

"When your father was killed before he told you about the pictures, Howard got ideas. He figured he could get the tickets with nobody the wiser. But he had to check on them before he was sure. That first group he got were evidently not pictures of your father's horses. So there were no tickets. Howard made another try."

"I see," she said. "And after knocking me down in the dark he rushed out and joined Mrs. Howard at the front door for an alibi. When did you decide it was Howard?"

"Not until after I'd discovered the tickets and checked on them. Howard's friendship with your dad, his job, and all the rest, added up."

"But Mort, did—" Her voice broke.

"Howard undoubtedly killed your cousin because Mort found out something. Maybe Mort caught him trying again to get at the tickets. After the killing and your appearance, Howard had to figure another way to get the pictures and cover up. Hence the van idea."

"All of which gives me a nice out," a voice purred from the doorway.

The Baron spun, but Tomara's gun made any further action suicidal.

"Oh, you!" the Baron said coolly. "I almost forgot you'd be following me. Well, the pictures are here all right, but they're in charge of the Imperial Casualty Company for sale."

Tomara let a smile spread across his face.

"My business is with Miss Billings now, Tolliver, not you," he said. The club owner faced Laura. "I'm still offering five grand for those pictures. But if you don't take it this time, I'll have to work the hard way. I've got my boys on that truck outside and I'm taking them with me no matter what. You can make it easy for yourself or tough."

THE girl shot a look at the Baron. The Baron's grin turned into a laugh. "You wouldn't be checking on that old story about Long Shot Billings writing out his winning system in code on his pictures, would you, Tomara?" he said.

Tomara's features screwed up. "You know everything, don't you," he growled. "Well, it won't do you any good, because I'm getting that system from those pictures and destroying it afterward."

The Baron laughed loudly. "Take his five grand and let him check the writing

on those pictures," he said to the girl. "For all it is, is shorthand recording of the winner's record."

"Yeah?" Tomara snapped. "Well, I'll look first before I'm—" He broke off.

A shot came from outside. The Baron leaped forward in a flying mare as Tomara's head shifted at the sound of the shot. He struck the night-club owner midway between the knees and the stomach. It was all over in a second. First because Tomara had been knocked completely cold and second because in stepped Hogan and another detective from Headquarters, shoving the two Howards, Gus and another of Tomara's gorillas in front of them.

"I find Howard and his wife out cold," Hogan growled. "What is—" He broke off as he saw Tomara on the floor. He groaned. "Another one?"

* * * * *

The small bleached blond waitress brought the Baron's morning coffee.

As he stirred it he held forth about the Billings' pictures in a voice which, although fuzzy on account of his puffed and swollen lips, still reached all parts of the Live-and-Let-Live Lunchroom.

"I'd never have figured it," he said, "if I hadn't made such an advanced study of the technical side of horse racing. For years I've been keeping charts and comparative figures. Why once—"

Baldy Leigh's head popped unexpectedly over the edge of the booth in front of the Baron.

"Did I hear you say you were a racing expert, Baron?" Baldy's eyes were mocking.

The Baron gulped. "Oh, hello, Baldy. I thought I heard the boss say he'd sent you upstate today. Have a cup of coffee on me, pal!"