

# The Damp Man

GEORGE PELGRIM sat with exaggerated boredom on the uncomfortable wood benches of the amphitheatre. The sign above the several rows proclaimed that this was the section reserved for the press, but George, as his sprawled long legs and discontented manner indicated, was neither impressed by the sign nor the spectacle going on beneath him in the pool where the Women's State Swimming Championships were being held.

Despite his comparatively young years, Pelgrim had covered a newspaper reporter's average quota of big stories, including those of the sports variety. This was a comedown. More than that, it was an out-and-out indignity, and for at least the tenth time that day, Pelgrim reviewed the disadvantages of working for a big short-handed metropolitan daily with the inevitable shuffling of assignments to its younger members that short-handedness dictated. Still, covering something like a girls' swimming meet, and a relatively obscure one at that, was going too far. He'd taken a lot from McBrien, his editor, but this was . . .

Five similar forms splashed mightily below him, and one in a red cap finally forged ahead and touched the pool's end. The p.a. system then announced that the 100-yard free-style winner was Miss Linda Mallory. Second was Miss Mary Ciphers, the former title-holder in this event. . . .

George yawned. Thank God it was the last event. He slouched out of the stands, passing by the public-relations table to pick up a press sheet with Events, Winners, and Times. Now a few words from the new 100-yard champion and he'd be through this day's work. He took his time getting to the clubhouse and then he flashed his press pass at the doorway that proclaimed, "No Visitors

—Contestants' Entrance." He nodded to a timer he recognized as someone he'd seen several times before at track meets—Oh happy days!—then he buttonholed one of the ribboned committeemen.

"I'd like to see that girl who won the 100-yard. Just a few words." He looked down at his sheet. "Mallory?"

"Ah yes, Miss Mallory," said the committeeman, filled with be-nice-to-the-press resolutions. "A fine swimmer!"

He beckoned the newspaperman to follow him and went down a corridor stopping before a door, knocking on it and then sticking his head in to murmur a few words. Then he turned back.

"Go right in."

Pelgrim went in. Linda Mallory was standing just inside. Pelgrim got the impression of well-built blondeness. She was dressed in street clothes now.

"I'm Pelgrim of the *Gazette*," he mumbled. "I'd just like a few words, Miss Mallory. Is this the first district championship you've won? How old are you?"

HE SHOT forth a few other questions. Get - it - over - with - as - soon - as - possible Pelgrim. Then for the first time he really looked at her. She was very pretty, if you like the big healthy athletic type. But there was something else. One shapely arm was holding onto the dressing table as though she needed its support. George's eyes narrowed. This was a strange way for a newly crowned champion to act. She ought to be pleased. Instead, Linda Mallory was terrified.

There was an awkward silence and then the girl managed the ghost of a smile.

"I'm sorry," she said and squared her shoulders. "I'm twenty and this is the first

He was so obviously a man; so obviously, too, not a human!

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time I've won a county championship. It's very nice." Her voice trailed off and she didn't look as though she thought there was anything nice about it.

"Okay, thanks Miss Mallory."

George's puzzlement at the girl's anxiety was being submerged by his indignation at having this assignment. He turned on his heel.

"Wait a minute, please!" She touched his arm imperatively. "Did you see anyone outside in the hall or coming through the clubhouse? A large man, fat, that is, in a dark suit with . . . with . . . ?"

George frowned. "Didn't notice. Say, are you all right, Miss Mallory? I mean, are you sick or anything?"

She shook her head. "No, no, I'm all right. I just wondered if you'd seen this person. I'm afraid I haven't been much good at being interviewed."

"I've got enough," replied Pelgrim and he stepped to the door. "About this friend of yours. I wouldn't worry though. He'll find you."

"Yes," said Linda Mallory, "I guess he will!"

The best part of the day for Pelgrim started twenty minutes later when he ran into Al Holden entirely unexpectedly. He filed his story hurriedly and left the telegrapher's office arm in arm with Al. There were many "You old son-of-a-gun. Haven't seen you since . . ." He and his former pal repaired to the nearest bistro, and within a few minutes all thoughts of Linda Mallory had gone from Pelgrim's consciousness. He had enough presence of mind come sixty-five, though, to slap Holden on the back.

"It's been great, Al, but I've got to run. That old buzzard boss of mine has probably got three or four other jobs for his errand boys tonight!"

He made the 6:45 train to the city and settled into an empty seat, pleasantly mellowed by the five or six drinks and the realization that he had a three-quarters of an hour ride before he reached town, with the possibilities therein contained for a little nap.

He was dreaming gently of riding a huge rubber sea serpent in Central Park Lake when the sea serpent reached up a suddenly

grown tentacle and began to shake him. He did what he could, but the sea serpent was persistent. George woke up and looked into Linda Mallory's startled face. It was her hand on his arm.

"Mr. Pelgrim, I'm so sorry. I saw you and sat down here in the seat next to you. I . . . I'm scared, Mr. Pelgrim. *He's* on this train."

**S**TILL only half awake, the only thing the reporter could think of was the sea serpent, and where Linda Mallory came in with the sea serpent was more than he could figure out. He straightened against the car seat with the self-conscious air of someone who is silently saying that of course he wasn't really asleep. He looked at the girl's agitated face and then took her hand because it seemed the thing to do. It was a nice hand, cool, or maybe that was because he'd had those drinks with Al Holden. Or maybe it was because she was so frightened.

"Now listen," he spoke in the heavy paternal manner of someone of his years to another person not too many years younger. "What's this all about?"

He remembered her as someone so self-possessed and confident that afternoon in her blue bathing suit with the red cap. Now she was, well, almost pathetic. Pelgrim was good at listening. He listened. He nodded at the right times and looked straight ahead, hoping his breath wasn't still one hundred percent alcoholic. After all, you don't meet an old friend like Al Holden every day. And that was a good excuse to top off a few.

Linda Mallory's story was straightforward and well-expressed, he analyzed. The telling of it seemed to help her. Anyway, she was less agitated at the finish. She was from the West. From the earliest she could remember, she told Pelgrim, she'd just had an aunt in the world and an ability to swim faster than the other kids in school. Her home town had first sent her east to compete in a small meet and she'd won. There were the usual offers then to compete in other meets.

In the meantime, she'd gotten a modest job in an office in town—she could type—and everything seemed fine until one day she'd met him. It was just recently. She'd competed in a meet and had been walking to the clubhouse when this man had loomed

up in front of her. He'd said something, she wasn't quite sure now, like "You are to be mine," or some such strange statement. He'd held his arms out to her, maybe beechingly, maybe threateningly, she wasn't sure. She'd dodged his advances and brushed on by hurriedly, but he was outside when she'd left the dressing quarters.

HE'D followed her to the bus the swimmers took back to town. She'd boarded it heaving a sigh of relief as his gross figure faded in the distance when they got under way. Then miraculously he'd turned up one morning not many days later, sitting in the lobby of her hotel. He'd followed her through the streets. He'd been outside her office when she left at five-thirty.

Once she'd called a policeman, but when the officer had turned to look in the direction she indicated, there was no one. He was clever, this big man.

Pelgrim thought to himself, Well, why not? There are plenty of these cranks around. You don't need to work on a newspaper to realize that and she's a cute kid. She was.

Aloud he asked, "You think you saw him this afternoon out at the meet and you think he's on this train?"

She nodded. "I know he is, Mr. Pelgrim." "Well, we'll look into that, and in the meantime, cut out the Mister Pelgrim business. A lot of people have worse names for me, but let's compromise and you call me George. Just what does this man look like?"

Linda shuddered. "He's . . . he's awful! I don't know how to describe him exactly except that he's very big and fat and he always has on a dark suit like a chauffeur's suit but it isn't really. But you know that dark material. And his face is lumpy and kind of swollen. And his eyes scare me, too. I tell you, Mr. Pel—George—that time I came downstairs in my hotel and saw him sitting there, those eyes looked at me over a newspaper he'd been reading. It made me feel all . . ." she shuddered again.

"You sit tight," George advised. "I'm going to see if I can spot him."

"He's back of us," Linda Mallory indicated. "I saw him get on the end of the train."

George got up and tried to look formidable. Maybe walking would clear the

last "Great-to-see-you-Al-Holden" cobwebs out of his brain. He smiled and pointed towards the back.

"He went this way?"

Linda smiled back. "Look, is this the right thing to do? I mean, don't get into any trouble on account of me."

"I'm interested. I want to see this fascinated fan of yours for myself."

He left her sitting there looking after him. There were one, two, three, four cars behind theirs. The reporter walked slowly down the aisle, hands thrust deep in his pockets, looking casually from side to side. The usual assortment of flower-dress ladies, candy-eating children, men with their papers. A couple of long-stouts with papers. In the last car one had on a brown suit, the other had on sort of a gray and darkish sort of suit. He was buried in his paper, too. Looked pretty big from the shoulders.

The train slowed for a suburban station and stopped. George stood on the back platform with his eyes on the big fellow's back, undecided. Then he started up the aisle retracing his steps. When he came abreast of the suspect, he bobbed his head down.

"Pardon me," he thumbed at an item in the paper.

The fellow's face came out the other side of the tabloid.

"Friend of mine," murmured George apologetically.

The stranger's face was belligerent. It was also long, thin and horse. It looked as though it were backed up by a good wallop. George smilingly backed away. It wasn't the man. The train started up again. Maybe he'd missed the guy the first time, or maybe he'd gotten off. George got back to his car and rehearsed a small speech. It was an excuse to hold her nice, capable hand again. He'd say, "There's nothing to worry about. Believe me, I fingerprinted all the guys back there. There's nobody answering your three-state alarm on the train."

But there was no speech because Linda Mallory was gone. And she wasn't on the train. George assured himself of that by looking through the forward cars. He fumed the rest of the way into town.

Three days later Pelgrim's desk jangled. It was Linda. Despite himself, he'd wondered about her even though with

proper reportorial cynicism he told himself the whole business was probably screwy.

"Well, why the vanishing act?"

She apologized fervently, "But I had to. Just after you'd gone up the aisle out of the car, he appeared. I couldn't stand it. I got off at the next stop."

George um-hummed.

"Could I talk to you sometime?"

George, with studied effort answered slowly. "Well, I guess so. Where are you?"

Linda Mallory gave the name of a hotel.

"I'll come up this evening," he said and hung up.

As he sat at his desk, the reporter realized he wasn't at all sure about Linda Mallory, about a lot of things concerning her. He admitted to himself reluctantly though that he was sure of one thing. He was glad to hear from her.

THAT night he arrived in the lobby of her building at the appointed time. It was a women's hotel and the downstairs was filled with potted palms and waiting males. She was there standing by the desk, and he thought mentally that the simple blue dress became her. She certainly didn't look like someone suffering from hallucinations.

He liked the way she stuck her hand out when she saw him and her smile—he'd liked that before.

"Let's sit over here," she motioned towards an off-the-floor alcove where there were a couple of chairs. He followed.

She looked at him intently. "If I were you, I'd probably think I was crazy."

He smiled. "My sentiments almost exactly," Pelgrim replied.

"I really don't have any right to get you into this and you've been very kind."

"Into what?" he persisted. "After all, if you don't mind my saying so, and if you do, I'll still say it, aren't you getting a little overwrought about the attentions of a fan of yours?"

"He's been here," she went on ignoring his question. "I think he got off just as I did at that station. I got a bus but he followed me."

"Look, if this thing is bothering you so much," George suggested, "why not get the police in on it? I mean really, a man sitting in your hotel lobby, following you to your

job, shadowing you home from work. You've got a perfect right to—"

"He's clever," she said, and the fear look came back into her eyes. "I told you before, once in the street I spoke to an officer. He seems to anticipate . . . I mean he was just gone when the policeman looked. Last night, George, I worked late. When I came out, I didn't see him. I didn't look for him very hard. I guess I thought that he'd have gotten tired waiting for me. I went to a restaurant a couple of blocks away from here, and when I came out it was pitch dark. I was walking, not thinking of anything, you understand, not expecting to hear anything when I heard his steps behind me. You can't miss the sound. It's the sort of noise wet crepe rubber makes."

"I guess I lost my head. I ran the rest of the way here. Then I stood just inside the door and looked outside. I didn't see him again."

Pelgrim thought that over for a minute.

"Tell you, what you need is to get out of here for a little while. Stop thinking about it. Let's go to a show or something."

She brightened. "That'd be swell."

"All right, I'll wait right here and you go upstairs and get your coat."

He saw her disappear into the shining maw of the elevator. Then his eyes wandered over the people in the lobby. His spot was advantageous. From his side alcove he could see without himself being noticed. Harmless enough looking, everybody was.

His mind running over the things Linda Mallory had told him turned a sudden flip-flop, landing in a new position. This man, this follower she complained of and seemed so frightened of. It was strange no one else ever noticed him. He himself, for instance, or the policeman Linda admitted having spoken to one day on the street. There were all these episodes, these macabre details of some ungainly creature trailing her through the streets and everywhere, and yet no one, apparently but Linda Mallory ever saw the man.

George had the average college-educated young man's rudimentary knowledge of psychology. How many times in the lay press had he read of things like a persecution complex—persons thinking other people are plotting against them, following them, whis-

pering about them, etc.? Linda, in spite of her small job and her occasional swimming contests, was essentially very much alone here in the city, and he knew nothing about her background really. It was an uncomfortable thought, one that shouldered its way into his mind rather than was welcomed there, but newspaper work demands objectivity, and this conclusion was at least a possible one, based on the facts as he knew them.

HE COULD admit to himself that Linda Mallory was attractive, straightforward and nice. There was a simplicity about her that pleased him, and yet fear had been the most dominant chord in her make-up, a fixed fear about one thing that she hadn't been able to demonstrate for anyone else.

Unhappy at his own thoughts, George got up and ambled towards the front door. It was hot in here. He pushed through the portal, coming out on the street. There was one small bulb set in the middle of the awning that ran out to the curb. George stepped out of its depressingly feeble circle of light, fumbling for a cigarette in his jacket pocket. As he did so, he collided with someone.

The reporter mumbled, "Sorry," and the other figure moved away from him towards the door of the hotel. George turned. He gaped. The retreating figure was that of a very large fat man, his ungainly body fitted into a rumpled dark cloth suit. Pelgrim flicked his cigarette into the street and followed.

Inside he saw the other man walking purposefully toward the alcove which George, himself, had just quit a moment or so ago. George took a few tentative steps in that direction. The man picked out the chair George had been sitting in and lowered himself heavily into it. Pelgrim had a glimpse of a fleshy dead-white face, and then an evening paper ascended in front of the waistcoat and head like a protective barrier.

George changed his mind, turned around and headed towards the desk. It was placed near the elevators and he would see her the moment she got down. He waited, tapping nervously on the counter. From this point he couldn't quite see into the corner of the alcove where the man sat.

Finally the metal door of the lift opened and Linda came out. He was at her side in an instant and ferried her across the floor towards the door. He said something, something trivial about what movie do you think we ought to see? or some such, and he purposely walked on the alcove side.

As George pushed her through the door, he flashed a quick glance to one side. The big man in the dark suit was still sitting there, the paper still in front of him, but it had lowered just a trifle, just enough to show a pair of eyes. And the eyes were on them. . . .

They decided on a movie nearby. As they walked, George said to himself, Now you mustn't look back. You'll make her nervous, and yet look back was what he wanted to do more than anything else and still he couldn't be sure. There were other large men in dark suits who sat around reading papers. Pelgrim tried listening, but have you ever attempted to pick out a particular set of footsteps on a street in a crowded city?

When they got under the lighted theatre marquée, he was able to crane his neck. He spotted no one in the square of yellow light or on its outskirts. They went in and sat halfway down on the right side. The double feature was a whodunit and a comedy. Linda laughed at the slapstick and George was pleased.

It meant she was forgetting herself some, enjoying herself.

He murmured to her, "I've got to call into the office. Be back in just a sec."

IT WAS a half-truth. The phone to his paper was not imperative but Pelgrim did want to do a reconnaissance. The movie audience had thinned out even more, and with his back to the screen and the reflected light shining on the empty seats, it was easy for him to see the large, bulking figure sitting eight rows behind them. His emotions were half and half as he thumbed a nickel into the dial phone. He was annoyed and angry, and there was also a sort of creepy feeling up his back and neck because he had thought all sorts of things about Linda in the beginning. Maybe she was pulling a fake or throwing a psycho at him, and all the time there was a guy and he did just what she said he did.

He got the paper. "Hello, is Jim Crosier there?"

He was told Crosier had left half an hour earlier. He had reasons of his own for wanting to speak to the veteran newspaperman, but if he wasn't there—that was that.

George hurried back down the aisle and then he slowed as he neared it. For directly back of Linda, now, the big man was sitting. He'd moved up in the couple of moments Pelgrim had been away. George moved down beside her. She was smiling at something on the screen, oblivious of anything else around her. He'd have to handle this skillfully.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry but it looks as though we ought to head out. We must be almost up to where we came in."

He hated to take the kid away from this thing. She seemed to be enjoying it, but she nodded, good sport that she was. He pushed her hurriedly down the row and maneuvered her up the aisle so she wouldn't notice.

"I'm sorry," Linda Mallory apologized when they got outside. "You shouldn't have spent so much time with me tonight, should you?"

He sighed in mock tragedy and tried to make his tones light, "They'll probably have me back filling inkwells in the morning!"

They stopped at an all-night eatery, and over a cup of coffee, George made a decision. The whole thing was queer and mysterious enough without adding unnecessarily to those factors. The diner clock said that it was after twelve.

The streets were deserted as they walked from out of the oblong of light thrown down by the eatery's windows. A soft spring fog had crept in from the sea, muffling the sound of occasional midnight traffic, swathing the lonely streetlamps in ghostly halos and cutting visibility to not many yards.

They walked between rows of brick-fronted houses, houses that were lonely and ghostly as though they had never known human habitation, and their steps echoed soddently from the pavements.

IT WAS in the middle of one dingy block that George felt Linda's fingers tighten on his arm. Her hearing had been perhaps keener than his, but when the dying sound of a distant el train was completely gone, he

knew too that there were footsteps behind them. He looked at Linda Mallory. Her red mouth was partly open as though there were a question which she feared to ask.

He put his fingers over his hand. "What's the matter?"

He smiled even though he knew; they both knew. They walked on, and as though by mutual consent their steps were faster, but there seemed no end to this long black block. And the sounds behind them were more clearly defined. Perhaps because their senses were keyed so high and sent so completely backward towards the one focus point, or perhaps because the steps were actually nearer, gaining on them.

You know how it is when you were a child, a child somewhere in the darkness of night or in the darkness of an old house or in the darkness of your own imagination, the mad irresistible urge that sweeps over you suddenly, so suddenly to flee with all the strength of your being, to run, to hide.

There is some of that in all of us at certain times. It touched George briefly, a touch of darkness and fog, the run-and-hide urge, and he felt it in Linda too and her frightened look at him said so. With the other emotions and the thinking that was going on in his head, there was still room for pity for her. She'd had this unpleasant thing to fight with before and before. He was new to it, and the newness must be worth something, he resolved.

"Take it easy," he murmured to her.

She worked a little grin. "I just know I'd be sprinting by now if I were alone," Linda admitted.

In the tunnel of darkness ahead, there beckoned the wan yellow beacon of a street light. The single bulb glowed weakly in the sticky atmosphere. They marched toward it, and marched was the word, for George kept their paces even. It was a matter of morale, he knew instinctively; that if they once broke stride, they would run helter-skelter, an absurd mad spectacle of two very frightened people who should know better, plummeting down the lonely thoroughfare until they would trip and hurt themselves or come suddenly upon a greater brightness and busyness of the city and suddenly feel ashamed.

Pelgrim was no fool. He thought he had

calculated their situation and their chances. No casual bad man; no mugger or stick-up artist wastes his time tracking one person night after night. A big-city hold-up is as impersonal as an auto accident. It is completely indiscriminate. If you happen to be on such-and-such a street at such-and-such a time, you will feel a gun in your ribs or a billy on your skull, you or you or anyone else.

No, the lure here was the girl, and what he did not know about her could be his undoing, their undoing, and this disquieting thought made George stare at Linda again, so suddenly that she felt it and looked back. He felt ashamed of himself for any suspicions he might have had. This girl was honest. She'd told him what she knew. There was nothing contrived that she was a party to. A kidnaping was absurd and seemed out of the question. There were easier ways. This long surveillance, for instance. Why would that be necessary? And not Linda Mallory, a girl who made a tiny salary and was, at the most, only a promising swimmer of small local accomplishment.

This left another field, a category as dark and dank and misty as the night. This large man was one of those myriads of persons who tramp through the city and country on some small, strange purpose of their own. Small to us but large to them. The not wholly normal people. The twisted. The insane.

George wished he had a gun or a club or anything. They reached the oasis of light and he told her quickly, "You stand on the other side of it. Do you know the way to your hotel from here?"

She nodded.

"Sure?"

She nodded again.

"Just stand there. Don't say anything. Don't do anything, but if I tell you to run, run as fast as you can and keep running until you get where there are some more people or you see a policeman or you reach your hotel. Don't stop for anything else, you understand?"

She nodded for the third time. "But what about you?"

"I'm going to try and find out about this guy. Linda, there must be some explanation to this."

He hoped it sounded good the way he put it.

"Maybe he thinks you're his long-lost daughter or something."

THE steps were much nearer now and Pelgrim could see what she meant about wet crepe-rubber soles, almost a sloshing sound on the damp pavements. Linda backed away from him into the shadows on the other side of the circle of luminance. Satisfied, the reporter turned and faced the way they'd come. He took a few steps into the darkness, turned his head to look once more where Linda was. Good. From here, even knowing she was there, he could hardly make out her figure, and he waited.

The sounds seemed an endless number of heartbeats, of deep anticipatory breaths and then out of the blackness loomed up a greater blackness. It was the large man, looking even larger than George had remembered him, looking of the night itself with his dark suit and midnight fedora.

The steps stopped. The man stopped not a pace away from Pelgrim. The light shone on his lumpy, whitish face. The thin street-lamp light and shadows made more grotesqueness of the ungainly figure and the pads of flesh that were hands and jowls.

George stepped nearer quickly. Attack was his only plan.

"You following someone, Bud?"

Closer, he was appalled by the repulsiveness of the man. The eyes were one color black. They had no depth, no expression. They were simply round disks like the button gimlets of a cod exhibited in the window of a fish store. There was something else about the man that came over George, suddenly freezing him with a horror that was hard to control. He looked . . . he looked like someone George remembered years ago, a bloated body grappling irons had pulled out of the river one cold night onto a police-launch deck.

The skin looked like this, the puffiness, the blue-whiteness, the eyes expressionless with death. You don't see a thing like that often. But dead men don't speak. This one said, "Where is she?" and there was a flash of something unreadable in the dark ugly eyes.

The voice was deep with a resonant bar-

rel-like quality. The words were spoken slowly.

"Where's who?" shot back Pelgrim.

"The girl."

"What do you want with her? You've got a hell of a nerve, Mister . . ."

The big fellow's eyes stopped their peripatetic course and fixed themselves over the reporter's shoulder. Without looking, Pelgrim knew Linda had been spotted. He sensed the big body before him gathering itself and he dove forward just as the other man lunged.

As George drove his fists, he yelled, "Run, Linda, run!"

And above the sound of that message's echo in the lonely street, he heard her heels clicking away furiously. His fists pounded into the spongy monstrous hulk, and then a heavy fat hand smacked into the side of his neck making his senses reel. George almost went down but clung to a thick flaying arm. The large man reached forward. A shoulder caught him and George went to his knees grabbing a leg.

The big man grunted.

George saw the kick coming too late. It landed between his eyes and then the blackness of the street and the dark bulk of his opponent were swallowed up into an even greater blackness.

The next thing George knew, he felt the pressure of an arm under his head. He blinked at the flashlight in his eyes as a voice was saying, "There now, buddy, you're coming around."

He struggled to raise himself, and the light of the flashlight glanced off shiny policeman buttons. Another cop held the torch, and behind them was the white dome of a police radio car. George finally made it to his feet. There was a lump on his forehead and his senses were still faint with more fog than the night air. He gave his name and address mechanically to the inquiring policeman, showing his press card.

"You don't know who this guy was?" queried one of the uniforms.

"Nope." No use telling the full story now. The important thing was to find out whether Linda had made it okay to her building.

"Will you give me a lift?" He designated the street where she lived.

THEY piled him in behind them and drove him to his destination. Almost before he got out of the police car, Linda had come through the door and was greeting him.

She was shaking.

"George, I was scared stiff!"

"C'mon, let's get back inside," Pelgrim said.

"George, your head . . ."

"Never mind that." He steered her towards the alcove. "Any sign of him here?"

She shook her head sideways. "What happened? Those police and that head of yours!"

He told her quickly what had happened.

"You shouldn't have made me leave you," she criticized.

"You would have been a fine lot of help. No, this baby's a tough one, Linda. Now listen. I want you to go up to your room and I want you to stay there. No matter what happens, stay there! He can't get upstairs in this building. I'll phone you in the morning. Okay?"

She agreed.

"This time Buster has overstepped himself. We'll get that guy, Linda, don't worry."

"What . . . who is he?" she asked. "I mean, what's it all about, George?"

The fear look he hated to see was there again but he couldn't blame her.

"There's something else I want to ask you, George?"

"Yeah?"

"When you fought with him just now, did he grab hold of you at any time, or did you touch him?"

Pelgrim smiled wryly and motioned to his forehead.

"A pretty good grab, don't you think?"

"I mean . . ." she persisted, "there's something about that man that's not right. I told you the time at the swimming meet, he took hold of my arms and then I had to push him away. It was, well, it was almost as though he'd been in swimming. Did you notice anything strange like that?"

George laughed raucously. "You think the bird is dead! Someone come back from a watery grave? Your Uncle Egbert who sailed before the mast and died on the Spanish Main!"

"Don't laugh," she protested. "It's just that I . . ."

"He's flesh and blood, Linda. There's nothing dead about him."

"I didn't quite mean that."

"Well, stop meaning or thinking anything," the reporter ordered. "Go upstairs to your room and get some sleep. Forget it. I know that's pap advice but it's best. I'll call you in the morning. All right?"

They both rose. She squeezed his hand. "And thank you so much. This is my affair and my trouble and yet you've made it yours. I don't know what I'd have done without you. Probably gone completely batty."

"Forget it." He was embarrassed. "Call you in the morning."

He saw her to the elevator and only when the doors clanged shut behind her did he head for the hotel entrance. Pelgrim still felt a bit shaky so he hailed a taxi. As they drew into the avenue, George spotted something out the side window. As they flashed by, he saw the unmistakable familiar bulk leaning casually against a mailbox, face turned towards the hotel facade. George tapped on the partition.

"Cabby, wait a up a minute! I want to go back."

"Can't make a U-turn here, mister," the driver complained. "Against the law."

The next best thing was to describe a square around the block. By the time the mailbox landmark came in sight again though, the large man was gone. George settled back in the cab satisfied there was nothing more he could do this night.

Home in his apartment he wrung a towel out in cold water and put it around his head. It helped the throbbing, made him think better. That little thing Linda had spoken of, what she'd noticed about this man. He'd noticed it, too. The strange abnormal wetness of those beefy hamlike hands. Perhaps there were physical diseases that caused these things, he wouldn't know, and perhaps with them there was some sort of mental derangement that went as companion symptoms. All these things he could and would find out. In the meantime, he was going to shuffle the deck and make the Queen of Hearts disappear.

His alarm knocked the sleep out of him at seven-thirty. Within half an hour with

a shower and a coffee-and-eggs breakfast out of the way, he was on the phone to Linda Mallory.

"Number One," he enumerated pedantically, "I want you to pack up, Linda. Buster knows where you are. We're going to fix that. Number Two, phone that place where you work and tell them you're terribly sorry you're not coming back."

He forced both points home over her mild protests.

"Do anything you want around there, but don't leave the hotel. Understand?"

She did. He hung up and left for the office, surprising the newspaper staff considerably from copy boy to junior reporters by his early arrival.

He went into the office he shared with Jim Crosier and slammed the door. It was too early for the other man to be there but George made good use of his time. By ten o'clock he'd located a place on the other side of town where he could get a room for Linda. It was in a respectable neighborhood not far from a subway. By ten-thirty he'd fixed it up with Mort Hoge, the Sunday feature editor, to take Linda on as a typist in that department.

Crosier came in then and Pelgrim went to town.

"So you're the number one crime reporter in the county." It was a joke between them and Crosier liked it that way. Actually the older man did know the subject. He was an expert on the history of violence, on court procedure and the legal aspects.

George outlined his experiences with Linda Mallory. At the end the other reporter smiled.

"You stuck on the girl?"

Pelgrim huffed and puffed.

"I see you are," Jim answered his own question. "And you haven't been drinking too much lately, have you?"

"Say now, wait a minute. If you think I got this kick in the head . . ."

"Probably fell off a bar stool. Listen, George. The young lady evidently has other admirers besides you. This fat man is one of them. You know what they say about our present civilization and competition. You'll just have to accept it, kid. What's that? No, son, it's a tough point legally to get a man arrested because you say he's been following

someone. About your drunken brawl with him last night . . ." Croiser guffawed, ". . . I don't know."

George choked down an angry retort as the other reporter turned to his typewriter. And yet hadn't he, himself, been skeptical in the beginning? No, he guessed he'd have to handle it himself without court orders or the Police Department or Crosier.

There was one little thing, though, that would help. He'd get a gun. That was only feasible.

He left the office at noon and took a taxi up to Linda's hotel. He buzzed her on the house phone, told her to come downstairs with her luggage. She was with him inside of ten minutes and he was quieting her protests.

"Now, don't worry. I've got another place for you."

No, she wasn't to leave the new address as a forwarding one. After a moment they decided that she could refer any messages or mail to the swimming club she belonged to.

THE taxi they took drove an eccentric course until George, peering out of the back window, was satisfied there was no pursuit. Their destination was an old five-story brownstone house. The landlady was a Mrs. Brumley, a plump oldish woman, the widow of a former *Gazette* reporter. She bestowed a motherly greeting on them both.

"It's good to see you," she said to Pelgrim. "And I've got the third floor rear for the young lady."

George saw Linda up the creaking carpeted stairs. Hers was a big airy room looking out over back yards.

"Like it?"

"I think it's grand," Linda replied.

"Okay now, you get settled and then tomorrow you arrive down at my newspaper office at nine sharp." He gave her the address. "Don't expect to see me," George warned, "but they're expecting you in Department D."

He went downstairs and spoke to Mrs. Brumley for a moment before he left. He explained that Miss Mallory had had the unwanted attentions of a man forced upon her for some time and that that was the reason for the hurry-up change of address. Mrs. Brumley was to see that she was disturbed

by no strangers here, especially—and George described the large man carefully.

The telephone cut into Pelgrim's sleep the next morning. One half-opened eye focused on the clock beside the receiver. He pulled the instrument from its cradle, grouchily, noting that it was before eight. He made the noise that is a sleepy man's hello, and then her words cut into him deeper than the phone bell.

It was Linda and she was frightened, very frightened. George Pelgrim's eyes were open wide now.

"Hey, wait a minute. Hold on," he checked her. "What was that again?"

"It's in the paper," she repeated. "Peggy Greene, she lived next door to me at the hotel! I've mentioned her to you, George. Well, maybe I haven't."

"Well, what about—?"

"She's dead, I'm trying to tell you! They found her in the night!"

"That's tough," he sympathized, "awfully tough. I know it's an awful shock, but I don't get—"

"George, it's the same business, I'm sure! Listen to me. Peggy was almost my size. Yesterday when I was packing up, she asked to borrow my blue suit. I loaned it to her. She wanted to wear it last night. Don't you see, George? She's blonde like me, too. *He* thought it was me!"

The reporter thought for a moment.

"Get your breakfast there and wait for me. I'll pick you up," he ordered and hung up.

THIRTY minutes later in a taxi he read the early edition *Gazette*. The crime rated a four-column headline. She'd been choked, police thought, some time around midnight "in a lonely section not a dozen blocks from her hotel—." It made George wonder if it was the same "lonely section" where he and Linda had had their experience earlier. "The cause of death was strangulation. From marks on the throat the victim had been killed by choking." "—no trace of the assailant although police feel certain that it was a man."

There was a picture of Peggy Greene. She was blonde, older than Linda and well built and large of frame. In the dark with her light hair and in the swimmer's dress,

she could easily have been mistaken for the other girl. And she had been; there was the epitaph.

Mrs. Brumley was bustling with solicitude and "poor child." Linda was holding back the tears with an effort. George tried patting her shoulder. It seemed inadequate. He finally persuaded the girl to come with him down to the *Gazette* office.

"You don't want to sit around here all day going over and over this thing," he pointed at the paper on the table.

But they went over it going downtown. George forced an optimism he didn't feel.

"We can give the cops a steer on this thing," he opinionated. He tried to avoid saying, Obviously the big guy was after you.

But Linda Malolry got it. She turned to him.

"He's crazy, isn't he, George? Completely crazy. Some sort of strange perverted maniac."

"I don't know. I don't know what he is."

No matter what is the trouble with the rest of the world or with your own world, it helps to be in a big, impersonal office with a lot of people. You are caught up in the bustle and the activity. It is an intangible. It is *esprit de corps* and the power of suggestion, and no matter what your trouble, you feel better.

Linda did. Two hours after she was introduced to Department D, she was sitting there doing routine typing, listening to the gum-chewing redhead on the left of her complaining about her boy friend and laughing despite herself at the wisecracks of one of the office boys who kept popping in.

There was the other thing inside of her, the shock and the fear and the regret at losing a friend—perhaps she hadn't known the Greene girl long. Maybe it was only a month or so but still—but the feeling was deeper within her now.

George looked in two or three times that morning, noticed and was pleased. He had their lunches sent upstairs, and afterward he took her around, showing her some of the printing presses and the composition rooms.

Later that day she called her swimming club. She told them, as George had instructed, simply that she had had to move and that she'd come in within a week. They, in turn, passed on the information that there

were a couple of letters for her and a persistent caller, a man who kept asking about her whereabouts.

"We've got him guessing." That evening George saw her straight home in a cab.

AT THE end of the week she persuaded him to let her go to the swimming club. He got some mid-afternoon time off for both of them.

"After all," she argued, "I'm supposed to be a swimmer. I have to practice once in a while."

There was a pool in the basement of the building. Linda glanced at her mail and then at George. He guessed what was coming. There was a leathery-faced, mannish-looking woman who had been fussing over her by the desk. He caught snatches like, "Neglecting your practice, my dear, and after such a promising beginning."

Linda said, "George, I ought to do a little practicing in the pool. It's perfectly all right here. You can stay or go, as you want. Isn't that okay?"

"I'll stay," he replied curtly.

The tank was in the basement level, a small twenty-yard pool, green-sided, white-tiled bottom. There were a few benches running down one side. On the other were two corridors, one leading to the stairs from above and the other leading to the dressing and shower rooms. He sat down on one of the benches and stretched his long frame.

The water was very clear and completely quiescent. He supposed later in the afternoon and the evening other girls came here. But now it was very lonely, and the yellow dome lights blinked down solemnly on him.

In a moment Linda came out in her bathing suit. The leathery-faced woman who had been introduced to George as the Association's swimming coach came and stood by the side of the pool and called down instructions as the girl swam up and down the tank, first slowly and then faster.

"You're rolling a little too much, dear. That's it."

George, less the perfectionist than old Leather Face, marveled at Linda's powerful, long strokes.

"That's fine," the coach clapped her hands. "Now you do a few dozen pool lengths."

The coach then beckoned to Pelgrim.

"There's something I'd like to speak to you about," she said in a low voice. "Not here. Come up to my office a moment."

George looked doubtfully back at Linda in the pool. She waved gaily to him. He followed the older woman up the stairs. She led him into a small, dingy office and closed the door. The walls were covered with photographs of girl swimmers.

"My girls," old Leather Face intoned proudly, "and you know, I really think Linda Mallory could be one of the best, but she hasn't been practicing enough. Oh my no, not nearly enough."

The woman fluttered on talking about Linda and swimming, and around the edges of several other subjects. Finally the reporter asked, "And what was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

The swimming coach reddened. Her hands waved in the air. Why, she's positively embarrassed, George realized.

"I think I'd better be getting back to the pool."

"No, no," she cried and laid a claw-like hand on his arm. She tried for a smile and fluttered some more. "You see, Linda should devote her entire time to swimming. She could really, well, I think she could really become very good. It's a great opportunity." The woman went on.

He agreed. "But I really think I ought to go back."

She protested feebly again. The transparent stall of the thing suddenly hit Pelgrim. He yanked at the door and started down the stairs to the basement two at a time.

He heard the woman following some steps behind.

The pool was empty, and its emptiness caught at his throat. He'd been upstairs how long? Ten, fifteen minutes, maybe a little longer. He turned to old Leathery Face, raging.

"Where's her room! Where's Linda Mallory's dressing room?"

She beckoned down the other corridor. "It's really all right. Now, don't get so excited, young man."

He pounded down the corridor.

"That one," she indicated to the left.

Everywhere else the dressing room doors

were open showing emptiness, nothing but utter emptiness. Without knocking he flung open the one closed door. It, too, was completely empty. The older woman stood in the door behind him outside.

"Really, it's all right," she protested. "You're becoming much too excited."

"What's all right!" George yelled.

"She's with the gentleman," the coach insisted. "She's all right."

THE story poured out. This man who had phoned so often for Linda, and the time he'd come, admitting whimsically that as a suitor he was losing out to someone else. Would they . . . would they let him know the next time she came, phone him immediately?

"He gave me his number," Leather Face proclaimed, "and forced, positively forced a fifty-dollar bill on me." The memory of it still embarrassed her. "He was very persistent."

"What did he look like?" Pelgrim cried.

"Well, not what you'd really call attractive. No, really not at all. He was very large, big, almost fat, yes, fat. A large white face with very dark eyes, but he was very courteous to me."

George could see her remembering the fifty-dollar bill.

"And you think Linda left here with him of her own accord?"

"Why, of course. He was her fiancé, sort of. At least that's what I gathered."

"That's what you gathered!" George sneered, and he heard the strange sound of his own voice rising. "Just look in here a minute."

The woman came forward peering into the chamber, eyes bulging as though she expected to find a corpse.

"Her clothes!" Pelgrim thundered. "Her dress, all her things are here. You think she vanished, left this building of her own accord just in a bathing suit?"

The woman shook her head, amazement spreading across her face.

"Certainly he wouldn't risk taking her upstairs and out front that way. Is there a back entrance? Quick!"

The woman nodded and beckoned out the way they'd come. George found it. The way led to an alley beside the building. It

too was empty, but outside lying beside the brick wall was her bright-red bathing cap, a rubber seam split at one place as though it had been torn off. He picked it up, and without another word to the startled older woman still dogging his trail, he got into a cab and told the driver, "Take me to the nearest police station."

Sergeant Murphy was very helpful in that imperturbable, unconstructive way that police officials have in the face of any catastrophe. George gave a complete description of Linda, and as best he could, a complete description of the big man. The only factor that caused the vestiges of life to light small fires for a moment in the sergeant's face was mention that the abductee was abducted in a bathing suit.

"In a bathing suit, you say now!" That was Sergeant Murphy's sole contribution.

George left for home. He poured himself a stiff drink and another, then he remembered to phone the office and told them to transfer any calls to his apartment. George turned on the radio. He called the precinct. There was no news. He'd never before been a floor-pacer. But now he paced. It was doubly hard because it was his own fault for leaving her there.

That stupid fool of a woman mouthing on about the gentleman giving her a fifty-dollar bill! Not to know the name of the person he was seeking. Except that fifty-dollar bills don't grow on trees could mean he was rich, must mean he was well off.

At one-fifteen a.m. in the morning (George knew the time exactly because he'd just listened to the news on the radio), the knocking came at his door. The knocking was insistent, hysterical.

Pelgrim opened the door, expecting anything. The anything was Linda. She fell into his arms. Her knees gave way and she sagged to the floor. There was an old, tattered long coat around her and an ugly bruise on her cheekbone. She mumbled something to him about a taxi driver downstairs and she got out of the long coat. George got it.

"Will you be all right for a minute?"

SHE nodded but sat there on the floor where she'd collapsed. Her face was gray, her eyes circled with fatigue. He

made sure the catch was on the door and felt it lock from the outside.

The cab driver was waiting skeptically and getting increasingly nervous.

"Hadn't ought to do it, mister. Hadn't of excepting your wife is so pretty." He accepted his long coat back gratefully.

George paid him the fare and a five-dollar tip, upon which the cabby grew loquacious.

"Ought to take better care of your wife, mister, beautiful girl like that. Masquerade party, she says to me. Some masquerade party, I says to myself! Going around the city in a bathing suit! It's none of my business, but if you ask me, mister!"

George left the driver still talking and hurried back into the building. In a moment he'd let himself back into his apartment. Her eyes were large with fear and glazed with shock. He pulled her over to his bed and hoisted her onto it. Then he called a doctor friend of his, a man who didn't mind being disturbed at this hour and wouldn't ask too many questions.

Linda said little. She was plainly exhausted. Dr. Allen, when he came, confirmed that.

"I've given her something to make her sleep." He punched his friend playfully on the shoulder. "What're you up to, George, my boy, and what's the swimming-suit stunt? After mermaids now?"

"She's all right?" Pelgrim was in no mood for jokes.

"She's okay. A good sleep will do it. She's got a nasty bruise on her cheekbone there. I'd hate to see whatever she bumped into."

After Allen had left, George tiptoed in and saw that Linda was sleeping. He shut the door quietly and then curled up on the living-room sofa.

She slept late, and before he heard the first stirrings from her room, he'd already put together some breakfast and phoned the office saying she wouldn't be in and he'd be late. When he took coffee and toast in to her, he was pleased at how much better she looked, although the cheekbone was still ugly.

She had a hearty, "Hi, what goes here!" for him.

"You mean you don't remember?" he came back.

She didn't shake her head but she looked doubtful, just this side of shaking her head. Then she clenched her hands together tightly.

"Yes," her voice was low. "Yes, I do remember. I remember all of it, George, and I don't want to."

He didn't like the look on her face and he chattered quickly about something else and got some coffee into her. He told her to stay put, not to answer the door or even the telephone unless it rang in a simple code he explained to her. Then he went out.

The Civil Administration offices of the city were not unfamiliar to him. He'd been there before on stories. Once there'd been a conference in the mayor's chambers. Another time, when the Commissioner of Police had been sworn in. The Commissioner, George remembered, was a tall man with the erect carriage of the military and a bristly gray mustache, a rather fine-looking man.

**W**AITING in the anteroom, George rehearsed in his mind what he was going to say. It was unusual, of course, to take a complaint to the Commissioner, but he felt under the circumstances it was justifiable. He wasn't at all averse to cashing in on a public official's desire to please representatives of the press. A good press often elects public officials and sympathetic reporting is a good press. Anybody from the lowest ward-heeler on up knows this.

He would state it simply, "Mister Commissioner, I realize this is rather an extraordinary case, but this acquaintance of mine"—and he would outline the situation, ending up with a description of the big man. The Commissioner would listen politely, and at the very least, there would be some sort of alarm or alert posted to pick up this character at least for questioning.

George waited. And then the door to the Commissioner's office opened. The Commissioner himself walked out. But George's eyes were not for his erect bearing and the neatly-trimmed gray mustache. Instead they were caught and fascinated by the Commissioner's companion. The hugeness, the dark, rumpled suit. . . .

The two men shook hands fervently and then the dark-suited monster lumbered past

Pelgrim as though he hadn't seen him, and out of the offices.

The Commissioner beckoned to the stunned reporter, frowning as he did so. The frown stayed put when they sat down inside. George's mouth was dry. His throat was tight. Words wouldn't come. Nothing came. Instead, the Commissioner spoke from out of the frown.

"Now, Mister Pelgrim. You are Pelgrim of the *Gazette*, of course?"

George managed to nod. The Commissioner went on:

"Ah, yes, of course I remember you. Please don't tell me you've come here to make a complaint!"

George was immobile. The Commissioner waved one hand.

"We all make mistakes. Of course, I don't want to embarrass you with a recital of what you know only too well, for the fact remains that Mr. Remsdorf—er, you just saw him leaving—er—has just made a complaint against you! He told me just now that going by your conduct of the last few months, you would probably be following him here!" The Commissioner made another wave in the air with his hand.

"He did say you might probably lodge a complaint against him." The Commissioner smiled as though this last contingency was so utterly ridiculous that no other facial reaction could satisfy it.

"There's a girl, I know," the Commissioner continued.

George started to speak but the official motioned him to silence.

"I know, I know how these misunderstandings come up. But I would suggest under the circumstances that you back out of this situation gracefully. I, of course, don't like to take any action on behalf of the city or the Police Department against you or speak to your employer."

"Who is he?" George finally got out.

The Commissioner looked surprised. "You don't know? That's Lother Remsdorf, Jr!"

The name went around in Pelgrim's mind and then the lights came on. Lother Remsdorf, Sr., had been the brilliant experimentalist and multi-millionaire who owned the huge place up on Grandview Avenue, some plantations in the South, coal ore, timber

and vast real-estate holdings. Remsdorf, Jr., could buy and sell Commissioners of Police.

"What does he charge me with?" George asked, tight-lipped.

"Now, now, Mister Pelgrim. This can all be done with a minimum of dramatics and without any great loss to yourself. There are, you know"—with what he meant to be a witty smile—"other girls in the world. Just leave Mr. Remsdorf's fiancée alone! I make myself clear, I hope."

THE next few days were tortuous. Linda had regained her physical strength, and slowly the shock of her experiences with Remsdorf had passed. George learned about it bit by bit, not wanting to force her. How the big man had appeared from nowhere soon after George had gone upstairs with the swimming coach. He had grabbed her before she could escape into the pool again and forced her out the back way.

They'd driven for a long time in his long, black, expensive limousine, chauffeured by some sort of liveried South American, she thought.

He told her a strange tale about himself and about her and where, like a crossword puzzle, their two destinies fitted together. He'd said quite candidly, she recalled the story to Pelgrim, that he wasn't the same as other men.

She'd listened to him with growing horror as he'd talked, not wanting to accept what he said, her eyes fascinatedly watching the drops of moisture on the backs of his huge, fleshy hands, and she remembered that when he'd touched her, his hands were wet as though he had been in swimming and not she.

The prosaic, matter-of-fact way he presented what he averred was the scientific truth about himself made the revelations even more horrible. Linda had sat huddled in the corner of his huge sedan, stunned, speechless.

Finally he'd driven to the family town house on Grandview Avenue. He'd helped her inside. Helped was hardly the word, for his giant hand had closed over her forearm and she sensed that he would have wrenched it out of the socket before he would have let her escape. And where could

she go? The impossibility of fleeing down a city street in a bathing suit!

He'd talked to her in the large house, as silent and imperturbable as its servants who came and went with drinks and food which she assiduously avoided touching. He drank, she noticed, huge quantities of liquids, beaters of milk, glasses and glasses of water and assorted liquors.

Finally, it was some time later that night, he'd sat dozing and looking water-logged before her, surrounded by empty glasses. She'd gathered her strength and run off down the corridors of the old monstrous house. She'd heard him come awake, the sound of a bell being rung, undoubtedly to summon the servants, and then his huge flapping weight coming after her in pursuit.

Thankfully, she'd found a door, and just as his nightmare shape rounded a corner behind her, she burst into the street, unmindful of her appearance. It was then she'd found a taxi, and brokenly told her story. It was any story then, that she'd been at a masquerade, and given George's address.

PELGRIM listened, half disbelieving some of the time but the terror had been a valid thing stamped on her face, as real as the bruise where the big man had struck her when he'd dragged her struggling from the pool.

The days became weeks, and the weeks with their uneventfulness gratefully lent themselves to a growing feeling of security. Linda sensed it and thrived on it. The color came back into her pretty face. She'd continued on at Mrs. Brumley's and their routine was simple.

George picked her up every morning in a cab and they went to the *Gazette*. They went home again together at night, and in all that time they never once saw Remsdorf. In the first few days of that period of time, George had found out what he could about Lothe Remsdorf, Sr. and Jr. The father had been a brilliant scientist. No less an authority than Carrel had called him "decades ahead of his time."

He'd had the brilliant analytical incisive and curious mind of the born experimentalist, plus the family heredity of vast wealth which allowed him to delve where he would, independent of the politics that surround the

monetary grants from scientific and medical institutions.

There were no limits, some experts felt, to the anthropological, biological and protoplasmic advances Remsdorf might have been able to make when the catastrophic explosion destroyed his mountain laboratory. Most of his equipment and all of his notes were obliterated, and no trace of Remsdorf, Sr., was ever found by searching parties who came to the lofty eyrie to search among the blackened ruins.

**T**HREE was a son, though, to carry on the name—Lother Remsdorf, Jr. Although his interests were not, seemingly, concerned with science, he had supposedly a brilliant mind, and as direct and only heir was one of the three wealthiest men in the country. A man in his position could purchase almost anything he wished from property to human lives to do with, to distort or destroy, as he willed.

Pelgrim felt a vast futility in those first few days, but as time passed and Linda grew more cheerful, he, too, had hopes that they had seen the last of the big man. With the months came early winter, and that past spring and summer seemed like some half-forgotten evil story laid in the distant past.

Linda's work at the paper had gone on, but one day she came to George, her eyes bright. It was the Southern Indoor Swimming Meet, the last of the season. She wanted to compete.

"I know I've neglected my practice," she admitted, "but I'd like to try. George, that awful business is behind us now. Don't you think it's all right?"

He said he thought so, but somehow the association with swimming bothered him. He wangled the assignment from his editor, and a week later they were on the train, Linda's entry acceptance in her handbag.

The trip to the southern city was an overnight hop. George saw Linda safely into her lower berth. Her upper was occupied by an elderly woman going to visit her son, while George had an upper across the aisle.

His desire for a cigarette before turning in took the reporter to the rear of the train. The observation car was empty at this hour except for a porter counting up tips. Pelgrim pushed open the door onto the observation

platform and fumbled his way in the darkness to a seat. He cupped his hands over a match to light his cigarette. He inhaled deeply and then blew the smoke out into the currents of air that rushed passed.

It was quiet as a railroad car can be with its rhythmical clicking of wheels, quiet enough so that when a voice said, "Good evening, Mr. Pelgrim," George jumped as though at a revolver shot.

He turned his head and just made out the shape of someone sitting on the opposite rail of the platform. The tones and the shape were all too familiar. George let out air suddenly and a gasp that sounded like, "You!" The revolver he'd gotten the license for several months ago was back inside in his suitcase.

"Please don't say anything as prosaic as that I'm following you," the big man chuckled, "or I shall have to suggest to the authorities that quite the reverse is true. How is Miss Mallory?"

"She's—she *was* all right," George said angrily, rising to his feet. He stood at the entrance door looking down at Lother Remsdorf. "I don't care who you are! I'm going to get rid of you, do you understand?"

But this heated denunciation only caused the big man to chuckle more.

"I mean to have her, Mr. Pelgrim, in spite of all your efforts. You see, she and I, our destinies are together to start a new race. Ah, but there I go. You wouldn't understand." His voice took on a brittle hardness. "She'll be mine or she will not be at all! As for your worries about who I am, well, let that be subordinate, Mr. Pelgrim: I would suggest you worry about *what* I am!"

George left the platform raging at the sound of laughter behind him. He got into his berth and lay there the rest of the night while the clicking wheels counted off the miles and the hours, and he thought and wondered and thought some more, always ending up at an impasse.

**T**HREE next morning he transferred the revolver from his suitcase into his pocket. He'd planned to say nothing about Lother Remsdorf to Linda, but getting off the train, she spotted the big man alighting two cars down. The hugeness, the bulk, the dark rumpled suit, these characteristics were not

to be mistaken. Nor were they lost on the girl. She lunged against Pelgrim.

"Dear God," she almost cried, "aren't we ever to be free of him? He's turned up again, George! What can we do?"

He tried to quiet her, to soothe her. Their hotel was a small one, and George made sure there was no Remsdorf registered there.

The next evening at the Indoor Championships, though, the big man was seated prominently in a front-poolside seat. George wondered at Linda's courage. From his perch in the press row, he could see her strained face, her eyes drawn almost as though hypnotized to the dark bulk sitting, watching her implacably.

In the finals her start was poor as though she were preoccupied with something else and hardly heard the gun. She swam courageously and splendidly, making up most of the lost ground. It was Remsdorf and Remsdorf alone that cost her first place. As it was, she came in second a foot or so behind the leader.

Later in her hotel, the girl came close to hysteria. The medal presentations were scheduled for the next day.

"We've got to get out of here, George," Linda insisted. "I'm so terribly afraid of him."

He agreed. They packed hurriedly and left by a back way. The small southern town was filled with visitors attracted by the aquatic show. In spite of the chill air a carnival spirit pervaded the streets. George found a cab and pushed Linda inside, directing the driver to the station.

The first time he turned around and looked out the back window, there was nothing suspicious. The second time he thought they were being followed. When they pulled into the railroad terminal, he was sure. He threw a bill at the driver, grabbed their luggage and hustled the girl into the waiting room. A last glance had showed another cab trundling down the street towards the station.

The ticket agent blinked at him sleepily. "Now, don't be so excited, young man. The next express for the North doesn't come through here for better than two hours yet. Can't understand why you Yankees are so goldarn anxious to get back up to that blighted country!"

The other cab had stopped in the driveway. George pushed Linda out the door that led to the platform. The tracks gleamed coldly under the occasional electric bulbs. They hurried up the platform a way, and then Pelgrim, looking back, saw the oblong of light when the station door opened. Still, they couldn't be seen by someone coming out of the lighted waiting room.

"We'll cut across the tracks," he muttered. "It's the only way."

IT WAS flight now, blind hysterical flight to get away. Months long the pursuit had lasted, its tempo increasing. He helped Linda as her heels caught in the ballast underneath the ties. Four tracks, eight rails they stumbled across, and then there were bushes and shrubs, thankfully on the other side.

"You know where we're going?" she asked.

"I'm not sure, but I remember when we came here there was an airfield not far from the station."

They pushed on through the wooded area. Almost at the same time that they saw the circular beacon in the sky ahead of them, they both detected the sounds of pursuit, heavy, methodical tramping, unmistakably the sounds of a big person following them.

"Go on!" George panted to Linda, and the scene was faintly reminiscent of that other time months earlier in the city. "Go on, you can make it. I'll follow."

He wanted to keep both bags, but she insisted on taking one. She was gone then into the darkness. Her lips brushed his cheek. She murmured, "I don't want to leave you," and he ordered her roughly away, "I'm running this for better or worse." She saw the revolver in his hand and she understood.

The minutes passed, more time than he'd dared to hope for. She was well away by now, nearly to the municipal airport, he thought. And then out of the shrubbery loomed Lother Remsdorf, the clothes on his huge bull-like body more rumpled than ever, hands hanging at his sides, his black hat clamped tight on his head.

He came forward slowly, and what light there was reflected from the stars and the sky glanced off the dull barrel of Pelgrim's revolver.

"Now will you leave us alone?" the reporter snarled between clenched teeth. "Will you go back the way you've come and never bother us again?"

The laughter started then inside the big man, deep inside, and it grew to a gurgling sound to hear. The giant hands were raised and the first menacing step forward was taken when George fired.

He was aiming squarely at the gigantic middle, and at the range of only several paces, he couldn't have missed. Remsdorf lurched on towards him and the slobbering sound of his laughter seemed to beat down on the reporter. George fired again and again, but the monster kept coming.

Two more shots, and then with one chamber left, Pelgrim raised his revolver, pointed it squarely at the hideous white swollen face looming before him. He pulled the trigger and saw the course of the bullet in the man's face. Remsdorf shook his head then and stopped, but Pelgrim was as though rooted to the spot, fascinated.

THE big man was still grinning, and one hand came up and touched cheek. The hole there was apparent, but what was oozing out, slowly, thickly, almost like honey, was not blood. It could not be blood for it was not red. It was a neutral-colored liquid, strange and terrible to see as it was inexplicable. An almost whitish, thick serum-like substance.

"You've water in you, not blood," the reporter screamed involuntarily. "You're not human. . . ."

Almost imperceptibly the gigantic head nodded, as though in mute, mirthful agreement. . . .

George turned and ran then. Ran as fast as he could; as long as he could. There was somewhere in the back of his consciousness the youngster-thought that this could not be and that he would wake up and find it was dream-stuff, but he had enough presence of mind to shove the empty revolver in his coat pocket as he came onto the municipal airport field.

She was beckoning to him and they got on a flight to the North. He couldn't speak for gasping, but they sat huddled together while the plane filled. The minutes ticked away and Linda kept murmuring, her head against

his shoulder, Why didn't they leave, why didn't they leave? He held her head there because he was too tired to do anything else and because he didn't want her to see who had just gotten into the plane; their plane. . . . grinning still. . . . A man with six bullets in him. A man?

They flew into the night and into the dawn, and all the time George could feel, without looking, those eyes on them from the rear. Linda slept against his shoulder fitfully and he brushed her golden hair gently over her eyes.

The flight ended at a Northern airport and the two disembarked groggily with little fight left in them. Remsdorf was close behind.

It was one of those vagaries of Fate that made George look towards the Canadian plane warming up in the next runway. On the spur of the moment he bought two tickets, and in fifteen minutes they were flying north again, but no more alone, no more unpursued than they had been before.

George had a relative in this certain Canadian town, towards which they headed, an uncle of some influence locally but who could not be expected to contribute to their problem concretely. It was only the impulse to keep going that had driven Pelgrim on. Linda was too cold and too tired to care any longer.

IT WAS beginning to snow when they landed in the northern Canadian airport. George got Linda into a hack. The faithful Remsdorf was close behind in another. They got out at his uncle's address, leaning together for support. The snow was heavier and the wind was freezing.

George looked for his uncle's name on the doorbells. There was nothing. Frantically he pushed "Superintendent." Remsdorf's trailing cab stopped outside, and the big man got out across the street. George hoped he froze in his rumpled dark suit, got sick, dropped dead, anything.

The superintendent shoved a bleary face around the door jamb.

"He's not here any more. He's moved. He's ten blocks or so up the street."

He scribbled an address for Pelgrim and handed it to him. The two started out again, heads bent against the storm. The snow had

all but stopped as the mercury tumbled even lower, but the going was bad and the wind ferocious. Linda's teeth chattered as they trudged on, endlessly it seemed.

The final half of the way led through a small park, deserted in this weather. The big man was still behind them, George saw when he craned his head, but there was something newly strange.

"What is it?" Linda's fingers dug into Pelgrim's arm.

"It's all right," George reassured. "Let's just keep going," but his head was still craned backward.

The big man was walking staggeringly, stiffly. He seemed to be trying as hard as before to keep up with them, but his steps were clumsy even for him.

They had almost reached the other side of the park when George saw Remsdorf stagger and put his great hands out to clutch at a bench. He eased himself stiffly into it like a very old, old man with rheumatism.

George turned his head away and there was the address ahead. Soon they were inside out of the bitter weather and his uncle, small, gray as ever, was clucking over them like a mother hen. Linda was put to bed immediately in the guest room with a hot-water bottle and a pint of spiked hot tea.

George talked with his uncle for a while, grateful that the older man didn't press him for reasons.

"I know you newspaper fellows," his relative wagged, "always up to some kind of scalawag, looking for stories. Son, you ought to turn in now. You look pretty tuckered."

George assured him he would but said no, certainly he wouldn't take the older man's bed. He'd sleep outside here.

By midnight the house was quiet. George tiptoed to the front closet and took out a greatcoat. Then as silently he let himself out the front door.

The night was bright with snow and clear with the zero temperature. He made his way into the barren and deserted park. He walked down the path they'd taken earlier until he came to the desolate bench set by the way. There was Remsdorf, no longer graining, sitting fixedly. The reporter's thoughts went back to the water-substance that had flowed from the monster's wound where red blood should have been.

George came closer and his eyes bulged. It was too much, it was incredible, but Remsdorf's head under the black slouch hat, seemed a snowball, his hands were stiff claws of ice. Disbelieving, George took the revolver from his pocket, and with its barrel struck gently against one of the outstretched fingers. The tip broke off as easily as if this thing were a candy figure.

For Remsdorf was not of this world. He was frozen. He was dead. He was an ice man and no more!