



# The Green Flame

By ERIC NORTH

Author of "Three Against the Stars"

Most sinister of criminals was the Toad, whose chilling secret surpassed any knowledge of the scientists. Because of it, his power over the world was more terrible than hatred, more crushing than Armageddon. Beginning a weird and exciting novel of things undreamed of

## CHAPTER I

### HUMAN PYRE

**M**Y NAME is Maurice John Murchison. I detest writing, and have been betrayed into this effort only by the sheer horror which infects me whenever I am poisoned by thought of Toad. He called himself only that; and the name may well have been received from the christening hands of Satan.

Not one of the high Australian offi-

cials who were concerned in Toad's disarming is now alive. Although they emerged from the ordeal apparently in normal good health, they were dying men. That those of us who played minor roles in this terrible drama escaped the aftermath of Toad's poison, I can ascribe only to the goodness of Providence.

Yet the world at large never knew the hideously searing extinction it so narrowly missed in those blackest days. Even now I wonder fearfully whether



what has happened may happen again. It seems improbable, yet my common sense tells me the risk is there. I pray that I may be wrong. . . .

Toad comes into being, so far as my own experience is concerned, on an evening late in November. I had arrived by the express from Sydney at midday, with my entire personal possessions contained in two suitcases, and with barely enough money to insure me against a month of idleness.

I was not unduly apprehensive. I was thirty; fairly well equipped with a public school education and some ten years' experience of city and commercial life as seen from the angle of a secretary and a clerk.

I had health and average good looks, and was unencumbered by family re-

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sponsibility. The world of my choosing was still at my feet, and the ball was in play.

I left my suitcases in the station cloakroom while I sought for comfortable and cheap lodgings. With the guidance of the newspapers I inspected many alleged "homes from home" but found none to my own definition.

I had no delusions about boarding-house life and customs, but never before had I encountered an atmosphere so unattractive and depressing. As a consequence, when night came I was still unsettled.

After I had eaten at a cafe I fell

idly into place in the street throng. The night was clear and the air warm, and a green mill turned slowly against a background of soft sky. Tempted by the quiet of the Alexandra Gardens I followed a white winding pathway to a seat under a small tree thickset, stretched my tired legs and lit my pipe.

I was congratulating myself on being so comfortable when the figure of a man appeared precipitately from a side path. At its junction with the main path he halted and looked eagerly from side to side. Seeing the glow of my pipe, as I suppose, he came rapidly towards me.

He was bareheaded, and his face glimmered oddly in the half light as he paused and peered directly at me.

He said in a pleasant but distinctly agitated voice:

"I beg your pardon. I am in search of a friend. You haven't, by any chance, seen hereabouts an elderly man wearing a dark overcoat and soft felt hat, and carrying a stick and bundle of papers? He walks very slowly and leans rather noticeably on his stick."

I said:

"No, I'm sorry I haven't. You're the first I've seen for nearly ten minutes. No one answering to that description has passed me."

**H**HE SAT on the other end of the seat and lit a cigarette. In the brief spurt of matchlight I saw that he was young—about my own age, or a year or two less. He was smartly dressed, and had the air of a man who is considerably perturbed.

He said, as if thinking aloud:

"Perhaps, after all, I'm acting foolishly. He may be unharmed."

"Were you fearing his harm?" I asked.

"Yes and no. I wish—" He appeared

suddenly to recollect that he was talking to a stranger, and stood up and stared at me. Possibly my voice reassured him, for he continued, as if glad of an opportunity to confide in someone:

"His heart is weak. He has to take certain specially ordered medicines. But I was not particularly alluding to that. I—"

The tread of heavy feet brought our heads around simultaneously. My companion exclaimed in a relieved tone: "Here's officer Crampton, one of the park police."

For a second I was blinded by the glare of an electric torch. A voice said: "Who's this? Oh, how are you, Mr. Framling? Anything wrong?"

"Not exactly wrong," Framling replied. I could feel him glance at me doubtfully. "The fact is, I'm looking for Mr. Stephen Gregory. You know him, Crampton, I think. He's director of the Bureau of Chemical Science."

"Is that all your trouble? Yes, I know Mr. Gregory well. I passed him not fifty yards back, coming this way. Here he is now."

Framling muttered something which sounded suspiciously like "Thank Heaven." He went to meet the newcomer, leaving Crampton to say to me: "A friend of Mr. Framling?"

I said, "No. I just happened to be here when he came looking for this Mr. Gregory. I suppose you wouldn't object to telling me who Mr. Framling is? He seems a good chap."

So, for that matter, was the park policeman. He told me that George Framling was private secretary to the premier, Mr. Morgan Hannaford, and was considered a very able young fellow and a very likable one. He was the premier's right-hand man in a semi-official sense.

Framling returned to the seat with his Mr. Gregory. The director of the Science Bureau was a man verging on sixty, tall and spare with short iron-gray hair and beard. His voice was mild and his manner hesitating.

He appeared to move in a world of the intellect—a clever, gentle old man, undeserving of a single enemy.

My first impulse was to pass on to find another seat, leaving the three to their conversation in common. I was, however, tired out, and possession rights were clearly mine. Added to this was a frank curiosity to learn what could prompt so personable an official as George Framling to hatless, agitated search for a scientist of such peaceful persuasion.

And so it was that the horrible thing which happened took place, as it were, at the very core of my understanding.

**Y**OUNG FRAMLING was saying, as they seated themselves: "Why of course not, Mr. Gregory. I said as much, to the premier this evening, but he was unusually nervous. Not at all like himself.

"Another of those letters came by the afternoon mail, you see. I was for treating it as a joke, but Mr. Hannaford became very serious. He asked me, in view of the facts of your particular investigation to—well, in short, to keep a bit of an eye on you."

"Toad," said Mr. Gregory, in a quiet, cultured voice, "is sinister and ill-sounding. Perhaps that, Mr. Framling, coupled with the nature of these communications, explains the psychology of the premier's unease. I might say that this morning I received a letter myself."

"You did?" Framling exclaimed—incredulously, I thought. "A letter with that signature, Mr. Gregory?"

"My dear boy," said the old gentleman—and I saw his thin hand go out to touch Framling's arm in a gesture that was singularly sweet—"my dear Framling, at my age such ill-conditioned threats have small power to terrify.

"Why, yes; Toad; as he styles himself, is evidently aware of my small entry into his affairs. Indeed, I fancy he is under a name less ugly—among my personal acquaintances. There is nothing strange in that.

"Our giants of chemistry are not so many that one should escape me. It is possible that I have unwittingly revealed to the man himself the mission entrusted to me by the premier, to endeavor to discover the identity of this man—Toad."

"He threatens you, then?"

"He definitely gives me until midnight tonight to make an end of living. Although, to be sure, I had forgotten all about it until now. A crank, Framling, if there ever was one."

"The letter received by Mr. Hannaford late this afternoon threatened you in exactly similar terms," Framling said. "Nothing would satisfy him but that I should find you and take you to his office. Knowing your habit of walking near the pond at this hour, I came immediately in search of you. The premier's impatience would not allow me even to find my hat. I have a taxi waiting on the avenue."

"What is the time?" Mr. Gregory asked.

The park policeman, Crampton, who was about to stroll on, turned his torchlight on the watch in Framling's hand.

"A quarter to eight."

"So late?" the old gentleman said with mild concern. "I am behind with my medicine, Framling. Crampton, would you have the goodness to give

me a little more light? Thank you."

Framling said, plainly amused by this meticulous adherence to time-table treatment: "How has your heart been, Mr. Gregory? You still carry with you each exact dose in a phial, I see."

"Otherwise I am sure I should forget to take my medicine at all." Mr. Gregory smiled.

He raised the tiny glass bottle to his lips and swallowed the amber contents at a gulp.

**I** CANNOT—no, I simply cannot find words to describe the incredible sequel. It seemed to me that even with the act of swallowing, the old man—as if yielding to a sudden, swift, spontaneous combustion—burst into flame. A spurt of jade-green fire came from his mouth, lighting for one horrific second the enormous astonishment and fear that distended the pupils of his eyes.

His nostrils seemed to crackle. He fell gently forward, like a wax candle bending to the heat, with the ghastly flame sucked downward into his body, and toppled over on his face.

If the awfulness had stopped at that our sanity had been shocked enough. Yet we three, standing paralyzed, saw worse—infinity, unbelievably worse.

For as he lay, there came again from every cell of flesh and blood and bone, little creeping tendrils of that jade-green flame, as if his body were soaked with fire—came and vanished. And there was no body. . . .

There was nothing but a thin green mist that might have been smoke, but that was shining and heat-laden and evilly stinking, like a breath from Hell.

Crampton's voice said at my ear: "Quick! Catch him!"

Though I was half fainting myself, Framling's utter collapse came as a

needed spur. Between us we got him to a grass border, where he lay quivering.

Crampton said, like a man distraught: "Great God! I must be mad. Nothing like that ever happened . . . ever could happen. . . ."

He left me at that and went away a little, and I seemed to hear him being violently ill. He was a big man, middle-aged and powerful, but when he returned he was sagging like jelly. He picked up his torch from the gravel path, where it had fallen in the stress of his emotion, and walked to where Mr. Gregory had been.

The green haze, or whatever it was, had gone. The gravel thereabouts—as I saw for myself next day—seemed slightly darker in shade than the rest; but that was all. There remained of Mr. Gregory nothing but the walking stick which he had rested against the seat when he stood up to drink.

**M**Y OWN sickness had passed. I carried water in my hat from a nearby tap, and with this aid quickly revived Framling. But for some seconds after he was conscious, his look was vacant.

He said presently, catching at his throat: "Crampton . . . Where's Crampton? Look here. Did that really happen to Mr. Gregory, or was it some shocking nightmare of illness?"

"It . . . happened, Mr. Framling," Crampton said.

Framling sat a moment with his face buried in his hands. I could hear the breath whistling in his lungs. But in a little while he became composed. He turned to me and asked: "What is your name?"

I told him.

"Well, Mr. Murchison," he said, "I needn't tell you, I suppose, how urgently necessary it is that not one



word of this ghastly business should reach the public ear. It might do incalculable harm. I can rely on your word of honor?"

"Of course," I said. "What do you mean to do, Mr. Framling?"

For a moment or two he said nothing. He looked at Crampton, who was taking little short strides up and down the path, like a man bereft.

"I must see the premier. I shall probably be accused of insanity, or worse. After all, there's that possibility for all of us. We may be insane . . ."

I said: "No, Mr. Framling, we're not insane. What we saw was insane, but we three are sane enough."

"Well," said Framling, "this won't do. There's no telling how the premier will take this news. Look here, in case your added testimony is needed, what's your address?"

I told him how I stood.

He said: "You seem a good sort. And I'm awfully obliged for the way you've stood to Crampton and me. I can put you in the way of decent lodgings, I think. My wife has a girl friend who lets a few rooms by way of keeping the wolf from the door. I happen to know that a room became vacant yesterday. If you'd like to try there . . ."

It sounded just what I wanted and I said so gratefully.

"I'll give you this little note, then," Framling said, scribbling a few lines on the back of an envelope. "Her name is Nancy Carlisle, and the address is Monray Street, East Melbourne.

"By the way, in case you're suited, I ought to tell you, perhaps, that her father is something of a crank. Mona—that's my wife—says it's a case of religious mania. But he's not objectionable, they say. Anyhow, you'll like Nancy. She's a first-rate girl.

"And, mind—not a word to any one about poor old Gregory. Good Lord! I can't bring myself to believe it, even now."

Crampton came up then. He said: "I suppose you'll want me to go with you to the premier, Mr. Framling?"

"Yes," Framling said. "Murchison, we can give you a lift as far as the Treasury. Monray street is not five minutes away from the Government offices, as a matter of fact."

I said goodbye at the foot of the Treasury steps, and set out for Monray Street and Miss Nancy Carlisle. My head was in a whirl. It seemed to me that even now the real significance of everything had somehow escaped us, and that a vaster horror was to come.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CURIOUS CARLISLES

I FOUND the house without difficulty. It formed part of a stone terrace which had obviously fallen on evil times.

The brick steps, up which one climbed to a narrow porch, were crumbling and moss-grown. An attenuated wooden veranda ran the length of the entire second story, after the manner of a long, acrobatic earthworm.

Number 5 was exactly midway along the terrace. As I pushed open the creaking iron gate I saw that an attempt at a garden graced the meager frontage. There were a number of abbreviated kerosene tins containing geraniums, and a nasturtium grew at the foot of the steps. There was also a solitary rose bush at the center of a patch of grass.

Search discovered no bell of any kind, but an old-style knocker was on the door, and this I made use of to

invoke from within a series of low, hollow echoes. The last had barely died when the door opened to the light of a narrow hallway, with a staircase climbing at its end.

The walls were covered with a gloomy-tinted surface very shining and clean. In places, the plaster had broken away, and the paint-work was old and shabby.

These impressions were not all gained at the time; they came later in the evening, when I made a second entry with my suitcases from the railway cloakrooms. For the moment I was fully occupied in admiration of the girl confronting me.

Nancy Carlisle was then—as she confessed some weeks later—within a week of her twenty-fifth birthday. She was of medium height and inclining to plumpness. In the exact sense of the word she was not pretty; her features were too irregular, perhaps.

It was the animation in her face and the musical timbre of her voice that first captured my imagination. These imbued her with a charm far beyond the ordered sightliness of mere good looks.

Her eyes were a mellow brown, very wide and frank. Her hair was brown and disposed about her shapely head in a wind-blown bob.

Having read Framling's introductory scrawl, she gave me a friendly smile.

"Yes, Mr. Murchison, the room is still vacant. I shall be glad to let you have it, if you find it suitable. I will show it to you."

It proved to be large and airy, with just the right amount of furniture—all spotlessly clean. There was one large window of the ordinary type, and a double-door window which gave access to the balcony. From this a fine view

was had of the Fitzroy Gardens, now softly dotted with lights.

I said, "This is exactly what I hoped for, Miss Carlisle—if it is not too expensive."

"With breakfast, Mr. Murchison, I have been charging thirty shillings a week." Her tone was a little anxious, I thought, as if she feared I might think her gasping. "And of course you would have the use of the sitting room downstairs. Mr. Mertz was always comfortable here, I think."

I gathered that she referred to my predecessor. Certainly he had every opportunity of being comfortable, and I said so.

"That will suit me admirably, Miss Carlisle. Was Mr. Mertz with you for any length of time?"

"Nearly three years," she said. She added impulsively: "And yet, do you know, I could hardly describe to you what he looked like. Isn't that curious? In all that time I don't believe I ever met him, as we say, face to face. I always placed his breakfast on a tray outside his door, and knocked and went away."

"He left the house very early each morning—even on Sundays—and usually returned late at night. He had no visitors, unless you might count Father as one. Father often came here to Mr. Mertz's room, and they would talk for hours. Father liked Mr. Mertz."

"But you did not?" I asked, at a venture, attracted by some queer quality in her look.

"No," she said frankly, "I did not. Indeed, I think I very much disliked him. And yet he never once openly offended me. I can hardly explain it. But I was glad when he left us. I haven't even bothered to find out where he went."

"But I think father knows. I think

father went to see Mr. Mertz tonight, in fact. After all, Mr. Murchison, why shouldn't he? He is a lonely man himself, and I am glad that he has at least one person that he takes pleasure in."

I WAS shown the sitting room down stairs. It, too, was plainly but comfortably furnished. There was a piano in an alcove by the fireplace, and a large bookcase stood by one wall.

There was another boarder besides me, I learned. This was a Miss Mollie Hollidew, a young lady who graced the chorus in a musical comedy when opportunity came. For the time being she was one of the ensemble of *The Kewpie Girl*, which was drawing crowded houses at the Theatre Royal.

"Mollie is quite a dear," Nancy Carlisle said, "except for what she calls her temperament, but what I call plain bad temper. It worries Cuthbert frightfully."

I said: "Who is Cuthbert?"

Nancy smiled.

"Cuthbert is—well, it is rather hard to describe Cuthbert. His other name, by the way, is Weinseidle. Cuthbert Weinseidle. It's an astonishing name, isn't it, Mr. Murchison? He's devoted to Mollie. He fetches her from the theater in his car regularly every night. It's really quite pathetic.

"He has no conversation; absolutely none. He just sits in front of Mollie, and stares at her mournfully. He reminds me sometimes of one of these china poodles. And he often irritates Mollie to the verge of madness."

"He wants her to marry him?"

"He proposes every night, I think."

Nancy burst into musical laughter. "Really it's too absurd. She won't say yes or no to the poor soul. She might do a great deal worse than Cuthbert. He has plenty of money—inherited, of

course. And if he is not over-blessed with intelligence, he is a very good-hearted, decent boy. I like him."

When I returned from the railway cloakrooms with my suitcases, a handsome car was drawn up at the curb; and I judged that Mr. Cuthbert Weinseidle had performed his nightly task according to established custom, and was even then mournfully regarding the tired object of his affections.

In witness whereof, Nancy Carlisle met me, as I entered the hall, with an invitation to join them in the sitting room.

"Father has gone to bed," she said, "but Mollie and Cuthbert are inside. You're just in time for some supper, Mr. Murchison."

Mollie Hollidew welcomed the introduction with a sleepy but entirely friendly smile. She was a solid-looking brunette with a shingled, glossy head, and a much-carmined complexion. Her manner was a little affected, but underneath it I seemed to sense a sound heart.

She said as we shook hands: "You'll excuse me not rising, Mr. Murchison, won't you? As I tell Nancy, art is so exacting. Of course, you've been to see *The Kewpie Girl*?"

"Mr. Murchison arrived from Sydney only today," Nancy explained. "Mr. Weinseidle . . . Mr. Murchison."

His hand lay in mine like a lifeless herring.

Mr. Weinseidle's eye, I thought, was a little glassy. It rested on me briefly, and returned to Miss Hollidew.

He said: "Undoubtedly."

There didn't seem to be much sense in this, but as I was to discover later, "undoubtedly" was one of Cuthbert's stock remarks. He only had two. The other was "sure." As Nancy had said, he had no conversation.



MISS HOLLIDEW, I was now informed, had had a tiff with the stage manager. She alluded to him scornfully as "that little runt," and said it was no wonder that three wives had divorced him. The only thing she couldn't understand was how he had escaped being poisoned.

While she enlarged on her text I studied Cuthbert. He was plainly much younger than Miss Hollidew; somewhere, I thought, about twenty-five or twenty-six. He had a long face and a short upper lip; his hair was fair and highly polished, and he wore sideburns and a small moustache.

Upon the whole, he seemed a little improved upon his kind. And without doubt the effect upon him of Miss Hollidew's charms was tremendous. His gaze never swerved from her, even when she made excited reference to the fact that he had made no attempt to destroy the stage manager in return for insulting reference to a lady.

"Restraint is the wiser course," Nancy said tactfully. "The manager is probably still remembering Cuthbert's look of contempt. You did look at him, didn't you, Cuthbert?"

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

"There . . . you see, Mollie," Nancy said.

"Well, perhaps, after all, it was best," Miss Hollidew conceded, with a yawn. "What's the use of arguing with a beastly little germ-like Swiggins, anyhow? Give me a cigarette."

I thought this a good time to depart. I had only just realized how appallingly tired I was. The long journey by train, coupled with the incredible events of the evening, had shaken my nerves badly. Thought of Mr. Gregory was like a great black cloud at the back of my mind. I was suddenly chilled and dispirited.

Very likely something of this showed in my face, for Nancy Carlisle said as I stood up: "You look weary, Mr. Murchison. It was selfish of me to keep you up like this. I do hope you will find your bed comfortable."

I liked the warm, anxious way she smiled at me. Framling had been right when he said that she was a fine girl. It was extraordinary how homelike and contented a feeling she had given me. I think at that moment, apart from the incubus of my thought of Mr. Gregory, I was happier than I had ever been in my life.

In parting from Cuthbert I said: "I hope we shall meet again soon, Mr. Weinseidle."

I expected him to say, "Undoubtedly." Instead, he said, "Sure." His eyes never left Miss Hollidew, but I knew somehow that this resorting to the other half of his vocabulary was intended to express gratitude and liking.

Sleep came tardily. I am, as a rule, a good sleeper, but the poison of my first experience of Toad ran riot in my mind. I tried to tell myself that the thing had never happened, that it was a figment of morbid imagination, but failed sensibly to do so.

In the end, I gathered my thoughts about Nancy Carlisle—something I was to do often, very often, in the days to come. It was an anodyne which has never once failed me.

II BREAKFASTED in the sitting room about nine o'clock next morning. There was, so far, no appearance of Nancy's father, and Miss Hollidew was in the habit of keeping to her bed—unless she was rehearsing—until after midday, so that Nancy and I were the sole company during the meal.

When it was over I went out for a walk. I ought, I suppose, to have bent

all my energies toward securing some manner of occupation, for it was plain that my small capital must soon be at an end.

But I was queerly disinclined. I idled in the gardens for the entire morning and did not return to Excelsior Terrace until after lunch time.

Someone was playing the piano in the sitting room: a hymn tune. And presently there came the sound of a man's voice singing in tones that were muffled harshly.

As I entered the hall the singing ceased, and the voice entered upon a kind of undertoned recitative, like a litany. The door of the sitting room was half open, prompting my curiosity. It was presently viewing the rounded shoulders of a man who knelt at the piano stool as if it were some sort of altar.

He was chanting monotonously, yet the words held the leaven of a strange fervor. I could make nothing of what he was saying. It sounded to me like a hodgepodge of Biblical quotations.

"For what saith the Scriptures. . . Behold, I am come to send fire on the earth . . . neither shall there be any more a flood to destroy the earth . . . water and fire . . . and the two shall be one, and one shall be made two . . . woe unto this wicked generation for the end of all things is at hand . . ."

My elbow was touched gently. I turned, a little shamefaced, to see Nancy Carlisle at my side. It seemed to me that her brown eyes were full of tears.

But before either of us could speak the old man at the piano made an end of his mumbling and rose to his feet facing us. He was tall and thin, with a straggling gray beard, and eyes that burned somberly from the shadow of his prominent brows.

Nancy said: "Father, this is Mr. Murchison. He has taken the room that Mr. Mertz used to have."

I doubt that the old man understood her. He lifted a thin hand to his forehead and said, in a high, shaking voice: "A new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

She went to him and slipped her hand quietly into the crook of his arm.

THE soft appeal appeared to rouse his scattered wits. The fire left his eyes and his body ceased its trembling. Sanity returned to his voice.

"Yes, Nancy?"

"This is Mr. Murchison, father. He is taking Mr. Mertz's old room."

I said: "I am glad to meet you, Mr. Carlisle."

It was remarkable how changed he was in those few seconds. From a fierce-visaged fanatic he was become a timid, bewildered old man. He gave me his hand doubtfully.

"I trust you are comfortable with us, Mr. Murchison. Our ways are simple, but our friends find us sincere."

I said I was sure of that. The situation was not without pathos, and I was glad presently to escape to my own room. I found an old cane arm-chair on the balcony; sat down and lit my pipe; and fell to musing over the strange person I had just met.

It was later, of course, that I learned the history of Rufus Carlisle. He had been a prominent figure some years before in the commercial life of the city. He was an ardent church worker and among the foremost in charitable enterprise.

As very often happens, however, in men untried by any grave crisis until fairly late in life, his philosophy was without solid foundation when reverses attacked it.

Unlucky speculation was followed by the death of his wife; and the weakness latent in Rufus Carlisle suddenly manifested itself in a fierce insobriety. He became a notorious drunkard and a man about town. His business was neglected and eventually collapsed; and he himself emerged from delirium tremens to remain for some weeks an inmate of a mental hospital.

On his discharge a strange reaction took place. He forswore utterly those practices which had reduced him to human wreckage, and entered a phase of religious mania. This was for the most part unobtrusive.

In general, the old man fell into a formula of daily existence which never varied in essentials. He rose from his bed punctually each day at ten o'clock; and at eleven o'clock began the conduct of an hour's devotional exercise in the sitting room. He then dined.

From two o'clock to five each afternoon, unless prevented by rough weather, he was to be found upon a certain seat in the Fitzroy Gardens, reading a much-thumbed Bible and meditating vacantly. At six o'clock he had his tea.

The evenings alone were free of settled conduct. Sometimes he retired early; more often he was absent until a late hour.

Nancy, I discovered, never questioned her father's actions. She gave him a solicitude which was more maternal than daughterly, attending to his wants as to those of a small, irresponsible boy. She saw that he was properly garbed before he left the house, and that in the right-hand pocket of his overcoat were always a shilling and a small paper bag containing tobacco and matches.

The old man accepted this regular attention mechanically. I think, indeed,

he moved mostly in a world of his own, without proper consciousness of mundane existence.

For all that, I surprised now and then a furtive look in his eyes which suggested that his mind was not so wholly clouded, but held very definitely some purpose of this world.

### CHAPTER III

#### WHO FOR EXTINCTION?

I HAD finished my pipe and was considering what now to do, when a tap came at the door of my bedroom. Nancy Carlisle's voice called: "Are you there, Mr. Murchison? Here's a visitor for you."

It was George Framling. I don't know that I was surprised to see him, for all day the impression had been with me that there was much more to come of the tragic circumstances of Mr. Gregory's annihilation.

In daylight Framling proved to be dark-complexioned and very good-looking. His eyes were alert and clever, and he had a firm mouth and chin. If he was worried at all he concealed the fact cleverly, for he stood smiling and joking very naturally until Nancy withdrew and we were left alone.

But I knew then that his jollity was assumed. His smile left him like the dropping of a mask, and his hands seemed unsteady as he lit a cigarette.

He said: "Can we be overheard here, Murchison?"

"I don't think so," I replied.

And then, I suppose, the terrific occasion of our last meeting returned with a rush, for I heard myself stammering: "Good Lord! Then it was true! Do you know, I had half a belief until now that I'd dreamed the whole beastly thing."

"It's no dream," Framling said

shortly. "In fact, Murchison, no nightmare could approach the reality. I came to take you to the Treasury buildings. Mr. Hannaford and one or two others are waiting for us."

"Mr. Hannaford?"

"The premier. This thing is horribly serious, Murchison. I've never seen him so grave. I don't know whether he guesses what lies behind it all, but I do know that for the time being he is putting aside all considerations of an ordinary nature. By the way, you've kept your own counsel?"

"Yes," I said.

"Continue to do so," Framling said simply. "Now, if you'll get your hat . . ."

We left the house in silence.

**F**IVE men awaited us in the premier's room in the State Government offices. First, Mr. Morgan Hannaford himself—short and stout, with close-cropped gray hair and mustache, rather plethoric cheeks falling to a stern, square jaw, and somber gray eyes.

When we entered he was seated at a table, talking earnestly to a thin, angular man with keen, clever features, who was presently made known to me as Professor Branden, of the Faculty of Chemical Science at the Melbourne University.

Close by stood a middle-aged, powerfully built man, with a large nose and mouth and an almost bald head. This was Sir Hector Corrilees, chief commissioner of police.

The fourth man I immediately recognized as Senior-Detective Ralph Hermann. Hermann's rugged, farmer-like face had of late figured frequently in the photographic columns of the daily press. He held a remarkably able record in the annals of crime detection, and had only then barely concluded a partic-

ularly brilliant coup. He was high in the confidence of his chiefs and was understood to possess initiative and determination.

I saw him now as a thickset man of average height, slow moving and slow speaking. His eyes were mild, but a fearless confidence seemed to inspire his every word.

The remaining man was Crampton, the park policeman.

"Your name, I understand, is Murchison?" Mr. Hannaford said, as I came forward.

"Maurice Murchison," I told them. "I arrived from Sydney yesterday."

"Will you kindly tell us, Mr. Murchison, what you know of last night's extraordinary happening?"

I did so briefly. It was evident when I had concluded that their gravity deepened. Until that moment I really think they had cherished an improbable hope that Framling and the park policeman were victims of an extensive delusion. My corroborating testimony left them utterly at a loss.

The premier frowned and looked at Professor Branden.

"Have you any theory, Professor? Does science know of a chemical capable of such a shockingly complete annihilative action?"

"To my knowledge it does not," Branden said emphatically. His eyes were frankly bewildered. "Here is something which appears to have ignited, as it were, the entire juices of the body. I can describe it in no other way. And artificially induced an instantaneous bodily combustion . . . Mr. Hannaford, sanity finds no answer."

Detective Hermann asked abruptly: "A green flame, you said, Mr. Murchison? What kind of a green flame?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Just an ordinary green flame."

"It seems to me," Framling interposed, "that the green was edged with orange."

"It scarcely matters," the premier said. "Mr. Murchison, I need scarcely ask if you realise the profound significance of what has happened and the vital necessity for secrecy. You can imagine the public alarm were the facts known at large. The facts must not be known. You will give me your word of honor, I hope, that so far as you are concerned no word of it passes your lips outside the present company."

"You have it," I promised. "I should like to know, however, how you propose to conceal the fact of Mr. Gregory's disappearance."

Mr. Hannaford smiled grimly.

"We don't propose to conceal it. Mr. Gregory was known to be suffering from an affected heart. Under the circumstances, his sudden death will occasion no surprise. The press has been notified already; and this evening you will read that at a late hour last night Mr. Gregory collapsed in his rooms and died at once. His funeral will take place tomorrow morning."

"His funeral!" I could not avoid exclaiming.

Sir Hector Corrilees said, apparently impatient at my dullness: "Exactly, Mr. Murchison. When a man dies he is usually provided with a funeral, is he not? In this case the public will be none the worse off for showing reverence for an empty coffin. Better that than the truth."

"THE truth," the premier said, "remains with ourselves alone. Now, Mr. Murchison, one other thing. Framling tells me that you are at present without employment. I propose, with your consent, to appoint you as assistant to Framling. You will be paid a

salary and will be, to all intents and purposes, a clerk in my department.

"Actually, your duties will be to act, as you may be directed, toward an elucidation now to be undertaken by us seven men of the mystery surrounding the death of Mr. Gregory. Are you agreeable?"

It was a subtle command rather than a request, and as such I recognized it. In any case, I was willing enough. Here was work to my hand; and of a caliber to excite my utmost interest.

"I am quite willing," I assured him.

"The rest of us are sworn to secrecy," the premier continued gravely, "and you will be good enough, Mr. Murchison, to take the oath in turn, and put your signature to this declaration. Possibly this procedure strikes you as extraordinary. I may go so far, indeed, as to say that not only are the circumstances themselves extraordinary; they mark a crisis of unexampled danger."

When I had taken the oath the tension seemed to relax a little.

"And now, Mr. Murchison," Mr. Hannaford said, "it is necessary you should know something of what we fear. The crime of which you were a witness last night is undoubtedly that of a man who styles himself Toad."

"Toad is, I should say, a criminal lunatic with the brain of a genius. His identity is wholly unknown to us, although Professor Branden has fortunately been able to provide us with a tiny clue. He has recalled that some years ago, when he was a student, a classmate at the chemistry sessions bore the nickname of Toad. I understand, Professor, that you have been unable to trace this man's proper name?"

"Unfortunately, that is so," Professor Branden said. "The time which has elapsed—it must be, I suppose, close on



thirty years—has dimmed everything. I can only recollect that he was a man of very repulsive features, but exceedingly clever, and with almost a mania for research work.

"Poor Gregory was also in my year, and it was he who revived my impressions of the fellow only yesterday. He was called Toad, I believe, because someone had noticed that the iris of his eyes was of a peculiar reddish hue. The toad, as perhaps you are aware, Mr. Murchison, has a flame-colored iris.

"Toad had also a face which, as I remember it, was globular and puffy—another characteristic of the reptile whose name he vaingloriously affected. I say 'vaingloriously' because he was a man of enormous vanity. So far from being resentful of the ugly appellation, he took it as a compliment.

"Apart from this fact of his appearance, he was of a spiteful, poisonous disposition. If Toad of our present problem, Mr. Hannaford, is Toad as known to Gregory and me, we are confronted with a man who is both wicked and clever to a degree."

**F**RAMLING said in a low voice: "Mr. Gregory spoke of him as a giant of chemistry. You remember that, perhaps, Murchison?"

"Yes," I said. "I had an impression that Mr. Gregory was pretty close to knowing who he was."

"I believe that," Professor Branden said. His manner for a second or two was agitated. "It was that knowledge—or, I should say, impending knowledge—which destroyed him. By some means this man knew of it. It became imperative, apparently, that Gregory should be silenced.

"That, of course, is a danger which now confronts every one of us in this room. I scarcely think, however, that

similar means will be employed. Chance probably aided in Gregory's case. And there would always be the risk that the chemical employed—if it is a chemical—might be discovered and its foul nature revealed."

Sir Hector Corrilees looked at his fuming cigar. He said: "What steps do you advise, Hermann?"

"The identity of Toad is my first concern," the detective said slowly. "There are two lines of approach. First, what Professor Branden has told us; second, the man's handwriting, assuming that it is his handwriting. Framling, you might let Mr. Murchison see those communications. The first of the story lies there."

"And you, Branden?"

"For my part," the professor said, as Framling handed to me a little sheaf of papers, "I have taken a sample of the gravel where poor Gregory fell. I intend to subject it to an exhaustive analysis."

I gave my attention, then, to Framling and the letters. There were six of these, the first being dated some four months back. All were in a crabbed handwriting very difficult to decipher, but the envelopes in each case were neatly typed and addressed uniformly: *The State Premier, Treasury Buildings, Melbourne.*

Framling said: "The writing is atrocious, isn't it? You will note that each letter bears a separate country district postmark. An ordinary precaution, of course, on the part of the writer."

The first letter was as follows:

*The Premier, Mr. Morgan Hannaford  
... I require the sum of £100,000,  
failing which I shall make myself un-  
pleasantly known to the Government  
and country. Reply in the Missing  
Friends columns of the daily press.  
Toad.*

"A touch of satire there," Framling murmured at my elbow. "We took no notice, naturally. Those in office are inundated with crank communications. A fortnight later this one arrived."

The second was couched more peremptorily:

*I now require £200,000. Delay, Mr. Hannaford, will prove costly. See to it.*  
Toad.

There were two more letters in similar vein. Then came this:

*My patience is not inexhaustible. I am fully able to enforce my demands by means of which you little dream. My terms are now £500,000, and unless reply is forthcoming within one week I shall endeavor to prove to you my entire seriousness.*

Toad.

"In the meantime," Framling explained, "we had taken steps to identify the writer, if possible. Mr. Gregory had chanced to call on the premier early in the series, and was shown the letters—more by way of a joke than anything else. He was, however, impressed by the signature.

"At his own suggestion, Mr. Gregory undertook to make inquiries. Still later, Mr. Hannaford, persuaded now that the affair was not altogether a joking matter, arranged that Hermann should take it up. The week ended the day before yesterday. Yesterday afternoon this letter came."

As I read, an ugliness seemed to leer at me from every line of the crooked writing.

*On my own head be it, then, Mr. Hannaford, or rather, on the head of Mr. Stephen Gregory, whose unwarranted interference in my affairs has annoyed me for some time past. I now demand £800,000.*

Toad.

"It was this letter," Framling explained, "which sent me in search of

Mr. Gregory last night. Can anyone doubt the connection?"

As if in sinister reply, a knock came at the door. Framling opened it to take from a messenger a telegram addressed to Mr. Hannaford. The premier opened the envelope casually, continuing his conversation with Sir Hector Corrilees and Professor Branden.

But as his eye fell on the contents I saw his face blanch, he let the telegraph form fall from his fingers to the floor.

Professor Branden said, as he recovered the telegram: "Not bad news, I trust, Mr. Hannaford."

The premier seemed to recover his grip on himself. He gave a short laugh, and said: "Read it out, Branden, and judge for yourselves."

Branden did so, a hardness creeping into his tones as he grasped its damnable import.

*Gregory gone. Who next? Think it over.*

Toad.

THE silence was broken by a savage exclamation from the chief commissioner. He stood up and threw his cigar butt into the chimney grate as if he might have been hurling a bomb into the face of our common enemy, then said, harshly:

"Hermann, it's up to you. I give you carte blanche. Do exactly as you like so long as you lay this swine by the heels. Alive or dead, Hermann. Nobody will bother you with a single question."

"I'll do my best, Sir Hector," the detective said, very quietly.

A little later we quietly went our ways—to meet again as individual mourners at the mock funeral next morning of Stephen Gregory. It was curious to observe the all-unconscious solemnity of the great crowd which as-

sembled at the graveside, and to reflect upon the astonishment and indignation which must have resulted were it known that the beautiful fostering hope of the burial service was being evoked for nothing more than a coffin full of carefully packed bricks.

I saw Detective Hermann standing on the outskirts of the assemblage, a frown on his farmer's face. When the service was over, he approached me unobtrusively and suggested that we lunch in company.

I was quite agreeable to this, for I wanted to know him more intimately. He had, as I found, an engaging personality when he chose. We chatted of many things, but of Toad there was—as if by tacit understanding—no mention. Our surroundings, indeed, precluded an exchange of confidences.

The events of that evening, apart from my own share in them, were told to me next day by Hermann. He spent the afternoon going through the class files at the University, in the hope of narrowing down the identity of Toad.

At seven o'clock, having dined in town, Hermann retired to his office at Russell Street Headquarters for, as he explained, some quiet thinking. At seven-thirty the telephone on his desk rang violently. As he lifted the receiver a man's voice, almost incoherent with emotion, greeted his ear.

He asked sharply: "Who's that? Take your time . . . easy now. What name did you say?"

"Is that you Hermann? George Framling speaking . . ."

"It's you, George . . ." Hermann confessed that he had a premonition of evil as he caught the name. "Anything wrong?"

Framling said in a choking voice: "Hermann . . . Mona . . ."

"Your wife!" Hermann exclaimed.

A sound came, like a sob. "She's gone," Framling said. "She's disappeared . . ."

## CHAPTER IV

### CHINAMAN'S CHANCE

ON THE evening of Mr. Gregory's funeral I was bold enough to suggest to Nancy Carlisle that we go to a theater.

She said, without the least trace of coquetry or affectation: "It's awfully kind of you to ask me, Mr. Murchison, and I appreciate it. Father is out and won't be home until late. Friday is his greatest extravagance. And today is Friday."

"He spends the day with old friends?" I suggested.

"I don't know," she replied. For a moment her brown eyes looked troubled, but presently she was smiling again.

"Honestly, Mr. Murchison, I don't know where he goes or what he does. Poor old dear, if he likes to ramble around, why not? Can we go to see *The Kewpie Girl* do you think?"

I said: "*The Kewpie Girl* is the very place for us."

Nancy went to get tea ready, and I went to my room and hunted up my best necktie. Even Toad, I found, was not proof against a pair of soft brown eyes and a voice like a flute. The creature vanished completely from my mind.

We decided to walk to the theater. We went through the gardens into Spring Street, and thence to the top of Bourke Street. We had just turned the corner when Nancy exclaimed:

"There's Cuthbert. I suppose he's just driven Mollie to the theater, and now doesn't know what to do with himself."

A car was standing at the curb, and I made out the lugubrious features of Mr. Weinseidle peering at us from the window of the driver's seat. A cigarette drooped from under one corner of his incipient mustache.

"Why, whatever are you doing here?" Nancy said, as we halted. "Have you dropped Mollie in at her dressing rooms, or are you waiting for her now?"

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

But immediately afterward it appeared that this sounded quite as futile in his own ears as in ours, for he added, with an obviously tremendous effort: "She's at the theater. I'm just hanging about. Nothing to do."

"Why don't you go home for an hour or two?" Nancy asked gently.

Cuthbert found no reply to this. He shifted his cigarette to the opposite corner of his mustache and just stared at us.

"Well," Nancy said, "we must be going or we shall be late for the theater. Mr. Murchison is taking me to see Mollie in *The Kewpie Girl*. Good-bye, Cuthbert."

"WAIT a moment," I said. I was almost certain that I saw an unusual effort of speech dawning in Mr. Weinseidle's eye. "I think he wants to tell us something."

"Undoubtedly," Cuthbert said. He seemed to gather his vocabulary about him as if it were a cloak, and his cheeks grew pink with a rush of words. "Funny thing, I thought I saw Mona Framling a little while back. Nearly stopped and said how-de-do, only I knew it wasn't Mona."

Something prompted Nancy to say: "How do you know it wasn't Mona? Didn't you see her face?"

"Sure. But it wasn't Mona. What

would Mona be doing going into a Chinese joint at this hour, with a Chinese companion? Am I right? Undoubtedly."

This effort left him almost panting. But Nancy almost flew at him.

"Cuthbert, are you positive it wasn't Mona? You know her so well. How could you be mistaken?"

I could see Cuthbert mentally testing out both "undoubtedly" and "sure" and deciding that, for once, neither would do. What he eventually said was: "I could have sworn it was Mona, you know. Yes, it looked like Mona."

Nancy's eyes sought mine. Her face was oddly pale in the car light.

She asked: "Can you remember the place, Cuthbert? Will you take us there? I can't understand how it could be Mona, but strange things happen sometimes, even in Melbourne. I feel most uneasy."

"Hop in," Cuthbert said.

At least, if he lacked conversation, he knew how to handle a car in theater traffic. A more perfect control I have never seen. It seemed scarcely a minute before we were stepping out at the entrance of an untidy lane that reeked of decay and gave an odd impression of slinking backward into the jungle of malodorous shadows beyond. My skin suddenly tingled.

"Where are we?" Nancy asked.

"Lane off Little Frankland," Cuthbert said. He took a fresh cigarette from his case. Before lighting it he pointed it at a blowsy stone building.

"Went in there."

I said, on a sudden thought, "Mr. Weinseidle, I don't like this. Would you mind, I wonder, driving to Russell Street and seeing if you can get hold of Detective Hermann. He could telephone to Framling. If Mrs. Framling is missing, bring them both right back

here. Miss Carlisle and I will wait."

"I was going to suggest that," Nancy said.

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

HE CLIMBED back into his seat, threw in the clutch, and was gone. We were left standing in the darkness, staring alternately at each other and at the black oblong of the doorway confronting us across the lane.

There was not a light anywhere in the building that I could see. The lane, and the street itself, were silent and deserted. And yet I experienced a queer clairvoyance of little sounds and sensations as I looked up at the one window which showed like a white, amorphous face, against the crumbling background of the night.

Nancy, I think, knew something of the same disordered emotion, for she drew near to me, and I felt her hand trembling as it slipped unashamedly into the crook of my arm.

She said, almost in a whisper: "Mr. Murchison, it's quite impossible, surely, that Mona could be in such a place. I do hope Cuthbert comes back to laugh at us."

My own thoughts were coming piecemeal, like drips from a tap. I began to feel that if I didn't become active in some way or another, I should grow panic-stricken.

"It's so unlikely that it was Mrs. Framling that I shouldn't worry yet if I were you," I said. "Suppose we have a closer look at the place, Nancy?"

The name slipped out before I thought what I was saying. But she gave no sign of disapproval. All she said was: "Of course it's absurd of Cuthbert, altogether. What a beastly looking place it is."

And then, in a quite natural voice: "Maurice, I'm so grateful that you're

here with me. Fancy if I was waiting all alone: how much more horrible."

The "Maurice" so gratified me that I became momentarily embarrassed.

I said: "I've a good mind to bang on the door and fetch the people out—if there are any people. What do you think, Nancy?"

"I hate standing idle when Mona might actually be there, and in peril, perhaps," she said. "But it's so utterly improbable that we'd be wise, I think, to wait Cuthbert's return."

I thought it no harm, all the same, to try the handle of the door. To my astonishment it was not locked. I pushed it gently inward, aware of a thick, musty, orientally flavored stretch rising to my nostrils out of the cave-like interior. The hall, as I supposed it to be, was in inky darkness. Not a sound was to be heard.

"Why, Maurice, it's an empty house," Nancy said. Her voice held an immense relief. "How absurd."

I said cautiously: "We can't be sure of that. Look here. I'll go inside a little way. Stay just where you are. If anything alarms you, call me instantly."

I could see that the idea did not commend itself to her very greatly, but she made no objection. All she said was: "Be careful, Maurice. Have you matches?"

I said, "Yes," and lit one forthwith. It discovered for me a kind of vestibule, with a staircase at the end. The walls were blotched and stained with damp, and the wallpaper hung in strips everywhere.

I was so certain, even upon that brief inspection, that the place was deserted and dead that I was on the point of immediate withdrawal, when I chanced to notice the floor. What I saw made me strike a second match and walk some way up the vestibule.



Dust lay thickly upon the creaking floor boards. Clearly defined upon it were freshly made footprints, pointing toward the stairs. There were no returning prints; therefore it was obvious that whoever had entered was still in the house, unless an exit had been made from the rear.

On a sort of landing at the foot of the stairs the wall disclosed a squat doorway. This I tried, and found the door fast with bolt and padlock. By the look of it I should say it had not been used for a long time, for the greasy dust was piled high against the lintels.

My last match had burned out, and I found to my annoyance that I was now helpless against the night. I raised my eyes to the stair-landing above. I saw a thread of brightness stretched horizontally upon the thick, palpitating darkness, and knew it instantly for light escaping from beneath a door.

The unexpectedness of it sent my hand groping for the support of the bannister—with disastrous results. I had no sooner touched it than simultaneously, as it seemed, a bell whirred shrill warning overhead. It stilled as abruptly and paralyzingly as it had begun.

The thread of brightness wavered, then gave place to a tall oblong of light as the door opened. Framed in it was the squat silhouette of a man.

This, I think, was my first sight of Toad—if it was Toad. And of small satisfaction at that, for there was only this indeterminate black shadow waxing and waning against the dim light at its back.

Even the voice which now challenged me was odd—like the joining of hollow echoes into one sibilant whole.

Already I was turning the corner of

the bannister into the vestibule, with the open street door beckoning like a friendly gray ghost. There was a chill at my spine and my scalp tingled. For all I knew, the next second might see the blackness behind me split by the flame of a discharging gun, and I should know the searing impact of a bullet.

I am sure that it was not the thought of a shot itself that so overcome me, but the creeping horror of the malign intelligence poised bat-like at the core of the darkness. I am not certain even now that the encounter was with Toad. I believe so, but I do not know. Of its evilness I have no doubt at all.

The challenge was not repeated, but I seemed to hear the stealthy tread of feet descending the stairs. I was half-way to the street door when two interruptions came. There was first the scream of a woman's voice, faint yet penetrating, from some recess of the darkness; then, leaping on my ears with the suddenness of an explosion, the screaming brakes of a motor car suddenly halted.

II WAS back on the footpath before the clamor died, with Nancy holding to my arms and the breath of her excitement on my face.

She said: "Maurice, was that a scream?"

As I nodded, Hermann and George Framling scrambled from the car. I said to Nancy: "Go over and stay by the car with Cuthbert."

For a second I thought she meant to dispute my sudden, unconscious assumption of authority. But whatever resentment she may have felt, she mercifully refrained from comment. She left me without a word. I was presently replying, as best I could, to Framling's distracted questioning.

I said: "I'm certain I heard a woman call out a second ago. Nancy heard it, too. There's a man in the house, anyway."

Framling made a rush for the door, but Hermann was too quick for him. He caught him gently but firmly by the arm.

"Steady, George. If Mrs. Framling is in there we'll have her out safe and sound in a moment or two. No need to run your face into someone's fist, or worse. I know this place. It used to be occupied by Sing Wu, who called himself a herbalist. Now, Mr. Murchison, what have you discovered?"

I could see how the delay galled and fretted Framling, but there was no help for it. After all, Hermann's caution was born of experience and had ample justification. He had a measure of responsibility toward all of us there, apart from Mona Framling. As he afterward explained, the house might have held a dozen police "wanteds" for all we knew.

I recounted my experience, even to the panic which had driven me cravenly into the open.

"You were wise," Hermann said.

He released Framling's arm and took an electric torch from his pocket. He held this in his left hand; his right hand was thrust into the pocket of his coat. If I am not mistaken, it grasped the butt of an automatic. Hermann had no liking for spectacular gunplay. He fired invariably through the right-hand pocket of his coat.

The first thing that struck me on re-entry of the vestibule was the fact that the door at the foot of the stairs, which had been shut and padlocked, was now open. I said as much. Hermann pushed through it and sent the light over a narrow yard beyond.

He had barely remarked, "Empty

as a fasting friar," when Framling again lost his self control. With an excited exclamation, he elbowed the detective aside and raced up the stairs. The example fired my own courage. With Hermann's voice at our backs condemning the pair of us for somethinged undisciplined fools, we arrived breathlessly at the landing.

Framling, fighting mad, did not even wait to try the handle of the now closed door. He put his shoulder to it with a grunt. The flimsy catch yielded instantly. There was a momentary jar of the door bursting inwards, and next moment we sprawled on the floor beyond.

As I rose in the light of an oil lamp set on a packing case against the far wall, I saw that the room was empty, except for the crumpled body of a woman at its center. She lay without movement, arms extended, and white face pointing at the dingy ceiling, and I heard a sob in Framling's throat as he fell on his knees at her side. For a horrible second I feared she was dead.

But even as Framling called her name agonizedly, the heavy eyelids fluttered and opened. As Hermann stamped into the room Mona Framling struggled up against her husband's arms.

"George!"

"Thank God!" Framling cried. And then, sharply. "You're not hurt?"

"I don't think so. No, of course not. I think . . . I just fainted. Has that horrible Chinaman gone?"

"There's no one here but ourselves," Framling said.

Hermann had left us. I could hear his stolid tread as he went from room to room, searching thoroughly but unavailingly. I was about to follow him, being uncomfortably awakened to a sense of intrusion, when Framling

turned from his endearments to sudden recognition of my presence. A little confused, he got to his feet. But suddenly also came the reaction of his relief. He began to laugh . . .

He said, presently, wiping his eyes: "Murchison, old man, I beg your pardon, I quite forgot. Meet my wife."

And then, I suppose, the queer circumstances of the introduction caught us simultaneously, for all three of us joined our laughter.

Even the farmer face of Hermann, now standing in the doorway, bore a faint grin.

He said: "Well, if Mrs. Framling's ready, we'll close the party and get home."

## CHAPTER V

### EYES OF FIRE

CUTHBERT, now inarticulate as ever, drove us to the Framling's suburban flat. He refused, however, to leave the car.

His owlish expression was eloquent of concentration upon the subject of Miss Mollie Hollidew. Even when Hermann complimented him upon his share in the success of the evening, he only stared mournfully. He drove away finally without having uttered a single word.

The adventure had robbed Nancy and me of the theatre for that night. Consequently, when Framling suggested that we should all repair to his home for the purpose of hearing his wife's story—if she felt equal to the task of telling it then—we agreed readily.

Hermann accompanied us.

As we entered the flat he asked me: "Do you write shorthand, Mr. Murchison? You do. Then I'll get you to take notes of any account we may have

from Mrs. Framling. I'll have them typed, and they can accompany my official report."

Hermann, some time after, returned my notes, thinking I might have curiosity to retain them for my own private satisfaction. The long lapse of time, as I honestly believe, has removed the bar of secrecy from the events of those troublous and terrifying days. In revealing this portion of them, I am fortunately enabled to refer to the original statement of Mona Framling.

A naturally courageous girl, she had almost wholly recovered her nerve by the time she reached her home, and was even eager to relate what had occurred. This she did slowly and thoughtfully, sitting in a comfortable armchair before the radiator in her bedroom. The night was warmish; but, as often happens where the whole system is shocked, she was chilled to the fingertips.

Nancy made some hot coffee for Mona and herself, and Framling produced for the rest of us some very decent whisky.

Mona Framling was a pretty brunette, with a pleasant voice and manner. She had, I think, the most shapely hands I have ever seen. These supplemented her voice during her narration with little odd, explanatory gestures which were very charming.

I give the story verbatim. She began nervously, but soon settled to an easy, comfortable style, encouraged, from time to time, by Framling's warm, quick smile.

"It must have been about six o'clock this evening when the phone rang. I had everything ready for George's tea, and the phone bell rather startled me. I thought I knew exactly what had happened. George was working late at the office and wouldn't be home to eat

the nice things I'd got for him. I felt a bit annoyed.

"When I took down the receiver, however, it wasn't George at all; it was a man's voice, though. The queer thing is that the tones seemed to be familiar. I'd heard them before. It was someone I knew. And this reassured me, when I heard what he had to say. Thinking it came from a friend, I never for a moment questioned the truth of it.

"He said that George had met with an accident and had asked him to telephone and ask me to come into town to him. No, George wasn't badly hurt, and there was no need to come in a taxi. It was partly that he was ill and partly that he wanted to see me at once on particular business.

"I asked who was speaking but he passed it over. He said that he'd taken George to rest a while into a Chinese herbalist's place that happened to be handy. The name was Sing Wu, and it was in Padderman's Lane, off Little Frankland Street."

Hermann interrupted here to say: "The name is genuine enough. Sing Wu ran a herbal business there for over a year. It was really only a blind for a fan-tan school. The plainclothes men found that out and closed Wu up. That was a month ago. Wu cleared out to Bendigo, and the house has been vacant since. Yes, Mrs. Framling?"

SHE continued: "Well, of course I said I'd go. I was a good deal upset, naturally. It didn't occur to me that the obvious thing for him to do was to bring George home to me instead of asking me to trail all the way there after him. And all the time, as I said before, I seemed to know the voice. I was certain I knew the speaker.

"When I'd hung up and was dressing

to go out, I began to puzzle over it. And, all at once, I thought I knew. Nancy, you remember the man that used to board with you? That funny, keep-to-myself kind of man that your father used to talk to?"

"Do you mean Mr. Mertz?"

"That's the name—Mr. Mertz. It sounded to me like Mr. Mertz. When I used to be so often in your house—before George became serious enough to want to marry me—I met Mr. Mertz once or twice. I never really saw him properly, but we used to greet each other politely in passing. His voice held a peculiar quality, and this impressed me. Besides, I nearly always remember people's voices."

"And was it Mertz?" Hermann asked.

Mona shrugged her shoulders.

"It couldn't have been, Mr. Hermann. When I got to the corner of Padderman's Lane it was dusk. There wasn't a soul in sight except a middle-aged Chinaman standing on the corner. When I started looking about me he came up to me and said: 'Are you Mrs. Framling?'

"His English was as good as my own, but that didn't surprise me. I know that lots of Chinese now are the product of our public schools. I said I was Mrs. Framling.

"He said: 'I am Dr. Sing Wu. I telephoned to you on behalf of your husband. My house is here, Mrs. Framling. I hope I have not distressed you very much. As a matter of fact, Mr. Framling has very nearly recovered.'

"I said, as we entered the house: 'What happened to Mr. Framling?'

"He replied: 'He was knocked down by a motorcycle. Fortunately no bones are broken. He is bruised and a little sick, but otherwise unhurt.'"

"Sorry to interrupt again," Hermann said. He was frowning thought-

fully. "Did you recognize this man's voice? Of course it wasn't really Sing Wu; Wu is a little nutcracker of a Chinese, all tied in knots with rheumatism, and nearly a hundred years old by the look of him. Did you recognize his voice as that you'd heard on the phone? Was it like the voice of this other man, Mertz?"

Mona said: "Yes, it was astonishingly so. It was growing dark, and I couldn't see his face clearly. But if he wasn't a Chinaman he certainly resembled one. I don't see how it could have been Mr. Mertz."

"There is such a thing as disguise," the detective said dryly. "What happened next, Mrs. Framling?"

"**W**HY, the next thing was that I began to have my first doubts about the story of this man. The vestibule was quite bare and very dirty, you see. It was plainly unoccupied. I stopped, just inside the door.

"Sing Wu—I might as well call him by that name—said: 'I occupy the top floor only, Mrs. Framling. I haven't found a tenant yet for the bottom floor. Will you go upstairs?'"

"Well, there was nothing else to do. If George was there it was all right enough. If he wasn't . . . But I couldn't make any sense of the business in such case. Sing Wu had never even heard of me before then, so far as I knew. Why should he go to all that trouble if things weren't as he said? I wasn't worth robbing . . .

"Anyhow, it was too late to draw back then. So up the stairs I went, with Sing Wu coming softly behind. There was a lighted lamp in the room off the top landing, and I went in, expecting to see George. When I found he wasn't there, I became really frightened.

"I said: 'Where is my husband?'"

"He said, quite calmly: 'Your husband is coming, Mrs. Framling. As soon as he gets the letter you are going to write to him now, he will join you.'"

"I said: 'What do you mean? Why should I write a letter to him? You told me he had met with an accident, and was here in your house, waiting for me. Well, where is he?'"

"He answered: 'My dear young lady, it was necessary to deceive you a little. Mr. Framling hasn't yet met with his accident. I was a trifle previous, that's all. Now you'll take that paper and pencil on the box there, and write him a nice little note, telling him to come here at once, and to be sure not to bring anyone with him or to mention to anyone where he is going.'"

"Naturally I refused to do anything of the kind. I realized that I was in some kind of a trap. I said that if he did not release me at once I would scream my head off. He didn't get angry or excited. He just smiled.

"He said, in the smooth, soft voice that he had used from the beginning: 'Scream as hard as you like, Mrs. Framling. No one will hear you. And, even if they should, no notice will be taken. In this quarter of Melbourne a woman's scream is nothing at all; just nothing at all.'"

Mona broke off a minute and buried her face in her hands. When she resumed, her voice shook a little.

"I wish I could make you understand the horrible way in which he said that. As I said, his voice was smooth and soft. Too smooth and soft. It was like some filthy fat slug crawling over my ears. The innuendo scared me properly . . ."

George Framling put his arm over her shoulders. His eyes were burning. He said: "Never mind that for a moment, darling. Try to remember now.



Did you see Cuthbert pass in his car, just as you met this—this man?"

"No," Mona answered. "I remember seeing a car pass at the head of the lane, though . . . Where was I? Oh . . . Well, then I was terribly scared, but I said pointblank that I wouldn't write. I demanded over and over again to be set free. Sing Wu stood there smiling. His hat was off and I could see his eyes shining.

"They were dreadful eyes. They looked as if they were on fire. They were all red around the pupils . . ."

I exclaimed at this. I couldn't help it. It flashed on me all at once what Professor Branden had said about Toad having eyes with flame-colored irises. I believe that if Hermann had not suddenly kicked my ankle, I must have spoken the name out loud.

I remembered in time that the women were not to know of Toad—were never to know, if we could help it; that the name Toad must never be given to the outside world.

Nancy asked: "Why, Maurice, what's the matter?"

I said lamely: "Nothing. The description struck me as unusual, that's all. Please continue, Mrs. Framling."

"I don't want to talk any more about that," Mona said, shuddering. "The next thing that happened was that I heard a car drive up and stop just outside the house. A minute later it drove away again.

"That was Cuthbert bringing Nancy and Mr. Murchison, of course. I didn't know that. Still, I opened my mouth to yell, in the hope that someone was there to hear me. But before I could make a sound Sing Wu, or whatever the creature's real name is, held out a little bottle or flask made of silver-gray metal, and removed a stopper made

from the same metal, releasing an acrid scent.

"He said, in that horrible slug's voice: 'Not a word, Mrs. Framling, please. Do you know what hydrofluoric acid is? So powerful in its action, it can only be kept in containers of platinum or beeswax. If I emptied this into your pretty face, by the time your inquisitive friends found you the flesh of your head would be eaten off to the bone. That happens the moment you call out.'"

Framling was walking up and down the little room, his hands opening and shutting. Where the rest of us were starkly horrified, he was like a man out of his mind.

He kept saying: "The unutterable beast! The swine! If I get my hands on that devil . . ."

"Steady, George," Hermann said.

He went to Framling and took him by the shoulders.

"That will keep, George. Don't say it."

The sharp warning recalled Framling to his senses. He drew his hand across his eyes and laughed shortly, and sat down once more. But he continued for some time to tremble like a man in an ague.

Hermann said, glancing at me: "You were remarkably brave, Mrs. Framling. Hydrofluoric acid, eh? Acrid-smelling? Well, perhaps it was hydrofluoric. What then?"

"We stayed like that, Mr. Hermann what seemed an age, just glaring at each other. Sing Wu was about to break the silence when, all at once, a bell blared on the landing just outside. It startled him badly, I could see that. He was at the door like a shot. He opened it, and I heard him call: 'Who is there?'"

"There was no answer. After a mo-

ment Sing Wu began to go down the stairs. He could only have descended half a dozen steps when, for the second time, a car pulled up in the street below. I could hear the motor racing. . . .

"I was standing listening, when Sing Wu returned. His eyes were like little flames. He had the bottle in his hand, and I saw his fingers touching the metal stopper. I screamed then at the top of my voice.

"And then, I suppose, I must have fainted at last, for the next I knew I was clutching at George . . ."

THERE was a long silence when Mona finished. Nancy had drawn close to my side. Her face was ghastly. I caught her hands in mine and held them tightly. I feared for a moment that she was about to faint herself.

Hermann said presently: "Mrs. Framling—and you, Miss Carlisle—I'm going to ask you to keep the events of this night as the strictest secret. I can't explain to you why I ask this. You must trust me that I wouldn't ask it if it weren't absolutely necessary. Will you give me your word that you will not speak of it to anyone?"

They nodded solemnly.

"I promise, too," Nancy whispered.

"Thank you," Hermann said gravely. "Suppose we all try to wipe it out of mind? We won't discuss it again, even among ourselves, eh?"

"But surely," Nancy said, "you'll bring that dreadful man to account?"

"I give you my word of honor, Miss Carlisle, that I shall move heaven and earth to find him," the detective said grimly. "I have no greater ambition in life, believing as I do. Now, Mrs. Framling, if I were you I should get to bed and to sleep.

"On no account whatever go alone again on an excursion of the kind. If anything untoward occurs let me know. Failing me, ask for Sir Hector Corrilees, the chief commissioner. I will arrange that you will be put directly into touch with Sir Hector himself.

"This applies to you also, Miss Carlisle. Do nothing except on advice. And remain at home, rather than go out at night alone."

He went away then. Shortly afterward, Nancy and I took our leave. We were both silent. It was a long time before I could get to sleep that night. My mind was haunted by Toad.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

## Help Kidneys Pass 3 Pints a Day

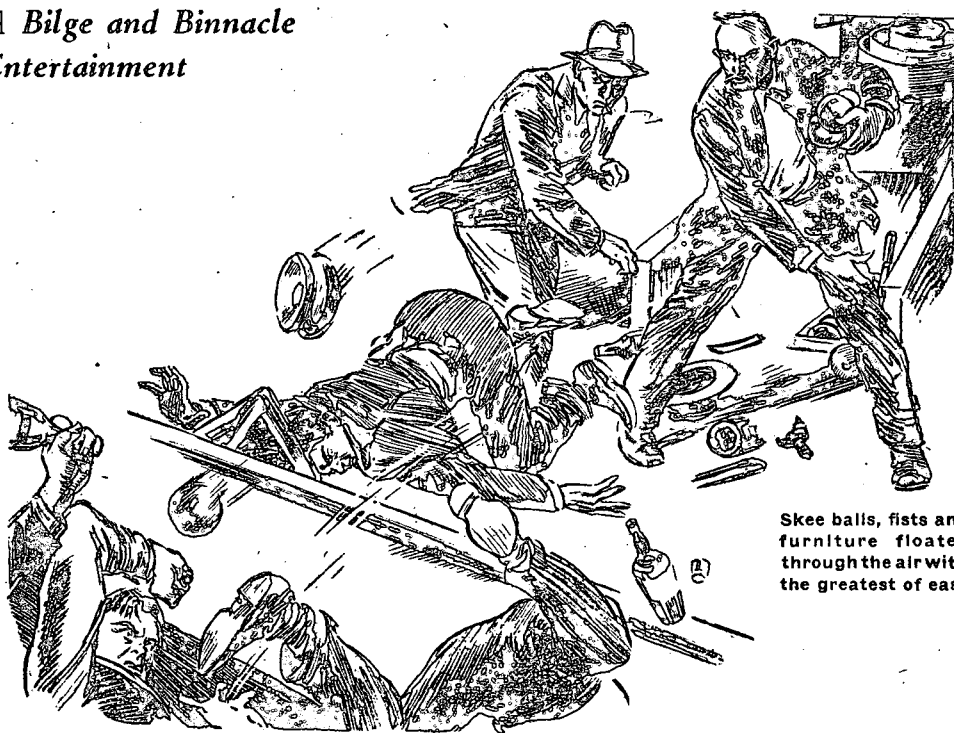
Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. Kidneys remove excess acids and poisonous waste from your blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up

nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

*A Bilge and Binnacle  
Entertainment*



Skee balls, fists and  
furniture floated  
through the air with  
the greatest of ease

## Suicide Sid

Presenting the one and only Indestructible Sidney (is he man or mouse?), sponsored by those sea-going brawlers, the members of the Bilge and Binnacle Club, in a program of assault, confusion and calamity unequalled since the Flood.  
A riotous novelet

By CRAWFORD SULLIVAN

Author of "Even Stephen," "The Horrible Hornbills," etc.

### I

IT IS a well known fact around Fort Street that Tug Raffin is a great humanitarian. Of course there are a few backbiters who will say that he is a roughneck sailor whose brains have slipped down to his fists, but even they will admit that Tug hates to see anyone suffer and usually disposes of his enemies in one punch.

Although he is a big blond moose with a face that looks as-though it had been blasted out of the side of Stone Mountain, Tug Raffin owns a heart which is crammed with consideration for his fellow man. All of which leads up to the matter at hand.

On a bright September morning Tug Raffin and Rat-line Sam were coming out of Fink Hall when they saw a large crowd gathered in the street be-