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An Epic Novel of Haunted Treasure

THE FACE IN THE ABYSS A. Merritt 12

Nicholas Graydon set out to explore a mystery, ancient beyond all memory of man, and riches untold—in the treacherous hills of bewitched Cordillera de Carabaya.

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Weird Novelette of Sinister Power

THE GREEN FLAME Eric North 64

Most diabolic of criminals was Toad, whose chilling secret surpassed any human knowledge. Because of it, his power was crushing—more terrible than hatred.

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Features and Departments

READERS' COLUMN 6

CALLING ALL FANTASY FANS! The Editor 10

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THE GREEN FLAME

A WEIRD NOVELETTE OF SINISTER POWER

By **Eric North**

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CHAPTER 1

Human Pyre

MY 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 officials 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 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

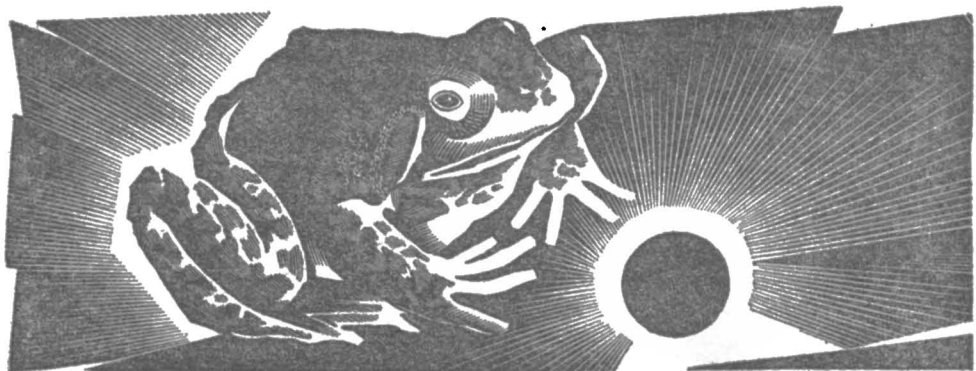
happened may happen again. It seems improbable, yet my common sense tells me the risk is there. I pray that I may be wrong. . . .

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 responsibility. 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





Toad reeked of insane egotism. Satan, his master, knew the satisfaction such a distinction might afford him.

own definition. They were pretty awful.

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 café 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 thicket, 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 a 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."

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 cer-

tain 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 likeable 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, underserving 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 a 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.

Young 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—infinately, 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 before he falls over!"

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.

My 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 quite frankly just 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 the 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 what happened, 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 even five minutes 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.



Jade green fire lighted for one horrific second the fear that distended the pupils of his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

The Curious Carlises

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 slabby.

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 very 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 a large and airy room, 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 grasping. "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 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 he has at least one person that he takes pleasure in."

I was shown the sitting room downstairs. 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 beside 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. Probably to no avail.

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 charm was tremendous. His gaze never averted 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 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. Weinsidle."

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.

I 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. I 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 heaven 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 lightly. I turned, a little shame-faced, 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 lunatic he had 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 solitude 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 3

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 death.

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 had just 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 . . ."

Five 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, really a very remarkable man.

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 particularly 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 realize 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 Corriees 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."

Framling 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 beginning 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 county 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 unpleasantly 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 assembled at the graveside, and to reflect upon the astonishment and indignation which might 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. He spent the afternoon going through the class files at the University, in the hope of narrowing down the identity of Toad.

CHAPTER 4

Prepare for Perdition!

NEXT day I began duty supposedly as assistant to Framling, in the premier's department. In reality I had something to do with routine affairs of state. My instructions were to keep strict watch upon strangers entering the Treasury buildings.

I was asked privately by Sir Hector Corrilees to be particularly watchful over the premier while he was on the premises. The chief commissioner did not say outright that he feared an attempt to harm Mr. Hannaford, but the fact was fairly evident.

In addition to me three plainclothes policemen were stationed in and about the premier's section of the building. The premier's messenger held strict orders to admit no one to Mr. Hannaford's room who had not first been approved either by Framling or by me.

A whole fortnight went by without incident of any kind. Toad had apparently withdrawn into his hole, for there was neither sight nor sign of him. Since the

sneering telegram received by the premier, even the mails had been silent.

Framling and I began to breathe more freely. We told each other that Toad was the usual kind of crank, after all; that, as his kind almost invariably did, he had gone off on some other *ignis fatuus* of his disordered imagination, and must already have forgotten us.

Not that we really believed this. At the back of our minds remained ever the abominable taint of poor Gregory's death.

The reason for this respite has never been made plain. The premier and Sir Hector Corriles later subscribed to the belief that Toad had fallen ill. Hermann, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the silence was a deliberate attempt to infect our resolution further, this time with the bacillus of indecision.

I incline to this myself. Indecision, waiting for the unknown to happen, is notoriously demoralizing in its effect. This would have been a metaphysical move quite in keeping with what I know of Toad's mental strategy.

During this fortnight I found unhindered opportunity to establish myself in Nancy's good graces. From the first the attraction had been mutual, and I was now finding friendship too barren a name for the feeling she inspired in me.

I had good sense enough, however, to progress slowly. Even had Nancy then returned my love, I had nothing to offer her in the way of worldly possessions. I had yet to make any real progress toward success, and it was important to me that I gain some standing before offering marriage.

But there was a second, more ominous consideration.

Nancy was becoming more and more anxious about her father. The course of Rufus Carlisle's aberration no longer ran smoothly, but showed a new and alarming impetus. Whereas formerly his outbursts of prophetic declamation had come at stated times, he now went into them irregularly and without warning. His manner grew painfully excited, and there were times when he frankly raved.

Rufus Carlisle had become a stranger to the sublimely comforting assurance of religion. The man was obsessed by the thought of the world's impending doom.

He gloried in it with the fierce joy of the fanatic. He was the keeper and dispenser of the secret councils of wrath incarnate, and the envisaging of death and destruction roused him to overpowering madness.

My first indication of the old man's increasing disorder came on Saturday, shortly before midnight. I was talking with Cuthbert and Mollie Hollidew, who had shortly before returned from the theater, while Nancy had gone to the kitchen to prepare supper.

Rufus Carlisle had been absent since early in the afternoon, and Nancy was more than a little anxious about him. To pacify her I had promised that if he had not returned by twelve o'clock I would borrow Cuthbert and his car, and go quietly in search of him. I had a feeling, however, that he would appear safely before that hour. And so, indeed, it proved.

Mollie Hollidew, I remember, was in a bad temper. The company had opened that night in a new show with the engaging title of *Step On It, Maudie*, and a new leading lady billed as Nonie Mayhew. Certain flowers and chocolates, which Miss Hollidew thought destined for herself, had gone instead to the leading lady.

SHE said: "I bet you couldn't find a less greedy girl than me anywhere in the world, Mr. Murchison; but, as I told Cuthbert, coming home, I'm not altogether blind and dumb. Did I, or did I not, see that man smiling at me and shouting encore?"

Cuthbert said, supremely distraught: "Undoubtedly . . . sure, Mollie . . . undoubtedly . . ."

At which Mollie began to sniff into an absurd handkerchief.

It was at this unpropitious moment that Rufus Carlisle entered. Invariably on his return he went straight up the stairs to his bedroom. Tonight saw a drastic alteration.

I think he was quite oblivious of our presence in the sitting room. For a second, as he stumbled toward the piano, I caught his look; but there was no recognition in it. His mind was turned inward upon itself in a kind of visionary ecstasy.

He fell on his knees by the piano stool, and his thin voice rose in a flood of disjointed words.

"Behold, the end of all things is at hand . . . With mine own eyes have I seen the flame . . . For the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up . . ."

The trembling voice went on and on: "Because of their wickedness men shall cease . . . As it was in the days of Noah . . ."

Madness, without doubt; and yet I could not escape a kind of superstitious awe. I had, too, a sense of intrusion. It did not seem quite decent, somehow, to be listening to this intimate craziness of a human soul.

I was on the point of going for Nancy, when she came quietly into the room. It made my heart ache to see how wan she looked. She laid her hand gently on the shaking shoulders.

"Daddy . . . come, dear, you're so tired. You must get to bed. I've saved such a nice supper . . ."

If he heard he took no notice.

"For the two shall be one, and the one two. Fire shall be water, and water fire. There shall be perdition of unrighteous men, and they that mock shall be reserved unto fire against the great day of judgment . . ."

Nancy said, a catch in her voice:

"Daddy . . . See, it's bedtime. You're so tired . . ."

She tugged at his arm, and of a sudden the reedy voice wavered and was still. Rufus Carlisle rose unsteadily to his feet, staring at us with bent brows.

"Your supper is all ready, Father."

"Even these shall know perdition," old Carlisle mumbled, pointing at us with a skeleton hand. "Even these, your friends, Nancy, for they know not righteousness, neither have they been purged by flames."

Nancy said: "Yes, dear. You must tell them tomorrow, for now you're so tired."

He allowed her to lead him away then. He walked like a man asleep, leaning heavily on her slightness.

"Purged by flames, indeed!" Miss Hollidew exclaimed. "He wants purging with a straitjacket. I call it downright insulting. Considering the company he keeps, I'd like to know who he thinks he is, wanting to burn up his betters . . . I would so. Eh, Cuthbert?"

Thus imperishably the King's English, as from the scornful lips of Miss Hollidew. Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

I said: "What do you mean—the company he keeps?"

Mollie nodded wisely.

"I saw him coming out of a joint the other day, chin and nose, as they say, with a Chinaman. At least, if it wasn't a Chinaman it was so near to it you couldn't have told the difference. Hobnobbing away in great style. Now, I ask you Mr. Murchison—ain't there plenty of his own kind to talk to, when he feels chatty?"

The news was disturbing. And yet there was more than one Chinese in Melbourne.

CHAPTER 5

Madman's Mind

EARLY in the afternoon, on Wednesday of Toad's third week of silence, I stood for a half hour or so, talking to the little knot of police who were stolidly watching a number of unemployed staging a demonstration in front of the Treasury buildings.

These unfortunates, foiled in an attempt to interview the premier, resolved themselves into a meeting of protest. One of their number climbed upon a lamp post and from this vantage point treated his fellows to a violent harangue. At length, glancing defiantly toward us, he added a kind of benediction—or malediction:

"Revolution, says you. Worse'n that by a long chalk, I'm telling you, if things ain't altered. I know what I know. I've heard of a bloke that reckons he's got hold of something that'll knock the guv'ment rotten . . . aye, and the whole darned country beside, if they ain't careful. I don't know what it is, but I'm just telling you."

It was sheer absurdity to connect this rambling utterance with the horrific machinations of the creature with whom our little band was contending. And yet I found myself doing so. I was soaked through and through with the poison of Toad.

The seven sworn to find an antidote for that poison met in the premier's room at eight o'clock in the evening. The blinds were tightly drawn, and a plainclothes man was on guard outside the door. Mr.

Hannaford, whose manner betrayed the nervous strain which he was undergoing, briefly reviewed facts as we then knew them.

He added: "No further communication has been received by me. Professor Branden, have you discovered the nature of the liquid used to destroy Mr. Gregory, or the means by which it was substituted for his ordinary medicine?"

From this point onward Framling and I took turns in recording what was said.

"As regards the liquid," Branden said slowly, "I have discovered nothing. It is evidently an evaporative, since no trace of it was found in analysis of the gravel where Mr. Gregory was annihilated. The nature of it is utterly beyond me to determine. Science has no answer for the astounding facts. They are apparently not to be explained by any known formulae; being, in fact, totally opposed to the science of chemistry."

He cleared his throat, adjusted his pince-nez with a slightly trembling hand, and resumed: "I think, however, I can account for the substitution . . . if it was a substitution and not merely an introduction. Gregory compounded his own medicines. He had, as perhaps you know, a slight dropsy of the heart and regularly took small portions of rosemary wine.

"He was pronouncedly in favor of herbal remedies, and obtained supplies of the herbs he required from a Chinese herbalist of good repute. I have satisfied myself that this man is beyond suspicion.

"In addition to the rosemary wine, Gregory prepared a very concentrated tincture of certain herbs. It was his custom to prepare a number of doses and keep these in tiny bottles in readiness for taking. When going out he slipped one of these bottles into his waistcoat pocket. When a dose became due he simply emptied the contents of the bottle at a gulp.

"As you also know, Mr. Hannaford, Gregory lived alone in city lodgings. He was without relatives . . . a fact which was of enormous help to us in keeping the circumstances of his death secret. I interviewed the landlady last week and elicited some interesting but useless details of his private life.

"One particular, however, is worth mentioning. On the morning of Gregory's

death, while he was absent, a Chinese came to the house. He informed Mrs. Brent, the landlady, that he came with a fresh supply of herbs for Gregory, and asked permission to place these in Gregory's bedroom. He gave as excuse for his personal attention an alleged need that certain of the herbs must be disposed in a certain manner, otherwise their virtue became impaired."

Professor Branden shrugged.

"Now . . . you see how easily substitution could have been effected. Gregory's habit of taking his medicine from small phials taken from his waistcoat pocket was widely known. Indeed, it was somewhat of a joke in luncheon circles in the city, for more than once he had been known to interrupt himself in an after-dinner speech to swallow his prescribed dose at the prescribed hour.

"To my mind, gentlemen, the fact that he was late in taking his medicine on the evening of the tragedy shows that he was unduly abstracted. He had, I believe, definitely identified Toad. Had he lived another hour, perhaps, that information would now be in our possession. It was fated that he was to die before he could reveal it.

"To return . . . Observe, then, how easy it would have been for Gregory's caller to take from his dressing table the first in order of the little row of phials that were always there in readiness—in the sequence of their freshness—and replace it with an identical phial containing—whatever it was. Gregory returns and had his lunch. He then places in his pocket the phial containing his evening dose, and again leaves the house. The rest we know."

The detective began with the statement that he had narrowed the University class lists down to some thirty-five names.

"This is going to be a longer task than I thought. Only the necessity for secrecy holds me to it personally. Apart from this, I have nothing to report."

"In all this," Mr. Hannaford said, when Hermann had fallen silent, "Chinese figure. Is Toad, then, a Chinese? If so, it appears to dispose of Professor Branden's theory that he is identical with the man so nicknamed in his chemistry classes."

The detective said: "Not necessarily,

I think. Let us say, for example, that Toad assumes the disguise in order to impose upon Gregory's landlady and effect the desired substitution."

The professor was still mentally engaged upon the problem of the amber-colored fluid, I knew; for he had been muttering disjointedly to himself for some time.

Here and there I caught a word—I am bound to say without making much sense of them. He appeared to be of an exhaustive turn of mind.

He muttered now, staring at the wall: "Radioactivity . . . little traces of tangibility . . . chemical reactions . . . transmutation of primary elements . . ."

He seemed to linger on the last, whatever it might mean, for he repeated it several times.

"Well, gentlemen, what now?" the premier said wearily. "We must, I suppose, concentrate upon discovering this pseudo-Chinese? Should that be very difficult?"

"I would rather," Professor Branden said, rousing himself, "discover Toad's laboratory. There lies our real danger. The man himself is powerless without the means to harm. We must discover and destroy this poison at its source."

We parted at that.

On reaching home I found Nancy rather upset; and with small wonder. I have persuaded her to set down herself the events of that evening, which occurred in my absence. To my mind they have a distinct bearing on the whole story of Toad.

Nancy's statement follows:

CHAPTER 6

Pursuit of Mertz

MAURICE has asked me to record what little I know of Mr. Mertz, and to explain, if I can, something of the relations which existed between Mr. Mertz and my poor father.

I think whatever influence Mr. Mertz had was evil. This is pure assumption on my part, for I have nothing really tangible to offer in proof. Say, if you like, that my woman's intuition upholds the belief.

Instinct warned me from the very beginning that Mr. Mertz was undesirable. I remember the day—some three years be-

fore Maurice came—when I answered a knock on the door, and opened it to see Mr. Mertz on the step.

He wore an overcoat, with the collar turned up around his neck, and a felt hat that was pulled well down over his forehead. I saw nothing of his face but the thick-lensed spectacles which he always affected. The lenses of these were very large and round, and gave him a queer, owlish appearance. He was short and squat in build, and his voice was soft . . .

This is my only impression of Mr. Mertz. I never once saw him without his overcoat and hat. During the three years that he boarded with us he never once, to my knowledge, entered the sitting room. He left the house early, after taking breakfast in his bedroom, and returned invariably late at night.

He never spoke to me, unless I first spoke to him; and then but briefly. His behavior was faultless. He paid his board faithfully each week.

And yet I detested him. He seemed to carry with him a kind of sinister atmosphere. I was always expecting some horrible revelation—of what, I cannot even now conceive. A sort of repressed wickedness, perhaps. But no revelation came. The man went his own way, whatever it was, and kept his own counsel. If he had a secret vice he kept it well hidden.

For the first two years he came and went in this manner, without seeming to notice Father or me, except indirectly. Father was only at the beginning of his illness, then. He was very quiet and self-effacing. But his poor old head was growing steadily worse all the time.

It was pitiful to watch. I just made up my mind to humor him. It was doing nobody any harm if he liked to conduct a little service all to himself, kneeling at the piano stool in the sitting room, and afterward playing and singing hymns. It brought comfort to him.

One morning Mr. Mertz unexpectedly returned to the home—I suppose, for something he had forgotten. Father was right in the middle of his devotions, and I was dusting the bannisters on the first landing of the stairs.

I don't think Mr. Mertz saw me—indeed, I know he did not. The sitting room door was open, and I saw him stand there

looking in at Father in exactly the same half-amused, half-curious way that Maurice was to emulate later. He stood for quite five minutes . . .

And I stood, too, watching him in turn. I wanted to say that I considered his action prying and impertinent, but somehow the words wouldn't come. I seemed to understand that some extraordinary train of thought had seized him, and that his mood would not brook interference. I was, in a way, frightened.

While I was trying to reassure myself, Father made an end of his prayers. Mr. Mertz called in a soft voice: "Why, Mr. Carlisle, so you're an Adventist, are you?"

Father mumbled something in reply, but I could not distinguish what he said. At that moment I was prompted to draw back from the bannisters into the shadow of the landing. I had scarcely done so when Mr. Mertz turned and looked deliberately up and down, as if to make sure he was unobserved.

Apparently he was satisfied that I was nowhere about, for he turned once more to Father, who had come out into the vestibule. They talked for a little time, very softly and almost secretly, I thought. I could only catch an odd word here and there.

Presently Mr. Mertz turned again toward the foot of the stairs. He said quite plainly now: "Come and talk in my room this evening, Mr. Carlisle. I wish I'd known of this before."

Father replied: "I will . . . I will."

He was very excited and his voice shook.

I didn't wait any longer, for Mr. Mertz was coming up the stairs. I crept softly ahead and went into my own room and shut the door very gently. I heard him pass. A few moments later, he came back and down the stairs, and I heard the front door close after him.

I came out then. Father was still standing in the vestibule. I spoke to him, but his poor mind was clouded again. He just looked at me in his vague, gentle way without answering. I made him lie down for a while, and I think he slept. After he had had his lunch he went out, as usual, to sit and read in the gardens.

I hadn't the heart to worry him with questions. I couldn't see that it mattered

very much, one way or the other, if he became friendly with Mr. Mertz.

Father spent several hours that night in Mr. Mertz's room. It became a regular proceeding, after a while, that they should sit and talk into the small hours.

Father never referred to these talks with Mr. Mertz. I began to notice a change in his manner, however. He became more—what is the word? More militant. That's it: more militant.

FOR a long time past he had been wrapped up in prophecy and all that kind of thing. He was always expecting and praying for the end of the world to come. But hitherto it had been in a mild, rambling manner, as a child looks forward to a picnic or a treat of some kind.

The talks with Mr. Mertz—at least, I suppose it was that—changed all this. He began to declaim and denounce and threaten. The world was a sink of iniquity, and the sooner it was destroyed the better. He was dreadfully worked up about it all at times.

I was terrified that someone unsympathetic would overhear him and call in the authorities. I couldn't bear the thought that he would be taken away from me and shut up.

And then one day Mr. Mertz left us. He gave me no reason for doing so. He merely said that he was going elsewhere, and I was glad to be quit of him, but a little worried lest Father should miss the strange companionship.

As it happened, Father did not seem to mind in the least. I soon found out that he was visiting Mr. Mertz in his new home. Father gave me the impression that he and Mr. Mertz shared some tremendous secret. His poor, dear eyes sparkled and glowed, and he began to look almost happy.

Once I asked him whether he knew where Mr. Mertz had gone, and whether he ever saw him now. He looked at me very cunningly and shook his head. But I knew he was deceiving me. Someone—I think it was Cuthbert Weinsidle—had seen him talking to Mr. Mertz in the city . . .

I come now to the evening when Maurice was engaged at the premier's office. Mollie had left for the theater with Cuth-

bert; father and I had not been alone long when the knocker banged at the street door. I opened it and saw Mr. Mertz.

He said, in his soft voice: "Good evening, Miss Carlisle. I promised your father, you know, that I would look in on him now and then. In fact, if he's at home, a walk might brighten him up. You might tell him I'm here."

I would have told him that Father was not at home, but it would have been useless. Father was at my elbow. He was trembling as if with a sudden new excitement. He said, in the high, thin voice which so distressed me: "Behold! The hour draweth near when all the . . ."

Mr. Mertz interrupted—hastily and sharply, I thought.

He said: "I've come to take you for a walk and a talk, Carlisle. That is, if Miss Nancy doesn't object?"

There was polite question in his voice, but his eyes behind their covering glasses were commanding. I felt a little shiver run down my spine.

I said nothing, but helped Father on with his hat and overcoat. Mr. Mertz seemed to be smiling in the shadow of his hat as he took Father by the arm.

The door had scarcely closed upon them when I was racing upstairs to my room, in the sudden determination to follow them.

I cannot say what prompted me to do this. I think, perhaps, my patience was at an end. I thought that if I could learn something to Mr. Mertz's discredit I might use it as a threat to leave Father alone.

For by this time I was definitely assured that the association was in some way harmful to Father. I asked myself why Mr. Mertz should bother with Father at all, unless he had some ulterior motive. His interest dated from the time he had discovered Father's religious obsession, and he had been extraordinarily attentive since then.

Yet I could not for the life of me understand what it all meant.

I left the light burning in the vestibule. The house would be quite safe, and Maurice had his own key.

Fortunately, Father was a slow walker. I soon picked them up and followed some fifty yards behind. At Bourke Street Mr.

Mertz helped Father into a street car. I was too late to catch it, but a second car for the same destination came up almost immediately. I stood on the platform outside, keeping a sharp lookout for Mr. Mertz and Father when they alighted. The roadway was fairly empty and we had caught up to the car ahead and were following only a few feet in the rear.

In such manner I came presently into North Carlton. The conductor of my car asked me now where I proposed to get off. At a venture I said I was traveling to the terminus. I was told that we were then approaching it.

The conductor was young and quite evidently impressed by his own looks. I discovered that I was being invited to join in the impression. I am afraid I dispelled this hope rather rudely.

I was most concerned, not by his following crude pique, but by the fact that he obscured my view of people alighting from the car ahead. When finally he went grumbling about his business, I caught an instant's impression, as my car gathered way, of Mr. Mertz and Father walking toward a side street.

I rang the bell at once, but the car did not stop. The young conductor—glad, I suppose, to vent his ill humor—merely grinned at my frantic signals. I could have cried with vexation when the car deliberately ran past the next stopping place.

It became evident that I was being punished for ignoring the pimpled Adonis. My anger was so great that I would not yield him the satisfaction of admitting defeat. I waited until the car momentarily slowed, as it does to the panting of the great, tired cable, and stepped off, with a prayer in my heart.

I can still see the look of sour astonishment on the face of the conductor when I alighted without a mishap. Ignoring his shout of warning—I suppose he was frightened that his bad manners might have got him into serious trouble—I set off at a run along the block and a half dividing me from the lane where I had last seen Mr. Mertz and Father.

I found it presently at least, it seemed to be the place. A high tin fence ran on either side and beyond were crazy, ill-favored buildings of the kind Maurice and I had once seen in Padderman's Lane.

Where were they? I did not know what to do. Father might have been anywhere in the jumbled, vile-smelling darkness.

I looked at the houses on either side of the lane. They were both of brick and two-storied. Those along the lane were, as far as I could see, just tumble-down cottages.

I thought I must have been mistaken in thinking I saw them turn into the lane itself. The eyes play curious tricks by lamplight. It was, I thought, more likely that they had gone into one of the better class of houses on the main street.

My blood was up now, and I was resolved, if I could, to discover Father and assert my authority. I would take him home at once, Mr. Mertz or no Mr. Mertz. And I would tell Mr. Mertz in plain language that he must in the future leave Father alone. Father was not like other men. I had been careless of the fact. I would be careless no longer. But looking at the long ramble of houses I knew it would be almost impossible to find Father. I had missed my chance. I had been back for an hour or so when Maurice came in, and I told him what had happened.

CHAPTER 7

Shadow of Terror

WHEN Nancy had finished her story I tried to comfort her, for she was frightful worried about her father. Then, all my good advice deserted me. I forgot everything except that I loved her.

I just took her in my arms forthwith . . . And there we were, holding to each other, and saying all those dear, quaint, foolish things that lovers manage to say. But this is not the story of my courtship.

It was late that night when old Rufus Carlisle returned. He seemed very tired and wan, I thought, and stared at us with even more abstraction than usual.

Nancy and I had agreed that it would be best not to question him. And so Nancy gave the old man his supper and saw him quietly to bed, as usual, without comment of any kind.

The next day passed without incident. On Saturday afternoon Nancy and I went to see George Framling and his wife. The

fact of our engagement was so self-evident that we could not have denied it, even if we had wanted to.

Immediately it was definitely thus established, Mona Framling—as women will—inveigled Nancy apart for, I suppose, an exchange of confidences and a comparison of methods of manly proposal. I was much too happy to care. Framling and I were left to ourselves.

Framling said: "Well, Murchison, I must say you're a fast worker. I congratulate you. Next to my wife there isn't a girl I respect and admire more than Nancy Carlisle."

We chatted for some time, and then Framling was seized with an idea.

He said: "Look here, I've got a notion to run into town to the gardens and hunt up Crampton, and the three of us talk things over. You'll be staying to tea with us, and the girls are quite comfortable together. We can spend an hour or so on Toad's trail."

I thought it a good idea. So, shortly after, we found ourselves in the Alexandra Gardens looking for Crampton. We found him without difficulty, and presently we were seated on the very bench where Framling and I had sat on the eve of Mr. Gregory's death.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and it was difficult to realize that such charm as surrounded us was associated with so shocking a tragedy.

Framling asked: "Well, Crampton, have you had any luck at all in solving this unhappy business? Nobody suspicious found on the prowl about this spot, I suppose?"

The park policeman shook his head. He was stolid-looking, with a hint of obstinacy in his square mouth and blunt nose, but an honest, dependable chap enough.

"Not a sign, Mr. Framling. I've kept a keen eye myself by day and night, and one of the other men has done the same—of course, without knowing anything of the facts. I can't say that anything unusual has happened.

"Well, I don't know. There's one rather queer thing. Very likely there's nothing in it, after all. I expect it's just that my sight's not too good, now I'm getting on in years. But it is queer."

He looked at us, I thought, a little defiantly.

"In what way?" I asked.

"That dark patch on the gravel where Mr. Gregory fell," Crampton said abruptly. "You remember the sort of stain that was left; at least, it looked like a stain."

Our eyes were automatically turned on the fatal spot. Yes, undoubtedly the stain was still there. And yet . . .

Perhaps Crampton read my thoughts, for he said: "I think Mr. Murchison has noticed it already. Walk right up to it, will you? That's right. Well, now . . .?"

"Standing right over it," Framling said slowly, "the gravel here is as white as the rest. Has it been regravled, Crampton? Is that what you mean?"

Crampton said: "No nothing has been done. Professor Branden came one day and took a sample of the gravel, but otherwise it has not been disturbed. You see, then! There's no stain. Not what you'd call a stain."

Framling and I walked slowly backward for, perhaps, some ten or fifteen yards. As the distance grew, so there seemed to grow, also, a darkening of the ground where he had been. It is rather difficult to explain. It was as if a shadow had suddenly been cast . . .

It was only when I looked more closely—following a quick glance at Crampton's rather pasty-pale face—that I saw the exact significance of the illusion. If it was an illusion. Framling saw it at the same time, and I saw his lips compress nervously.

The shadow—or stain, if you will—was the exact semblance of a sprawling body. It was almost as if Gregory himself lay there before our eyes. I don't know . . . As if the husk and flesh of the man had been destroyed, but the ego that was its complementary remained.

IT WAS neither a shadow nor a stain, yet somehow it was both. It was there and it was not there. It was something, I think, that one saw with the eye of the mind rather than the physical eye.

The whole thing gave me a sense of horror. It was so uncanny—there in bright sunlight, with people treading, as it were, upon Gregory's apparition—that I felt my hair rise.

Framling said: "Good Lord! But there's nothing there, Crampton. Nothing, really. That is even more insane than the other thing."

"How did you first come to discover it?" I asked.

Crampton smiled strangely.

"It's like one of these picture puzzles, isn't it? You know the kind I mean. Find a face hidden in a tree. Once it hits your eye you never lose it."

He shrugged his shoulders and continued: "An elderly pair came up to me just about dusk, Monday evening, and said there was a man lying on the path by the rockery here. Naturally I hurried along, thinking someone was ill. And I saw—this.

"The old couple saw it too: as it is, I mean. You never saw faces more scared. They went off in a hurry, muttering something about the path being haunted. Since then two others have come to me with the same story about a man stretched on the gravel. Mr. Murchison, it's—it's devilish."

What the explanation may be I do not know. It appears to me that perhaps that explanation of Professor Branden—given in the light of our later discoveries—most closely approximates to truth. Branden's theory was that the liquid used in Gregory's body annihilation held some peculiar photogenic property.

In other words, he held that Gregory's body had been photographed, as it might be, on the elastic solid which theorists call the ether.

This was, I believe, the sole hint he ever obtained toward his unhappy after-attempts to discover the components of the amber fluid.

We were still discussing this dreadful shadow mockery of poor Gregory when Hermann accidentally found us. His bewilderment was added to our own. Manifestly, the whole sum of human experience was helpless to achieve understanding here.

Hermann said presently: "This saves me some ringing on the phone. I've just come from the premier. He received at his house, this morning, another letter from Toad. You had better read it for yourselves."

The letter was, as I expected, brief and

to the point, just like the other ones.

Mr. Hannaford, I can no longer tolerate delay. Since the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. I shall call upon you at your office at eight o'clock on Monday night next, when I shall present incontestable evidence of my right to demand from the world whatever it pleases me. Victoria's share of the price of immunity now stands at one million pounds sterling.

Toad.

Hermann commented: "As mad as a hatter, of course. But a fool, for all that."

I said: "Why a fool?"

"Because he gives himself into our hands," the detective said jubilantly. "Do you think that we will ever let him go, once we have him?"

"What does the premier say?" Framling asked.

"He thinks as I do, that Toad is merely bluffing, in a kind of insane malice. And that reminds me, George. The premier, at all events, cannot be present on Monday evening. He's a pretty sick man. He wishes Sir Hector Corriles to preside in his place. If Toad turns up . . ."

"I can't believe he would overlook the threat of arrest," I felt impelled to say. "Very likely he feels secure enough to defy anything of the kind. It's my belief that he will keep this appointment."

"If he does," Hermann said stubbornly, "he's a goner. Make no mistake about that, Murchison. Why, man, what is there to prevent my arresting him? He's only human, as we are."

I said nothing, but somehow I wasn't impressed. It was incredible that Toad would not foresee and safeguard himself. A man clever enough to compound so diabolical a thing as the amber fluid was not to be caught napping that way.

CHAPTER 8

Satanoill

FOLLOWING a night of bad dreams I rose early on Sunday morning and went for a brisk walk in and around the Fitzroy Gardens. The weather was doing one of those climatic

about faces so typical of Melbourne and the dawn was cheerless and chill. From the trees birds sounded the dirge of a wormless melancholy.

As I walked, the city emerged slowly from the shadows in a stark nudity of chimney-potted skyline, wiping the smoke and train oil from her face with a rag of cold wind, and reaching for the powder and lipstick of urban respectability.

I was experiencing a great uneasiness. Some alarming thoughts had come to me in the night, and I sough now to view them squarely.

Not all my loyalty to Nancy could dispel my new and astounding fear that her father was, in some mysterious way, associated with Toad. Indeed, I had actually—during one of the night's dark depressions—contemplated a theory that Rufus Carlisle was himself Toad.

In the horrifying second during which I had struggled to cast this thought from me, I seemed to know that his mental disorder was merely the cloak of a consummate cunning, and that beneath it crouched the wild beast of an incomparable wickedness.

In the comforting light of day I was able to realize how outrageous a theory this was. I was thoroughly ashamed of the mental panic which had led me into so clumsy a moral trap. I escaped it almost on sight, as it were; but the shock stimulated a suspicion of which I had long been conscious.

Now I brought it ruthlessly into the open. Was it possible, I thought, that Mertz was Toad, or was a creature of Toad's? Was Rufus Carlisle's unbalance being made use of to his own and our undoing?

In the light of this new thought many of the old man's actions now appeared sinisterly suggestive. Whence came his sudden urge to proclaim with such fierce insistence the impending destruction of mankind? And to what insane lengths might not such apocalyptic fanaticism be driven, under the spur of evil influence? I was to find answer to this—in part, at least—before that Sabbath day was closed.

Not for worlds would I have spoken my uneasiness aloud. But I vowed secretly to study the old man under the micro-

scope of my suspicions. I decided that at the earliest opportunity I would endeavor to discover where he had gone with Mertz that night before. I would pick up the trail where Nancy had left it, and see where it led me.

Framling and I—better still, Crampton and I might spend a day in the vicinity of the Carlton Lane where Nancy had lost him.

Useless to torture myself with remorse over the result of that decision. I have comforted myself with the reflection that my choice of Crampton, which was eventually to bring him to an inconceivably dreadful end, was something beyond my control.

The morning and afternoon passed quietly. Toward evening Rufus Carlisle left the house. Only for the fact that I had promised Nancy to attend with her the evening service at St. Paul's Cathedral, I think I would have followed him there and then. But it was the first Sunday since we had become engaged; Nancy wanted to go to the service, and I was quite willing.

We entered the cathedral by the southwest porch. Presently the service began. It was so long since I had attended church that I was glad of Nancy's guiding book. But the hymns I knew, and if my voice was rusty from disuse, at least I sang heartily and happily. Prayers and lessons, and then the offertory. The congregation settled itself for the sermon.

The archbishop had mounted to the pulpit, and there came the little hush which marks the preacher's gathering of his thought to purposeful speech. I was looking idly at the white-gowned choristers in the choir seats . . .

And suddenly came interruption. Into the cathedral quiet came a man's voice—high, penetrating, cutting the silence as if with a sword—a fierce, exultant voice that seemed to fall from the vault of heaven itself.

"Behold, the end of all things is at hand. The world being overflowed with water perished, but now is reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of unrighteous men . . ."

The congregation sat as if paralyzed. I saw the Archbishop turn in amazement, and a vergers hurriedly left his seat in the

aisle. Nancy's hand gripped my arm so strongly that I winced. Her face had gone deathly white.

AND all the while the hidden voice spoke its eerie threat: "For fire shall turn to water, and water to fire; and they two shall be one; and there shall be a new Heaven and a new earth . . ."

The worshipers were rousing now from their stupor of outraged surprise. A man at my elbow, whose curiosity evidently outweighed his sense of church ethics, was almost on his feet, in an effort to discover where the unorthodox preacher was stationed.

A second man, youthful and alert, whom I immediately took to be a newspaper reporter, was tiptoeing down the west aisle toward the chancel, brazenly clutching a wad of copy paper.

The precentor and a second vergers were standing by the choir gate. I saw the first point upward suddenly toward the gallery that runs high above the altar.

". . . and the elements shall melt with fervent heat . . ."

I heard a sob catch in Nancy's throat. I sensed rather than heard the terrified whisper from her trembling lips.

"Maurice. Oh, Maurice. It's—Daddy."

She half rose, but I managed to restrain her.

"Sit down, dearest," I said. "We can do no good. Steady. If we attract attention it may lead to his hurt. They can't know who he is, and he might get away."

Old Rufus had, in fact, ceased his fulminations. The Archbishop, with admirable nerve, was announcing his text.

Regardless of being seen I put my arm about Nancy's shaking body. Her eyes were closed, and I think she was on the point of fainting. My mind was in a ferment, through which the impassive tones of the preacher came at brief, uncertain intervals . . .

I roused Nancy gently.

"We can slip away now, without drawing attention."

I had to support her down the aisle to the door. A vergers met us concernedly in the porch. He murmured something about fetching a glass of water. Nancy shook her head feebly.

I said: "Thanks, no. If she might rest

here a moment, while I go get a taxi . . ."

He came with me to the outside steps. He said: "That affair was enough to upset any lady. I don't wonder she looks ill."

When I reentered the porch Nancy smiled at me bravely. The verger was still there, and I could no longer forbear the question that was tormenting both Nancy and myself.

I said: "Did they catch the poor fellow, do you know?"

It seemed an age before the answer came.

"Unfortunately he got away. He must have slipped through into the diocesan buildings. At any rate, he hadn't been found yet. The mystery is how he ever got into the gallery at all. We've been troubled before with cranks of the kind, but never before so sensationally."

We were silent during the short drive to Monray Street. Cuthbert and Millie Hollidew were in the sitting room, but there was no sign of Rufus Carlisle.

Miss Hollidew exclaimed at sight of Nancy: "My goodness, what have you been doing to the child, Mr. Murchison?"

I said: "Nancy isn't feeling very well."

"My goodness!" reiterated Miss Hollidew. "She looks like a corpse. I've some brandy in my room."

The good-hearted creature almost carried Nancy upstairs, and a little later we could hear her bustling about in the kitchen and crying out to know what had become of the hot-water bag. On the way back to Nancy she put her head in at the door.

"I want her to go to bed, but d'you think she will? She's worried ill over that old fool of a father of hers. He ought to be put in the asylum."

She vanished again precipitately, leaving Cuthbert and me to stare at each other.

I said: "What a warm heart Miss Hollidew has, Mr. Weinseidle."

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

He pulled his little bit of a mustache and nodded at me almost humanly. My praise of Miss Hollidew had evidently touched him.

A moment later Rufus Carlisle stumbled in and fell to his knees by the piano stool.

The man was a scarecrow. His clothes were torn and dirty, and he shook like a

leaf. His eyes were two live coals set in a china-white face. He began to mumble inarticulately, beating his thin hands together.

The spectacle was too much for Cuthbert's reserve. He said: "Old boy's been on a jag. Might have fallen off a street car by the look of him. Absolutely!"

"Mr. Weinseidle, I know you like Nancy," I said. "Will you promise me something for her sake?"

He said: "Undoubtedly."

I said: "If you hear or read of anything unusual which took place in St. Paul's Cathedral this evening, please say nothing to anyone about this poor old man here. I don't want to speak any plainer. I'm sure you will understand."

Cuthbert nodded.

"AND if you can give Miss Hollidew the hint, I'll be doubly grateful," I said. "It's a strangely sad world, Mr. Weinseidle. If we don't help each other now and then, we're lost to happiness. You'll keep your own counsel, won't you?"

He did a thing that endeared his eccentricity to me for always. He stood up and very shyly offered his hand.

"Sure, Mr. Murchison . . . fond of Nancy, y'know . . . glad to help."

I said: "I wonder if we could persuade Mr. Carlisle to go to bed, without troubling Nancy."

To my surprise, Cuthbert winked. He put his face down to the old man's and said: "Satanoil!"

The effect upon Rufus Carlisle was amazing. He looked at Cuthbert with an expression of terror such as I hope never again to see on the face of any living creature. He put out a shaking hand, as if to ward off a blow.

Cuthbert said: "Hadn't you better go to bed, Mr. Carlisle? Listen: Satanoil."

"In Heaven's name," Rufus Carlisle mumbled, "who are you? You're not—you're not—I'll go, I'll go. You wouldn't do that. No, no! Not that name . . ."

I believe I am not wrong in stating that he ran from the room. We heard him clawing his way up the stairs and then the thud of his bedroom door closing. The whole thing was so astonishing that for the moment I was speechless. Even Cuth-

bert seemed shaken by the result of his effort.

I said presently. "How on earth did you do that? What was that you said to him, Mr. Weinsidle?"

He answered: "I said, Satanoil."

"Satanoil! What does that mean?"

"I'm hanged if I know, Mr. Murchison. Honest I don't. There was a chap here before you came, fellow named Mertz. Queer bird. I heard him say that to the old boy one time, and the old chap nearly took a fit. Just thought I'd try it on him now."

I could think of nothing to say for the moment, but: "Did Mertz know that you overheard?"

"I don't think so. Didn't see me. Only passing, y'know."

I repeated the name aloud several times, trying to find a clue to the meaning.

"Satanoil. Satanoil."

The significance stared me in the face, and yet I could not grasp it.

At this moment, Mollie Hollidev rejoined us. She said: "Did you ever see the like of old Rufus Carlisle? Cuthbert, I simply must have a cigarette. The old boy looks as if he's been hit by a cyclone, and he's rattier than ever. Nancy's seeing him into bed."

"I was to tell you, Mr. Murchison, that she's feeling well again, and will be down in the kitchen in a minute or two."

While I waited in the kitchen I lit the gas stove, just for the comfort of seeing the flames. Nancy came in very quietly and shut the door. She came straight to me and put her head on my shoulder. She cried a little.

I tried to comfort her. I said: "Well, he's come home safe and sound. We must be thankful for that. It isn't as bad as it seems, you know. They'll never find out who it was. I don't suppose they'll even try."

She said: "It isn't so much that part of it, Maurice. It's the general hopelessness and depression of everything. All sorts of queer, horrible things seem to be going on all around us. I feel sometimes as if I were living in the middle of a nightmare, and that none of us really existed outside my dream. And I get frightened . . . nothing will ever hurt you or take you away from me, will it?"

"Not if I have any say in the matter," I said. "Come, we mustn't get morbid. A good sleep and you'll feel ever so much better in the morning."

"Maurice," she said, "who is Mr. Mertz?"

I almost answered, "Toad." But, apart from my caution, I couldn't be sure that I'd been right in saying so. I don't know even now if it was so. I think it was, but I don't know.

What I did say was: "Does it matter, dearest? I mean, I expect he's just an ordinary kind of mortal, a little eccentric, perhaps, who has a quaint liking for your father. It isn't fair of us to lay everything at Mertz's door, for we really can't be sure that his influence is evil."

"It is . . . it is," Nancy said passionately. "Maurice, a woman knows these things instinctively. I always felt that there was something horrible about Mr. Mertz. Always. There's an uncleanness, a wickedness . . ."

I said: "Never fear, it can't touch us. Look here, I promise to find out all about Mertz for you, within a day or two. That ought to be easy enough."

"Be careful," she said. I felt a little shudder go through her. "Maurice, be careful. In some way that I can't understand I know that he's dangerous. Promise that you will not go alone."

"I'll take Crampton with me." I laughed. "We'll make a start at the spot where you last saw your Dad with Mertz; that lane in Carlton. Crampton's big enough to eat half a dozen of your Mertzies. I promise we'll be careful."

This seemed to soothe her, and a little later I was able to persuade her to go to bed.

CHAPTER 9

Tonight I Come

WHEN I entered the Treasury next morning I knew a little stir of trepidation and excitement in my veins. I felt that the night would mark further extraordinary happenings. The paramount thought was: Will Toad reveal himself?

I still believed that he would. We were about to enter a new phase of this uni-

quely abominable experience. I felt it profoundly.

Almost as soon as I entered the building I encountered George Framling. He smiled at me rather strangely and held out a letter. It was addressed *Maurice Murchison, Esq., One of the Seven, Premier's Office, Melbourne.*

I opened it. There was nothing but a small oblong of white cardboard. On it was roughly drawn a toad with its thick squat body covered with warts or tubercles, and the pored protuberance behind each eye. Underneath the drawing this line was hand printed:

Bufo vulgaris. He spits poison.

Somehow I could not resist grinning. It had, no doubt, been intended to scare me: actually it had the opposite effect. The melodrama was overdone. That is the worst of your criminal—he cannot resist a theatrical strutting.

I suppose I must have looked a question, for Framling said: "Yes, as far as I know, we each got one: Hermann did, for he rang me up to tell me. You'll find that the premier, Branden, Sir Hector, and Crampton were similarly honored in this morning's mail. It's a crude threat."

"The point that occurs to me," I said, "is that it shows Toad has a complete knowledge of who we are and what we are. It is evident he wanted to let us know this on the eve of declaring himself. I don't quite like that part of it. He must be fully equipped to defy us."

"I can't see it," Framling said. "Hermann says it's sheer bluff. He says Toad can't possibly be such a fool as to put himself into our hands. It doesn't stand to reason."

I reminded him of the appalling death of Mr. Gregory: "Toad is too evidently outside ordinary methods and manners. He tells us so, here on this card. He may have chosen a crude way of doing so—in fact, he admits it, for he boasts of himself as *bufo vulgaris*—but he means business, all the same. He can spit poison. He has proved it, and he is prepared to prove it again."

"Perhaps you're right, Maurice. If we knew what the poison consisted of, we could look for the antidote. The trouble

is that we don't know. As Branden said, it's an outrage on probability."

I inquired how the premier was.

"Not at all well. There isn't a chance of having him with us tonight. He's as worried as the devil. I'm to report all that takes place at the earliest opportunity. Sir Hector Corrilees had a long talk with Mr. Hannaford yesterday, and I fancy they arrived at some decision. Sir Hector has full power to speak for the premier tonight."

For the remainder of the day the matter rested there. Routine vents claimed our attention. The sole interlude was provided by Professor Branden, who looked in briefly to ask whether Framling and I had received cards.

He said: "Well, Mr. Murchison, the chase grows stern."

"At any rate, we hope to sight the quarry soon," I replied.

He smiled a little sadly.

"I'm utterly depressed. I thought I knew something of chemical science, but it appears that I really know very little. I haven't a ghost of an idea what this darned amber fluid is. I feel like a child groping its way through the most ordinary lessons. I'm ashamed and humbled. I'm . . ."

I had an uncomfortable impression that he was on the point of breaking down completely. His face was haggard and his voice shook.

I interjected hastily: "You take altogether too severe a view of your own measure of responsibility, Professor. No man could do more than you have, seeing the complete fog in which you are forced to work. I don't see how you can expect to discover anything, having nothing at all to go on."

But he would not listen to this.

"It's my job, and I've failed. Sometimes I'm tempted to beg Mr. Hannaford to hand the task elsewhere. Johns of Adelaide, or Paul Birkett, from the Bureau of Science and Industry. Both keen, clever men. They might succeed. The only thing that holds me is that poor Gregory was my friend. I want to avenge him myself. I tell you, Murchison, I will discover this devil's brew. I will—if it kills me."

He calmed, presently, and went away.

And so the day passed.

Nancy and I had tea cosily together in the evening. Mollie Hollidew was dining with Cuthbert in the city, and old Rufus Carlisle had wandered away early in the afternoon. Nancy, I thought, seemed much happier about him.

She said: "He was so quiet and gentle this morning. It was lovely to see him. He kissed me of his own accord, and spoke of mother—a thing he hasn't done for years. Such a grave, solemn old chap, as if all the cares of the world were resting on his poor shoulders."

I hated leaving her alone in the house, but it could not be helped. I had told her that I had some special correspondence of the premier's to attend to, and I should probably be home late. I made her promise that she would not leave the house on any pretext whatever.

She did so laughingly.

"Why, Maurice, how dreadfully serious you look. Of course, I can't go out. I have to wait in for father."

Not being able to tell her about Toad, I had to pretend that my seriousness was unconscious.

I said: "It is having to leave you that gives me a dour look, I expect. Anyway, I always hated correspondence, letter writing is an art of which I know nothing."

I found Hermann strolling up and down in front of the Treasury main entrance. I knew from the enthusiastic grip of his handshake that he was feeling in fine fettle. Indeed, he presently unburdened himself with all the naiveté of school girl attending her first party.

"If Toad comes tonight, Murchison, it's his finish. I'll have a plainclothes man hiding around every exit in the building. He can't escape, no matter how he tries. No one is to interfere with him if and when he enters. We'll be like the good old British bulldog, Murchison. We don't object to his coming, but we do object to his going."

The detective was rubbing his hands together in a pleasurable sense of impending triumph. I thought the optimism ill-judged, but refrained from saying so.

He knew my opinion and was not all impressed by it. It would have been idle to labor my point. And after all, I didn't want to be thought presumptuous. His

experience was far greater than mine.

Sir Hector Corrilees, Professor Branden, and Framling, I now learned, were already waiting in the premier's room. On the arrival, shortly, of Crampton, we three joined the others. I looked at the clock on the mantel, as I took my seat at Framling's side. It pointed ten minutes to eight o'clock.

Ten minutes until we saw him face to face—the Toad that spat poison. We sat stiffly, and our faces grew tense . . .

CHAPTER 10

So Water Won't Burn?

THOSE ten minutes seemed an eternity of waiting. I suppose this was because every man of us was silent. The chief commissioner sat in the premier's chair, his large mouth twisted in a thoughtful grimace, and his hands clasped squarely on top of his almost bald head.

Professor Branden, thin and angular, sat at Sir Hector's elbow. He was staring into a vacancy and his lips moved soundlessly.

Hermann and Crampton were stationed one on either side of the room, close to the inner door of green baize. Their position was a strategic one and argued ill for Toad's escape by the way he would enter. The detective's farmer-like face held a grim smile, in which was blended resolve and doubt. He caught my eye and nodded briefly, as if to emphasize his scepticism.

Sir Hector broke the quiet by saying: "The ordinary messenger is in attendance outside, you said, Framling?"

"Yes," George replied. "I gave him no name. I merely instructed that a visitor might call, asking to see the premier: in which case, Baines was to show him in here. He was then to inform the two plainclothes men who are waiting in the clerk's room opposite. The three will take up a position outside the premier's door."

Sir Hector was muttering his approval of this, when the clock on the mantel chimed eight. With the last stroke, as it seemed, the baize door opened to disclose the stolid features of the messenger, Baines.

He said: "A gentleman to see the

premier, sir. May I show him in, now?"

"Show him in," Sir Hector snapped.

He said under his breath, darting a look at Hermann: "There's punctuality for you. Now, gentlemen, watch yourselves."

His face was set.

Hermann's astonishment was plain to see. In spite of his careful preparations, he had never really expected Toad to keep the appointment. Nor, I think, had any of us but myself. But mine had been intuition rather than a reasoning of probabilities.

I was still tasting my fortuitous triumph when Toad came into the room.

Three times I have attempted to draw a pen portrait of this man—as we saw him then, for the first time, openly—and three times I have scored out what I have written. The truth is that Toad somehow defies description. The likeness is here at the back of my mind, but I cannot focus it.

Let me try once more.

He was short and squat; globular face, with high, bushy brows, a wide straight slit of a mouth, and flattened nostrils. His cheekbones were oblique, Eastern. A short, dun-colored down—scarcely to be described as hair—covered his skull. The flesh of his throat was in folds.

No; I have failed again. This reads as the description of some animal, not of a man. Let it stand, in all its crude, inhuman ugliness. Add to this the eyes: large, with drowsy lids, and pouched below the eyeballs; a flame-colored iris . . .

This was the face that confronted us presently from across the premier's table. I was reminded of some carnival mask set upon thick, humping shoulders—coldly impassive, fascination in its superlative arrogance.

Sir Hector Corrileeps said curtly: "You are Toad?"

The voice which replied was smooth, yet concise and faintly ironic.

"I am Toad. But you are not the premier."

"Mr. Hannaford is ill," Sir Hector said, in his quick, uncompromising tones. "He deputed me to hear what you have to say."

A little curious sound escaped Professor Branden. He was staring at Toad intently, his mouth hung open and his

brows were frowning. Suddenly he appeared to grasp the thought in his mind. He pointed a lean, accusing finger.

"I remember you now. You're Michael Domidorf. Of course. How stupid of me to forget . . ."

Toad said: "I was always just ahead of you in class, Branden, wasn't I? I'm still ahead, you see."

This, I believe, was the keynote to the man—his insane egotism. His crazy genius stood astride his world of self, and fretted to stand astride the souls of men. He lusted for power, like some demoniac demigod, and felt the scepter of it already in his hands.

"Domidorf . . ."

"Toad, at your service, Branden."

"Toad, the . . ." Branden's voice rose thinly. "Your criminal lunacy might be expected to welcome even the perversion of a name. What hellish thing did you do to Stephen Gregory? Answer me that, before we call you to account . . ."

The flicker of a smile crossed Toad's face.

"You're hysterical, Branden. Gregory brought about his own death. As well blame your Maker when the lightning strikes you."

"You're not omnipotent."

"So near to that, Branden," Toad said unemotionally, "that I can afford to overlook your childishness."

Sir Hector Corrileeps interrupted.

"Branden, please. Now, you Toad, as you style yourself. I hardly believe that you'd be brazen enough, for all your hardihood, to put yourself so completely in our hands. Of that we'll talk later. We'll hear first what you have to say."

Again that flicker of a smile.

"Brave words, Corrileeps, but they won't help you. Why, you fools, I hold you in the hollow of my hand. I can destroy you and your world. The earth is mine and the fullness thereof. I shall take toll of the nations. And no man dare lift his hand against me, lest I wreck the universe. Power, Branden—that's what I hold."

A MADMAN, plainly. And yet the thought brought no comfort. If he had ranted . . . But his voice was not even raised in emphasis. He might have

been stating plain, everyday facts, for all of his cold, unbalanced emotion. Only his eyes betrayed the exultation of his thought. Their flame seemed to ebb and flow.

Sir Hector Corrilees was unpleasantly amused. It was evident that now he thought he knew precisely the kind of man with whom we were dealing.

He said, glancing at Hermann: "So that's it, is it? Well, Hermann, I don't think we need wait any longer, do you? We can't hang you, Toad, but we can do the next best thing. We can put you where your destructive notions can't do any harm. And we'll do it now."

His strong teeth bit the end from a cigar. He looked at Framling and me, as much as to say: "Well, all the upset is over. The premier is going to be mighty relieved to hear the truth of it."

Hermann and Crampton had come quietly forward. They stood each at Toad's elbow, the very incarnation of stern, relentless officialdom. Hermann had a pair of handcuffs in his hand. He was grinning a little. He even allowed himself to joke.

He said: "Now, then, Napoleon, you're keeping the court waiting. And there's the battle of Waterloo to be seen to."

"Wait," Toad said quietly.

Some quality in his voice struck the grin from Hermann's face. Sir Hector sensed it, too, for he paused in the lighting of his cigar, to peer uncertainly at Toad.

"Do you think," the smooth, chill voice proceeded, "that I was so incredibly stupid as not to foresee this action on your part? I have taken all precautions against it. This will be plainer when I have demonstrated what I have come to demonstrate."

"I said that I would produce incontestable proof of my right to dictate not only to this Government, but to the governments and peoples of the entire earth. Incidentally, Branden's curiosity may obtain a hint as to the method of Gregory's death."

"And suppose we prefer not to see this precious demonstration?" Sir Hector said.

Toad replied, with a careless shrug of his shoulders: "In that case you will precipitate the most stupendous calamity which has ever fallen upon mankind. I warn you, I am sane and serious."

The allusion to Gregory, I could see, had caught the attention of Professor Branden. He was a-quiver, in a scientific sense, to establish the identity of the amber fluid.

He said: "A little further delay, Sir Hector, can hardly matter. If there is any demonstration, however absurd, it might not be amiss to have it."

I smile sadly now when I think of our cocksureness. For the moment, even my fears had been calmed. I was seeing Toad as a bombastic lunatic who had poisoned Gregory by means of some obscure chemistry and was threatening to poison us all in the pursuit of his monstrous ambitions. Of the shocking truth I had no conception.

"Go ahead if you wish," replied Sir Hector.

"Thank you. Will some one bring me water, preferably in an iron basin. Not more than a tumblerful. Also, allow me—for your sakes, rather than my own—to stand here, a little apart."

At Sir Hector's nod Hermann and Crampton drew away a few paces. Framling left the room to obtain what was required.

Hermann said bluntly: "No tricks. There are six of us here, and there are men posted inside and outside the building. You can't get away. Besides, at the first sign of any funny business, I shall shoot to kill."

"When I leave here, as I shall shortly, it will be by myself and with your full permission," Toad said.

Hermann sneered incredulously.

Framling came back with a small enamel basin. He said, as he handed this to Toad: "Is that enough water?"

"A little too much," Toad said. He poured some into the fireplace, and set the basin on a chair.

He turned then to Branden, the red of his eyes glowing. "Branden, what would you say if I told you that I could burn water?"

"What?" Branden exclaimed.

Suddenly he laughed outright in thin, reedy tones. He said, "Are you as mad as that? I'm sorry, Sir Hector; I've wasted your time after all."

"Wait," Toad said. "Suppose you tell us, Branden, why water will not ignite,

as the world now understands ignition."

BRANDEN said mechanically: "Every child knows that water will not burn because it cannot combine with the oxygen of the atmosphere. That is a scientific fact."

"Allow me then to introduce you to Satanoil," Toad said.

Some small object—I could not distinguish what it was—fell from his hand into the basin. Immediately he stepped away from it, his palms before his eyes.

Satanoil! . . . For a second I had a vision of old Rufus Carlisle kneeling at the piano stool, with Cuthbert's face lowered to speak that very word. *Satanoil . . . Satanoil . . .* The full meaning of the name burst upon me.

And as instantaneously the thing itself burst upon our astounded senses. From the basin shot a single wide tongue of jade-green flame, edged with bright orange. It rose three or four feet in the air and spread like a fan. There was no noise of its burning but the room was pervaded by a sudden enormous sensation of heat. I could hear the tiny crackling of the enamel lining the basin, which seemed to rock on the chair.

As swiftly as it had come, so the flame died. Nothing remained but a thin green haze immediately over the basin. My eyes were paining in the way they had pained once before, when I had incautiously looked at the flame of an oxy-acetylene welding process. There was a faint acridness in the air.

Professor Branden's face was aghast. He said: "What—what—what—" over and over like a child.

Beyond that was the silence of utter consternation. Sir Hector Corrirees was breathing like a man in a fit. Crampton was wiping tears of hurt from his eyes, while Framling's face was buried in his hands.

On this silence came the smooth voice of Toad.

"When I said I had taken precautions against my arrest here tonight, I might have said that they had to do with this thing that I call Satanoil. How do you like the name, Branden?"

"Never mind that now. The point is this. Should I not return to a certain

place by midnight, what happened in this basin will happen in the river.

"I need say no more. You have imagination enough to visualize the picture. Fresh water or salt, a drop of Satanoil will do for it what one match will do for a forest. The river runs to the ocean, and the ocean to other oceans. Touch me and the world burns. You begin to understand at last the tremendous power that I wield.

"And now for my terms. You pay me one million pounds as Victoria's share in the price of the world's immunity. I have done with playing. I give you one week to consent. If at this hour today in a week the acceptance of the government is not notified to me through the columns of the press, I shall punish swiftly. And I shall go on punishing until my will is done."

"You devil!" Branden choked.

Sir Hector Corrirees seemed to rouse himself from a state of stupefaction.

He said hoarsely: "What guarantee do we have that even if we agree to this preposterous sum in payment, further demands will not be made on us?"

For the first time Toad ceased to smile.

"None. If it's my will you go on paying. The world pays or perishes. You talk of the great kings of the earth! Bah! Never a king in history such as I shall be. Science, Branden; power. Satanoil, Branden. Get over that if you can!"

Branden said: "Are you human? Was it with that you murdered poor Gregory? You black-hearted devil!"

Toad was impervious. There was no change in his cool, unangered tones.

"The wet of his veins fed the flames, Branden. As a quick and effective means of suicide I can recommend Satanoil. A drop on your tongue . . ."

I saw Herman reach out a great hand toward him as he turned to the door. Sir Hector Corrirees saw it, too, and called harshly: "Let him go, Hermann. We daren't risk it. Tell those men outside—"

His voice broke sharply.

Toad paused, his flame-colored iris glowing from the shadowed doorway. In the dimness of my aching sight his features seemed to puff and swell.

He said: "So water won't burn, eh, Branden? Well, you're wiser now."

As he turned a hideous travesty of laughter left his lips.

CHAPTER 11

Calling Mr. X

GEORGE FRAMLING, on his own initiative, told the mystified plain-clothes police and the messenger Baines that they were no longer required.

When he returned from doing so he drew my attention to the basin used in Toad's demonstration. The enamel lining was cracked and melted—evidence of the terrific heat to which it had been subjected. Not a vestige of moisture remained.

The green haze or smoke had also vanished. As in the case of poor Gregory, it had slowly and imperceptibly thinned into nothingness.

I could not help wondering whether here, also, the air held an imperishable photographic record of events. It seemed to me that in that confined space there was a possibility that the whole contents of the room might thus be impressed upon the atmosphere.

Given certain conditions of lighting and perspective, I thought, our tragic group might be reproduced—as it were, superimposed upon the room itself—long after its individual members were scattered and dead.

My theory proved correct, but in part only. This curious photogenic property of Satanoil would appear to have been limited in effect to within two or three feet of its action only. As a consequence, in this case its influence was confined to Toad—who stood nearest—and the chair and basin.

Some four times, I believe, persons have claimed since to have seen this phantom, and on this basis is founded the superstition still current that the premier's room in the Treasury building is haunted. The effect, I am told, is that of a short, stocky man standing, hands before his face, close to a chair holding a basin. On all four occasions the hour was around dusk and the lighting was natural.

The scientific and curious may make what they will of this phenomenon. I venture no opinion, except to state that I doubt that Toad himself was aware of

it. In any event, I am certain it was beyond his designing. Professor Branden was emphatic on this point.

It was the primary property of Satanoil that was concerning him, now. I could read in his expression that he was doubting his own sanity. All his preconceived notions and precise scientific maxims had tumbled about his ears. The impossible had become possible.

Sir Hector Corrilees was striding about the room. He halted abruptly, and said: "Shocking! Shocking! A terrible power to be in the hands of any man, let alone a criminal. No man, sane or insane, is to be trusted with such power."

Framling said: "Satanoil. It's well named."

Professor Branden struck his forehead. "Gentlemen, it violates all established principles of science. And yet—you saw it. You saw water burn. What do I say? Am I mad, myself? Corrilees—Murchison—you saw it. Say you saw it . . ."

It was some time before the hysteria of his fear left him. Crampton ran for some brandy. Upon this Branden revived sufficiently to reply to Sir Hector.

The chief commissioner asked: "Can you hazard an explanation? I want to understand what I can of your point of view. Water, you told us, will not burn because it cannot be made to combine with the oxygen of the air. I take it, then, that Toad has effected this combination. Am I right?"

"How else?" Branden murmured.

He paused a moment, wetting his lips with a trembling tongue.

"The chemist distinguishes bodies into simple and compound substances. A chemical union is not merely a mixture of the components, such as would take place if we shook together white and black sand, but an entirely new substance is formed with properties utterly different from any of its constituents.

"Water—as said—to burn must combine with the oxygen of the air. It is first necessary to decompose it into its equivalent gases. But when this is done, these gases immediately combine to return to the original state—water."

Branden stared at us in turn. "And so it becomes necessary—if water is to burn—not only to decompose it into its gases,

but to fix those gases for at least sufficiently long to permit their ignition. Some intermediary has to be found which frees and ignites in a continuously evolving process. In Satanoil Toad has apparently discovered this intermediary . . . Sir Hector, what is to be done?"

"I wish I knew," Corrilees said. His own face was gray. "We must confer at once with the premier. God help us . . . If the world knew, it would become insane with fear. The destruction of the entire globe is at the will of one man—and that man a dangerous lunatic."

"Say, rather, perverted genius," Branden said. "In all my horror I cannot escape the brilliance of what he has done. To have achieved such a thing as that . . ."

Hermann interposed: "Professor, you addressed him as Michael Domidorf? I saw the name on the class lists and traced it, as I thought, to a harmless conclusion. Domidorf is supposed to have died ten years back. I saw the entry in the register."

"Nevertheless, as you see," Branden said, with a weary smile, "Domidorf is alive. For reasons of his own, no doubt, he preferred to be thought dead. It is not very difficult to perpetrate a fraud of that description, Hermann. A medical corpse, and a venal registrar, and the thing is done. Michael Domidorf died and some other name was taken. We must find what that other name is. Everything now, depends upon it."

"In what way?" asked Hermann.

"We have a week of truce. It is unlikely that Toad would entrust a confederate permanently with the means of so dreadful a world holocaust. Depend upon it, this confederate is ignorant of the deadly property of his task. He is told, should Toad not return at a certain hour, to do a certain thing. It is, one presumes, that he empty a certain liquid into the Yarra River.

"He is unaware of the tremendous results that will follow his act. It would be easy to deceive such a man. He might be told, for example, that the liquid was to be thus disposed of in order that it should not fall into the hands of the police."

I think we all followed this reasoning readily enough.

Hermann said, "I believe you've hit on it."

"And so, you see," Branden continued, "it is extremely improbable that Toad—fearing that in ignorance his confederate may bungle and precipitate disaster—will trust another in the intervals of his hiding. He feels tolerably safe from discovery.

"In fact, I believe this is at the bottom of the murder of poor Gregory. Toad dares not be caught at a time when he has not the safeguard of his confederate. Gregory was a threat, therefore Toad destroyed him."

"You say confederate," Sir Hector Corrilees questioned. "Why not confederates?"

"For the reasons already stated," Branden replied. "Satanoil, as Toad well knows, is too dangerous a thing to play with. A single confederate is all he needs."

AT THIS point my attention wandered. I was, in short, testing the horror of my own thought. I could no longer escape the conclusion that Nancy's father was the confederate of whom Branden had made mention.

All the facts pointed to it. If I had been sure that no other confederate existed—that old Rufus Carlisle was alone in his hideous, if unconscious, partnership of evil—I think I should have made my conclusions known to the rest.

But I was not sure. I felt that before committing myself to a step which must inevitably bring sorrow to the girl I loved, I ought first to settle this point beyond doubt.

That is to say, I must identify Toad with Mertz. If Toad and Mertz were not one and the same, then Mertz was also a confederate. There was also the man who had masqueraded as the Chinese herbalist.

Everything was so involved that I would not risk Nancy's hurt until I saw more clearly. It might even be that Mertz, not Rufus Carlisle, was Toad's single confederate, and that the old man was merely coincident in his outburst of adventist mania. And so I decided to keep my own counsel still.

Crampton was sitting stolidly at the end of the table. Under cover of what Professor Branden was saying, I invited

the park policeman to join me next day in a thorough search of the locality where Nancy had lost sight of her father and Mertz.

I said: "If you could get the day off, or manage between shifts, I'd like you to join me in a little tour of exploration. I want to trace a man named Mertz. We may be wasting our time, but I think not."

"I'll go," Crampton said promptly.

I arranged to meet Crampton outside the Treasury at nine o'clock the next morning. I told him of the lane in Carlton, and said that Mertz had been seen to enter the lane one night.

"I know the spot," Crampton said. "A bad quarter. We'll go through that district with a fine-tooth comb."

And knife-like there entered my consciousness the thought of old Rufus Carlisle. *Fire and water . . . water and fire . . . for the firmament shall pass away in flame.* His prophecy.

What did Nancy's father know of this ghastly business?

Crampton lived with his wife in a small wooden cottage on the bank of the Salt-water River. The property was their own, and stood apart from the nearest neighbor by some hundred and fifty yards. The locality is bare and bleak; at night, when the almost invariable wind is howling, it is eerie and hostile.

The Cramptons were alone in the house except for a nine-year-old granddaughter, Mary Jonas—left by their only child, a daughter who had married and died in widowhood. Mary had been formally adopted by her grandparents, who lavished upon her the affection they had known for their daughter.

These scant particulars were told to me by Crampton himself, in the course of our journey by street car to North Carlton, on the morning after our meeting with Toad. The park policeman was likable; a little heavy in conversation, perhaps, but honest as the day.

We got off two stops from the end of the line and set to work to find our bearings.

Crampton said, "Looking for Mertz in here is going to be a slow business. We'll save time if we divide up and take a street each. Are you game to tackle it, Mr. Murchison?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"All right," Crampton said. "You take the street ahead and I'll start in further back. We'll meet at the other end of the lane. Just one word of warning. Don't go inside any of the houses. Any you think worth a look over, make a note of them. We'll go through them together."

I began to appreciate the unsavory lot of the canvasser in mean localities, as I progressed with my task. Progressed is hardly the right word in my own case: retrogressed would describe it more accurately.

I met denial at every door. No one knew the name. Some said so civilly enough; others with abuse. It was plain, in any case, that I was viewed with suspicion.

None the less, I stuck to my task. When it was completed I drew a breath of relief. I had certainly drawn a blank, but the disappointment yielded to a sense of freedom. I lit a cigarette and went to find Crampton.

He was waiting for me at the entrance to the lane. He said: "What luck?"

"None. And you?"

He scratched his head.

"Why, I'm not so sure. Did you notice an old building midway along that looked as if it might once have been a factory?"

I had. The building faced upon the street Crampton had canvassed. The lot continued right through to my street, where it was fenced off with broken pickets. It was so obviously unoccupied that I had not bothered to investigate it. I said as much to Crampton.

"The old party in the cottage alongside tells me that it used to be a boot factory," Crampton said. "It's been vacant for some years. The point is, for several nights lately there has been a light in one of the windows."

"A caretaker," I suggested.

"There isn't one. She's a decent old party, this, and she tells me she was afraid it was a gang of roughnecks . . . What's the time?"

I was surprised to find that it was past noon. We had made a late start, and the morning had flown.

"We'll have a bite somewhere, and then we'll overhaul that building, Mr. Murchison."

We found a dingy café, and presently disputed with a horde of flies for possession of muddy coffee and some dubious sandwiches. After a brief smoke we set out for the factory.

CHAPTER 12

A Yellow Marble

IT WAS a two-storied wooden structure, very tumbledown and unprepossessing. The main doors were locked, but we gained entry by a small side door leading into what had once been a boiler house.

The door communicating with the factory proper was also locked. I was looking around for something with which to force it, when my eye fell on an opening cut in the wall, evidently for the purpose of admitting a pulley belt. The boards here were loose, and we soon forced a passage for our bodies.

We stood now in a barn-like area with a concrete floor and a number of concrete pillars. In the dim light we made out a wooden staircase rising beyond.

"Empty enough," Crampton said.

I was about to reply, when a step sounded overhead. Someone was moving about the second story. Not a doubt of it.

"Come on," Crampton said.

We tiptoed up the stairs, arriving at a small landing. To the left ran a board corridor, with here and there an open doorway showing. It marked, I thought, a one-time group of offices. Indeed, at one point projected a name board, bearing the painted inscription: *Secretary*.

Immediately before us was a closed door built of rough hardwood. Crampton tried the handle and found it fast. Upon this he knocked smartly.

"Is there anyone inside?"

There was no reply.

Crampton said, in an undertone: "Look in the other rooms."

I did so, and found them dusty and unoccupied. When I returned Crampton called again.

He said: "Police here. Open this door."

There came suddenly sounds of movement beyond. But still no reply. I seemed once to hear the clink of glass and a hurried footfall.

"Look out," Crampton said.

As I stood aside he seized a broken stair-rail and began to batter at the lock. His was, I think, one of those temperaments which find anger quickly in opposition. The rail was tough and heavy, and his strength was enormous. The door fell inward within a minute, and we after it. I caught a glimpse of a man disappearing into a sort of manhole in the wall at the far end of the chamber.

"After him," Crampton roared.

His foot caught in some obstruction as he spoke, and out of the tail of my eye I saw him fall headlong. Next moment, I was through the manhole upon an outside platform.

Over my head was a great beam, with a pulley at its end, through which depended a rusty iron chain. By these means, in the days of the factory's prosperity, case goods had been lowered to the vehicles waiting in the lane below. I understood this much instinctively.

I saw that the rusty chain was being violently agitated and peered quickly downward to discover the man we sought, lowering himself hand below hand. As I looked he released his hold, having come to the end of the chain, and dropped the short remaining distance. He picked himself up and darted around a corner out of sight just as Crampton joined me.

I was for making chase, I remember; but Crampton withheld me.

He said: "It wouldn't be any use, Mr. Murchison. He has too great a start on us. I've never used worse strategy in my life. One of us ought to have been posted below. But it's too late to think of that now. Did you get a look at his face?"

"No," I said. "He had on a hat and overcoat, and he never once looked back. As far as I could see he was about medium height and stockily built."

"Could it have been Mertz?"

I had to confess that I had never seen Mertz.

"Toad, then?"

"It could have been Toad," I said. "It was his build. In the circumstances it might have been anybody, though."

Crampton shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll get the office to put a man on to watch this place, anyhow. I don't expect it will be much use. He was up to no

good, whoever he was. He won't walk into a trap. But it's worth trying."

We went back through the manhole arrangement into the room. The first thing I noticed was that one corner of it was fitted up with a number of glass jars, retorts and test tubes, after the manner of a laboratory. There was a spirit lamp and a glass retort; in a sink under a tap was a small iron crucible.

I looked at the jars. Most of them were empty, but one or two contained liquid. One was labeled *Aqua Fortis*; a second *Aqua Regia*; a third *Nitrate of Silver*. The names meant nothing to me.

From Professor Branden I learned later that the first was the nitric acid of the shops, a powerful oxidizing agent, dissolving most of the metals after oxidizing them. In the anhydrous state it is in the form of six-sided prisms which become very hot in water and dissolve without disengaging any gas.

Aqua regia, Branden said, was named so by the old alchemists, because it had the property of dissolving gold and platinum. In chemistry it was a compound of nitric and muriatic acids. Nitrate of silver was a compound of nitric acid and oxide of silver, and a substance of great importance in photography.

Branden, as I have already stated, from the first suspected the presence of nitrate of silver in Satanoil, because of the extraordinary photogenic properties of this damnable amber fluid.

So far as Crampton and I were concerned, these were just some kind of acids. We left them severely alone.

The crucible was empty and quite dry. We found nothing of which we made any consequence, except what appeared to be a small yellow marble, which rolled from beneath a wad of cotton waste as Crampton lifted it.

WE EXAMINED it in turn. It was made of some substance resembling celluloid, but more nearly approaching a tough papiermaché. When it was held to the light there appeared to be a liquid within. If so, it was of a thick and oily consistency, for no amount of shaking produced the feel of liquid.

Crampton dropped the yellow marble into his pocket

He said: "I'll have a look at it when I get home. It will be something to amuse Mary with."

I suggested that it would be safer, perhaps, to take the marble to Professor Branden. Crampton, however, declared that the thing was of slight importance.

"There's nothing inside it. It's probably what it looks to be—a composition marble. They stick them in kettles, you know, to keep the bottom from rusting. Anyhow, if I think different on looking it over, I'll run it along to Branden."

After all, the thing was only a yellow marble. I made sure of this. I asked Crampton to let me see it once more. I held it again to the light and satisfied myself that what we had at first supposed to be a liquid inside was nothing more than a property of transparency which reflected the light and shade.

It showed, I thought, how jumpy my mind was, that a mere marble, discovered upon premises which might conceivably have been occupied by Toad, could induce in me such caution.

To show my conversion to common sense, I knuckled the marble as in the days of my youthful schooling and made quite a creditable shot—with the glass bulb of a broken thermometer for taw.

I said: "I'll come out and help your Mary play with it, one of these days. I used to be good . . ."

There seemed little more we could do that day. It was getting late in the afternoon, and Crampton had promised to be home in good time that evening. We agreed that I should let Sir Hector Corrilees know of the empty factory, so that a man could be detailed to watch it, if that was thought necessary.

Crampton said, at parting: "Well, Mr. Murchison, better luck next time. We've six days left for this job. I've thought over what you said about the possibility that your man, Mertz, is Toad. I think it unlikely. As for the chap we scared in the old factory, there's nothing to show who he was. I'll be in tomorrow, and we'll go over the ground a second time, if you like."

We shook hands.

I never saw Crampton again.

I went straight to Russell Street and managed to persuade the commissioner's

orderly to take my name to Sir Hector. When I entered his room I saw that Professor Branden was there.

I related briefly the events of the day, to the place where the occupant of the factory had made his escape. Sir Hector seemed, I thought, a little impatient.

"You should have taken the man on the beat with you. Not that I think the thing has any bearing on Toad. In fact, it seems to me to have been rather a waste of time."

Making full allowance for the burden of his responsibility, I thought this was unjust.

I said: "You haven't heard the whole of the story."

I then went on to relate what followed. When I spoke of the laboratory paraphernalia Branden's haggard face lit interestedly.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. "That is certainly significant. What do you say, Sir Hector?"

But the chief commissioner's disgruntled mood continued.

"Probably some patent medicine chemist trying to evade the factory laws. We'll trace him, if we can. Just as well to make sure. Anything else, Murchison?"

I was rising to take my leave, when I remembered the yellow marble. I felt ashamed to mention such a trivial thing: but I can never be too thankful now that I did.

I said: "Nothing. By the way, there was a sort of yellow marble thing . . . Crampton took it home to give to his little granddaughter."

"What!" Branden exclaimed.

He literally sprang from his chair.

"What did you say? A yellow marble?" His eyes were snapping with excitement. "A yellow marble, Murchison?"

"It looked like one," I replied.

Branden said: "Good Lord! We must find Crampton at once. At once! Where are your senses, Murchison?"

"Why?" I asked, staring, no doubt, like the fool I was.

Branden threw his hands into the air. He said incredulously: "Were you blind last night? You, too, Sir Hector?"

"I'm darned if I know what you're driving at," Sir Hector said, sharing my astonishment.

The professor appeared to catch at his self-control. He took his hat from the table with trembling hands.

"It was a yellow marble that Toad dropped into the basin of water last night," he said, almost in a whisper.

CHAPTER 13

The Flame Descends

IN RESPONSE to Sir Hector's ring, his orderly was already in the room.

"My car, Green. Tell them to be snappy. You'd better come, too Murchison. We may need you. It's the curse of this affair that it has to be kept secret. No: I'll drive myself, Green."

We tore along Flemington Road, and thence into Maribyrnong Road. In Maribyrnong Road we turned and twisted through side streets until I caught sight of the river somewhere in the vicinity of the Power Magazine.

I had scarcely identified the locality when Branden suddenly pointed: "That's Crampton's house on fire."

Sir Hector, hunched at the wheel, increased our speed.

There had, I fondly imagined, been an ordinary outbreak of fire. But it came to me suddenly that there was something unusual in the appearance of the smoke from the burning building. It clung together in the form of a cone, whose base was flattened upon the house. It remained thus, neither dispelling nor breaking its contour. In the rays of the setting sun it took on a kind of transparency, reminding me somehow of green glass. Across and through this glazed surface there shot long filaments of brilliant orange flame.

The fire engine was drawn up on the river bank and firemen were running a hose line to the river. Here and there stood an odd spectator, while others hastened to the scene across the open paddocks. In the foreground, as we came to a stop with rasping brakes, a little girl screamed and sobbed in the agitated arms of an elderly woman.

The connection had been made with the hose. Presently a jet of river water hurled itself at the conflagration. I saw the two hosemen brace themselves against the

powerful current of it, their hands locked about the nozzle.

And then . . . How shall I hope to describe what followed? Then, of a sudden, the silver line of darting water turned to a shining green. From the nozzle of the hose rose a spray of mist—steam—I don't know what.

From the hosemen came cries of agony. The hose fell to the ground, where it writhed like a great snake, vomiting not water, but a flame of green fire.

I can still hear Professor Branden's warning shout as he ran gesticulating toward the fire engine.

"Stop that pump. Stop that pump. Cut off the water!"

Sir Hector Corrilees, standing at my side, said hoarsely: "Did you see that? Did you see that, Murchison? The flame ran back along the water . . ."

The fireman at the pump had acted promptly, in response to Branden's terrified entreaty. The green flame ceased to gush from the nozzle. It was withdrawn like a tongue, into the cavern of the burning building.

A medley of excited voices immediately arose, mingled with the groans of the injured hosemen. But on the heels of it came a shrill cry from Branden. He beckoned furiously, calling us by name.

"Corrilees — Murchison — For God's sake!"

I saw; and for an instant my heart seemed to stand still. The ground about the hose, the hose itself, was curling in a green, metallic flame. Wherever water trickled, the green flame followed. In a score of places it moved over the bank toward the river itself.

Sir Hector came to action with a roar.

"Tear that hose out of the river. You men there—turn back those gutters! Keep them from the river, on your lives!"

The officer in charge, who fortunately knew Sir Hector, repeated the order sharply. I saw men clutch at the hose with scaling-hooks, as I myself raced for a green line just disappearing over the brow of the bank.

Branden bellowed at me: "Don't touch it. Kick up an earthquake with your heels . . . burn itself out."

The next few minutes saw a nightmare activity. Twice I stayed a green line by

a miracle, even as it poised to fall into the river. Once I narrowly escaped falling headlong into the flame itself.

I came from a stupor of reaction to find Sir Hector before me. He was shaking like a man with chills.

He said: "We did it. We did it. Are you all right, Murchison? It never touched you?"

"No," I answered. "Supposing it had?"

"I don't know," he said, "but the risk was there. Remember Gregory."

I asked: "How about the horsemen?"

"The flame itself never touched them," he replied. "The metal of the nozzle turned white hot all at once. It was that that burned them. The flesh is gone from their hands, seared to the bone."

Branden said shakily: "I've been trying to explain to Mr. Petersen, here, what I think must have happened. Crampton must have stored oil on the premises. Yes, that was it. A chemical oil. I think he once mentioned as much to you, Murchison—remember?"

His look cautioned, implored.

"He said something about it this afternoon," I answered, lying valiantly. "He was a bit of a chemist, in an amateur way. He thought he had found a new spraying oil . . . orchard pests . . ."

An impossible story enough, but I could find nothing better on the spur of the moment.

Peterson said: "Well, it must have been something of the kind. I thought I knew something about fire, but I never in my life saw anything like this. Oil? What kind of oil? I could have sworn that the water itself was in flame. But, of course, that's so darn impossible that—"

He broke off abruptly with a shrug of his shoulders.

"The stuff ran on top of the water," Sir Hector said.

I saw unbelief in Peterson's eyes. But he could find no saner explanation himself.

"Well," he said, "it was the strangest experience. I'd better put that in my report. About the oil, I mean. Anyway, the house is finished. We daren't turn the water on, after a thing like that."

For the first time I turned to look at Crampton's home. It had vanished completely. The ground was swept as bare

as the palm of my hand. Not a joist or beam remained. Even the iron of the roof was gone. All that remained was the thin green haze which was characteristic of the aftermath of Satanoil.

I said: "What a dreadful blow for poor Crampton! His wife, too. Where is Crampton, by the way?"

Branden looked at me queerly.

"Murchison, I thought you knew. Both Crampton and his wife were in the house. The only one who escaped was their little granddaughter."

I have often wondered what Toad's thoughts were, when he read—as no doubt he did—in the papers next day, of the awful fate which befell the Cramptons.

No public mention was made of the yellow marble. Mary Jonas, in the first delirium of her terror, had gabbled incessantly of a yellow marble. On this particular she was ignored entirely by both the police and the reporters. Obviously, there could be no connection between such a holocaust and a yellow marble. It was regarded as merely the outcry of a disordered child mind.

And so people were left to guess, if they had interest enough, at the cause of the outbreak. Peterson's report adopted the theory that there had been a chemical oil in bulk on the premises. The point was seized upon by the papers as explaining the unusual incidents which marked the operations of the firemen and the extraordinarily complete burning.

It was agreed that Crampton had somehow ignited the chemical oil, the fumes of which had overcome him and his wife. This was gravely recorded at the coroner's inquest also, following the usual procedure.

THE evidence of Mary Jonas was admitted more or less with reservations. The official mind made kindly allowance for her tender years and excited condition. Poor little thing, it thought, it was small wonder that her whispered story was incoherent.

But we who heard that story in full, in circumstances full of gentle sympathy and encouragement, and attuned to the sensitiveness of a frightened and lonely child, arrived at the verdict of truth.

Professor Branden had taken Mary

Jonas home to his wife on the night of her grandparents' death. They had no children of their own, and Mrs. Branden welcomed her with open arms.

Not until the child had recovered from the shock of her experiences was any attempt made to probe her allusions to the yellow marble. There came an evening toward the end of our seven days of armistice, when Professor Branden invited Framling and me to his home in the University grounds. On arrival we found Sir Hector Corrieles and Hermann already there. The premier was unable to be present. The facts, had, however, been communicated to him.

Branden and his wife had that morning coaxed Mary to tell her story. Branden made rough notes, and later worked them up. I give them as he read them to us at the time—alternately in the first and third persons, as seemed best for him to record during the light and shade of Mary's account.

She was, then, playing in the garden when Crampton returned home. She ran to meet him: they entered the house together, she clinging to his arm, as her habit was.

Crampton potted about for a while and then apparently remembered the yellow marble. According to Mary:

"Grandpa said he had a surprise for me. It was a lovely marble thing. We held it up to the light, and it looked as if it was full of smoke inside it. I had fun holding it against the lamp in the kitchen. It was yellow on the outside, but when I looked at it very hard it seemed to be green."

She asked her grandfather where he had obtained the marble. Crampton—making play, I suppose—told her solemnly that it was a fairy marble found under a toadstool by a cross-eyed, lefthanded old woman. This play on Toad was probably quite unconscious. He had wanted merely to mystify Mary. And in this he succeeded.

"I asked Grandma if fairies played marbles, but she only smiled. I think Grandpa was teasing me. He said that only boys played marbles, anyhow, so the yellow marble wasn't any use to me. He said to give it back to him.

"But I didn't, because I thought it was

a game we were having. Grandma had gone out of the kitchen, and I ran round the table, holding the marble. I teased Grandpa back. I said that if it was a fairy marble I expected it would vanish suddenly. And then I pretended that it had vanished.

Crampton, it seemed, pursued the child around the kitchen in an attempt to recover the marble. He was half in jest and half in earnest. She was a nimble little thing, and succeeded in evading him for quite a time.

Finally he caught her. Just as he did so, she threw the marble laughingly from her. Crampton spun around to get it, but his sight was not quick enough.

The yellow marble fell—as Mary could have told him—into the big tin pan of water in which her grandmother had been washing the vegetables.

And then, just when the child was opening her mouth to tell him, the tragedy happened.

"A big green flame came out of the dish. Oh, it was dreadful. It went all over Grandpa, and he cried out. He went all on fire. . ."

Mrs. Crampton, hearing the cries, came running into the kitchen. After the first shock, she did what most persons so situated would have done. A kerosene tin of water stood at the side of the kitchen sink. She lifted this and threw the contents over her husband.

The frightful result can be imagined.

"All the kitchen became full of green flames. The heat" (Mary was standing by the door) "burned my face and hurt my eyes. Grandma screamed and fell down. I think she fainted."

The terrified child rushed outdoors in a state bordering on frenzy. She had no clear idea of what happened, except that she knew her grandparents were being burned up. She saw an elderly woman passing along the track beyond the gate, and she ran to her, crying.

The woman caught her and tried to soothe her. A boy on a bicycle saw the smoke from the house and rode on and broke a fire alarm.

Mary's story practically ended at this point. Ended in a double sense; for she began to sob and moan in Mrs. Branden's arms, and Branden had abruptly ceased

his questioning. He had established the identity of the yellow marble.

CHAPTER 14

Two Days to Go

THE Crampton tragedy occurred on Tuesday night. On Wednesday, Professor Branden, Hermann, and I visited the old factory where the yellow marble had been found.

Some one had been before us. The crude laboratory apparatus was gone. The upstairs room was quite empty now, except for odds and ends which were of no use in our investigations. Not only had the various articles been removed, but the bench and sink—in places even parts of the wall—had been thoroughly washed down and cleaned.

He looked disappointed. Indeed, I know he was badly discouraged by the absence of anything from which he might have got a hint as to the nature of Toad's diabolical alchemy.

"I thought there might have been a charcoal oven or a brazier. Well, it can't be helped."

"Wonder why he cleaned up so thoroughly," Hermann said.

Branden snapped impatiently: "I wish the rest were as clear. Of course he cleaned up so that we shouldn't have even a trace on which to base an analysis. Trust his cunning for that. If we had only had the sense to put a man on guard last night, we should know by now a lot more than we do. Crampton's shocking affair drove everything else from our heads."

Nothing was to be gained by staying any longer, and so we returned to town and went our separate ways. Hermann was more worried than I had seen him.

He said, on parting: "In any other circumstances, I would have Toad inside a week. I would put on a dozen men, if need be, to trace him down. But I daren't do it. They would be working in the dark and a false move might bring about the very thing we are fighting to prevent."

Professor Branden said, "Have you thought about the Toad's confederate, Hermann? Or confederates? Can we trace them?"

"Not now," the detective said gloomily,

as he turned to swing aboard a street car. "If we landed them now, he would only get others. The thing to do is to get Toad himself."

This view eased my conscience as to Nancy's father. I was a little worried over my suppression of the facts about Rufus Carlisle; yet I thought, after all, I could put my hand on the old man whenever he was wanted.

And there was Nancy to consider. As it was, she was very unhappy; every minute of the day the poor girl expected his identification as the disturber of the Cathedral service. She lived in dread.

At lunch she unburdened herself to this effect. Her father had gone out early in the morning and had not returned, although it was long past his usual hour.

Nancy said: "He was so strange this morning, Maurice. So gentle and vague. And yet, in other respects, more responsible than I remember him for years. Actually he came back twice over to kiss me, when he was going. Almost as if he were really saying goodbye. You don't think his poor mind was contemplating anything foolish, do you?"

Her brown eyes were full of tears, as she looked at me. I hastened to reassure her.

"Of course not," I said. "Very likely he's having a little doze in the gardens. It's such a warm, comfortable day that almost anyone would yield to it."

"Suppose they find out that it was father who made the upset at St. Paul's?"

"They won't," I said.

I left her a little cheered. But toward five o'clock she telephoned me at the Treasury. I knew from her voice that she was crying.

"Maurice, he hasn't come home yet. He's never done this before—never. What can we do?"

I admit I was far from easy myself at this news. But as yet I had no theory. I said that I would come at once, and we would talk it over.

George Framling was at my elbow as I talked. The gist of what I said was apparently quite plain; for, as I hung up the receiver, he said: "I don't want to butt in, Maurice, but is anything wrong? It's something to do with old Carlisle, isn't it? You know Mona and I are very fond

of Nancy. If we can help you two at any time. . ."

"Old Carlisle," I said, "went out as usual this morning, but so far has failed to return. Always before he had been home regularly at twelve o'clock. I mean, since he has given up his eleven o'clock prayer meeting in the sitting room. For some weeks now he has gone out fairly early in the morning and returned at noon. The whole of his conduct has altered, in fact."

"This is probably only another phase of it," Framling said. "There's no denying, you know, that the poor chap is mad as they make them."

"By the way, the premier returns to duty tomorrow. I saw him at his home this morning. He's much better, but far from well. The deaths of Crampton and his wife shocked him very greatly. He says he has been out of the ring too long, and it's time to put the gloves on in earnest."

"I can't see what he can do that we haven't done, or are doing. Anyway, we have four days left out of the seven. And who knows but what Hermann may land Toad before the truce runs out."

He said it without conviction.

NANCY was calm again when I found her. She said merely: "I ought not to have worried you. Because, you know, it's quite plain what has happened."

I said, "You think someone has connected him with the Cathedral affair and had him picked up?"

"What else can I think? How can we find out?"

I said: "I'll go out and telephone the police—and the Receiving Home. If that has happened, they're bound to know of it."

I did so. To my relief nothing was known of Rufus Carlisle. No one answering to his description had been encountered. As I was about to leave the telephone booth a new fear came. I rang the hospitals in turn. But here, too, I was speedily reassured. Not illness; not accident.

I spoke just now of a new fear. By this I meant not the death, itself, of Rufus Carlisle, but the possible significance of that death. Rufus Carlisle was our sole

connecting link with Toad; if that link were lost our position would become incalculably worse.

I determined now that should the old man be still absent when morning came, I would confide the whole of my suspicions concerning him to George Framling. If Framling thought it advisable, I would speak to Sir Hector Corrilees or Hermann. The time had come when even I might no longer shield the girl I loved from this hurt.

Nancy gave me a wistful smile on receipt of my news.

There was another possibility of which she fortunately had no conception. Following the old man's outbreak in the Cathedral, Toad had become alarmed. Possibly he feared—as Nancy did—that Rufus Carlisle would be traced and put under restraint. He therefore had coaxed or threatened Carlisle into a place of hiding. The more I thought about this theory, the more surely I approved it.

We agreed to avoid the subject for the rest of the evening and await events. If her father had not returned by morning, I was to notify police, so that search could be undertaken.

We were sitting quietly in the front room, when a car drew up at the gate. The shrill accusing tones of Miss Mollie Hollidew reached us faintly. She was, it appeared, berating the unfortunate Cuthbert for some reason or other. Mollie and comedy were never far apart, even in her most dramatic moments, and I saw a faint smile on Nancy's lips.

She said: "Poor Cuthbert."

The entry of Miss Hollidew into the hall was occasioned with violence. I looked at the clock and saw that it was within a minute of eight. I thought: No wonder she's in a tantrum. She'll be late for the theater. Cuthbert must have overlooked the time.

I expected to hear her flying up the stairs to her room. Instead, she precipitated herself into the sitting room, looked at us with a faint scream, and collapsed upon the sofa.

Nancy, womanlike, was instantly all concern. She went to Mollie and said: "Good heavens! Are you ill, dear?"

Mollie continued to moan.

At this juncture Mr. Weinseidle en-

tered. He wore a hangdog expression.

I asked: "Is she ill?"

He stammered: "Undoubtedly."

His eyes seemed to beckon and I stepped close to him. He muttered hoarsely in my ear: "She got fired at the theater. Talked back to the producer, or something. My gosh! Have I had a rotten time? I ask you. Undoubtedly."

He fell into a chair, and I gave him a cigarette. His attempt to smoke it was pathetic. Twice it fell on the carpet, and once he put the lighted end in his mouth.

In the meantime, Nancy brought a glass of water.

She said innocently: "Shall I get Cuthbert to ring the theater and tell them you're too ill to attend?"

This brought Miss Hollidew to a sitting position. She flung her fringe from her brow with a tragic hand and laughed.

"Don't bother. They know perfectly well that I'll not be there, tonight or any other night. I may as well tell you that I've resigned. If the firm thinks it owns Mollie Hollidew, it has another guess coming."

"Too bad," Nancy sympathized.

MISS HOLLIDEW stared at her. I thought for a moment that she was going to brazen it out absurdly. But all at once her lip dropped. The ill humor and defiance fled from her, and she cast herself on Nancy's neck with a wail.

"What am I going to do? Oh, what am I going to do?"

I heard a voice—an alien voice, filled with both purpose and appeal—at my back.

"Marry me," it said.

I turned to see Mr. Weinseidle standing with purple face and clenched hands. Somehow all his vacuity and vanished. There was even a certain nobility in the poise of his head, the determination of his look. He was a man transformed.

Mollie Hollidew emitted a sound that was half sob and half a giggle.

She said: "What do you know about that? Marry you!"

"Undoubtedly," said the old Cuthbert. The new Cuthbert added almost ferociously: "Yes, you confounded little fool."

The shock of this rendered Miss Hollidew momentarily speechless.

"My art—" she began.

"Curse your art!" said Cuthbert. "It's time this nonsense stopped. I'm glad they tipped you out of the theater, for there's no excuse now for any more backing and filling."

Miss Hollidew, bolt upright, said faintly, "Cuthbert! Have you been drinking? Why, my goodness, I never even imagined such a thing. I must have time to think about it."

"Tomorrow," Cuthbert said, in his amazing role of cave man, "I'll get a license. Drink! No I haven't been drinking. But I shall probably get drunk as soon as we're married. Undoubtedly."

As he advanced amorously upon Miss Hollidew, Nancy slipped to my side. By common consent we found ourselves presently in the kitchen, where our laughter exploded simultaneously.

I said: "Something's happened to Cuthbert."

"Astounding," Nancy said. "I'm awfully glad he's taken Mollie in hand at last. I never thought he had it in him. She was so surprised that she nearly fell off the sofa. They'll be perfectly happy together when they are married."

I tried to think, as I lay in bed, what ought to be done in the morning. I knew, I was as certain as I could be, that Rufus Carlisle still lived. Toad had made him prisoner. . .

At breakfast, Nancy said: "You see I was right, Maurice. Now what shall we do?"

"We must get the police to search for him," I said.

At the first opportunity, on reaching the premier's office, I drew Framling aside and confided my fear. I thought his face paled a little.

"The only thing to do is to tell the others," he said, after thinking silently for some moments. "If you're right, Maurice, it's hard for Nancy."

"We've got to keep it from her," I said.

Framling shrugged his shoulders and went to the telephone to call Hermann to the Treasury. By luck the detective had not left his office. He promised to come immediately.

"Hermann will know what to do," Framling said.

Presently the detective arrived. Framling smuggled us very unobtrusively into the premier's room. Mr. Hannaford greeted us with a worried smile.

He said: "What is it? If you wish me to send for this man Toad, I will not do it. I refuse absolutely to treat with him. He dare not carry out his threat to destroy the world. I tell you, he dare not. . ."

"It's not that, exactly, sir," Framling explained. "Murchison here has a theory as to Toad's confederate. We thought you ought to be told."

I told briefly what I knew of Rufus Carlisle, making it appear that my suspicions had been aroused only following his disappearance. I did not refer to the Cathedral sensation, but Hermann seized on it instantly.

He said: "It was Carlisle beyond doubt, then, who declaimed the other Sunday during the service at St. Paul's. You remember the incident, sir?"

"I heard of it," the premier said. He looked at me very earnestly. "Was it Carlisle, do you think, Murchison?"

There was no help for it.

"Yes," I answered, "I am afraid it was."

George Framling, with a little apologetic glance at me, said: "Murchison is engaged to Carlisle's daughter, sir."

A KINDLY interest came to Mr. Hannaford's tired face. His sudden smile was singularly sweet and understanding—a true index of the greathearted man that he was.

"Indeed. I can well believe how distressed both of you must be. Will you tell Miss Carlisle from me that every consideration will be shown her father, should we discover him for her. Of course, she knows nothing of his association with this foul creature."

As we rose to go, Hermann said stolidly: "The seven days will be up on Sunday night, sir. Tomorrow is Saturday. If you intend to communicate with Toad in any way, through the newspapers, it will have to be done at once, sir, or it will be too late."

The white of the premier's thin cheek suddenly yielded to an angry red.

"I will not treat with so vile a man. Let him do his worst I look to you, Her-

mann, to see that that worst is ineffectual. He must be found and arrested. Is one man to set at naught every rule of civilized conduct? What are you police doing? Are you impotent?"

Before this unexpected outburst Hermann's farmer-like face grew stiff and gray. He said, with hurt dignity: "You forget, Mr. Hannaford, that your own order forbids the aid of the police force as a whole. Now that Crampton is gone, I am practically alone."

"Forgive me," the premier said. He bowed his head once more, and his hand made a gesture infinitely weary and self-accusing. "You are quite right, Hermann, I am—not very well, I think. Do your best. We must all work and hope. And God be with the rest."

To Hermann's everlasting credit there was not bitterness in his voice when he spoke to Framling and me in the corridor.

"And just think of the effect on the people themselves. There'd be a revolution before you could wink your eye. No; the premier's a brave and wise man."

. . . Now that Mollie Hollidew was no longer working, Nancy had company at least for a night. When, therefore, George Framling asked me to his flat to talk things over, I had no compunction about going.

Mollie, it transpired, although she had capitulated to the idea of becoming Mrs. Cuthbert Weinseidle, had her own ideas as to when this desirable end should be attained. She had fixed the marriage for the week before Christmas—that is to say, two weeks ahead, for we were now in December. Nancy and I were enlisted as bridesmaid and best man, respectively.

For Nancy's sake, I am glad of the diversion afforded. Despite the uncertainty of her father's fate, she was able to enter into the spirit of the occasion with tolerable enthusiasm.

Mona went early to bed, and Framling and I talked to a late hour. I am bound to say, however, without much comfort. Midway in the evening Framling got his radio going. And curiously enough, almost the first item of broadcasting we heard was applicable to our problem.

"The Russell Street police have asked the whereabouts of Rufus Carlisle—

C-a-r-l-i-s-l-e—last seen leaving his home at Number 5, Monray Street, East Melbourne, at nine o'clock yesterday morning, please communicate with the nearest police station, or with Miss Carlisle at that address at once."

There followed then a brief description of the old man, which Nancy herself had supplied to Hermann.

"It's a rotten business, altogether," Framling said.

He shivered slightly and pulled hard at his pipe.

He said: "I wish the girls were out of it, Maurice. A man doesn't mind for himself, but when one thinks of women and children. . ."

"Courage," I said. And we shook hands good night.

CHAPTER 15

Stop for a Cop!

NOW that the crisis of my story looms, I find my thoughts growing a little breathless and out of step. The sequence of events is a twisted thread running through the pattern of those days of dread, and the task of straightening it is difficult.

I have at my elbow as I write the newspapers of the period, with their screaming headlines and hysterical punctuation. What a front-page story Toad must have made, if such a riot of print could follow one movement only of his hidden hand.

If the press had known the facts behind the news, it would have bawled itself and its readers into the mad-house. Most fortunately, it was so occupied with theory and description that there was never any danger of its discovering the fact and circumstance.

. . . On Monday morning, I encountered in the city Sir Hector Corrirees and Professor Branden. The two were walking slowly down the block, talking earnestly. On seeing me, Branden said: "If you care to join us in a cup of coffee, Murchison, I have some data in regard to Satanoil which will interest you."

I accepted eagerly, and presently, we were seated in a quiet cafe corner.

"Well," Sir Hector said, as the waitress withdrew with our order, "the armistice

is over. We shall see now what Toad's threat amounts to. Nervous, Murchison?"

I said: "To be frank, I am nervous. Mighty nervous. I suppose there is no news of Rufus Carlisle?"

"No, but I expect to find him within a few more hours. I have thirty men searching."

"Suppose," Branden said slowly, "they find Carlisle. In view of their ignorance of the real significance of events, isn't there a risk that disaster may follow—accidentally?"

Sir Hector frowned.

"We have to chance that. The orders are strict. If found, Carlisle is to be taken directly to my office. A keen eye is to be kept on all his movements, but he is not to be searched or interfered with in any way. Above all, he is not to be allowed access to any water supply. Hermann and I will take him in hand, as soon as notified."

He frowned, and added: "If I could be sure that Carlisle, and Carlisle alone, was Toad's confederate—"

He left the sentence unfinished, and turned abruptly to the professor.

"You were going to tell us something about Satanoil?"

Branden nodded.

"Little enough, Sir Hector, but not altogether insignificant, I think. I have collected quite a lot of evidence from various people who figured in the burning of Crampton's house. And a conclusion I have reached is that Satanoil is limited in its effect in certain directions.

"For example, the heat it generates will disintegrate metal but not stone. The galvanized iron of Crampton's house was utterly consumed, but the stone foundation of the porch was unharmed.

"In Gregory's case not a vestige was left. Even his watch was dissolved and burned. The sole evidence that he had been there a moment before was found in his walking stick, which he had left on the bench where Murchison was sitting at the time.

"The most interesting point, however, is the apparent limitation of what I may call the ignition radius of Satanoil. What distance separated you from Gregory, Murchison?"

Both men turned to me.

I replied: "About a dozen feet, I should say."

Branden sipped his coffee, and continued: "You felt heat, but not to an uncomfortable degree. Exactly. I thought so. And your experience coincides with that of Framling, who was even nearer. It would seem, then, that the ignition radius is not in direct proportion to the bulk of the flame, but to its height.

"In the case of Crampton, the furthest point at which the heat ignited the grass was about fifty feet. The flame was cone-shaped and very restricted. Its apex was never higher than twelve or fifteen feet above the ridge of the house. Did you happen to notice the condition of the atmosphere, by the way?"

"You mean its humidity?" Sir Hector asked.

"Yes."

"It was particularly dry," I said.

"And on the evening Gregory was destroyed?" Branden prompted.

"It was fairly moist." I said. "It rained a couple of hours later."

"Just so." Branden nodded. "Now do you see the connection? The moister the air the higher—and therefore the greater ignition radius of—the flame of Satanoil. There is also an exhaustion point where the green flame of Satanoil turns to the red flame of ordinary fire. There is, in short, a point where Satanoil, if no longer fed by water, returns to itself and is self-extinguished."

HE LOOKED at us queerly in turn.

"By God's mercy, gentlemen, no rain has fallen on either occasion when the flame of Satanoil was alive."

"What!" Sir Hector exclaimed.

His jaw seemed to sag. He burst out incredulously: "You don't mean to say—Rubbish, Branden. Impossible!"

"Is it?" Branden said, "Is it? Is Satanoil impossible? . . . Well, perhaps you're right. But I hope I never live to see it put to the proof."

I was conscious of a sick feeling at the pit of my stomach.

I said: "You don't surely mean that hellfire would run over the rain-wet earth?"

"The earth!" Branden jeered. Actually, I believe, his scientific fervor approved

the horror he pictured for us now. "The earth! Say rather the sky. Have you ever seen fire run up a curtain, Murchison? Then imagine a fire that climbed sheets of rain to ignite the clouds themselves. . ."

"Stop!" Sir Hector cried hoarsely.

But Branden had already ceased. The reaction of his own fear was upon him, and he hid his face in his hands. The three of us sat as if turned to stone by the sheer desperation of the moment.

All about us flowed the life of the city; all those pleasant and intimate evidences of human progress and companionship. And here at our elbow the grisly spectre of annihilation. . .

In the black chasm of my thought rose the vision of a world utterly consumed by Satan. The substance gone, the shadow only remaining. Photographed on time and eternity; a ghastly phantom world rolling on through space. . .

I was recalled by Branden's voice.

He said: "Reserved by fire unto the Day of Judgment! The pavement prophets—how little they realize the truth concealed in their cranky ravings. I heard an old fellow last night—mad, of course. And yet saner than the sanest of us. Full of warnings. . ."

Sir Hector said sharply: "What? What was that? Where was this? What sort of a man?"

"Why, I don't remember precisely," Branden said. He looked his astonishment. "The usual type that scribble on walls and footpaths. An old fellow. . ."

I recalled that Branden knew nothing of our suspicions concerning Rufus Carlisle. He had never seen Rufus Carlisle, so far as I knew. Probably had never even heard of him.

I said: "Was he in a suit of rusty black? A thin face and scanty white hair? A high, thin voice?"

"That's the man," Branden said.

"But where? Where was he?" Sir Hector pressed excitedly. "Think Branden. Think!"

"No," the professor said, after a moment. "I can't place where it was. I was around a good deal in the evening. Some place in Carlton. But I was at the dispensary in Abbotsford, and then I went to Newmarket. No, I can't recall where it was."

Sir Hector, restraining his impatience and disappointment, told him of Rufus Carlisle.

He said: "Now you can see the significance, Branden. Call on your wits, my dear fellow. Can't you give us some kind of a clue?"

Branden, looking very downcast, repeated that for the moment, at least, his mind was fogged.

"I'll do my best to remember, Corrailees. I'll communicate instantly with you in that case. Drummond Street. . . No, it wasn't there. Well, I'll do my best. If only you had told me earlier. . ."

With this we had to be content.

The rest of the day passed without incident. Tuesday came and went. Wednesday. . . And still no sign of Toad.

And then. . . Wednesday night. We had said in our hearts, "Toad will not dare." How little our vision proved.

At tea on Wednesday evening Mollie Hollidew suggested that Nancy and I go for a run to the hills with her when Cuthbert came with his car.

"Listen," said Miss Hollidew, "I'll go out and phone Cuthbert right away. The night's like an oven."

She borrowed two pennies from me to work the public telephone with, and sailed into the street. I helped Nancy clear away, and then she went to tidy herself for the drive.

Mollie Hollidew returned presently with the news that Cuthbert was already on his way.

In a little while Cuthbert glided in at the curb. He was driving a convertible with the top down. We could get what breeze our going made, at all events.

I said, "It's very decent of you to take us along with you and Mollie, Mr. Weinsidle."

"Undout—Not at all," he said. "By the way, shall we spill the mister? Sure. Well, where'd you like to run to, Maurice?"

"Anywhere," Nancy said, settling herself deliciously in the back seat.

"Murchison! Hold it!"

I was just getting in the car when I caught sight of the man running furiously toward us. I recognized him even as he shouted my name. It was Detective Hermann.

CHAPTER 16

Hell on Earth

IT SEEMED scarcely a second later that he was plumped down on the seat at my side. He was breathless with exertion, and his voice shook with suppressed excitement.

He yelled at Cuthbert: "Police job. Coupe . . . black body . . . just turned north along Clarendon Street . . . after it. . ."

To do Cuthbert justice, he wasn't in the least put out at finding himself thus harshly commandeered. He knew Hermann; as did Nancy. Mollie Hollidew, however, vented her surprise and indignation in characteristic fashion.

"Of all the cheek!" she said shrilly, as the car shot forward. "Who's the boy friend, Cuthbert?"

She glared at Hermann.

I heard Cuthbert grunt: "Chuck the chorus stuff, Mollie—there's a dear. That's Hermann the Hound. I bet we have some fun before the night's out."

As the car took the turn Hermann's mouth dropped to my ear. He muttered: "It's Toad, Murchison. I saw him climb in and drive off, but wasn't quick enough to grab him."

He sat up then, and yelled at Cuthbert: "The number is 298764. It's a fake, of course, Murchison. Wait a moment. What's that car pulling out from the service station?"

I saw it myself. It looked like a Rat-tray Six. But I haven't that intuitive identification of a motor car which is the wonderful and fearful prerogative of the small boy, and I couldn't be sure. It slid into the thickening gloom ahead of us.

Cuthbert called over his shoulder: "That's your car, Hermann. He must have pulled in for juice. Want me to chase him into the curb?"

Hermann grinned.

"No. Just keep him in sight. Follow him whenever he goes. Good evening, Miss Carlisle."

"What has he done?" Nancy asked acknowledging his belated salutation. She was frankly bewildered by the turn of events. "Has he stolen the car, Mr. Hermann?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," the detective said evasively. I sensed that he was casting about in his mind for a suitable deception. "No, it isn't that. I've half an idea it's a chap named Bickerson. He's wanted for forgery."

Nancy asked sensibly: "Why don't you let Cuthbert run ahead and stop him? Wouldn't it save time?"

"Well—perhaps it would," Hermann said. "The fact is, you see, we think he has a coining plant somewhere. He may take me right to it if we let him alone."

"Why, how clever of you to think of that!" Nancy said. She was thrilled by the prospects of the chase. "Don't you think so, Maurice?"

"Rather," I said.

But if this were Toad . . .

Hermann and I began to talk in a cautious undertone.

"He has someone with him in the car," Hermann said. He lowered his head a moment while he lit a cigarette. "Toad. Yes, I'll swear it's Toad. Do you know Murchison, I saw his confounded red eyes shining in the dark. There isn't another pair of eyes like that in the whole of Australia."

I wondered, with a glance at Nancy's pale oval of a face, whether Toad's companion was Rufus Carlisle. I hoped it might be; for if it was not, the plain inference was that he had more than one confederate. In that case, our task was more complex than ever.

Hermann shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish I knew . . . Who's the girl with Weinsidle?"

"That's Mollie Hollidew."

"Know anything?"

"Not a word," I said.

He said: "It was the luckiest thing, finding you all ready with a car like this. I tried to hold up a private car, and the darned fool nearly went over the top of me. I got his number, though, and I'll have him on the mat in the morning."

His tone, I thought, was worried. He stared steadily ahead at the Rat-tray Six, and his hands fidgeted.

He said, all at once: "I wish I knew what all this meant. Where's he heading for? If that's Toad—and I haven't a doubt of it—what's his game?"

"Where are we now?" I asked.

"This is Thomastown. We've been traveling due north the whole time. Now what the devil would Toad want up this way?"

I couldn't imagine.

I said. "Wouldn't it be safer, after all, to do as Nancy suggested? Can't we overhaul them and arrest Toad? At the worst we would only be forced to release him again if we found he had taken the usual precautions."

"No," Hermann said explosively. "So long as he doesn't know that he's being shadowed, he may give us rope enough to hang him. I may be wrong, but that's how it seems to me. He's on a mission of some kind, and a devil's one at that. If we could find out what it is . . ."

The traffic had thinned to such an extent that Cuthbert, on his own initiative, deliberately dropped further to the rear. Hermann saw the move and approved.

"That's shrewd. Of course, in a little while he'd want to know why we didn't pass him . . . We're getting into Epping now."

A moment later we turned east. At South Morang the road ran north again. By this time, I suppose, we had covered some twenty miles. The next township, Hermann informed me—if we held the present direction—was Mernda.

WE WERE, in fact, on the outskirts of Mernda when there came one of those unexpected interruptions which are known to all motorists. The Rattray Six was now a quarter of a mile in advance; the tail light was just visible. Cuthbert was holding the distance easily.

But now, from a side road, came suddenly a lumbering, horse-drawn market cart. I saw its bulk loom, and heard Mollie Hollidew's frightened squeak.

And then we swerved violently into the roadside with a grinding of brakes and a sudden, paralyzing stop. Nancy woke and clutched my arm.

The market-gardener, no doubt equally startled, came running to know what damage his idiocy had caused. Hermann waved him aside with a torrent of angry instruction.

"Get that cart off the road. Let us pass. This is a police car."

The word "police" evidently scared the man, for he scuttled obediently to his task. A second later we shot by him in a cloud of dust. But the delay had been fatal. The Rattray Six had vanished completely. Cuthbert let the car out almost to the limit. We simply tore through the night. But only a deserted road greeted our straining eyes. Toad had escaped us.

I was cursing the luck, when Hermann suddenly sprang to his feet.

"Stop her, Weinsidle, stop her! What a fool I am! Of course! the Yan Yean. Can you find the road to the Yan Yean? They must have turned off just as we met that cart."

He fell back, mopping at his face. Cuthbert turned the car, and we ran back toward the Yan Yean.

Nancy and Mollie Hollidew, their feminine perceptions aroused at last to the urgent nature of Hermann's chase, began to shrill with excitement.

Hermann shouted: "Do you know the reservoir, Weinsidle?"

"Undoubtedly," the wind brought to us.

Hermann said quickly:

"Then pull up at the big gates, and face the car back this way. The girls stay right where you are; and you in the driver's seat, Weinsidle. I can't explain. That's the cue for you three when we get there. Murchison will come out with me. Get me?"

Cuthbert nodded, and Hermann sank back at my side. He mumbled: "The swine. The unutterable beast. Faster, Weinsidle, faster. What a devil!"

Even then—but I was a stranger to Melbourne after all—I did not realize how monstrous a fear was his. I turned the name over in my mind. Yan Yean. Surely there was a familiarity about it. Where had I heard it before?

As if guessing at my thought, Hermann suddenly shouted in my ear: "Don't you see what he's at, Murchison? Don't you? He means to fire the reservoir. Melbourne's water supply—think of it!"

My flesh crept as I tried to picture what such a deed would mean. Had I known the utmost possibilities—as Hermann must have known—I would have felt an even blacker horror and despair. But I was completely ignorant of the city's great

water system. And it was just as well.

Toad himself must have been equally ignorant about that. It was not his purpose at this stage to carry out his threat of world destruction. Yet when I make clear the incalculable danger to which he brought humanity this night, it would almost seem indeed that this was his intention.

Toad was undoubtedly unaware of the photogenic properties of Satanoi. He was also, I am certain, unaware of the possibility of the atmosphere igniting. And here, too, his malicious blundering narrowly escaped its possible conclusion. If Hermann had not shown the initiative that distinguished him now, the supreme catastrophe might have resulted.

Melbourne's water system involved the Wallaby Creek, Plenty and Yan Yean watersheds. The Silver Creek water led into the Silver Aqueduct, which joined the Wallaby Aqueduct, thence connecting via cascades to Jack's Creek, the whole emptying into the Toorourrong Reservoir. The Plenty River also ran into the reservoir and out again.

A clear-water channel carried this water to the Yan Yean Reservoir, which had a capacity of some seven billion gallons. The reservoir depth was nineteen feet, with a greatest possible depth available for storage of twenty-five feet. The water covered an area of thirteen hundred acres.

So—the water held an unbroken line from the Yan Yean Reservoir, through Toorourrong and over the cascades, into creeks and rivers, into the Silver, Wallaby, Pheasant and King Parrot Creeks, and into the Plenty River. And the Plenty River into the Yarra River. And the Yarra River into the sea. Fire following this line . . .

No doubt these facts poured through Hermann's mind as the car rushed onward. I know that his face was white against the shadow, and once I heard the breath sob in his throat.

No sight or sound met us as the car halted at the gates of the reservoir. Hermann, with a muttered admonition to those who were to remain, leaped to the ground.

I RAN after Hermann, who had already pushed through the fence into the reserve. Before us, some two hundred yards

from the shore of the reservoir itself, was the ranger's house. A voice hailed us sharply.

"Who's that? What are you doing in here without a permit?"

Hermann said to the advancing patrolman: "We're from the police. No time to explain now. Is there telephone connection with Toorourrong?"

"Yes," the man said. I felt that he was eyeing us with a certain amount of doubt. "There's a line from the ranger's house, there."

Hermann said, "Good! Call your man up. Look: you know a police badge when you see one. Go for your life and tell Toorourrong to drop the gateways on the clear-water channels."

"What's wrong?" the patrolman's curiosity prompted.

"For God's sake," Hermann exclaimed, "do what I ask."

The tone of his voice was so compelling that the man turned without a word and made for the house.

Hermann said: "Murchison, I can't be wrong. I'll swear Toad meant this. Can you see anything? Hear anything?"

"No," I replied.

"We'll make the circuit of the water," the detective said. "Who's this?"

It was the ranger and the patrolman. The first showed signs of irritation.

"What's the idea?" he asked curtly.

"Did you get Toorourrong?" Hermann snapped.

"Yes. The gates are down."

Hermann said: "Can you divert the outlets?"

"Yes. By valves and by-washes. Look here—"

"Do it," Hermann commanded. "Get your family out of that house and over here on the bank. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. But the risk's too great to play with."

"Risk!" the ranger exclaimed incredulously. I am sure at that moment he thought he had to do with a lunatic. "Risk of what? Risk of what?"

I could contain my suspense no longer.

"Death!" I heard myself cry. "Death."

Even now, when I close my eyes, the scene returns sharply, as if etched within their lids. I live again, for a shattering second, the enormity of that fear. I see

the bulky shadow of Hermann, and the blurred silhouettes of the ranger and patrolman, crouching against the background of the night sky. I see the faint mirror of the water in the reservoir, quiet and dark and star-strewn. And, framed in the open, lighted doorway of the house, the ranger's wife and young daughter. A vision soft, idyllic . . .

Then this: A tube of blue-green rising like a water-spout from the farther edge of the reservoir, thickening as it lifted. A widening blaze like the coming of a midnight sun; heat crackling upon the air, as if to the crumpling of a gigantic newspaper.

And the screaming of women.

Hermann yelled: "The car! Get those women to the car!"

The Plenty Slope was illumined with the completeness of broad daylight. The tube of flame had turned to a cone whose base was already upon half the width of the water. The heat scorched.

I was at the ranger's heels as he stooped to lift his wife from the path where she had fallen unconscious in the extremity of her terror. The girl ran screaming past me, and I caught her arm. She struggled to escape me, but I managed to retain my hold. I half dragged, half carried her across the reserve. And all at once her resistance ended. Her body went slack, and she pitched in a faint, dragging me to my knees.

As I got up, trying to lift her, I saw the bulk of the ranger's house suddenly glow. Flame sheared it like a great blade, and the two halves fell slowly apart. They seemed to settle as foam settles; to melt, rather than burn; and all at once were gone. The bush on the farther side of the reserve was alight. That on our side was smoking in a dozen places.

The patrolman appeared suddenly at my side. As we raised the girl between us he stammered: "My God! The world is on fire! Is she dead?"

I shook my head. It was not time for talking. I wanted all my breath for running. The heat seemed like a hand reaching to pluck us into the core of its burning. I felt that in another few moments we should crumple where we stood. Already the air was sapped of its virtue, so that we breathed with difficulty.

We came, after what seemed an age, to the roadside. The engine of the car was running, and Cuthbert's voice, roused for once to a pitch of open excitement, nailed us sharply.

"Where's Hermann?"

I gasped: "Isn't he here?"

Nancy's white face loomed for a moment on my dazed sight.

"Maurice! . . . I thought you were never coming. Lift that poor child in here with her mother. Oh, Maurice—What dreadful thing is happening?"

"We daren't wait much longer," Cuthbert said.

I had an impression of Mollie Hollidew twisted in her seat to stare at us. She looked, somehow, like a wax figure. Her eyes were glazed, and her mouth was still working, as if she had only that moment reached an exhaustion of screaming.

"Here they are," the patrolman said.

Hermann and the ranger, beating at their scorching clothes came tumbling into our midst. Hermann said huskily, as he climbed into the car: "Managed—turn pipes—off. Thought it safer."

I turned to look behind us as we gathered way. Where we had stood the grass was in flame. The whole sky was alight to its zenith.

CHAPTER 17

The Terror

BUT for the sadness that comes over me, I could smile at the theorizing of the newspapers in the days that followed. They were all hopelessly at fault in their attempt to guess the origin and nature of the period which now figures in the history books as The Three Days' Terror.

It could hardly be otherwise. For those of us who could have told the horrible truth of that mystery held grimly to our oath of silence. We had at all costs to keep the people from the panic of realization.

For three days and nights the country to the north of the city ran red with fire. On the fourth day rain fell . . . Of this I shall speak later.

As for the rest of that night—

When we had left the reservoir reserve Cuthbert drove us from house to house—

in ever-widening circles, as the flames pursued us—while we roused the settlers to escape. The entire slope had ignited, and the ranges blazed with such monstrous magnificence that men stood aghast in the streets of Melbourne, and asked one another whether this was indeed the end of all things.

Speculation ran riot. Reporters became almost hysterical in the role of prophet.

One paper spoke of a subterranean gas explosion. A second ran a streamer in huge type, *Seismologists Confounded*. A third declared *Earth Swallows Reservoir*.

A special correspondent of one of the leading dailies put it this way:

Shortly after nine o'clock last night a tremendous explosion, thought to be of volcanic origin, completely wrecked the Yan Yean Reservoir and set fire to the surrounding country.

At the time of writing some fifty fatalities are recorded, and the death roll is steadily growing. Former disasters, such as those of Black Thursday and the holocaust of the Mount Fatigue district, are trivial by comparison with this.

The hills are now a furnace covering many square miles. Although hundreds of fire-fighters are at work, there appears to be little possibility of checking the flames without a heavy rain. Experienced bushmen assert that no fire within living memory had burned so fast and so viciously. On the site of the reservoir proper a cavity of some forty feet in depth has been burned.

In view of the unknown origin of the disaster, and the fact that the bed of the basin still emits a flame, a cordon has been drawn about the area for the protection of the ever curious. The watershed is denuded. The heat is intense.

An interview with the ranger, Henry Borrowdean, follows. He states that he cannot account for what has happened. The account proceeds:

It would appear that the first warning came from Senior-Detective Hermann, who was one of a party motoring the neighborhood of the basin. Hermann declines to comment on the cause of the disaster.

He stated, however, that certain phenomena, with which the lake districts of New Zealand had familiarized him, attracted his attention in passing. He became uneasy and returned to investigate. Encountering one of the Patrolmen, William Slambee, he instructed him to close the gateways admitting to the clear-water channel at Toorourrong Reservoir, distant some seven miles.

This was done. The reason for the request is not clear. Detective Hermann intimated that he would justify the action in his official report.

Under the circumstances it seems strange that water for fighting the fire should have been

deliberately withheld. To this fact, and to the absence of any rain, must be ascribed the extent of the fire now raging.

Had the channels from the Toorourrong basin been allowed to pour into the site of the explosion, it is probable that the outbreak would have been restricted to the reserve itself. And this in spite of the fact that the water in the Yan Yean basin seems to have been swallowed by an initial earth fissure.

No trace of such a fissure can now be seen. It is supposed that the fissure closed immediately after the water in the basin was exhausted. In that case, the water from Toorourrong could have been used against the fire.

Theories were launched the world over. One was that an earth vent released a subterranean gas which, on meeting the atmosphere, spontaneously ignited. A second theory, advanced by a well-known American savant, was to the effect that what is known as a volcanic pocket had by some means found communications with the atmosphere, resulting in a local eruption.

In all accounts the word "explosion" was used. In point of fact, no real explosion took place. One of the remarkable features of Satanoil was the comparative silence in which it destroyed. It was accompanied by a crackling and a hissing, reminding one of an electrical discharge.

BRANDEN was among the first to descend into the charred basin of the Yan Yean. In places where moisture exuded from the earth a green flame still flickered. Regardless of onlookers, Branden carried out certain hasty investigations. The most important consisted of a spectrum analysis of the flame of Satanoil. He discovered the sharply defined yellow and red lines indicative of the presence of a lithium compound. He estimated this as a little less than the millionth part of a milligram in quantity. He thought, also, that he detected traces of rubidium.

Further than this, Branden was able to declare to us that the exhaustion point of the Satanoil flame was reached at the end of the second day of burning. Had rain fallen in those two days . . .

But rain did not fall. The reporter's disappointment, I still think, was providential.

As for the fresh-water channels from the Toorourrong basin, they were charred but intact. Branden's theory as to the

resistance of stone to Satanoil most fortunately proved correct: otherwise the trickle of water remaining in the channels, after the gateways were dropped, might have led into the Toorourrong basin after all, despite Hermann's prompt action.

A thorough investigation was undertaken by the government, but to no result. A party of international geologists and seismologists, equipped by the Rockefeller Institute of America, spent some months upon the same quest. The scientific journals of the time were flooded with theory, but scarcely a fact of importance was gathered. The denuded basin was eventually restorted, and once again fills its purpose of water supply to Melbourne.

One detail was curiously missing in this case. There was no evidence of the photogenic properties of Satanoil. When the reservoir burned, some atmospheric requisite appears to have been lacking. At all events, no mirage of the horror has, so far as I am aware, been recorded.

I have myself, however, seen the phantom of Crampton's house against the skyline. The illusion is preserved to this day, and is known as The Haunted Castle on the Saltwater River.

It was on the evening of the fourth day following the Yan Yean holocaust that George Framling came to the house with the news that the premier had called a conference that night at his offices.

It was then a quarter to eight, and Framling and I set out to walk to the Treasury building. Rain was still falling gently, but the aftermath of the fire was even then noticeable in the angry hue of the northern sky.

I said: "What will Mr. Hannaford do now? What can he do? I suppose this spells defeat."

Framling nodded. When he spoke he choked a little.

"I'm afraid so. Eighty-four people have been burned to death, Melbourne has practically no water, and the destruction of livestock and property is appalling. No, we didn't understand what we were up against."

He broke out, then, cursing Toad and all his ways.

"He's inhuman, Maurice. A devil in human shape. Good Lord! He has the world at his mercy."

I could only hold to helpless silence. The others were waiting for us. The premier looked ghastly. His flesh was chalk-white, and his body never ceased its trembling.

He said: "Well, gentlemen, we've failed. We've done our best, but we've failed. We can do no more."

"It seems so," Sir Hector Corrilees agreed.

"We don't dare risk the further malice of this monster," Hannaford said. "We're whipped, eh Murchison?"

The laugh he ventured made me shudder. To plainly he was a broken man at last. His eyes were unutterably sick.

"There's time yet," I stammered. "Surely we can do something."

He flung one thin hand at me.

"Why waste words? This is the end. Or is it? Do you know, I'm tempted to make it so. I'm tempted to call this devil's bluff and let the world go to the devil. Better get it over and done with than that men should live under the shadow of Hell. Well, Branden?"

But Branden only gave a shrug of his shoulders. He had, I think, long since finished with moral issues. The obsession which was to destroy him was already upon him, and his veins were fired only by the scientific wonder of what had happened.

Sir Hector Corrilees said: "You'll send for Toad?"

All of us followed his glance to Hannaford's white, drawn face.

"Yes," the premier replied in a dull voice. "I'll send for Toad. Framling, you'll arrange that. Say this: *I agree. Arrange meeting. Sign it. What's the difference? Who would guess or care to guess? Sign it Premier.*"

Framling said: "Very good, sir."

THE irony of that! Who, chancing upon the simple message in the newspapers next day, would have dreamed its mighty import? The head of the government confessing his failure to prevail against the threat of criminal lunacy. The clue to the tragedy that was bewildering the brains of science.

I went to the Treasury next day, futile though the pretence now was, merely because I could think of nothing else to do.

And I wanted to hide my telltale face from Nancy. She, poor girl, sensed the despair in my thought, and looked at me wistfully, no doubt ascribing it to concern for her own anxiety. We had heard nothing of Rufus Carlisle. I dreaded what we might hear.

At midday came a telegram addressed to the premier. I stood by Framling's elbow as he read. Laconic and peremptory:

YOUR OFFICE MIDNIGHT THIS DAY
—TOAD

George, I remember, said: "Why midnight?"

And I can hear myself saying.

"Why! Because he's dramatic. Those swines always are. They can't let acting alone. It's the right setting, you see, for the work of the devil. Evil hates the light."

Framling went to telephone the others. I took my hat and went down town. I wanted to see the happy crowds, all secure in their ignorance. I wanted to shout their folly at them; to tell them what fools they were . . .

Someone caught me by the arm, as I stood; caught hold of me and shook me.

"Murchison, has your courage caved in altogether? You look like a corpse."

"I feel like one," I said, staring back into Sir Hector's set face. "Did you know it was tonight?"

Hermann was with his chief. They both looked at me.

"What's tonight?" the detective asked.

"Tonight the world puts its neck under Toad's foot," I said. I must have shouted it, for the people passing turned to peer at us. "He sent an answer to the premier's message. We're to meet at the office at midnight. Framling was to telephone to you."

They were silent a moment.

"Come aside into a quiet corner," Sir Hector muttered.

We sat at a café table—I was reminded of that other café table, where I had sat with Sir Hector and Professor Branden, while Branden seemed to gloat over the marvels of Satanoil—and looked at each other.

Sir Hector's face had an appearance of swelling. The veins in his neck and forehead stood out like whipcord.

"Murchison—Hermann," he said. He put his hands on our shoulders. "It must not be. Even now at the eleventh hour, it must not be. We three must prevent it. But how? How?"

"The whole thing, so far as I can see," Hermann said slowly, "rests upon Toad's accomplice or accomplices. Without them he won't dare come to us. Rufus Carlisle . . ."

The chief commissioner broke in hurriedly with:

"How do we know Carlisle is alone? And yet, if I could lay my hands on the old man, I would—I would . . . But even so, the risk is fearful and our chances are slim."

I could not follow this thought then, though I did so later. Nor, I think, could Hermann.

The detective said: "We will send men out after dark. All loiterers on the river banks will be taken in."

"Is that the best you can think of?" Sir Hector asked, savage in his anxiety. "Why, the word would pass as soon as the first man was taken. No use trying it."

"We must find Carlisle himself," I said. "If there are others in it, probably they will all be together. But I believe Carlisle to be the only one."

"We aren't even certain that Carlisle is one," Sir Hector said.

Hermann said, in a resolute tone: "I don't think there's a doubt of it. Murchison, will you hunt with me . . . until midnight? A last hunt? To try and find Carlisle?"

I said: "Willingly. But where shall we search? We don't even know where to start."

"After dusk on the river bank," Hermann said. "We must find Carlisle on the river bank. The appointment is for midnight. Until eleven-thirty we can still act."

"After that," Sir Hector said, with a twisted smile, "the deluge. No; the world has had its deluge. I was forgetting. It is the turn of fire."

We rose then. And there, I suppose, our blundering would have left us—had we not encountered at the very door of the café Professor Branden. Providence was with us.

CHAPTER 18

The Last Stand

HIS sunken eyes lit at sight of us. He exclaimed: "This is extraordinary. I have been searching for you everywhere, Corriees.

"I have remembered where it was that I encountered that fanatic that you say may be Rufus Carlisle. It was just after I had turned out of Drummond Street into Macpherson Street. Was it Macpherson Street? I'm not sure. There's an old two-story brick place at the corner. A fourth rate hotel, I should say."

"Chugwin Street," Hermann injected.

"That's it," said the professor. He looked from one to another of us eagerly. "Any good?"

"Perhaps," Hermann said, looking at me. "This alters our plans. Meet me at ten o'clock tonight outside the Weather Bureau, Murchison. In the meantime, I'll scout in my own way."

"If you show yourself—" Sir Hector began.

"I won't," Hermann said. "But if Carlisle's anywhere handy, I'll place him."

I wondered, waiting at the Weather Bureau later, how he meant to carry out his search, and whether it had succeeded. But, at his first words I knew that the second query was answered.

He said in a whisper, as we shook hands: "I've found him, Murchison. I've found him."

"How did you do it?"

He told me as we walked.

"Wherever you want to know about the people in a locality, you won't go far wrong if you tackle the first small boy you meet who lives there. Youngsters have eyes and ears, Murchison, that we elders can't approach for sharpness. Tact and a couple of coins will work wonders. Rufus Carlisle is hiding in a back street. We're going there now."

"To arrest him?" I asked.

"Not at once. Unless I'm badly mistaken, Toad is in the same house. When and if he leaves it, we act. I have posted a plainclothes man at each end of the street, with a description of Carlisle. But no one else is to be stopped. It's a tight game, Murchison. I've never known a

tighter one—and for such high stakes."

A man stepped from the shadow of a tin fence, as we turned a corner.

Hermann said: "Well?"

"Three passed me, but not our man."

The detective looked at his watch.

"It's ten-thirty. Who were they, Straughan?"

"An old couple . . . It's all right. I know them well. They run a secondhand shop. And a man. Short, squat figure with glasses. Came out nine or ten doors along."

Hermann's elbow nudged me. I knew he had the same thought. It was Toad himself.

"Good. Get hold of Cordray from the other end, and the two of you come to number eleven. One at the front and one at the back. Come on, Murchison."

My heart beat fast as we entered the gate of number eleven. It was an old-fashioned weatherboard cottage, with a narrow strip of ground in front and at the side.

Hermann tried the door, found it fast, and tiptoed to where a light shone from a dusty window. The blind was drawn. We listened a moment, but there was no sound.

Feet sounded in the street, and Hermann said: "Here are the boys. We'll try the back now, Murchison."

I wondered, as we went, what Nancy would have thought if she had seen me creeping upon her father as if he were the greatest criminal in the land. I hated what we were doing. Sentiment has always obscured my judgment.

The back door yielded readily, and we found ourselves in a small vestibule. Light came from a doorway in the passage beyond. As we stood watching it, there came the scraping of a chair, and a thin, tremulous cough.

"He's there," Hermann said.

Old Carlisle, clad in his rusty black, was standing by a table when we entered. He faced us directly, but there was no recognition in his look. His eyes were vacant, his mouth flaccid.

I said gently: "Why, Mr. Carlisle, Nancy has been looking for you everywhere. You'll come home now, won't you?"

"Who are you?" his reedy voice asked.

The dullness was passing from his eyes, and his straggly beard twitched. "I don't know you."

There was alarm in his manner.

"I'm Maurice Murchison," I said. "Surely you remember me? I come from your home in East Melbourne. Nancy will be overjoyed to have found you."

"No!" he said. He blinked at us with a mixture of cunning and apprehension. "I don't know you."

Hermann stepped forward impatiently.

"Well, you soon will," he said, regardless of my appeal. "You're coming with me, Mr. Carlisle."

But the old man shrank from Hermann's touch. A crazy flame leaped into his eyes. He began to rant.

"I have no dealings with the ungodly. Men of perdition and of evil minds. For what saith the Scriptures . . .?"

"Now, now," Hermann said.

He caught one bony wrist firmly, but not ungently.

"Let me be. Let me be. There is work to do . . ."

It was pitiful to see his struggles.

Hermann panted. "He's like a wild-cat!"

The last vestige of the old man's sanity seemed suddenly to vanish. He shrieked: "Fools. Fools. The end of all things is at hand. Woe unto the world, that shall be burned up with fire, neither shall there any more be a flood . . ."

With extraordinary adroitness he slipped from Hermann's clutch, doubled under my outflung arm, and darted into the passage.

"After him!" Hermann roared.

We collided in the doorway.

BUT Hermann's shouting did its work. We came presently upon Straughan on the back porch, with old Carlisle stiffened on his arm. When we carried him into the light, there was foam at the corners of his working mouth. His eyes were closed, and a blueness was spread over his lips.

Cordray came in from the front, and the four of us bent over our capture. I had the thought that Rufus Carlisle was dying.

"He looks pretty sick," Cordray said.

"Get a taxi and run him to the hospi-

tal," Hermann said. "And stay with him. Alive or dead, stay with him."

I ran to the corner of the street, with Straughan at my heels.

He said, as I hailed a cruising car:

"What's the lay, do you know?"

I said: "I don't know. Hermann won't say. They want him for something, I suppose."

It never occurred to me that Hermann should have searched the old man's pockets while I was absent. He looked at me queerly, I thought, when I entered. But he said nothing then.

"Off you go, you two," he directed the plainclothes men. "If you want me, I'll be at the premier's office for an hour or two after midnight. Keep the old man in the hospital until you hear from me."

Hermann and I walked in the wake of the departing taxi. We were silent and serious.

He said presently: "Well, we've spiked one of Toad's guns. The question is, are there any others? I wish we knew."

"What now?" I asked.

It was after eleven o'clock. Events are quicker in the telling than in the doing.

Hermann said: "Let's find a place for a cup of coffee."

We sat over the cups, smoking in silence, each busy with his thoughts. Mine, I am free to say, were anything but reassuring. I couldn't see what we had really gained by finding Rufus Carlisle. To be quite safe, we had to know. And we didn't know. At best, we could only guess.

We reached the Treasury building at five minutes to midnight, and were admitted by George Framling, who was stationed at the door.

"There isn't a soul in the place except ourselves," he said. He meant those of us who had been—who still were—leagued against Toad.

We left him waiting for Toad.

Sir Hector Corriees stared at Hermann as we entered the premier's room, and his brows rose questioningly. Hermann nodded.

"What!" the chief commissioner said. "You found Carlisle? You mean that?"

"He's under guard at the Melbourne Hospital," Hermann said. "He took a fit or something."

Sir Hector turned to the premier.

"Hannaford, we've got Carlisle."

"What good is that?" Mr. Hannaford asked wearily. "It's too late, Corrilees, too late."

"Is it?" Sir Hector asked, with curious quietness. "Is it too late? We shall see."

Professor Branden, huddled on his chair, peered short-sighted at the chief commissioner.

Sir Hector began: "Hermann, did you find—?"

The opening of the baize door cut him short. Framling's pale face appeared. He seemed to hesitate; then stood aside with an audible intake of his breath.

I found myself confronted by the evil, amorphous features of the greatest criminal the world has ever known.

It was then that the premier, turning his eyes, inspired the only burst of anger we had ever known this enemy to display.

Mr. Hannaford said, in indescribable tones: "And so—you are The Toad?"

I hope never to witness anything more demoniacal than the swift convulsion of the creature's face at this innocent question.

His cheeks puffed, like those of the loathsome thing whose name he affected, and he seemed to eject his speech as poison is ejected—in a single stream.

"Toad, damn you. Toad!"

Toad reeked of insane egotism. Satan, his master, knew the satisfaction such a distinction might afford him. "There's only one Toad. You're the premier, Morgan Hannaford? You've had a bellyful at last, then. Fools, to pit yourselves against such brains as mine!"

Hermann, his former face suffused, said bluntly: "Whatever else you are, you're frankly a lunatic."

Strangely, the abuse seemed to calm Toad. He smiled as he seated himself. When next he spoke his voice held no anger, but only a cold arrogance.

"Well, Mr. Premier, we know each other at last."

Mr. Hannaford was contemptuously silent, his mouth aquiver.

Professor Branden, as if unable to restrain himself, shot a finger at Toad.

"Michael Domidorf," he said, "you are a cold-blooded murderer."

Toad sneered.

"What! It's you, Branden, is it? You with your little pettifogging chemistry. You fool."

I DON'T know what possessed me, but I said: "You called yourself Mertz. You are the man who took lodgings with poor old Rufus Carlisle."

He neither denied nor affirmed. He turned his flame-colored iris on me . . .

The premier's voice broke a nightmare spell.

He said: "Domidorf, Mertz, Toad—call yourself as you will. There is one thing you forget. You forget that there is a just and righteous God . . ."

"Can your God do more than destroy the world?" The laugh that was the travesty of a laugh chilled my spine. "I can do that. Therefore I am all the god you need. All the god this world shall boast. My will shall be supreme. The earth shall be my footstool. I, its greatest emperor. Toad, by the grace of Satan-oil . . ."

"You blaspheme!" the premier said.

"Or if not," the abhorrent voice continued, "there shall be no more world. Think of it. Earth shall cease to be. But not before all flesh suffers as it never before suffered."

Something impelled me to look at Sir Hector Corrilees. His eyes were like stone, his mouth was a grim line.

He said: "You would do this thing?"

The other licked his toad's lips.

"Haven't I just said so? The world accepts my terms, or it perishes. It may take its choice."

"Do you know," Sir Hector said very slowly and deliberately, "I think I shall kill you. There are some creatures too foul to be left alive."

Toad said easily: "Brave words, Mr. Police Commissioner; but quite helpless. Be sure I have seen to all that. If I do not return to my home within an hour of dawn, the thing you fear will come to pass."

Sir Hector's right hand had gone to his jacket pocket. Toad noted the action, and his look jeered. He knew he had us. His voice began to gloat sadistically.

"Picture it. Fair women and little children screaming to the melting of their

tender flesh. A world in flames . . ."

I saw Sir Hector's hand leave his pocket, gripping the butt of an automatic pistol. The eyes of the others were fixed upon Toad in a sort of horrified fascination. They did not see.

But I saw. I saw the point of the automatic rising, and the strong lean finger tightening to its task of heroic madness. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Toad half rise from his seat, as realization swept over him.

And then a sharp crack, and a thin spurt of flame. And Toad sprawled again in his chair, a star of blood welling at the exact center of his forehead. Dead on the instant.

There was a moment of utter silence. Then the pistol fell from Sir Hector's hand to the table. As if it were the signal to release our paralyzed emotions, sound sprang like a gust of wind. The premier, his face ashen, his eyes wild, rose, swaying, to his feet.

He whispered: "Corrilees. Corrilees. What have you done? Dear God! What have you done?"

"I have done well," Sir Hector answered. "It is a gamble. All life is a gamble. Better so than the other. If his only accomplice was Rufus Carlisle . . ."

The telephone on the premier's table shrilled with such suddenness that we all started. Hermann took down the receiver with a shaking hand.

He said: "Dead . . . Heart failure! Thank you, Cordray. No; stay there until you hear from me. I shall be there soon after dawn—I hope."

Professor Branden asked: "What now, Hermann?"

"Rufus Carlisle is dead."

I looked at Toad. Even in those few moments death had stamped more deeply the vile resemblance to the creature he had parodied. The body was slumped forward grotesquely. The puffy lids were half-closed, and a film was on the strange, flame-colored irises.

Hermann, his lips compressed, commenced to search Toad's pockets. He found nothing. The premier was still standing. His look was now a little vacant. Presently he sank into his chair with bowed head.

"In any case," Branden said, nodding

at the corpse, "how are we going to explain that?"

"I neither know nor care," Sir Hector replied. "The world, I have no doubt, will call me murderer. Does it matter?"

"Surely," I began, "no jury . . ."

"Can ever be told the truth," Sir Hector finished, with a pale smile. "No, Murchison; it won't work that way. Well, we shall see."

HERMANN said, in a matter-of-fact tone: "At any rate, Toad need not remain here. Murchison, will you and Framling give me a hand? We'll put him in the basement."

I sensed some covert meaning in his look. There was, I told myself, some task he would be at. He would share it only with Framling and me.

I had to fight to overcome my repugnance toward touching Toad. Hermann, being the strongest, took the shoulders; George and I, a leg apiece. In such manner we carried our ugly burden down the dark, silent stairways.

George said: "You've got some sort of a plan for getting rid of him?"

"I have," the detective answered.

Hermann plunged a hand into his pocket. He drew forth a yellow marble.

Framling and I exclaimed simultaneously:

"Where did you get that?"

"I took it from Rufus Carlisle," Hermann said. "Now you know why I didn't want Branden down here. He'd give his soul to have this to experiment with. Well, he won't get it. I tell you, Murchison, no man living is to be trusted with such a damnable secret. If I knew of such a man, though he were the most honest and upright in the world, I would shoot that man dead if I could, just as the chief shot Toad. Civilization could not risk him."

As he spoke he bent over Toad and pushed the yellow marble into the dead, half-opened mouth.

It seemed scarcely a minute later that there was re-enacted before our eyes the annihilative process which had been the fate of Gregory. There came that frightful green flame out of the mouth of Toad, and his body became transparent and glowing as the Satanoil licked up its

juices. We were presently staring at nothing but a writhing green haze. It, too, vanished.

Hermann drew a deep breath.

"Exit Toad," he said.

Framling shuddered. "That was horrible."

"The chief is safe, so far as the laws of this world are concerned, at any rate," said the loyal Hermann. "If we are to perish when the day comes, the criminal brain that planned it will have gone first."

We returned to the premier's room.

Sir Hector asked: "What have you done? It's no use, you know. Hermann, I'll have to face the music."

"There's none to face," Hermann told him. "There's no murder without a corpse. And there's no Toad."

"What do you mean?" the premier asked.

Hermann told them.

Branden almost screamed at him.

"What! You had in your hand the most marvelous chemical discovery in the world, and you deliberately destroyed it?"

The premier checked him sternly.

Mr. Hannaford said—as if, indeed, he had heard, and was now echoing, what Hermann had said to Framling and me not five minutes back—"Branden, you hardly realize what you are saying. No man alive is to be trusted with such a vile

discovery. No man, Branden no man."

Poor Branden . . . He subsided sullenly, muttering, and twisting together his thin fingers. A picture of woe and disappointment.

"Thank you, Hermann," said Sir Hector, simply.

We sat then in silence through the interminable hours. There was no thought of our leaving the room while the uncertainty held. The drama was nearly finished. Shortly, the curtain must fall.

I think I dozed in sheer weariness of thought. I became conscious, suddenly, that Hermann had raised the blind of the window. As if to a common impulse, we gathered about it, looking out upon the brightening sky. The dawn was coming . . . had come.

I turned at a sound behind me.

The premier was on his knees against a chair. His thin shoulders were shaking.

Someone gripped my hand . . .

* * *

My task is done.

And yet . . . Sometimes in the dark hours my thought stirs affrightedly. Is there on earth, I wonder, a drop of Satan-oil remaining still? Might some innocent hand come one day to chance discovery of a yellow marble, and plunge earth to its doom?

I wish I knew.

THE END