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FANTASTIC

Novels



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No. 2

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THE SOUL TRAP

By Charles B. Stilson

He essayed to catch an immortal soul midway in its last escaping flight. . . . And success was his, in a way he had not thought of—and horror beyond all dreaming. . . .

SATISFIED from his first glance that the case was hopeless, the doctor laid his medicine-case on the table and seated himself beside the couch to wait for the end. It would not be long delayed.

He would have liked to have questioned the servant who had summoned him; but the man was a deaf-mute, and old and inane to boot. He pottered about the room for a few moments, his vacuous eyes staring owlishly from the physician to the dying man, and then withdrew to the rear of the house, rubbing his lean old hands together and shaking his head. There was no one else to keep the watch with Pennerton.

Near the foot of the couch a tall, old-fashioned clock ticked steadily. Beyond the open windows the poplars whispered endlessly to their neighbor pines: "When? When? When?" And from within the old clock answered them. "Not yet; not yet."

White lilacs, unnaturally pallid in the light of the moon, peered through the casements and nodded in the night breeze as they watched the master die. Except for these and death and the dying, Pennerton was alone.

The man died hard. Never in the course of a considerable professional experience had the doctor seen a vitality more persistent than that which was being forced slowly from its citadel before his eyes. By all the rules of the grim old game, death should have turned down the cards hours before.

Half of the long body lay very quiet; for it was paralyzed from the waist. In that part of its domain still left to it, life strug-

gled furiously to remain. He was an old man, too. Wasted tissues, withered hands, the creases in the neck, the wrinkled brow, all gave the lie to the curling black hair and bush of beard that age had failed to blanch.

And strong; for the ceaselessly groping hands had torn the tough, hemmed linen of the sheets to fringe. Not for an instant did the long fingers cease their fretting. The thin shoulders twitched. The chest scarcely rose for a breath that was not a shudder. With eyes fast closed, the features of the face writhed continually; but always they registered one of two expressions—iron determination was succeeded by overwhelming terror.

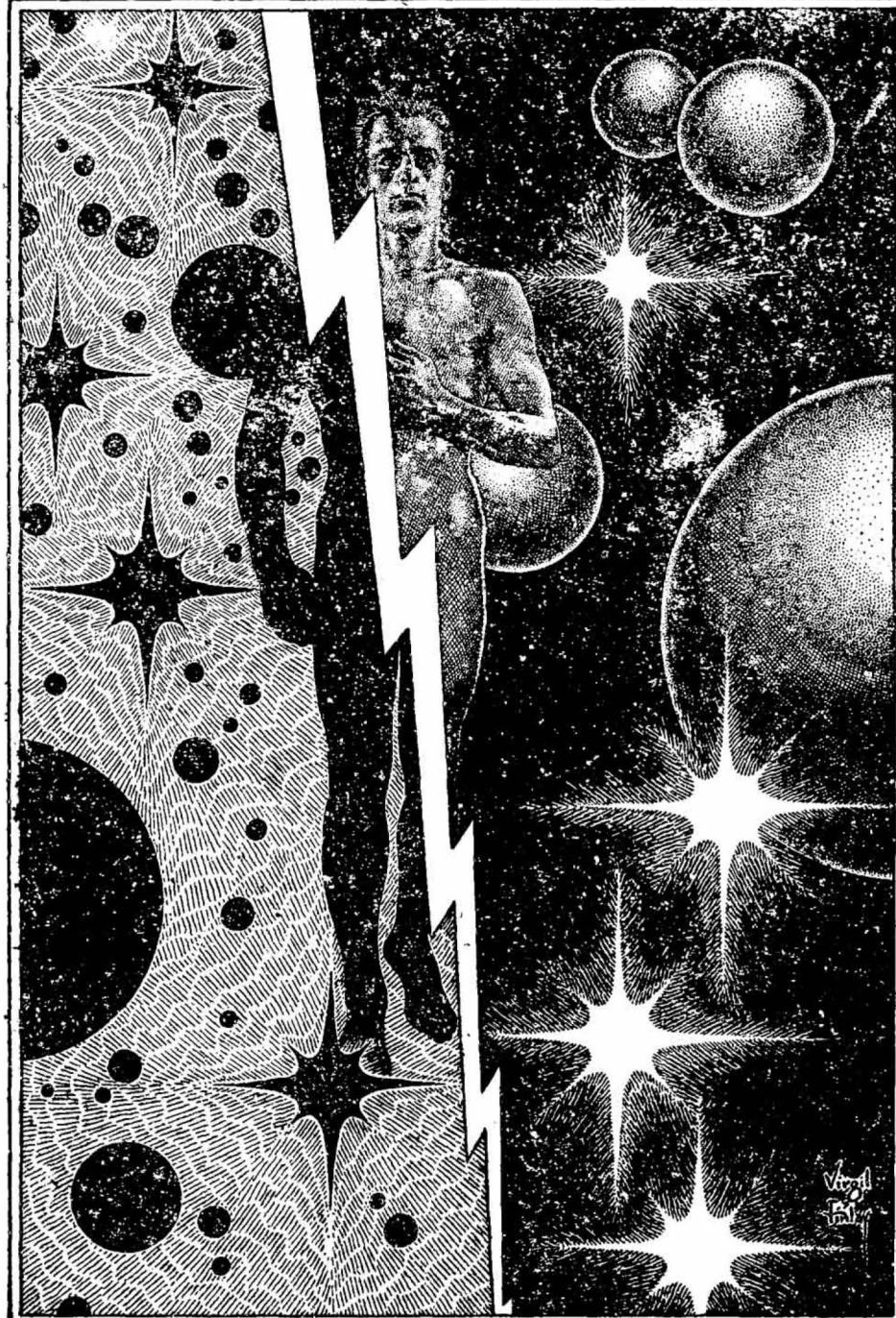
On Pennerton, watching, there grew the impression that there must be a strong and terrible reason for such unnatural, such fierce tenacity; that in this gaunt, half-dead body an intelligence was still keenly, fearfully alive; that, with its defenses nearly battered down, a quenchless spirit was holding death at bay until a great purpose should be accomplished.

So powerful was that impression that the physician found himself straining forward in his chair like one who has a hazard in a hard-fought game and seeks by stress of his own will and body to urge on to victory the player he has favored.

For a long hour the ancient clock ticked out its repeated message of procrastination. And then, as such old clocks sometimes do, it changed its tenor and its tone.

"Time's up! Time's up!" it seemed to say.

The man on the couch gasped. His head rolled from side to side on his pillow; he



What is, and what is the destiny of, that part of
man that still lives on when the body perishes?

opened his eyes, saw Pennerton bending toward him, and by a supreme effort raised himself on his elbow. His lips worked. Then his gaze strayed from the watcher's face to a closed door at the far side of the room; and over his features spread an expression of such frenzied and unutterable horror that the doctor shuddered and turned pale.

Raising his free hand as if to ward off a deadly stroke, the dying man opened his lips; and though the palsied vocal cords did not respond, the effect on Pennerton of that soundless shriek was more awful than a wail from hell.

Twice and thrice the quivering jaw fell and twitched back. The old man glared around at Pennerton. The warding arm stiffened and pointed to the closed door. Then words came.

"Break! Break! Break!" The voice died into inarticulate yammering, then burst forth again in full-throated speech.

"For the love of God—break the crystal case!"

The agony, the terror, the appeal in that cry will echo in Pennerton's memory for years.

Seeing the look of incomprehension on the doctor's face, the old man swung around, and his fist crashed down on a litter of papers which lay on a small table at the head of the couch.

"Read! Read! And—and—break—" He choked, collapsed on the pillow—and was gone.

PENNERTON eased the twisted body on the couch. He folded the bony hands on the gaunt chest and smoothed the disordered coverings. The dead man's eyes, wide open, seemed to follow his every movement. From their depths they still sent forth that agonized, compelling appeal that had been their last message when the hand of death had closed.

Pennerton found a couple of silver quarters in his pocket, and closing the staring eyes laid the coins on the lids. He had only to summon the old servant and take his departure. But he did not go. The physician found it hard to ignore the message of those eyes. Through the closed lids with their silver weights they still were staring, urging, commanding.

What was it that this man would have him do? What fear had left that dread impress that even death had not effaced? What was this crystal case that must be broken? What lay beyond that closed door?

The doctor stood by the couch and stared at the door. It was of oak, paneled, heavy, and substantial, as everything in this house was substantial. A key was set in the lock. Was it locked or unlocked? Pennerton wondered. Had the dead man turned that key to intervene between himself and some fearful transaction on the other side of the door? Or had he left the lock free, so that by a turn of the knob he might pass in and face whatever thing it was beyond that he had dreaded?

Pah! The man was crazed. Illness had unsettled his reason. His wild terror was a vagary born of disease and solitude. There was nothing beyond the closed door—nothing at any rate that a healthy-minded man should dread. Pennerton smiled at himself for having allowed his fancy to be so played upon. And yet—with a resolute set to his shoulders, the doctor crossed the room and gripped the white china knob of the door.

It turned in his grasp. The door was not locked. It yielded, opened. It gave on a steep and narrow stair, a dark staircase with a gleam of faint light above, as of moonbeams filtering through the branches of trees. A draft of cool air drew down the stairway and fanned Pennerton's cheeks; air so cool that it chilled his flesh—and it was nearly June. He shivered and closed the door. And quite unconsciously his fingers turned the key in the lock.

What was in that upper chamber, or attic—for the physician remembered now that the house in which he stood was one of those quaint, rambling, story-and-a-half structures of a type popular three-quarters of a century ago—could wait until morning for investigation. He would come again then and lay this foolish fantasy that had taken passing hold of his imagination.

He recrossed the room to the table to get his medicine case and his hat. What need to waken the old servant now? There was nothing to be done; let the man sleep. He stepped to the smaller table at the head of the couch to extinguish the light that burned there. His fingers were on the key of the lamp when his attention was arrested by the superscription of a large square envelope that lay on the table.

"To the physician whom the servant has gone to fetch—" it read.

So the dying man had known then that Pennerton was coming when he addressed this envelope.

A sheaf of papers, loosely folded, was thrust part way into the envelope in dis-

array, as though the hand that had placed them there had faltered at its task. They were covered with fine chirography, its lines closely written for the most part, but sprawling painfully at intervals, and in some places illegible. The doctor glanced at the opening sentences, then settled himself in a chair and read without pause to the end:

You, who will read these lines, I do not know you. I, Theron Karker, who write, was born in this house; for nearly forty years, since I was schooled, I have carried on continual labors here; yet I do not know the name even of the village doctor. Truly, I have been in this hamlet, but not of it. I know not if you are homeopath or allopath. No matter; I am beyond all your skill at dosing. An hour, perhaps two, and I am done. So I must make haste, haste. For there is a task I must lay upon you—God grant that you be of strong heart to do it—and it must be done, *must* be. And another than myself must do it. I am stricken of a deadly numbness of my lower limbs and cannot leave this couch. I have tried to drag myself by my hands; but my strength has failed and I cannot.

Go into the upper chamber, above this room where I lie, and break the crystal case that you will find there. Ah, you cannot refuse to do this! If you would set free a soul from tortures more terrible than hell hath dreamed, shatter those crystal walls!

(Here a number of sentences of the manuscript were illegible).

. . . would have asked the servant; but he is old and foolish. He would not understand, and would flee the house in terror and leave me with my task undone, that must be done. So in my extremity I turn to you, a stranger. I have refused to allow a physician to be fetched before, thinking that I might mend, might at least gain strength to reach that chamber. But I cannot, and it is too great a task for the old man's feeble limbs to carry me thither.

Tonight I feel that I am dying; so he has gone to fetch you. It grows late. He may not find you readily; his wit is as decrepit as his body. Probably I shall not live—

(Another unreadable scrawl).

. . . if time is vouchsafed me before the final summons comes, explain to you this request that must seem both strange and meaningless.

From my earliest memory as a reasoning being, it seems to me, my mind had en-

grossed itself in speculation on the problem of the race, the great unanswered question of the ages: What is, and what the destiny of, that part of man that still lives on when the body perishes? When I returned hither from my college studies, the analysis of theories, the dissection of religions, the vivisection of creeds, had grown on me, was an obsession. I made it a life study. Around me here I have gathered them all—the religions and the philosophies of the centuries, the living creeds and the dead.

In my labors I have gone farther than most. Now, as the end of those labors is nearing, I wonder with the poet, "Is it true that the wisest wander farthest and most hopelessly are lost?" Is all the groping, struggling, the toiling of these forty years wasted and futile?

Of the creeds that I have examined, I would say that most are founded on truth; but in none of them, search as I would, could I find man's naked soul, his self, his ego. So I passed down the list of those stern, tender, terrible beliefs that humanity has nurtured so long and so faithfully, until I came at length to one which, if less ably garnished with theories than some of the others, did at least offer me more of the manifestations of that which I sought.

TIME for me is too brief to tell you all of what I found among the Spiritualists. But they convinced me—not of the truth of all that they hold is true, but that there is a part of man that survives his mortal shell; and that—in a feeble, halting fashion—they could hold communication with it.

And there was the veil I could not pierce, but only dimly see through its mesh. I was balked and halted. For the "messages" the mediums brought me were such pitiful, meager, puerile fragments. Farther than this they could not aid me; that the soul passed beyond, like that newly come to this world, is weak and inexperienced in its state and must develop and progress, as a child's mind unfolds. And when the soul does gain in strength and expression, it straightway uses its new-found powers to pass on into another realm, whence no mediumistic summons may recall it.

Then, on an accursed day, I reasoned, if all these things be true, and a man find some way to cage a spirit and confine it, he might find it to progress and grow under his hand, in a hot-house as it were, and control it to his purpose.

Familiarity with the sciences of the

laboratory led me to ponder this problem to a conclusion. Spirits, I argued, must have some material qualities; else how can they produce audible phenomena, how rap on walls, play musical instruments, move articles of furniture? If so, if the soul is capable of such manifestations—and I had experienced them often—it must be in the nature of an ethereal fluid or essence; and such may be confined.

A fluid, an essence, may pass through the air unseen, may penetrate wherever air may penetrate. But, of all the substances wherewith the chemists work, there is one through which only sound and light may pass—and they are vibrations and not fluids. That substance is glass. Air does not pass through glass. It may be used to enclose a vacuum. Even that mysterious and powerful fluid we call electricity meets in glass an impassable barrier.

Why should not glass contain a soul? I asked myself. . . . So the man, he was an Italian, came across the sea and helped me.

He was a clever artisan, skilled in all the devices of the glass-working craft. Under my direction, he constructed it, slowly and with care, a casket of solid glass, seven feet square, with never a seam or a break in its entire structure, save at its top an opening large—large enough to pass the body of a man.

I paid the craftsman, and he went away to Italy again. But his brazier was left behind and a supply of glass. And I had learned of him, while we worked together, enough to finish my task.

I became a human spider then, waiting for a human fly, that I might suck the soul of in my wondrous crystal web.

At last I found a victim. Do not misread me. I have done no offense against human laws. Would that I had, and that merely, and were to suffer only human justice for it.

He was a man I had known and near forgotten, James Irvin, a college-mate of years ago. Knowledge came to me that he had met evil days, was dying slowly of tuberculosis in a county hospital in another state, alone and unfriended. I was glad; for none must know my purpose with him. I must risk no prying interference.

I fetched Irvin here. I told them where he was that I would take him away, and for the sake of our old-time friendship would make his last days easy. There was no obstacle. They were glad, I think, to escape the care of him. And Irvin, God

forgive me, he was extremely grateful.

With what impatience, then, I waited for Irvin to die! The more so when I discovered in myself the symptoms of the incurable malady that has laid me low. Every hour that he lived was withholding from me the fruits of my life's labor. How I grudged him those last poor hours! And how I watched him, that he might not slip away and leave me only his useless corpse! But, terrible as my impatience was, I did nothing to hasten on his end. Of that at least I stand guiltless.

Well, he died at last one night; but he did not escape me.

He had grown very weak. Life hung by a thread so slender that I dared not quit his bedside for more than moments, day or night; or sleep, lest it should snap and balk me.

All my preparations had been made. In the great glass case above I had taken, piece by piece, and set up, a low pallet and a small writing table. On the table I laid two hundred sheets of white paper and two dozen pencils, carefully pointed. I nailed small cleats around the table edges, so that the pencils should not roll from it and break on the crystal floor. I suspended a block and tackle from a rafter above the casket. In the last few days I kept my brazier fired day and night, that my glass might be in readiness for instant use.

The time came. Irvin lay in the room back in the library here, so nearly gone that I dared to wait no longer. His death was a matter of minutes only. And I? I was elated, gripped by an exaltation that recked not of lack of sleep and days in which I scarcely had tasted food. I was strong and confident. Only my feet were numb, with a growing numbness that presaged the advance of the malady that had seized me.

I ascended to the upper chamber and lighted the lamp that stood on a table beside the casket. The brazier was burning. The molten glass was ready. I stood and gazed at that shimmering crystal mausoleum as the lamplight gleamed through its transparent walls, and it was more fair to me in its seeming than any scintillant palace that fancy ever constructed; and fit for its purpose, too, it seemed—to be the abode of an immortal soul. Then the whole structure trembled, wavered. I felt myself falling. I threw out my hands, and I felt the cold and polished wall of glass as my palms slid down its surface, where my fingers could clutch no hold. My senses left me.

How long I lay unconscious I do not know; but I awoke at last, awoke with a horrible fear of defeat. While I had swooned weakly, had Irvin died and left my toiling of the years with miserable failure as its end? I hastened down the stair. No, I was not too late. His condition was unchanged. But there was not a moment to be wasted.

I looked down at the dying man, an unlovely thing of bones and skin and hard-fetched breath, so weak now that even his racking cough was stilled. A strange wave of nausea swept over me. I fought it fiercely, but succumbed, and once more I fell unconscious. That swoon was of brief duration. I arose from it, shook it off, and addressed myself to the completion of my task.

Again my brain was clear and confident, and I was strong. I plucked Irvin from his pillow—his weight was little more than that of a child—and carried him on my shoulders to the chamber above. I laid him in the canvas sling that I had made ready, and with my block and tackle I raised him to the dome of the crystal case and lowered him within it. I entered after him and laid him on the cot.

The disturbance and the motion had set his heart to beating faster. He opened his eyes—the first time in many hours—and looked at me. I thought I read a question and a growing terror in his eyes. Then his jaw fell and his throat began to rattle. In mad haste I clambered from the casket. I fetched glass and blowpipe, and, working on the little scaffold at the dome, I drew the molten crystal up to a point, twisted it, and cut it with my pliers. The work was done. The crystal cell was sealed.

Within five minutes the lifeless corpse of James Irvin lay on the cot in the great crypt of glass. And his spirit?—time would tell.

I must have stumbled from the chamber to my couch; for there I awoke after many hours of slumber.

Then began days of unceasing vigil. My will has never been feeble. I fought off the demands of nature. I scarcely slept. I might have starved but for my old servant, Marc Terriss.

He had long before been forbidden access to the upper chamber. I kept the door locked always. But many a time his insistent rapping at the stair-door roused me from my watch to partake of the food that I had forgotten. One thing my will could not conquer; that was the slow,

insidious advance of the malady that your experience will have taught you can neither be retarded nor hastened. With my hands almost gripping the infinite to impart its secrets to the world of men, the infinite itself reached out to me to take me away.

DAYs passed, and only death's ally, decay, seemed busy in the crystal case. The meager features of James Irvin became swollen and discolored. His clawlike hands festered. But his spirit stirred not.

Was it gone? Had it passed, thinner than a shadow's shadow, through the glass walls of the trap that I had set for it? Had it escaped me? Those were days of doubt; but I remembered what the mediums had told me and was steadfast. By day I watched with the sunlight that streamed through those walls of crystal. By night I kept vigil with three powerful lamps that I had provided.

And then one day at noon tide I strained forward with eyes staring and my face pressed flat against the crystal wall. Something stirred within the casket! It was only a sheet of paper, one of those paper sheets that lay on the writing table. But it moved! Aye, gently as though an infant's breath had disturbed it, it half rolled up, turned over, and fluttered to the floor. In my ears the blood pounded, roaring like the surging sea. And in my heart was a mighty triumph.

For in that sealed crypt no thing of earth could stir!

That was all. For many hours, perhaps days, no other motion disturbed the awful serenity of that crystal chamber.

It was a pencil next that Irvin's spirit essayed to move, did move. It was in the dead of night; but I was watching, waiting. I saw it. The end pencil of the row detached itself from its fellows and rolled to the table's edge, against the cleat that I had nailed there. It struggled there, rolling back and forth, upending an inch or two and falling back; and finally, balancing on the cleat, it oscillated, tipped, and fell and lay on the glass floor with broken point!

I was struck with consternation. Here was a contingency against which I was not provided. Should Irvin's blundering spirit break the points of all my pencils, how could it communicate with me?

With a devilish persistence, it seemed to me, that spirit labored to undo my work. While I looked on in torture, one by one, it let fall and broke four more pencils,

returning from each catastrophe to effect another.

Then it appeared to tire, and desisted. For another period of long hours there was no sign within the casket to tell me that it was haunted by a prisoned soul.

Ah, the mediums were right! It gained strength. When next it moved a pencil, it lifted it. Despite myself, I shuddered and the hair at my neck rose when the bit of wood and graphite stood erect on its point and staggered dizzily across the topmost sheet of paper, leaving an irregular, meaningless line behind it.

Many sheets of paper it covered with those futile lines before it learned to control a pencil and to write—for it *did* write. Always it threw its failures to the floor, to essay anew on a fresh page.

From mere lines to illegible scrawling and then to unconnected, rambling sentences the spirit progressed. Its first coherent message, and those that followed, were appeals to me for its release. Pleading, bitterness, defiance, menace; it ran the gamut of them all. It upbraided me for withholding it from its path to paradise. It pleaded eloquently with me to break its prison and set it free to go on its appointed way. It pictured to me the horror of its confinement, mewed up with the body that it could no longer tenant—the body that it had loved—now decaying into loathsome putrescence. But I was obdurate and ruthless.

Through the glass that intervened between us it read my object, divined my every thought. It taunted me and tantalized me with hints at greater knowledge that it possessed, but would not—

(Here another passage of Karker's narrative was illegible).

... I grow weaker. This chronicle must end soon. Elsewhere, in my diary, I have set down fully the messages that I received from the spirit of James Irvin. They may be confirmed from the originals; they are all there, in the crystal case. Would to God that I had yielded!

Yesterday came the last. It was—

(A number of sentences blotted out).

... God! I have tried to write it, but I cannot. It was of such appalling horror, a threat of a doom so hideous, that even I recoiled in terror. I fled that chamber as from a pestilence. I fell upon my couch here. When sense returned, I found that my limbs were paralyzed. I could not move them.

Had I all the treasures of Golconda I would barter them gladly for the strength

to ascend once more to that chamber, to enter, to break that crystal cell and set free that poor, tortured soul. You must do this! *For God's sake, break that case and set Irvin's spirit free!*

And I, though I shall lie here seemingly dead, insensate clay, I shall know! Yes; for that is a part of punishment—to know—part of the penalty that is so awful that I cannot, will not, write it to haunt fellow mortals through all their days.

Ah, you will believe me and do this thing! Go up into that chamber. It is all there. The crystal is there. The records are there. Read them—and believe.

I have dared to tamper with the great laws of being, and I shall suffer—God, the suffering! My body is perishing; but my mind works on, as clearly now as ever it did in my life—he said it would!

My pen grows heavy, too heavy....

KARKER'S writing, which had grown more tremulous and uneven toward its close, ended in a wavering line. On the carpet at Pennerton's feet lay the dead man's pen. Having read the burden of the dread record it had written, the doctor did not wonder that it had fallen from those weary, faltering fingers. He felt his own hands trembling as he laid the pages by.

Once more he heard the rhythmic ticking of the tall old clock as its tireless pendulum swung to and fro. He heard the whisperings of the trees, the fretting of leafy boughs against the clapboards of the house.

God! Could this thing be true?

Pennerton, a man strong of sense and with imagination well-disciplined, swung around in his chair and faced that closed door and felt the swimming horror of the dead man's revelation overmastering him. What monstrous thing dwelt in that silent room above him?

"My God! I dare not enter that chamber—not now!" he breathed.

The sound of his own whisper roused him. He brushed a hand across his forehead. The perspiration there was chill as tombstone damp. He left his seat and began pacing Theron Karker's library floor.

When he passed the closed door, he shuddered. Banished for this night were all thoughts of home and slumber. It were easier for him to quit this house were he fettered in chains of brass than to disregard that wild appeal that Karker had sent to him across the gap of death. But he could not do the dead man's bidding

now—not yet. He must wait for the light of day to cross the threshold and face the tenant of that chamber.

On the shelved walls of the library around him in their quiet rows stood the annals of the world's religions, the sum of human philosophies. Here were cold Kant and ponderous Schopenhauer and the visions of Swedenborg; here, Hegel and Darwin; and there, Drummond and the warmer imageries of Blavatsky, Besant and the Hindu mystics. There, too, were the printed bulwarks of the captains of Christ and Mohammed, Buddha and Confucius, and a legion of the lesser ones, the names of whom were unknown to Pennerton.

Many of them were in languages that were beyond the knowledge of the doctor and the contents of which he could only guess. This was the soul-laboratory of Theron Karker, where he had sought what he called truth in that eager, bitter search of forty years, where he had striven to analyze and classify the immortal part of mortal man.

The light burned dim in the big student's lamp at the head of the couch. Pennerton shook it to renewed life for a while; but at length it failed him utterly and went out. Then, strong man though he was, because he could not bear the flickering shadows that the moonlight played across the still face of a dead man, he quitted the library and went out on the front porch to wait with his pipe for the coming of the dawn.

As the last blue mists of the night were

fading from yard and hill and landscape, Pennerton arose and went within.

In the hours he had passed on the porch the strong nature of the man had reasserted itself; his poise had returned. The thing that he had read was preposterous. It was not; it could not be. Either Theron Karker was a madman, crazed by his morbid researches and unreined fancies, or he had played a ghastly joke when he had set his pen to that gruesome chronicle of his.

So Pennerton turned back the key in the door that he had locked and climbed the steep stairway. As he ascended the stairs he was fully convinced that he should find not a trace above of the unholy tragedy that he believed had existed only in the demented brain of the sick man.

It still was dusk in the attic chamber. The sun had not yet risen high enough to send its rays through the windows and the skylight of the cupola that topped the house and dispel the shadows of the room. A big room it was, wide and high, extending well over half the house.

Pennerton stood hesitant at the head of the stairs and strained his eyes to pierce the gloom of that dim twilight of the morning. To one side of him was a piled litter of ancient furniture, and near it a big closed cabinet of dark wood with a work-bench in front of it.

The physician peered on past the wooden cabinet. Then he saw—*It*, and a chill hand seemed to grip his heart and hold it motionless.

Its outlines gleaming, glittering, through the dim light that was full of shadows, a great case of crystal stood just below the windowed cupola! Within the walls of glass, half concealed and half defined, Pennerton could see the outlines of a small table, and nearer the floor, a long, low cot, covered over with white.

Theron Karker's words were true!

For a second time since he had set foot in this house Pennerton's hard and ingrained sensibility deserted him. He did not stay to see more, but stumbled down the narrow stair in such haste that he was near to falling headlong.

It was there! And the doctor's skepticism was shattered to its foundations. The crystal case was there! What more besides, he dared not to conjecture. Of one thing was he certain; he would not go back into that chamber until the fullest light of day shone in it; and then he would go back.

Hideous as might be the revelation that awaited him there, he would face it and have done with it. He returned to his porch and pipe to wait for the height of the sun.

FOR another hour the doctor waited. When the old lawn was bathed in sunlight and the sleepy twitterings of the birds had changed into their glad morning-song, he left the porch, ascended the attic stair and stood before the crystal chamber.

Work of a master craftsman indeed was here. Seven feet high and long and broad it stood, and domed at its top. Broad rays of the sun shone on its splendid structure through the windows and the skylights of the cupola. Playing through its shimmering sides, the beams cast their prismatic color patterns along the floor and walls of the attic room, like reflections from the facets of a monstrous gem.

A marvel; but within it a greater marvel was revealed to Pennerton's reluctant eyes.

On a small table in the center of the crypt, a table cleated around its edges, lay two hundred sheets of immaculate white paper, unmarked and undisturbed. Beside the pages in an orderly row lay two dozen lead pencils, carefully pointed; and on the floor beside the table—*an empty cot!*

That was all. There was no other thing within the chamber.

Above it swung a block and tackle, attached to the rafters. Nearby stood a large brazier, its fires long dead. An earthen

crucible on the brazier was nearly filled with glass that once had been molten, but now was hard and cold. On a rack at the brazier's side hung a blowpipe and other tools of the glass-worker's art. Three wooden stands stood about the sides of the crystal case, and on each was a large brass lamp.

All was as Theron Karker had described it; but—

His brain in a maze, his body sick with the revulsion of feeling, Pennerton turned from those things and went down the stairs. In the library he met Marc Terriss. The servant was bending over his dead master. As he straightened up, Pennerton thought his rheumy old eyes were moist. But Terriss could not voice his grief.

Seizing his prescription pad, the doctor wrote:

"Has a man named James Irvin been in this house?"

Old Marc took the paper from him and stared at it vacantly. Then a gleam of intelligence came into his eyes. He took a pencil from his pocket and scrawled:

"Yes."

"Where is he now?" wrote Pennerton, and waited breathless while the old man's tremulous fingers traced the answer.

"Dead."

"What became of his body?" persisted Pennerton.

"Buried in the churchyard. Mr. Karker brought him here. He was dying. He died one night about three weeks ago. I found him dead in his bed. Mr. Karker had been with him and had fainted on the floor beside the bed. Mr. Karker was ill too. I got him to bed. His mind was not right after that night. He used to rave at times. I never told him that Irvin had died. I did not want to worry him with that. I got the coroner, and they buried Irvin in the churchyard."

"When was Karker last able to be about—on his feet?" queried the doctor.

"He never walked again after I found him on the floor that night. He was paralyzed."

Pennerton made no more queries, but stood lost in thought. Old Marc hesitated for a moment and then shuffled away. When he had gone, Pennerton stepped to the side of the couch. He looked down at the dead man and his face grew solemn with pity. Slowly he said:

"Ah, the poor tortured spirit was not there, not in the crystal chamber, my friend. It was here"; and he laid his hand on Theron Karker's cold forehead.