



*Good God! Was I going mad? Surely
this was some awful nightmare!*

Compensation

By C. V. Tench



Compensation

Written by

C. V. Tench

Astounding Stories of Super-Science, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1930)

W.M.CLAYTON, Publisher HARRY BATES, Editor DOUGLAS M.DOLD,

Consulting editor

Transcription: Yan Viana

Published in: www.atomicvintage.com.br

Email: atomicvintage10@gmail.com

"WHY, John!" Involuntarily I halted at the entrance to my snug bachelor quarters as the flood of light my turning of the switch produced revealed a huddled figure slumped in an easy chair.

"Aye, sir, 'tis me." The man got to his feet, gnarled hands rubbing at his eyes. "An' 'tis all day that I've been waiting for you, sir. The caretaker said you'd be back soon so let me in. I must have fell asleep, an' no wonder, what with the strain an' no sleep or rest all last night."

"Strain? No rest?" I stared my bewilderment, trying at the same time to conceal the vague apprehensions occasioned by the fact that the trusted servitor of my friend, Professor Wroxton, should wait all day for me.

Hastily shedding my outer things, I bade him again be seated, sat down facing him, and asked him to explain.

"'Tis the professor, sir." The old chap peered at me with anxious, wrinkled eyes. "'Tis common enough for him to send me here on messages, sir, but to-day I've come on my own, because, sir," answering the question in my eyes, "I haven't seen sight of him since last night."

"Why—" I began.

"That's just it, sir." John took the words out of my mouth. "For twenty years my wife an' me have looked after the professor at The Grange. In all that time he's never been away at night. Whenever he had to come to town he'd tell us. Most times I'd drive him myself in the old car. But that was very seldom, sir, for Professor Wroxton had few interests outside."

"BUT, John," I protested "is there no other reason for your agitation? He might have had an urgent call, or gone out for a walk or drive by himself."

"No, sir. If you'll pardon me, sir, you're wrong. The professor was fixed in his habits. He would not go away without tellin' me. Think back, sir, you know the professor as well as me. Better, because you are his friend and I am only a servant. Although, sir," this proudly, "he always treated me as a friend."

"Go on," I urged, seeing he was not finished.

"Well, sir, a few minutes back you asked me if there was no other reason for my being upset like. There is, sir. You know, sir, that for more'n twenty years the professor has led a retired sort of life; the life of a—a—"

"Recluse," I suggested.

"That's it, sir. He only left The Grange when he had to. He was all wrapped up in some weird-like thing he was inventing. In all those years, sir, you were the only visitor who ever went into his laboratory, or stayed at The Grange for a night or more. That is, sir, until three days ago."

"Go on," I again urged, some of his perturbation communicating itself to me.

"The Grange, sir, lying as it does, fifteen miles from town an' back in its own grounds away from the road, isn't noted by many. When strangers do get into the grounds I usually gets 'em out again in short order. Three days ago, sir, a stranger drove up to the door in a fine car. He told me he was wantin' to purchase a country home. I told him The Grange was not for sale an' turned him away. He was turning his car to leave when my master came out. To my surprise, sir, he invited the stranger in. An' I'm sure, sir, because he looked so taken aback like, that the stranger had never seen the professor before."

"And after that?" I asked, now feeling decidedly uneasy.

"The stranger, sir—a Mr. Lathom he called himself—stayed on. He was in the study with the master last night. This morning there was no trace of either of them."

"But—good God, John!" I jerked to my feet, a fresh dread clutching at my heart. "What are you trying to get at? The professor and Mr. Lathom might possibly have driven away somewhere last night."

"Both cars, sir," the servant answered, "are in the garage. I bolt all the doors in the house myself every night. They were still fastened this morning. My wife an' me searched the house from cellar to garret an' hunted all over the grounds. We couldn't find a trace of the master or his guest."

"You mean to suggest then," I shot at him, "that two full grown men have completely vanished? It's absurd, John, absurd!"

I PACED the floor thinking desperately for a few minutes, conscious of the ancient's anxious eyes. I half smiled. The thing was too ridiculous for anything. Old John had grown morbid from living away from the outer world. Also, I had to admit that the atmosphere of The Grange, impregnated as it was with the lethal scientific dabbings of my friend, was exactly suited to the conjuring up of unhealthy forebodings in uneducated minds. I'd drive out to the home of my friend at once. No doubt I'd find him fit and well. He had refused to install a phone, so drive it had to be.

"John." I stopped my pacing and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm coming out to The Grange at once." His face showed his thankfulness. "I am sure," I went on as I struggled into my coat, "that we shall find the professor and his guest awaiting us. Anyway, it's time you got back to your wife and had some food."

"I hope to Heaven, sir, that you're right." With that we left the building and entered my car.

Although I had tried to dispel my fears, although I had tried to banter John out of his dread, I drove that evening as I had never driven before or since. Barely fifteen minutes later I halted my roadster at the short flight of steps leading to the main door of The

Grange. Even as we stepped from the machine the door flung open and an agitated woman hurried towards us. She was Mary, John's wife.

"Sir!" She gripped my arm and stared anxiously into my face. "'Tis glad I am that you've come. The Grange is a house of death."

In spite of myself a chill shook my whole body. Gently handing her to John, I strode up the steps.

At the open doorway I halted, the aged couple crowding on my heels, the woman still babbling about death. I couldn't blame her. All day she had been alone in that gloomy, rambling old building, wondering, no doubt, why John and I had not returned sooner.

AND gloomy the house was. Always, even when staying there at the professor's request, I had found it to be somber and depressing, as if there lurked within its walls the shadowy wings of the years-old tragedy that had caused my friend to retire to such a God-forsaken place, and there become absorbed in his scientific experiments.

Even now, as I gazed into the dimly-lighted hallway, the air seemed charged with that same malignant something I cannot describe.

Pulling myself together I strode quickly along the corridor, and flung open the study door. The lights being full on, one glance sufficed to show me that my friend was not there. Swinging on my heel, the horror I saw in the eyes of the servants, honest, healthy folks not easily frightened, conveyed itself to me. Somehow, the sight of that room, lights on, chairs drawn up to the burnt-out fire, brought home to me the fact that something serious was amiss. I chided myself for thinking John had been unduly agitated.

For a moment I stood, trying to conceal the chill coursing through my veins, puzzling what to do next. I decided to search the house thoroughly. If I found no sign of the professor or his guest, I would call in the police.

Fearfully yet willingly the aged couple led me from room to room, from attic to basement, until but one place remained—the laboratory. I hesitated for several seconds at the closed door of my friend's workroom. Not that I had never entered the—to a layman's eyes—weirdly-appointed place. I had been in many times with the professor. But this time I dreaded what I might find.

PULLING myself together, I gently tried the door. To my horror it yielded to my touch. Alive, the professor always kept it locked. A new dread assailed me, as, flinging the door wide open, I blinked in the sudden glare of powerful globes. Someone had left the lights full on!

Horried I stood and stared, knowing by their heavy breathing that the aged couple were also staring with fright-widened eyes. Afraid of what? I did not know. I only knew that the atmosphere had become even more sinister. I knew that something dreadful had taken place in that room.

Trembling with consternation I forced myself to take a few steps forward, then I again stared about me. At one end of the large room something shone brightly in the glow of the lights. Slowly I walked across to examine it: it appeared to be a glass case, almost like a show-case, about eight feet square and seven feet in height. With the mechanical actions of the mentally distraught I walked all around it. Not the slightest sign of an entrance could I see. The fact intrigued me. I tapped lightly on the highly polished surface with my fingers. It rang to my touch like cut glass.

Through the transparent surface I could see John and his wife. They were watching me furtively, wondering, no doubt, why I lingered. As I looked at them John suddenly lumbered up to the case on the opposite side. Dropping to his knees, he stared. Turning an imploring gaze to me, he pointed. His lips moved soundlessly. I followed the pointing finger with my eyes; gasped at what I saw.

Near the center of the cage, on the floor constructed of the same crystalline substance, something glittered, its brilliance almost dazzling as the light rays struck it. My face pressed close to the cold outer surface of the structure, my shocked intelligence gradually realized what that small sparkling object was. It was a magnificent diamond—and the professor had always worn a diamond ring!

IN a sudden frenzy of horror I pawed my way around the cage to where John still knelt. As I reached him he jerked his head in a numb way as he croaked, "It's a diamond, sir! The professor's!"

"But how?" I implored. "How can it be? There's no way into this thing. Perhaps he was working here, and the stone came loose from its setting. He couldn't have dropped it after the cage was completed."

"It's his diamond, sir," intoned the old man, dully. "I know it is."

Then a sudden unreasoning terror filled me. I shrank away from that shining box. It seemed to be mocking me, gloatingly, malevolently.

"Quickly!" I threw at the aged couple. "Let us get out of here! Now! At once!" They needed no second urging. I knew that they felt as I felt: the laboratory was a sepulcher!

Five minutes later I was guiding my car over the narrow road to town. I did not pause until I drew up at police headquarters. I suppose my appearance was distraught, for I was ushered into the presence of the chief without delay. In a few moments I had poured out my story. He listened with a polite calmness I found almost maddening. Leaning back in his chair, he reviewed, audibly, the facts.

"Some twenty-odd years ago your friend, Professor Wroxton, married. He was so absorbed in the pursuit of some weird invention that he neglected his bride. She ran away with another man. This man deserted her, and disappeared. The professor found her many

months later, in desperate health. Shortly afterwards she died. Your friend tried to trail the man, but failed. Shocked and saddened beyond measure, he retired to a place known as The Grange."

HE suddenly straightened up in his seat, and pointed at me a thick forefinger.

"How long have you known Professor Wroxton?"

"About ten years," I answered.

"What was he trying to invent?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"And yet you had his confidence in other matters?"

"But what has all this to do with finding out what has become of my friend?" I blurted out. "Perhaps every moment counts."

"A lot." The chief eyed me in a way I did not like. "Solely because your friend has not been seen by his servants for nearly twenty-four hours, merely because you saw what you believe to be his diamond in some kind of a glass compartment in his laboratory, you come here as distraught as a man who has something terrible on his mind. Why?"

"I can't say." I shifted uneasily under that direct stare. "Somehow I feel that something dreadful has happened to my friend."

"We do not go by feelings." The chief got to his feet. "But you have told me enough to warrant action. I want you to guide me and a couple of men to this house. Please wait here until I return." He left the room.

Sitting there awaiting his return, I tried to ponder the matter reasonably. After all, perhaps the chief was right. Merely because the professor had been absent for a few hours and I had seen what I thought to be his diamond in the laboratory, I had worked myself into a perfect fever of anxiety. I almost smiled to myself. In that businesslike office the

whole affair did seem absurd. After all the professor did not have to answer to his servants for his actions.

Heavy footsteps, announcing the chief's return, caused me to rise to my feet. A few minutes later, in company with the three officers, I was driving again towards The Grange.

WE made the return journey in almost complete silence. Occasionally the chief would shoot a question at me; but, the night air cooling my fevered brain, my replies were guarded. He realized that fact, for I felt his eyes upon me all the way. What was going on behind that broad forehead, I wondered.

Then we reached The Grange. As we mounted the steps, John, his wife herding behind him, flung wide the door. He answered the question in my eyes with a negative shake of his head, and the words, "Nothing fresh, sir."

The chief eyed him keenly, then curtly bade him lead the way to the laboratory. John hung back, his face blanched. "I can't, sir," he faltered. The chief turned to me, and, although I wanted to follow John's example, although the atmosphere of the house had again filled me with an unshakable dread, I led the way, standing back at the door to allow the officers to enter first.

With calculating gaze the chief slowly took in every detail of the stone apartment. He turned to me.

"What is there here to be afraid of?" I pointed hesitatingly towards the crystalline cage. The chief and his men strode across to it.

"You don't know how to open this?" the chief shot at me after a brief examination.

"No," I replied. "It was not here on my last visit."

"When was that?"

"Some two or three months ago", I answered. "My work occasions much traveling on my part."

THE chief and his men turned again to the cage, talking in undertones. He turned again to me.

"You notice that this thing is built in sections. One of them must be movable. Perhaps—" He paused as his eyes fell upon some wires and tubes that trailed across the floor from underneath the cage to a switchboard fastened to the wall.

"Perhaps," he repeated, "it is worked from that board." He crossed over, stared thoughtfully at the shining levers for some seconds, and moved one slightly. The result was astounding. All four of us stared with unbelieving eyes as slowly, without the faintest sound, a section of one wall slid inwards, as if guided by invisible tracks on floor and ceiling.

"Guess that's enough for now." With the words the chief backed away, almost timidly, I thought, from the switchboard, and walked to the cage. For a moment he hesitated, but he entered, and emerged with the sparkling object in his hand.

"It's the professor's," I choked, crowding close to him.

"How'd you know?" he shot back. "All unset stones look pretty much alike."

"I just know," was all I could falter.

"You 'just know'." The chief sat down on a stool and regarded me searchingly. "Mr. Thornton, when I started out with you, I thought I was on a wild goose chase or the trail of a confession. You looked exactly like a man who had either committed a serious crime, or was getting over a bad drunk. I feel sure now"—he again regarded the diamond—"that your story was not the product of an alcohol-crazed brain. Come on!" He lurched to his feet, and grasped me by the shoulder. "Come through!"

WITHOUT answering, I wrenched myself free. Over my shoulder I saw one of the policemen at the door. In the hand of the other a revolver suddenly appeared. Good God! I glared in bewilderment from one to another. Was I going mad? Surely this was some awful nightmare! What had I said to make them suspect me of having committed a revolting crime?

"Sit down!" The command came from the chief. Mechanically I found a stool, and obeyed him. "Hold your stations, boys, and listen carefully," he ordered his men. Then he turned to me.

"Professor Wroxton was a wealthy man without kith or kin?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the nature of his will?"

"Yes." Chilled to the heart, I felt the circumstantial net tightening.

"What is its nature?"

"This house and an annuity to John and his wife," I explained. "The residue of his wealth to me."

"Humph!" The chief stared at me piercingly. "And how has business been with you lately?"

Damn the man! What right had he to put me through the third degree? I felt my state of dazed horror slowly giving way to anger. I glanced around. The pistol still menaced; the man at the door had not moved. It was useless to try and evade the questions.

"For the past year," I replied, "business has been very poor. In fact, the professor advanced me some money."

"Humph!" Again that irritating, non-committal grunt.

THE chief turned in his seat and stared thoughtfully at the crystalline cage.

"And you don't know what the professor was trying to invent?"

"Only its nature," I began.

"Ah! That's better. Why didn't you tell me that before?" The chief leaned forward.

"Well," I explained, "the whole thing seems so absurd. When the professor told me how his married life had been broken up, he told me that at that time he reached the utmost depths of human suffering. Absolute zero, he called it."

"Ah!"

"The experiments he indulged in," I continued, trying to hide the shiver pimpling my flesh, "were to produce an actual state of absolute zero. It is years since he told me this. I had almost forgotten it."

"And exactly what is an absolute zero?" The chief's eyes never left mine.

"Well," I protested, "please understand that I also am a layman in these matters. According to my friend, an absolute zero has been the dream of scientists for ages. Once upon a time it was attained, but the secret became lost."

"And exactly what is an absolute zero?"

Curse the man! I could have struck him down for the chilling level of his tone. I forced myself to go on, realizing that I was damning myself at every step.

"An absolute zero is a cold so intense it will destroy flesh, bone and tissue. Remove them," my voice rose in spite of myself, "leaving absolutely no trace."

NO trace! Something attracted my eyes. The chief had opened his hand. The diamond there flashed and sparkled as if mocking me. I pulled myself together, and went on.

"It all comes back to me now. One day I came out here and found the professor terribly distraught. He told me that, with the aid of electric currents he had been able to invent the absolute zero, but he could not invent a container."

"Why?" Those eyes continued to bore into mine.

"Because—remember it is years since he told me this—there was difficulty in controlling the power. Besides destroying living things, it would destroy bricks and mortar, stone and iron. Only one substance it could not wipe out—crystalline of diamond hardness.

"I know, now!" I jumped to my feet and grabbed the chief's arm. "I know now what he meant. Fool, fool! Why did I not think of it before? This—" I swung towards the cage—"is compensation." Almost panting in my eagerness I went on:

"My friend told me that the law of compensation would atone to him for the tragedy of his youth. Absolute zero in suffering would be atoned for by a real state of absolute zero. Chief!" I whirled on him. "Don't you understand? This is the perfected dream of my friend. It is the absolute zero."

"Humph! Plausible but not convincing." I slumped back at the officer's words. "That does not explain the professor's disappearance. Even if it did, what about Mr. Lathom? And don't forget this contrivance is worked from outside. We found the diamond inside. Of course, he might have placed it there himself to test the machine," he concluded.

"Of course, that's it," I commenced. But I regretted the words when I saw suspicion flicker again in the chief's eyes. Lamely I finished, "And he has probably rushed off, in an ecstasy of triumph, to acquaint professional colleagues."

"Without unlocking any doors or taking a car, eh?"

"Mr. Thornton." The chief stood up and regarded me sternly. "As a sensible man, don't you think yourself that your story is a bit thin? The professor has disappeared. Here is a strange-looking case which you say is an absolute zero container. Whether you know, or are just jumping at conclusions, remains to be proved. But even if it is, do you think that, after perfecting such a tremendous invention, the professor would commit suicide?"

"On the contrary," I gasped, "my friend was a man of gentle, kindly disposition, but strong purpose. I should think his first action on attaining his life's ambition would be to notify me, his closest friend."

"And he didn't." Every word condemned me, and roused me to retaliate.

"Chief, I know enough of the law to know that, before you can try a man for murder, you must prove that murder has been committed." I grinned savagely. "You must have the corpus delicti. Go ahead! Find my friend or his remains, or else withdraw your charges." I grinned again, with shocked mirthlessness.

THEN I buried my head in my hands. I had called in the police to help find the professor, and they had only blundered around and asked a lot of stupid questions. The chief had practically accused me of murder—something I knew he could not prove, yet feared he might. Because I had told the chief of the locked doors and unused cars, he had confined his investigations to the house itself.

He interrupted my thoughts.

"Mr. Thornton, I am going back to town. You will remain here with my men. I advise you to get some sleep, as I shall not be able to carry out certain investigations until the morning. One of my men will spend his time searching the house and patrolling the grounds, the other one will stay here with you."

He turned away, whispered some instructions to his men, and, followed by one of them, silently left the laboratory. I started to protest, tried to follow him; the man at the door stopped me. Silently, almost grimly, he indicated a narrow cot at one end of the room. For a moment I hesitated, feeling the man's eyes upon me.

Sleep on my dead—I felt sure he was dead—friend's cot! Sleep in that fearful place! My whole being crawled with horror. I turned again to the man. His features were

unyielding. Perhaps this was more third degree. Limp with weakness and weariness, I dragged my lagging feet towards the cot.

AS long as I live I shall never forget my awakening. A uniformed figure, the chief, shaking me by the shoulder. Two other uniformed men silently watching. I sat up and gazed about me, dazedly. Bright sunlight streamed through the windows. A stray gleam struck the cage. I shrank back, trembling. And yet I had slept soundly.

"Mr. Thornton," the chief said, "I have serious news for you. I have positive proof your friend is dead."

"Dear God!" The exclamation was wrung from me as recollection returned with a rush. "Where? You can't have!"

"Here." He thrust a bundle of letters into my hands. "You acted so strangely last night you caused me to suspect you of a serious crime. Also, you overlooked several important points. You got back from a trip only last night."

Last night! Surely it was years.

"You had left instructions to have your mail forwarded," the level voice went on. "These letters were evidently one day behind you. I picked them up at your rooms this morning. I took the liberty of opening them. Read this one." He selected it.

WITH trembling fingers I extracted from the envelope a single written page. I recognized the handwriting as the professor's. I read with feverish intensity, each single word burning itself into my consciousness:

Dear Thornton:

I am writing this in anticipation. I will see that it is mailed when my plans are completed. Too late, dear friend, for you to attempt, with the best intentions in the world, to frustrate them.

You will, perhaps, recall that many years ago, when I gave you my full confidence, I told you that I felt sure that the law of compensation would atone in some measure for my loss. Thornton, old friend, I believe that, in more ways than one, my hour has arrived. Two days ago I completed the absolute zero. But even better!

A man called here to-day. Although he did not recognize me, I saw through the veneer of added years with ease. Fate, call it what you will, my visitor is the man who wrecked my happiness.

Under pretext I shall detain him. I shall induce him to enter the crystalline cage. I have already arranged a dual control which the power will destroy when I apply it from the inside of the cage.

Please destroy the cage. It will have brought compensation to me before you read this.

Good-by, dear friend!

Wroxton.

"I apologize, Mr. Thornton." The chief offered a hand which I clutched in mingled sorrow and relief. The world had lost a genius. I had lost a dear friend. But he was right. It was compensation.