

Weird Tales

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THE TENANT AT NUMBER SEVEN

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

MR. JOHN PADDON got onto the car at Charing Cross station and settled himself for a long ride into the northern part of the city. Mr. Paddon was an antiquary, and he had only just now closed his shop, having had to keep open much longer than usual to satisfy the whim of a late customer, who had, after all, bought scantily. A small, mean-looking man, Mr. Paddon reflected, who had begged him to sell him the grotesque medallion at a lower price than the tag called for. Mr. Paddon's thoughts revolved about the man, and from him moved very naturally to the Roman medallion, found, it was said, at York. Mr. Paddon had his doubts, for he was inclined to regard all antiques with a dubious eye; but, after all, it was not really his business whether they were antiques or not.

It was not often that Mr. Paddon took a late underground. When he thought of how late he would get home he made a grimace of annoyance. At the same moment he looked up and came face to face with his late customer. Mr. Paddon wondered whether he should nod; the customer, however, made no sign of recognition. The man was decidedly mean-looking, Mr. Paddon observed uncasily. Almost unconsciously he began to wish that he had sold him the medallion, even at the risk of a slight loss. He resolved to keep a careful eye on the man.

However, it was soon evident that the customer either did not remember Mr. Paddon, or did not wish to do so. Mr. Paddon's apprehension left him, and he began to scrutinize the man. He smiled discreetly at the beaver hat and the old-fashioned square spectacles, and followed the heavy black muffler from the man's throat to where it stuck out below his shabby jacket. The face above the muffler looked very old, but the thin lips were firm, and the tuft of grizzled hair on the chin was not totally white. The small eyes behind the spectacles were black. The nose was sharply aquiline, and Mr. Paddon found himself wondering how the man would look if it were slightly curved.

Quite suddenly the man looked up and stared fully at Mr. Paddon. The antiquary immediately buried his head in the *Times*. In a moment he looked cautiously over the top of the paper and found his late customer still regarding him thoughtfully. Mr. Paddon bent again to his paper; nor did he look up again until the motorman called out his station.

Mr. Paddon discovered that his late customer was also leaving the underground at St. John's Wood Road. At once his apprehension seized Mr. Paddon again. He decided hurriedly that if the man should come back to the shop on the following day he should have the medallion at his price. But when

Mr. Paddon stepped from the car he was alone; there was no one about. For a moment the antiquary entertained the idea that the man was about to ambush him, but he immediately dismissed it as absurd, and walked home.

THE following day was foggy. The air was uncomfortably heavy, and drops of water came out of the yellow and gray mist and struck Mr. Paddon as he walked swiftly from the station to his antique shop. He entered his shop with a sigh of relief, and closed the door hastily to shut out the fog that billowed inward. He drew off his gloves, and put them, together with his cane, on the counter. His greatcoat and hat he hung on a convenient suit of armor near the door. Then he settled himself on a stool behind the counter, put on his spectacles, and assumed an air of great importance. Hardly had he done so, when he discovered, not three feet from him, the customer of the night before.

Mr. Paddon stared at him for a moment, as if unable to comprehend his appearance. It was almost as if he had materialized from the suit of armor near the door, toward which Mr. Paddon involuntarily looked. Mr. Paddon had not heard the door open. With a half-apologetic smile, the antiquary returned his attention to his customer.

"Well, sir," he began, "I suppose you've come after that medallion?"

"If I could have it for five pounds, sir, I'd take it." The man's face did not change; he stared steadily at Mr. Paddon.

"Well, sir, I'd about decided last night that you could have it at five pounds—though it's a sacrifice, sir, and I'll never do it again."

The customer's expression did not change.

"But," continued Mr. Paddon, somewhat flustered, "I don't suppose I'd ever have the chance to sell it

again for some time; so it's just as well that it goes. By the way, what is your name?"

"Gaunt. Benjamin Gaunt."

"And address?"

"Seven, St. John's Wood Terrace."

"It's just in case of something turning up regarding it—you can't ever tell in this business. It's always better to have a record."

Mr. Paddon placed the medallion on the counter and reached for paper in which to wrap it. The customer reached for the medallion.

"You needn't wrap it; I'll take it just this way."

"As you please, sir." Mr. Paddon smiled; the customer nodded curtly and deposited several coins upon the counter. Then he turned and walked quickly to the door. Mr. Paddon took up the coins. The door closed softly.

Mr. Paddon stopped in the act of depositing the coins in the register to look at them more closely. They were coins of Queen Victoria. He glanced to where Mr. Gaunt had rested against the counter. There were no marks there—nothing at all to indicate that Mr. Gaunt's clothing had been dampened by the London mists.

THE door of Mr. Paddon's antique shop opened to admit a middle-aged man, who entered with a great bustle and noise, and almost knocked Mr. Paddon's walking-stick from the suit of armor. From a pocket of his greatcoat he took a catalogue, which Mr. Paddon recognized as one that he had sent out some days before. Mr. Paddon eyed his customer over his spectacles, and fixed a benevolent stare on his visitor's chubby red cheeks.

"Mr. Paddon," the customer began, "I'm James Conroyd—you've got my name on your mailing-list. Some days ago you sent out a catalogue in which you describe a Roman medallion—the particular medallion

that I've been searching for half my life. I've good reason to believe that it's the very medallion I lost years ago. Where did you get hold of it, by the way?"

"Why, I—I haven't any idea, Mr. Conroyd. Perhaps I could look it up, but it's pretty hard to keep account."

"Never mind. Let me see it, will you?"

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Paddon, looking rather futile, "but I sold it not ten minutes ago."

Mr. Conroyd opened his eyes wide. "You sold it? To whom, if I may ask?"

"To a Mr. Benjamin Gaunt."

"Why, that's the man I bought it from! The only other man who was looking for the medallion gets here before I do! You see, Mr. Paddon, some years ago, when I was little more than a kid, I bought the thing from Gaunt for five pounds."

"That's what I sold it to him for!"

"That's a coincidence. After I'd bought it from him, he was continually pestering me to sell it back to him. I never would have sold it to him. But one day I lost it." Suddenly Mr. Conroyd's face underwent a change. He stared at Mr. Paddon, who smiled respectfully. Then suddenly his face flushed angrily. "Say, listen! I don't know what your idea is, but you faked this fellow's name. Benjamin Gaunt died five years ago!"

Mr. Paddon looked his dismay. He felt suddenly horribly useless, and hastened to assure Mr. Conroyd that he had sold the medallion to Mr. Benjamin Gaunt.

"No, no, Mr. Conroyd. I sold it to a man who gave me that name."

"Did he give you his address?" asked Mr. Conroyd, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Yes. It's seven, St. John's Wood Terrace."

"Could you go out there with me, Mr. Paddon? I'm bound to have that

medallion—no matter what I pay for it."

"Well?"

"I'll pay you for your time."

Mr. Paddon looked dubiously at the fog outside, then back at his eager visitor. "Yes," he said, "I'll go."

SEVEN, St. John's Wood Terrace, was not difficult to find. Everyone seemed to know of it, and when the antiquary and his customer asked about it, they were treated to curious stares, and in some cases, discreet smiles. Seven, St. John's Wood Terrace, was a deserted house in its last stages. Not a window-pane remained in the ramshackle structure, and there were no doors. The shingles were green with moss, and the chimney had crumbled long before. There was no longer a discernible path leading to the door.

"Well," said Mr. Paddon, "should we go in?"

"I suppose we might as well, seeing we've come this far."

The two men hesitated a moment, and looked about them and back at the house, before they walked slowly up to the structure. They entered. Their footprints broke into the dust of years as they went from room to room.

In a little chamber in the back of the house Mr. Conroyd found the Roman medallion. On the table were marks disturbing the dust, where the medallion had been thrown. In one corner of the room lay an old beaver hat, damaged beyond repair. There were no footprints in the room, nor could the men find where the medallion had entered.

"Certainly Benjamin Gaunt's," said Mr. Conroyd, picking up the hat.

Quite near the table, covered with dust, Mr. Paddon noticed a black muffler. Some distance away lay all that was left of a pair of square spectacles.