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THE TENANT

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE cab that brought him had long since vanished over the crest of the distant hill, and still Gerald Paxton stood and stared at the low English country home that rambled away into a charming rock garden at the left. The door of the residence was partly open, suggesting perhaps that he was expected. Through the French window he could see Michael Sanbury busily writing at the center table. From the rock garden at the left came Michael's right-hand man, whose name, Paxton remembered, was Jenkins.

"Hallo, there. You're Mr. Paxton, I suppose. Mr. Sanbury's been looking for you. You're to go right in, sir."

"All right, Jenkins."

"You'd better go through the French windows, sir; I think Mr. Sanbury's in his library."

Mr. Paxton made his way slowly up the flagstone walk to the open windows. Jenkins looked meditative-ly at the trowel in his right hand, and began to meander casually back to the rock garden. For a moment Paxton hesitated before the windows; then he walked into the room.

He had progressed almost to the spot where Michael Sanbury sat, surrounded by sheaves of paper on all sides, before he was noticed.

"My dear Gerald! What a surprise!"

"Glad to see you again, Michael."

"Sit down, anywhere."

"I thought I'd have to run down here and see why you've secluded yourself."

"I'm taking life easy now, Gerald."

"This isn't by any means your place, is it?"

"It is. Surprized, aren't you? No more than I was when I first learned of it."

"How did you get it?"

"I inherited it by my grandfather's will. You should have seen it when I got here; I could have palmed it off as an antique ruin. With the help of Jenkins I've made a fair place out of it."

"I noticed. Especially your rock garden."

"Yes, I insisted on the rock garden; I had plenty of facilities, in the way of rocks."

"How old do you think the building is?"

"I haven't the remotest idea. I can remember it vaguely during my grandfather's day."

"I can't recall ever having heard of your grandfather."

"I don't think you did. He disappeared from this house when I was very young. His disappearance, by the way, gave rise to a peculiar rumor to the effect that this old house has an unseen tenant. You see, the conditions of my grandfather's disappearance are rather odd, to put it mildly. He vanished from the house while every possible exit from both house and grounds was guarded—not, of course, by hired guards, but by circumstantial guards. Nothing was ever heard of him."

"A curious story. It reminds me very much of the disappearance of

old Roxy Camburn, the pseudo-scientist."

"It *should* remind you; Roxy Camburn was my grandfather, my mother's father."

"My dear Gerald!"

"He wasn't, if you happen to remember, just exactly a reputable character."

"I do recollect that there were ugly rumors current about him. Nothing was ever proved, so far as I remember."

"No, nothing was ever proved; that's true. His name was connected with the disappearance of several small children from the countryside."

"It was about the time of the agitation about vampires, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I believe it was."

Michael Sanbury rose slowly and yawned. "Come, let me show you to your room. I think Jenkins is out in the garden."

"Yes. I saw him there when I came; in fact, he directed me to your library."

The two men moved slowly from the room.

IT WAS not exactly the kind of house Gerald Paxton had pictured to himself. Not that he was disappointed; he wasn't. There was a curious air of dejection about the place, in spite of its beautiful surroundings and its perfectly charming appearance. Michael had given him a grand old room, which had once been the study of his eccentric grandfather. It had been refurnished in excellent harmony, with a curiously feminine attention to detail. The two large windows, which overlooked a long stretch of rolling country, were hung with chintz and what looked to be muslin, but proved to be muslinette. Close to the window-seats stood a transformation chair, and to the right of this a smoking-stand, with place for books or magazines, or whatever one wished to put there. The bed was swollen with softness, and it

looked very much as if the puffy coverings would envelop him if he slept therein. But he did sleep in the bed, and a particularly refreshing sleep it was, so he told his host the following morning.

"I'm glad," said Michael, "that you liked it. I thought that perhaps you might be disturbed in the night. You weren't, were you?"

"I don't think I ever slept better. I heard nothing to disturb me. As a rule, I sleep quite soundly. What made you ask?"

"Jenkins has a most annoying habit of puttering about at all hours. He's disturbed me once or twice, and I've reprimanded him, but it doesn't seem to bother him. He knows I wouldn't discharge him, for he's priceless as a man of all work."

"He's been with you for years, hasn't he?"

"Twelve years. My sister has tried to get him from me; she's too conscious of his worth to please me."

The two men rose and strolled out into the rock garden.

"There's one thing," Michael resumed, "that I have against Jenkins: he believes that silly rumor of an unseen tenant in the house."

"How odd! He seems a sensible man."

"He is, Gerald; too sensible. Nothing I can say will change his mind in the least. He's bound that there's something else in this house; he doesn't say somebody, but something. That's why he putters about so much during the night; he's determined to discover the tenant."

"How droll! Can't you suggest anything that might explain it—his attitude, I mean?"

"I've been thinking, Gerald. And I wondered whether my grandfather has anything to do with this. You know, Jenkins worked under him two years. Odd as it is, he refuses to speak to me about him."

"Well, your Jenkins is proving somewhat of a mystery."

"He is a mystery; twelve years with him, and I know no more of him now than I ever did. At first he objected violently to my rejuvenating this place, but when he saw that I was fully as determined to do so as he was bound that I should not, he gave in without another word. Nor has he said anything since."

"I wonder what he'd tell me if I asked him?"

"Why not try asking him?"

"I think I shall; it won't do any harm."

Two days later the inimitable Jenkins was being persistently annoyed by Gerald Paxton, who had taken it upon himself to fathom the mystery. The two men stood in the rock garden, Jenkins sedulously trimming a rose tree, Paxton standing near, watching him.

"Is it true, then, that the old man kidnaped these children for his experiments?"

"Utter rot, sir; the old man wasn't half so bad as he was painted. He wouldn't harm a living thing if he could help it. Sometimes, though, he couldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"He used to tell me that he needed living things to feed his pet."

"What sort of pet did he have?"

"There you have me, sir. Just between you and me, sir, the old man was a bit daft. I never did see that pet, but I did hear some queer things at night. All sorts of noises there were, and when I asked the old man about them, he used to laugh and say that he had been feeding his pet."

Jenkins stopped and glanced nervously toward the house. He bent toward Paxton.

"It's odd, sir, but I've heard these noises since the old man died, while young Mr. Sanbury's been in the house."

"What sort of noises were there?"

"Different kinds, and they're hard to describe. One, though, I heard all

the time—a kind of wet, sloshy noise, as if someone were throwing a soaked sponge on the floor."

"Did you ever search the house, Jenkins?"

"I've searched that house so often that I could find my way through it blindfolded. I've gotten up more than once at night, and I've gone from garret to cellar, and all the good it's done me is to make Mr. Sanbury suspicious."

"Where do these noises seem to come from?"

"It's hard to say, but I think it's the cellar, or below the cellar if that be possible."

Michael Sanbury emerged from between the French windows and started for the rock garden. Jenkins bent again to the rose tree. Paxton moved to pick a rose.

"I say, Jenkins; suppose we search the house tomorrow while Mr. Sanbury's gone to the village?"

"He'll ask you to go with him."

"I'll be indisposed."

"Very well, sir."

Michael Sanbury came up. He took Paxton by the arm and moved with him to the farther extremity of the rock garden.

"Have you discovered anything?" he asked.

For a moment Paxton hesitated. Then he spoke.

"No. Singularly enough, he doesn't want to speak about him."

"Just what I thought."

"By the way, Michael, what sort of thing did your grandfather go in for?"

"As far as I remember it was bacteria culture."

"Oh! yes; it was he who wrote the paper that called down the wrath of Sir Crichton Crookes and his school."

"I don't remember."

"Yes, undoubtedly it was he."

IT WAS already late in the afternoon of the following day, when Jenkins and Paxton ended their methodical search in the cellar of Michael Sanbury's home. They had discovered nothing, and Paxton was quite ready to regard with amusement his credulous belief in Jenkins. Jenkins, firm in his belief, stood looking at the rear wall of the cellar with narrowed eyes, his head cocked a bit to one side, his thin lips pressed firmly together.

"It occurs to me, sir, that the cellar was larger than this when I worked under Mr. Camburn."

"That wall does look newer than the other three. Suppose you tap it?"

Jenkins was already at the wall, pounding upon it. It gave back a hollow sound that seemed to echo from within.

"Well, there's a hollow space behind it, all right. What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't think there's much danger of Mr. Sanbury's return for some time yet. I think we'd be safe in removing one or two stones to give us some idea of what's behind this wall. We can always put them back again."

"Very well, then; let's get at it."

Jenkins went upstairs and returned in a few minutes with a crowbar and a sledge-hammer. The two men attacked the wall. In five minutes a hole large enough for a man to crawl through had been made in the wall; a few seconds later the men were standing in the space disclosed, regarding a large, deep pit in the earth.

"Flash your light into that pit, Jenkins."

A stream of light lit up the almost perpendicular walls of the pit and the black slimy bottom.

"Mud!" from Jenkins.

"It looks like black jelly."

"Ugh!"

"That's what has been causing your noises, Jenkins. Bubbles rising

through that slime, or perhaps suction."

"Perhaps it is, sir. It's quite possible, at any rate."

"Listen. There's someone walking about above. Mr. Sanbury's returned. I'll go up to him. You put the stones back; we'll wall it up later."

Gerald Paxton ran up the stone steps and down the hall into the library. Michael Sanbury stood by the table, drawing off his gloves. He turned.

"I've sold my novel, Gerald. To Sadler's for five hundred pounds."

"Congratulations, Michael. I haven't been exactly idle all day. In fact Jenkins and I have discovered the mysterious tenant of this place."

"No!"

"It was nothing but a mud-bottomed pit walled off from the cellar. Jenkins had been hearing noises, caused by suction in the slime and mud; that's why he believed in the tenant story."

"Well, that's a relief. And, by the way, I inquired about my grandfather down at the village. It appears he is generally hated there. One old man, formerly a university professor, pointed out to me that the man was unquestionably insane. He says my grandfather entertained the belief that bacteria could be bred, and could be grown into an entity which would grow in proportion to its food. My grandfather is said to have believed that live food advanced the growth of a bacterium entity, and when some children disappeared in the locality (they were probably carried off by gipsies), it was thought that my insane ancestor had kidnaped them. Some action was actually taken against him, but nothing was ever proved."

"That helps to clear up our little mystery."

"It wasn't so deep after all, was it?"

THE strokes of a clock somewhere in the house came clearly to Gerald Paxton as he lay half awake, half asleep in his bed. He heard an owl call somewhere outside the window, and a moment later another. His watch ticked sharply on his arm.

The night was warm, and Gerald Paxton had lain for some time feigning sleep. It was already after midnight. Dimly to his ears came a soft sound, as of a soaked sponge being thrown to the floor. He listened. The sound increased in intensity; it seemed to be coming toward him. He started, and strove in his dream state to think of the day's discovery, of the suction of the mud in the pit, when suddenly he heard a new sound—a soft padding, as if someone were walking down the hall. Immediately alert, he thought of Jenkins, and of his nocturnal investigations. He wondered whether Michael heard. It dawned upon him at last that the soft spongy sound was annoyingly close, and he half rose in his bed, and strained his ears to listen. Suddenly, clearly, came a shot, and immediately after a sound as of a great mass of jelly sliding down the stone steps into the cellar.

Gerald Paxton arose, put on his slippers and snatched his dressing-gown. He switched on the light in the hall and ran to Michael's room. Michael, pale, wide-eyed, came from his room with a flashlight in one hand and a revolver in the other.

"It was Jenkins," said Michael, pointing down the hall to Jenkins' room. Through the open door they could see Jenkins' empty bed in the glare of the electric light.

"But what on earth is the man doing at this hour of the night?"

"I'm used to hearing him about—but shooting! It's beyond me. I didn't even know the man had a weapon."

"He seems to have gone into the cellar."

"I guess there's nothing for us to do but follow him."

Michael leading, they moved off down the hall, and on into the dark cellar. Michael flashed his light about until finally it came to rest upon an ominous aperture in the rear wall, and a cluster of scattered stones below it. The darkness of the pit seemed to come out to meet the light. Without warning Paxton snatched the light from Sanbury and ran forward through the aperture into the enclosure. On the ground, almost at the edge of the pit, lay a revolver. The barrel of the weapon was coated with a slimy, jellylike substance, clearly like to the mud at the bottom of the pit! Paxton stared at it with unseeing eyes. His flashlight wavered; it illuminated for a moment the mud of the pit, from the undisturbed surface of which came a loud sucking noise.

Blindly, Gerald Paxton ran from the pit into the arms of Michael, who had come to the broken wall.

"My God! My God! Cement, Michael; we must have cement to fix this wall!"

"But Jenkins? Where is Jenkins?"

"We must leave this place at once, Michael."

"Without——?"

"Yes, yes; at once. My God! The tenant got Jenkins!"

