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A House to Let

by Winnow Hardy

Paul only had today to pick one of the two houses, to suit him and his wife Ilse and their five-month old baby Kristin. One was a nice-enough looking semi in the outskirts, the other a cottage in a village six miles out. The semi was predictably ordinary, with a reasonably sized garden. He and the agent then drove to the more interesting cottage, down a track from the village.

“It looks in need of paint,” he commented.

“That’s why the rent’s so reasonable,” replied the agent.

As they entered, Paul felt a chill, an atmosphere of abandon. However, the rooms were a good size, and the garden large with woods behind.

Then he noticed a door at the end of the hall with a heavy bolt on it.

“Where does that go?” he asked.

“Oh that’s just the cellar,” replied the agent, making to leave.

“Strange,” thought Paul, “if something valuable was kept there, you’d need a padlock, not a bolt.”

He then headed to the village pub for a snack and a think. An elderly couple sitting in the corner looked up when he entered. He explained his mission to the landlord, saying, “It doesn’t look as if anyone’s lived there for a while”.

“People don’t seem to stay there long,” he answered, looking a little uneasy.

Puzzled, Paul decided to go back for another look. He went straight to the cellar door, drew back the bolt and stepped into total darkness. He climbed cautiously down and in the gloom discerned a clutter of boxes, a broken table, an old-fashioned pram.

He tried to brush a tangle of cobwebs off his sleeve. They seemed to be enclosed round something soft. He pulled the webs apart, to find inside a tiny pink baby-bootee. Horrified, he stumbled up the steps and made for the pub. The elderly couple were just leaving, and the woman came up to him.

“It’s not surprising no one stays there after what happened,” she said meaningfully.

“Oh, what was that?” asked Paul faintly.

“In the fifties it was,” she said, “young couple with a five-month baby. Wife was lonely so she came to the pub. Nice lady, Swedish I think. Well, her husband, was a strange one, he didn’t like that, so he locked her in the cellar as a punishment. Then he had a heart attack and died. Landlord found the bodies a month later. Terrible it was...”

Paul, nauseous, fled to his car.