

Lock and Keys

“There’s a pub here with an unusual name,” said Jim as they approached the village of Selscombe Magna, “The Lock and Keys.”

Jane and Jim were on holiday in the west country; they were driving around as the fancy took them, staying in country inns. Jim was intrigued by unusual or quirky pub names. Jane was sure he picked villages just because of this.

“Lock and Keys?” said Jane, “That’s a bit spooky, isn’t it? Remember that thing on Netflix we watched during the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021?”

“Thank goodness those days are over,” said Jim as they drove into the village. “But that ‘Locke’ was a surname; it had an ‘e’ at the end. Besides,” he added, “the series was called ‘Locke and Key’, singular.”

“Maybe,” said Jane, “but it was *keys* that opened magical doors, gateways to other dimensions.”

“Yes, yes,” laughed Jim. “Gateways to other dimensions! There are no such things in the real world. You find them only in science fiction and children’s stories like the Narnia books.”

The village, despite its name, was not large and they soon found the ‘Lock and Keys’ near the village green, where a cricket match was being played. It was obviously an old building: half-timbered, Tudor style with not a right angle to be seen.

“It’s very quaint,” said Jim, “I like the look of it. We’ll book in here, if we can.”

“I don’t know,” murmured Jane. “These old buildings always have a ghost or two – bound to after a few centuries. And the name still spooks me.”

Jim just laughed.

They stopped there and went in. There were spare rooms, so Jim booked a double room for the night, despite Jane’s misgivings. They bought a beer each and decided to sit outside in the sun and watch the cricket match. They also brought out a leaflet they found about the inn.

It was an old building and in fact pre-dated the Tudors since it went back to the early 15th century and the reign of Henry IV. It was originally known as ‘Lucking’s Bees’, named after a Betty Lucking who kept hives of bees and brewed her own mead and braggot (or honey ale). In the 17th century the name was found recorded as ‘Locking’s Quays’ (‘quays’ being spelt with initial ‘qu’) and it said some people claimed that an underground passage led from the inn down to quays at the coast which were used by smugglers. No evidence of this passage had been found, though it is quite likely that the inn was involved in the brandy smuggling of the 17th century. By the 19th century the name ‘Lock and keys’ was well established. Some speculated that it referred to the lock and keys of the jails where smugglers finished up. But that was probably fanciful. In earlier times hanging or transportation were the usual punishments.

Reading this and talking about it, as well the occasional look at the cricket, took time and meant another beer each to help them along. What with the drink and the leisurely warm afternoon, Jane mellowed and became more reconciled to staying there.

When the cricket had finished, they decided they needed a bit of exercise before thinking about an evening meal. They walked across the green and found a path that led up to the cliffs. They stood there and looked out over the sea and wondered if the smugglers’ quays were *really* there below them. But there was no obvious way down and they sauntered back.

After going to their room to shower and freshen up, they went down for their evening meal. It was very good and they whiled away the evening with a drink or two in the bar, listening to and occasionally joining in the chat at this obviously popular inn. Eventually they made their way up to their room.

Despite her misgivings earlier in the day, Jane was happy and content. She soon dropped off and slept well until the morning. Jim, however, was more troubled. Eventually he did drop off to sleep, but his sleep was fitful.

In the early hours of the morning as he lay awake Jim saw moonlight glinting on a key to a cupboard he had not noticed last evening. "That's strange," he thought.

He got up and wandered over. He turned the key and opened the cupboard. What happened next, dear reader, we are not certain. Did he indeed pass into another dimension? Did he find the entrance to the legendary smugglers' tunnel? Did he for some unexplained reason simply creep out of the inn without any one noticing? What we *do know* is that he disappeared.

Jane was surprised when she woke up next morning and found Jim was not there. She supposed he must have got up early and that, feeling restless but not wanting to disturb her, he had gone for an early morning walk. Yet his clothes were still there.

As she slowly got up, she noticed a cupboard door open which she thought odd. But it was only an empty cupboard; she pushed the door closed though, for some reason – maybe thinking of 'Locke and Key' on Netflix – she did not touch the key.

Eventually Jane made her way down to breakfast, thinking perhaps she might see Jim there. But she did not. She asked if anyone had seen him or had he gone out early. But no one had seen him. The staff made a search of their room and of all the empty rooms; but Jim was nowhere to be found.

As the morning wore on and there was no sign of Jim, the staff of the inn notified the police. A search of the village was made; but there were no signs of Jim and no one had seen anyone matching his description that morning. As Jim was an adult and there was no sign of foul play, there was little the police could do; as they explained, if Jim had decided to leave Jane without telling her and slipped away quietly, that was up to him. She explained about his clothes being left and said how unlikely it was that he would slip away in his pyjamas especially as their car was still there. But the police response was that he most likely had an accomplice, a lady-friend perhaps, who had both car and clothes waiting. But as no one had heard a car arriving in the night or early morning, Jane was not convinced.

In the end, Jane reluctantly packed their stuff and left. The police said they would keep their ears and eyes open and if any sign of anything untoward occurred they would let her know. There was no point now in continuing the holiday and Jane returned to their home in the Midlands. She did not know what she feared the most: that Jim had met an untimely end or that he had run off with some other woman.

The days passed, and days turned into weeks. About two months later Jane was surprised and shocked to see a report on the television news about someone whom a dog-walker had come across early in the morning as she walked her dog on the beach. It was man found wondering in a dazed state, dressed only in pyjamas and dressing gown. He apparently had no memory how he got there and, indeed, no memory of his name or who he was or where he was from. All he did, the reporter said, was to mumble something incomprehensible about aliens, but nothing that made sense.

The figure dressed only in pyjamas and dressing gown and helplessly wandering on the beach reminded Jane of Arthur Dent in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy; but she recognized the man

immediately: it was Jim.

But the beach where he had been found was some twenty miles or so away from Selscombe Magna where he had disappeared two months before. It was very odd. Where had he been all this time? How had he got there? Why *was* he still in his pyjamas and dressing gown?

When they were eventually reunited, Jim did not know who Jane was and still had no memory of anything before he had been found wandering on the beach; indeed, he did not even remember that clearly. But gradually over the coming weeks and months, odd items in the house began to recall vague memories; and the psychiatrist that saw him each week began to help him restore those memories.

It took almost a year, however, before he fully recovered or, rather, recovered as fully as he was ever going to. For, dear reader, he never remembered what happened in the two months between his disappearance from the 'Lock and Keys' in Selscombe Magna and being found wandering on a beach twenty miles away; and from that day forward, Jim suffered from a morbid dread of keys, or kleidiphobia. But Jane did not mind; she was just glad to have Jim back.

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