FOR SALE OR TO LET.

By Lucy Randall Comfort

It wanted just four weeks to the 1st of May, nd the real estate agent sat in his little wooden entry-box, his chair tipped back against the wall, is feet skillfully poised on the edge of his desk, hile his eyes were fixed pensively on a swinging obweb on the ceiling overhead.

"Business is awful dull this year," said the eal estate agent. "Never knew it so stagnant."

"We've only let thirteen houses and sold two his season," said his clerk, who performed the dditional duties of office-boy, and sold coals and vood on commission, and who was just now surreptitiously reading a novel behind the fat folds f the ledger.

"And them two sales wasn't sales—they was othing but exchanges," sighed the agent.

"Folks must move," said Eben Joyce, the clerk, vith cheerful alacrity.

"Then why ain't they about it?" said Mr. Pratt, the real estate agent.

At that very moment, however, a shadow darkned the square of yellow April sunshine that vas doing its best to gild the unswept floor. A portly old gentleman, with a gold-headed cane, buff waistcoat, and a clean-shaved double chin, stood on the threshold.

"Is this Mr. Philo Pratt's office?" said he.

The real estate agent scrambled to his feet at once. "Your most obedient, sir," said he, while the clerk pocketed the novel and tried to look very busy indeed. "How can I have the pleasure of serving you?"

"I'm going to move," said the stranger.

"Indeed!" said the agent, busily rubbing his hands together.

"I'm from New York," explained the old gentleman. "My name is Drake. I'm tired of the city, and I contemplate an entire change of location."

"Just so," said the agent. "A most excellent idea."

"And," added Mr. Drake, "I wish to rent a desirable residence for one year, with the privilege of purchasing. Can you recommend any such?"

"Joyce," said Mr. Pratt, catching up his hat, harness the horse at once, and see that the buggy top is properly dusted off and the wheels free of mud. Any such, my dear sir? Scores of such. The neighborhood of Annan Water is, so to speak, alive with 'em."

But late in the afternoon the old horse and his two passengers came back, weary and dispirited. Not one of the "desirable places" shown by Mr. Pratt had suited the stout old gentleman's capricious fancy.

"I'm sure, sir, I don't know what more you can ask," said the real estate agent, almost in despair.

"I *can't* make you comprehend my idea," said the old gentleman, in a passion. "I don't want any of these new-fangled villas and modern bandboxes. I want Antiquity. I want Age. I must have something mysterious, secluded, out of the common channel. Do I succeed in making myself understood?"

"Them ain't the kind of houses we have on our list," said the real estate agent, in some disgust. But the clerk looked up from the slate on which he had been conducting a private game of fox and goose.

"How would Desperation Hall do, sir?" said he, in a confidential under-tone to his principal.

"Desperation Hall!" repeated Mr. Pratt, aghast.

"Desperation Hall!—a taking name, that?" said the old gentleman, eagerly. "Where is it? What is it?"

"It's antique enough to suit any one," said Mr. Pratt, slowly chewing a straw, "and tumble-down enough, and mysterious enough; but I don't s'pose any one would want to *live* in it."

"I should s'pose it was just the sort of place the gen'leman would want, sir," said Eben Joyce, plausibly.

"Let's go and look at Desperation Hall, by all means," said Mr. Drake, seizing his gold-headed cane and replacing his hat on his head.

"But it's almost dark, sir," pleaded the real estate agent.

"Hang the dark!" exclaimed the stout old gentleman.

"'If thou wouldst view fair Melrose aright,
Go visit it by the pale moonlight.'

Come on! come on! don't let's lose time!"

The real estate agent, not being a literary man, was unacquainted with the words of the late Sir Walter Scott.

"I don't know as there's any moon to-night," said he, "and Melrose Station ain't on the Hudson River road; it's on the Harlem line."

"Yes, yes, exactly," said the old gentleman, coughing. "Let's go at once."

"I don't b'lieve you'll like it," said Pratt.

"Suppose you allow me to judge for myself on that point," sarcastically observed Mr. Drake; and so they set off without further parley.

Desperation Hall was some three miles off the high-road—a long gray stone house, big enough for a barrack, and lonely enough for a prison. It stood on the very brink of a brawling stream, shut in by moss-enamelled rocks, and overshadowed by a dense growth of Norway spruces, cedars, and drooping hemlocks. Most of the window-panes were broken; green mould covered the door-stone, and as you entered the porch a sort of chill seemed to descend on you, as if you were passing under the arch of a vault. In the center of the weedy garden a mildewed statue had tumbled down into the box border, and broken its most prominent features, a sun-dial was sunk in one-sided imbecility in a wilderness of rank-growing blue irises, and straggling rose-trees had woven a succession of man-traps across the path.

"De-lightful!" said Mr. Drake, exultantly, as he looked at the frowning gray façade of the house on one side, the blood-red glimmer of the twilight on the other, and listened to the restless roar and rush of the chafing stream, and the sorrowful murmur of the pines overhead.

"Tastes differ," said the real estate agent, with a little shudder, as he buttoned his coat closer.

"Why didn't you bring me here before?" said Mr. Drake.

"Didn't suppose the place would suit," said the agent.

"It suits exactly," declared Mr. Drake. "Here I find everything that I require—the Mysterious, the Uncertain, the Possible, the—"

"It's very much out of repair, sir," suggested Mr. Pratt, poking with his stick at a loose stone in the cellar wall.

"That signifies nothing," cheerfully uttered the old gentleman. "Ruin suggests antiquities. What wolud Thebes be without its ruined columns, Rome without its Coliseum?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," said the real estate agent.

"Let's go in," said Mr. Drake. "You've got the key, haven't you?"

"I'm afraid the house is damp, sir," said his cicerone, with evident reluctance.

"Well, well, we won't stay long," said Mr. Drake, his joyous alacrity increasing with every step. "I shall have roaring wood fires upon every hearth before I've been in possession twenty-four hours. Thirty acres of woodland with the place, I think you mentioned? Dear me! wood will be no consideration at all. So this is Desperation Hall, is it? But why 'Desperation'?"—stopping short in a great empty room whose fireplace was like a cavern, and whose foliated plaster cornice, once elaborately wrought, was crumbling away.

"I don't know, sir," said the agent. "The country people took to calling it so. Because it looked so gloomy, I suppose."

"Ah!" said Mr. Drake, with a chuckle. "Gloom is elevating. Any stucco bird-house on the top of a hill can look cheerful, but it takes a rare combination of circumstances to make a place thoroughly gloomy."

The real estate agent began to feel a little uneasy. If the gentleman was crazy—and it certainly began to look a little like it—it was no very comfortable thing to be shut up with him in a solitary house, deep sunk in a glen, with no nearer neighbor for three good miles than the owls and the foxes. He put his hands in his pockets, and drew his head turtlewise down into his coat collar, as he sidled toward the door.

"I came from the land of shadows."

"Hadn't we better be going?" said he.

"Nice big rooms," said the old gentleman, looking around. "Wide hall, with plenty of room for an oaken settle and a pair of deer's antlers. Dear me! I couldn't have suited myself better. Now if I could only be certain of a ghost."

"Of a—what?" said Mr. Pratt, with a nervous start, as a piece of plaster dropped with a hollow sound at his feet.

"You don't happen to know, do you," said the old gentleman, suddenly button-holing the agent, and speaking with extreme earnestness, "whether any one ever died suddenly in this house? Or if there ever was a—murder committed here?"

"No sir, I don't," said Mr. Pratt, vehemently struggling to escape.

"Ah, well, it don't matter," said the old gentleman. "Only I should have liked a ghost. You must know, my good friend," he added, complacently, "that I am an author. I wield the gray-goose quill—he! he! he! And if I could once see