A SINGULAR TENANT

A HAWK AND DOVE MYSTERY

LONDON, 1957.
HE NEEDED A LODGER.
HE FOUND A MYSTERY.



PATRICK WALLIS HICKEY

Dedication

To my wife Rita, for her patience and understanding during the many times I have disappeared for hours into my make-believe world of mystery and imagination.

A SINGULAR TENANT

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This is an original work of fiction. Simon Harlech and John Ransome are original creations of the author.

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John Ransome Journal

PART ONE

The Man in Baker Street

The winter had been an expensive one, and I could no longer afford the Baker Street apartment on my own. Reluctantly, I placed an advertisement seeking a respectable lodger, expecting little more than some relief from my financial worries and perhaps the occasional conversation over supper. Had I known who would eventually answer that advertisement, I suspect I would have torn the notice down before the ink had fully dried. Instead, a few days later, a person walked into my life and turned it completely upside down.

- John Ransome, 1957

Chapter One

A Very Unusual Tenant

y name is John Ransome, and I have a story to tell. It is old in my memory now, but the details are still fresh enough to bring a smile to my face as I remember those events which happened so long ago.

It began with my decision to take in a lodger, and as a result my life was never to be the same again. What would my future have been, I wonder, if I had not met… Well, I am already guilty of allowing myself to ramble on and must set down a clear and concise record. I have learned from a master that to speculate on the unknown is a fruitless exercise, and so I will begin this narrative with my earliest recollections.

It was the 30th December 1957, and a gloomy morning as I looked out of my window overlooking Baker Street in the heart of London, I could hear none of the usual sounds which normally came from that busy thoroughfare. The year 1957 was coming to an end, but for the weather, the streets would normally have been filled with shoppers looking for bargains.

The rain had deadened the sound of traffic, and only a muted rumble reached my ears and those of my companion, who shared the two-bedroom flat with me. I glanced towards him at that moment and noticed that he had been moodily poking the fire and, having successfully reduced it to a pile of grey ash, slumped back into his chair and closed his eyes. He appeared to be asleep, but I knew that this was merely a ruse to prevent me from engaging him in conversation.

I had not known him for more than a few weeks, and already I was beginning to wonder whether I had made a mistake in advertising for someone to share the accommodation with me. It was a matter of finances really, for I was already struggling to meet my tuition fees at college and needed some additional income before I ran into serious debt. I was a medical student and, like most of my colleagues, a poor one.

Since I had a spare room and my irregular hours meant that I left the apartment unoccupied for long periods, the obvious answer was to find someone to share the cost. I put a suitable advertisement in a local shop and looked forward to choosing between a number of applicants.

Strangely, my new flatmate had been the only person to respond, and it was some time before I realised that everyone else who had read the advertisement must have assumed it was a joke. Evidently, my address in Baker Street was close enough to a certain famous person to make my offer of lodgings sound like a prank.

I had almost given up hope when I received a handwritten note accepting my terms and indicating that the writer would arrive within the next few days and take up residence. No mention was made of it being subject to any prior approval on my part, and it seemed to assume my automatic acceptance without question. I confess now to a certain amount of nervousness as I awaited his arrival, and this was not entirely dispelled upon meeting him for the first time.

His timekeeping was impeccable. At exactly the appointed hour, I heard the sound of voices in the street below and, despite the fact that my callers were always intercepted by Mrs Hawkins, who occupied the ground-floor flat and acted as an unofficial concierge, he appeared at my door a few seconds afterwards. He must have evaded her clutches, I thought, and bounded up the stairs before she could interrogate him.

My immediate impression was of a tall, well-dressed fellow who appeared slightly older than I. He had a vigorous manner and seemed

little affected by his dash up to my apartment. A piercing look from a pair of steel-grey eyes arrested my attempt at a greeting and, involuntarily, I stepped back a pace. Ignoring my outstretched hand, he strode into my rooms and deposited a large canvas bag on the floor. He followed this by giving the apartment a brief but thorough inspection. Apparently satisfied by what he saw, he spoke his first words to me.

"I have several boxes of instruments that will be delivered later today," he said quietly. However, I detected an underlying firmness in his tone, "and if you have no objection, I will set up my equipment tomorrow." Indicating the small shared box room, he added, "That room will be suitable for my work, but I do insist on the utmost privacy."

He took my stunned silence for agreement and continued his study of the apartment. I noticed this included a cursory examination of me. I was considering how to respond to his high-handed manner when he issued another statement that threw me into further confusion.

"I shall not interfere with your medical studies," he said, "but if you were able to avoid waking me when you leave at around six o'clock in the morning, I would be most obliged. Your practice of kicking open the door while carrying your books is a habit I hope you can abandon in future, although I appreciate that left-handed persons, such as yourself, can tend to be unconventional."

Leaving me to ponder these cryptic remarks, he entered his room and closed the door.

When he returned, I had recovered my wits and demanded to know the purpose of his comments and how he had learned so much about me after so short an acquaintance. I confess his assessment had been uncannily accurate.

For the first time since his arrival, I noticed his eyes come alive and, although I was unaware of it at the time, his reply was to be one of patient explanation that I would see repeated so many times in the future.

Initially, he merely pointed to a number of medical journals that lay on my desk alongside the notes I had been writing up from the morning rounds at the hospital. Too easy, I thought, but how had he guessed my other habits?

As if responding to my unspoken thoughts, he indicated to my shoes, which undeniably showed the scuff marks where I did indeed regularly kick open my bedroom door. "You can see the results of your behaviour quite clearly," he said, and I realised that similar damage was evident on the woodwork.

"I also noticed that your alarm is set for half past five," he continued, "and you do not strike me as one who lingers too long over his breakfast." He then embarrassed me by indicating a small egg stain on my waistcoat.

With the benefit of explanation, his deductions now seemed less remarkable, but since I had offered him my right hand when we met, how had he formed his opinion of me as a left-hander? I questioned him about this and again he gestured towards the notes lying across the desk. "Your handwriting has a distinct downward slope from left to right," he said, "and although this on its own may not be conclusive, I also observed that your telephone receiver is placed on its cradle with the mouthpiece to the left. This would be consistent with a person normally holding it in his left hand."

I realised that I had encountered a rather odd person and that my quiet existence might be under threat. Little did I realise at the time how dramatic those changes would be.

Nevertheless, my new companion seemed a quiet fellow at first and had given me several months' rent in advance, which confirmed his intention to remain for the foreseeable future. At one point, I mentioned to him that my advertisement had been the subject of some ridicule, but he merely gave a rather enigmatic smile and made no comment.

His name was Simon Harlech, and at first I could learn very little about him. He kept to his room most of the time and, even when we did share the common parts of the flat, he was much given to long silences. Although he seemed rather too introspective at times and was inclined to stay up until the small hours reading his large collection of reference books, we formed a reasonable friendship over the first few weeks. He appeared to have some kind of private income, for I never saw him leave the flat for work of any kind, and he never discussed such matters with me.

I had my own studies to attend to, of course, and so we soon settled down to an easy-going, if rather unexciting, existence together.

I noticed his character beginning to change as the weather worsened after Christmas. The dark mornings seemed to affect him the most, and he never made an appearance until after I had left for my classes at the college.

I was informed about this by Mrs Hawkins, who had agreed to clean my rooms in return for my occasional diagnosis of her numerous imaginary ailments. She had more than once found her work delayed until beyond midday, and she spoke to me about it one day as I was putting her mind at rest regarding a small rash which had appeared on her neck.

"He holds me up, Mr Ransome," she complained, "and when I do get the chance, he won't let me touch anything. There is a funny smell about the place, and all those instruments of his are giving me the creeps."

It was not my business to object if he was a late riser, and at first I put this down to his nocturnal wanderings around the flat, but soon I began to suspect that he was undergoing a gradual change of personality. He became very withdrawn, but then he had never been very communicative from the start, and I had been able to learn little about him apart from his name.

Despite the fact that I was effectively his landlord, his manner towards

me started to take a more domineering turn as the weeks went by. I noticed that he would watch me as though observing a specimen in a laboratory, and more than once he followed this by writing notes in a pocketbook, which he then locked in his bedroom cabinet. This behaviour was disconcerting, to say the least, and I became convinced that my suspicions about his mental state were well-founded.

With increasing unease, I began to sense that he was assuming a new character, and it was not clear whether this was the resumption of a previous identity or the creation of a new persona yet to be revealed.

Since I still needed his cash contributions as much as ever, I overlooked his conduct, little knowing what was to come. However, I resolved to watch his actions even more closely and even studied some of my medical books, looking for symptoms that might indicate the cause of his strange behaviour.

In this fashion we spent the next few weeks: he observing me, and I secretly watching him in return.

The most disturbing indication came when he appeared from his room one evening wearing a long dressing gown of some gaudy silk material and smoking a ghastly pipe which filled the flat with a sickly-sweet odour. I protested, since I am a non-smoker myself, but he imperiously swept my objections aside.

He began to spend a considerable amount of time reading the daily newspapers, and I often heard him chuckling to himself as a particular article caught his eye. This made me very curious, and on one occasion, when he had gone out unusually early, I attempted to find out what he had been reading the previous day. It was not difficult, since he had marked one column with a large cross. It concerned a burglary in Mayfair and stated that the police had arrested a suspect, although they were not prepared at this stage to give details to the press. They did, however, provide a short communication regarding the robbery itself.

This stated that on the morning of the 4th February, a loud argument was heard coming from the ground-floor rooms of premises in

Cadogan Gardens, Mayfair. A few moments later, the front door was thrown open and two struggling figures appeared in the entrance. Two men, one older and larger than the other, fought violently on the doorstep until the younger of the pair was hurled to the pavement, where he lay dazed against the wheel of a coal merchant's cart which was making a delivery to the same premises.

Staggering to his feet, the youth had clutched at the side of the vehicle for support and then, without a backward look, ran off down the street despite an attempt by the driver to detain him. He was still missing at the time the paper went to press.

The police report continued by stating that when the owner re-entered the building, a distraught servant informed him that a valuable antique silver necklace had disappeared from the kitchen table where it had been placed for cleaning by one of the housemaids.

The officer conducting the case concluded by confirming that their enquiries were still ongoing and that a reward was being offered for any information that led to the recovery of the necklace. However, they were confident that the matter would be satisfactorily concluded within a few days.

I wondered why my companion had shown such interest in this account, but an immediate and alarming answer was about to be revealed.

That evening, he made a sudden appearance from his room, and his first words confirmed the mounting suspicion in my mind that he was becoming completely deranged.

As he buttoned his coat, he fixed me with a stern look.

"I shall be out for a short while, Dove, so kindly await my return."

"Dove." It was a name he had taken to using for me of late, just as I had come to think of him as Hawk — forever watching, forever circling, and ready to descend upon the smallest detail that caught his attention.

Before I could question him further, he was through the door.