

# The Companion

There is a village on the northern New England coast, known primarily to a few second- and third-generation summer vacationers, that provides the kind of quiet that is more and more only a fiction of guide book authors. Small houses perch on top of steep rock cliffs that rise above the sea. A winding, tree-lined road provides access to them. Some of the houses date back to the 19th century, having been built by seafaring men for families they would see only a few months each year. The village has a grocery store, old-time soda fountain, stationery store, gas station with lovingly preserved 1920s gas pump (round white-glass top containing faded name of long-forgotten oil company, big rotary handle that once, if you turned it, sent forth gasoline into Model T and Model A gas tanks), hardware store, a single restaurant serving three meals a day except Sunday, and shacks on small docks to provide basic services to a variety of pleasure boats and a few fishing boats.

One August day, a strange-looking figure made his way up the narrow street that wound along the cliffs — a tall middle-aged man with gaunt face, long black hair, long black coat and broad-brimmed hat. He carried a crooked stick although his long legs seemed perfectly capable of carrying him unaided up the steep incline. He might well have been a figure out of New England's Puritan history.

In his hand he held a piece of paper which he consulted as he moved past the small houses. Finally, at the very highest point of the road he paused in front of a white clapboard cottage from the rear of which rose a three-story gray tower. The vast expanse of ocean could be seen through the several old trees in the yard. He walked up the short flag-stone walk and with a crooked finger knocked on the door. No answer. He knocked again, then stooped and peered through the little window grate in the door. Finally, from inside a voice said "Just a minute, please" and then the door was pulled open to reveal a little white-haired woman with a warm, cheerful expression that she tried to maintain despite the mild shock of confronting this tall angular figure at her threshold.

He made a perfunctory tip of his hat, then said, looking at his sheet, "I have been told that you have a room to rent."

"Well, yes," she replied, looking at him from head to foot. "Are you...looking for a room?"

"Yes I am," he said. "Does it have big windows?"

The question clearly seemed a bit strange to her, but after a moment she said, "Yes, it does."

"Is it quiet at night?" he asked.

"It's always quiet in —" and she named the town. "Except for the sound of the waves. You always hear them." Then, after some hesitation, "Would you like to see the room?"

"Yes, please," and he lifted his hat from his head and stooped to enter the low doorway.

A short dark hallway extended the length of the house, opening onto what appeared to be a sunroom with floor-to-ceiling windows that provided a breathtaking view of the ocean below. He could see a table in front of the window, with a few dishes and a silver coffee pot. But just before entering that room, the woman turned right and slowly, and with some difficulty, began climbing a narrow, winding set of steep stairs that creaked under the old carpet that covered them. The man followed her, bending low in the confined space. The little stairwell opened onto a strange, octagonal room, with windows on the four walls facing the ocean, and a center portion that contained a few bookshelves and cabinets. But the woman opened two doors and showed him that it also contained a bathroom and a closet. It occurred to the man that the place might be a converted lighthouse, but he didn't ask her.

A narrow, low bed was positioned along one of the sides, a table and two chairs along another, an old easy chair along a third. The woman went over to one of the windows, undid a metal catch

and pushed the window outward. A rush of cold air filled the room. She showed how each of the windows could be opened and closed separately. She showed him where the switch was for the lights in the ceiling. The woman said, "The room is rather unusual, but most people like it in the summer. The view is beautiful. But if you want privacy you can just..." and she worked a pair of long plastic rods between two of the windows, lowering a shade. "If you are planning to stay through the winter, I will give you an electric heater," she said.

She turned to him and, somewhat shyly, not looking him in the eye, asked, "Are you employed in the area?"

"No, I am retired," he said.

"So you are enjoying a little vacation..."

He didn't answer the question. "There is something I have to do," he said, in his low, gravelly voice.

"I will need references," she said

"I can give you references."

He sat down on the bed, then allowed himself to settle back until he was lying down, his feet hanging over the edge. She saw this and said, "Oh, you poor man, you are too tall for the bed. I will find another one. I am sure there is one in the basement."

He waved away her concern. "This will be fine", he said. "You don't mind if I move the bed?"

"Well...no," she said.

"You can see the stars from here," he said to her, but she didn't reply because she was now seriously worried that a mentally disturbed person was trying to rent her room. "At night," he added, apparently sensing her concern.

He got up, told her he would like the room. He would be a quiet lodger. She hesitated, but then, having had a few other eccentric lodgers in the past, agreed to let him take it. He opened his black wallet, counted out the amount specified in the ad. She thanked him, folded the money in her one hand without looking at it, told him about the key and on what day the rent would be due, then turned and slowly descended the stairs.

Two days later he returned with a meager collection of possessions in suitcases: a couple of dozen books, a coat, a few shirts, pants, linens that he put in the drawer of the central portion of the room. He carefully made the bed, then took an expensive-looking compass out of a box in one of his suitcases. He held it, waiting for the needle to settle down, walked over to the bed with it, sat down carefully, not taking his eyes off the needle.

That afternoon, he went down to the village. He browsed in the book store, bought a newspaper and a book, lingered over a coffee and a sandwich while reading first the newspaper, then one of the books he had brought — a popularization of some of the latest discoveries about distant galaxies. He spent the rest of the afternoon strolling through the village, had a light supper at the restaurant, and was back in his room before nightfall. He greeted his landlady with a tip of his hat, then made his way up the narrow stairs to his room. He bent down and drew a large suitcase out from under his bed and put it on top of the bed. He unsnapped the locks, opened the lid, drew back a green felt cover cloth, and took out an expensive-looking telescope. Sitting on his bed, he slowly, carefully, assembled it, frowning all the while. Then he unfolded a tripod, placed the telescope on the tripod, and opened the outer shutter of one of the windows. He propped pillows up in his bed, placed the telescope so that he could look through it while leaning against them. From the papers he had placed neatly on a little desk in the center partition, he took a star map. Then he

## *The Companion*

lay down, and using his compass, and repeatedly looking at the map, carefully positioned the telescope so that it pointed out the window at the black, starry sky.

He leaned back against his pillows, eye to the eyepiece of the instrument. And in his mind he said, *I have a new home — a rather strange tower overlooking the ocean. Do you have oceans there? The one here is beautiful. There is news of war today Do you have wars? Probably all civilizations have them. But our nation is once again ill at ease. There is such pain in this life. I suppose you have suffered the same,*

*I never asked you before: are you old, or young? Do you have offspring? I never had any, though I was married for several years once. It seems to me that children always bring happiness into a person's life, but I know that is not always true.*

After his mind had spoken for a while, there was a silence, as he listened to the reply coming to him from across the vast reaches of space.

The communication went on for more than an hour.

*I must get some sleep. I am not able to stay awake as long as I used to. How long are your days and nights? Strange how difficult it is to communicate such things with one so far away.*

And so it went — not every night, because sometimes it was cloudy. One night he said, laughing, after a period of listening, *No, we could never meet! Our atmosphere would crush you, or make you explode, and the same if I came to your planet.* In those long pauses, the surf could be heard pounding below, as the stars twinkled in the ink-black sky. *I feel that you are hearing my thoughts instantaneously but we both know that would defy the laws of physics. And yet I am convinced that it is so.*

One night he said, *I wish I could see you. But I have no illusions! I'm sure you look nothing like some of our science fiction writers' fantasies about creatures on other worlds. Some of our scientists say that you probably are not too different from us. I mean you have limbs of some sort, and walk upright But ... I wish I could see you.*

He was a neat tenant, his landlady had no complaints. He spent his days reading and taking walks in the village. Gradually, after he became a regular sight on the sidewalks, people began to say hello to him. He would nod, touch the brim of his hat, murmur a greeting in response. He smiled at the children he met, sometimes stopped to exchange a few words with them. He always seemed not to want to hurt a child by not replying. They called him the Strange Man, or sometimes, Abe Lincoln. Sometimes he just stood on the edge of one the cliffs, coat flapping in the wind, looking at the ocean.

He always carried a book —usually a popularization of the kind written by physicists about recent discoveries of the cosmos beyond the Milky Way. Sometimes he would sit in a little restaurant for several hours in the afternoon, the sun coming through the windows, sending shadows across the checkered table cloths, the air warm with the smell of cooking. The waitresses were indulgent toward him, since they felt sorry for him.

And at night he adjusted his telescope, then lay back in his bed, and carried on his conversations.

He kept his room throughout the summer, then through the fall and to the start of winter. In late November a period of unusually cold winter weather settled in along the coast. Mrs. — tried to get her tenant to come down and sit in the warm living room during the evening, but he thanked her and said no, he was plenty warm with the heater. Several days passed without her seeing him,

*The Companion*

then she saw him one morning as he carefully closed and secured the door to his tower. She was shocked at how thin and pale he had become. He had begun coughing.

“Morning,” he said, as usual.

“Is everything all right, Mr. — ?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said, with his quick smile and the same non-committal tone as usual.

She tried to get used to his coughing. The next Monday she she heard no sound from his room. She climbed the narrow staircase and knocked softly on the door. No answer. She had never gone into a tenant’s room without his permission. It was perfectly possible that he had gone away for several days without telling her. But she was increasingly anxious, and so she called her old friend, Judge — , and expressed her concern to him. He told her to knock again in the morning and to call her if there was no response. There wasn’t, and so she called him and he came over. The weather was gray and freezing cold. The judge climbed the narrow, creaky staircase, gave two knocks. No reply. Three more. Still no reply.

“I’m going in,” he told her. He pushed gently on the door handle. The door opened. He stepped up into the hexagonal room. The gray sea could be heard pounding against the rocks below, the wind came through the cracks in the walls. Mr. — lay on his back, eyes closed, one hand raised as though in greeting or farewell his fingers curved a little, as though having just released another’s hand. No one who looked on that face could deny that in his last moments, something extraordinary had illuminated his soul.