

The Mysterious Guests

About six years ago, two Englishmen one day arrived at Calais in the Dover packet. They did not take up their quarters at the hotel of M. Dessein, on which the author of the *Sentimental Journey* bestowed such celebrity, but went on to an obscure inn, kept by a man of the name of Du Long. They desired to have his best apartments, spent a great deal of money, relished the produce of his wretched kitchen, and thought his adulterated wine perfectly genuine. From day to day Du Long supposed they would continue their journey, and proceed to the capital; for that they had come merely to see Calais, was an idea too absurd to enter anybody's head. But so far from continuing their journey, and proceeding to the capital, they did not even inspect what was worth seeing in Calais, for except going out now and then to shoot snipes, they kept close at home, eating, drinking, and doing nothing. 'They may be spies,' thought the host, 'or runaways, or fools. No matter—what is that to me? They pay honestly.' When he was sitting on an evening over a pint with his neighbour and relation the grocer, they used to rack their brains about the mysterious guests. 'They are spies,' said the grocer, 'one of them squints with his left eye;' 'A man may squint without being a spy,' rejoined the host. 'I should take them for runaways, for they read all my newspapers, probably for the sake of advertisements.' His kinsman then assured him that Englishmen spend at least a twelfth part of their time in reading newspapers. The conclusion to which they generally came, was, that as the said foreigners were apparently neither spies nor runaways, they could not possibly be anything else than fools. Here the matter rested. In this opinion Du Long was still more confirmed, when, at the end of a few weeks, one of his guests, an elderly man, thus addressed him: 'Landlord, we like your house, and if you will acquiesce in a certain whim, it is probably that we might continue for a long time to spend our money with you.' 'Your honors have only to give your commands; an inn-keeper is, by profession, the slave of all the whims that throng to him from all the four corners of the globe.' 'You have, to be sure,' continued the guest, 'had a prodigiously large beast painted on your sign, but your house is only a fly among inns, it scarcely contains three tolerable rooms, and unfortunately they all look into the street. We are fond of rest; we want to sleep. Your watchman has a very loud voice, and the coaches roll the whole night along the street, so as to make the windows rattle. We wake every quarter of an hour to curse them, and fall asleep again, to be again awakened in another quarter of an hour. You must admit, my dear fellow, that this is enough to destroy our health and exhaust our patience.' The host shrugged his shoulders—'How can it be helped?' 'Very easily,' replied the stranger; 'if you are not afraid of a little expense, in which we will go halves, without requiring at our departure the smallest compensation.' Du Long, whose barren field had, since the arrival of the Englishmen, been daily fertilized with a shower of guineas, promised to do all in his power to satisfy his guests, but he could not help the rattling of the coaches or the bellowing of the watchman. 'Neither is it necessary,' answered the stranger. 'Behind your house you have a little garden, though you are no lover of gardening, for, except a little parsley for your soups, I observe nothing in it but nettles. The old garden wall too, in spite of its thickness, is just ready to tumble. Suppose you were to make use of this space to run up a little building, a sort of a pleasure house, even if it was to contain no more than a couple of rooms. It might be supported by the old wall, by which means a considerable part of the expense would be saved, and the wall itself would be propped up. As I just now mentioned, for the sake of a quiet lodging, we would willingly defray one half of the costs, and when we are gone the building will be yours; you will then have a couple of convenient rooms to let. If on the other hand, you object to our proposal, we must leave you. The host, however, had not the least objection, though he thought within himself—'My kinsman and I were right enough in concluding that these people were fools.' He immediately sent for a brick-layer; the place was examined, and the Englishmen described what

they should like to have done. Joists and bricks were quickly brought, three light walls were run up, and the old garden wall formed the fourth, from which sloped a half roof so that the whole looked more like a woodhouse, than a habitation; but the strangers were satisfied, and Du Long laughed in his sleeve. Two months thus passed in mutual content; the golden spring flowed abundantly, though the wine grew worse and worse every day. The two Englishmen very seldom quitted their lodging, where they are, drank, and read the newspapers. The only thing that surprised the landlord of the Golden Elephant was, that for the sake of nocturnal repose they had built a house for themselves, and that now he very often perceived a light the whole night through in their apartments. He once conjectured they might be coiners, but as all the money spent passed through his hands, and their guineas, after a most careful examination, were always found to be good, his kinsman and he had no other alternative than to set them down for fools. One fine day in autumn he saw them go out with their guns slung over their shoulders. They told him they were going to take the diversion of snipe shooting, and they took leave of him for three days. The three days passed, and so did the fourth, but the strangers did not make their appearance. On the fifth Du Long shook his head – on the sixth, his kinsman began to shake his also; on the seventh, this suspicious circumstance was communicated to the police – and on the eighth, the deserted habitation was broken open with all the formalities of law. On the table was found a billet, the contents of it were as follows:— ‘Dear landlord—If you have any acquaintance with history, you must know that the English were once, during a period of two hundred and ten years, in possession of Calais; that they were at length driven out of it by the Duke of Guise, who treated them in the same manner as out Edward III did the French, that is drove them out of the town and seized all their effects. Not long since, we were so fortunate as to discover, in a chest of old parchments, deeds that proved that one of our ancestors formerly possessed at Calais a large house, on the site of which three houses stand at present; yours is one of the three. When our ancestor was obliged to flee, he buried his gold and silver at the foot of a thick wall, which is still in existence. Among his papers were found one which afforded satisfactory information respecting the situation of the building. We immediately repaired to Calais, and luckily found a public house on the spot so interesting to us; we took lodgings in it, examined everything, and concerted measures to take possession of our lawful inheritance without exciting notice. In what manner we removed all obstacles is well known to you. The great hole, and the empty iron chest, which you will find under the wall in your chamber, are proofs that we have been successful. We make you a present of the chest, and advise you to fill up the hole, and to give yourself no further concern about us; all inquiries will be in vain as the names we went by were only assumed—Farewell.’ The landlord of the Golden Elephant stood stock still, and with open mouth. His kinsman came: both looked at the hole, and then at the empty chest, and then at one another, and agreed that the strangers were not such fools as they had taken them for.

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