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GUESTS AT THE RED LION.

It's now nigh on ten years since the Red Lion and I parted company. The Red Lion was once the best house in Tunstone, but the railway knocked up the coaches, and that knocked up the business, and I was glad to get away while I had anything to get away with.

My wife (God bless her) I shall never see again in this world. She was very lame, and couldn't get about without help: so she sat for the most part in the little snuggery behind the bar, which I had fitted up for her as nice as money could make it. Her bird-cage hung from the ceiling, and in a warm corner near the fire there was a hassock, which was the special property of her tabby. Opposite to where my wife sat was a little mahogany cupboard let into the wall, the door of which was generally half open, so that when she looked up from her sewing or knitting, she could see ranged on the shelves the famous old china which her grandmother gave her for a wedding present; and above it, the silver teapot, the gilt candle-cup, &c.; and, at the top of all, the great punch-bowl, which was used only on grand occasions; all of which articles she used to take much pleasure in looking at. Her room was divided from the bar by a glass-door, which she could open and shut at pleasure; so that when any friend or acquaintance dropped in, she could, if so minded, have a chat with them; and though she sat there day after day, and month after month, it's my opinion that she knew more about the Tunstone people and their private affairs, than any other person in the town, except, perhaps, my head-waiter, Jim Topping. A very decent sort of fellow he was—middle-aged, brown, lean, with a stoop of the shoulders, and only one eye; but that one as sharp as a gimlet, and equal to the two eyes of most people. Poor fellow! he has been dead these seven years; and lies in Tunstone churchyard, with the finest double daisy growing on his grave that could be had for love or money. It was a flower he was always fond of, so I had one planted over him out of compliment to his memory.

It was one December afternoon, the very winter we had that long black frost, when I heard Jim talking to my wife.

"I've just put them into Number Nine," says he, "and a very nice couple they seem to be.—Cutlets and a chicken for dinner, M'm."

"Where do they come from, Jim?" says I.

"From the railway station," says Jim; "further than that I can't say. Name on the luggage is Oldwink."

I was not long before I went up stairs to pay my respects. When I entered the room, the gentleman was standing with his hands under his coat-tails, looking very earnestly through his spectacles at a print over the chimney-piece.

"After Gainsborough, eh?" he was saying.—"Great painter, Gainsborough. This is in his best style. Background well filled in; side-lights skillfully introduced; pyramidal grouping strictly observed. Full of merit, my dear. A wonderful painting. The original is in the gallery of my friend Lord Papyrus. Ah, landlord, is that you?"

The speaker was a portly, well-built, middle-aged gentleman. His cheeks and chin were well filled out, and he had a hearty color in his face; he had a hearty voice too—rich and full, that sounded as if he had a sugarplum always in his mouth. He had not a great deal of hair left, but what he had was brushed and frizzled, and made the most of. A large old-fashioned brooch held his white cravat in its place; and his feet were encased in shoes and gaiters. He had a well-fed, comfortable look, such as a landlord likes to see; and I set him down first either for a retired doctor, a clergyman out for a holiday, or a gentleman living on his private means.

The lady was considerably younger than her husband. She was rather sharp-featured, and rather hard of hearing. I think, too, that she painted a little; but many ladies do that, and are thought none the worse of for that.

"We think of staying a few days with you, Jobson, if we are suited. We shall, in fact, probably stay Sunday over. We have been travelling a great deal lately, and Mrs. Oldwink requires a little rest and quiet. You require a little rest and quiet, eh, my dear?" he said, elevating his voice, and addressing the lady.

"O, yes, certainly, a little rest and quiet," she replied with the nod of the head, and fell to work on some crochet again, as if for dear life.

"Her health is hardly what it ought to be," resumed Mrs. Oldwink, in a slow impressive tone. "But we must get you to drive us out, Jobson, for an hour or two every day; and try the effect of this pure country air. I trust that your sherry will bear investigation."

The same evening another stranger arrived at the Red Lion, who walked direct into the commercial room, and ordered tea and a bed. We somehow took him for a commercial gentleman, but he had no luggage with him, except a very small carpet bag.

He just walked in, ordered his tea, asked what company there was in the house; and then saying he had got the toothache very bad, tied a red silk handkerchief round his head, and getting into a warm corner, never stirred out of it till he went to bed.

Next morning came a letter directed to Mr. Purkiss, which he claimed, so of course his name was Purkiss. That was all we learned about him. As for his appearance, it was neither gentlemanly nor vulgar, but midway between the two. He was dressed in a suit of brown clothes; and was altogether a quiet, common-place sort of fellow. He still complained of the toothache, and kept the red handkerchief bound round his face; he said he should not stir out that day, but try what a little nursing of himself would do toward taking away the pain.

Half an hour after that, when I set off to drive Mr. and Mrs. Oldwink round the town, looking through the window I saw Mr. Purkiss walking up and down, with his head tied up, and his hand pressed against his cheek. He brightened up for a moment as we passed, and came to the window to see us off.

I drove Mr. and Mrs. Oldwink through Tunstone and round Tunstone, and pointed out all the interesting places I could think of. Mr. Oldwink seemed to be a gentleman of much information, and made learned remarks on everything we examined. Mrs. Oldwink had not much to say, but appeared to be so greatly gratified with the outing, that Mr. Oldwink arranged another for the following day.

When I reached home, I was greatly surprised at finding Mr. Purkiss seated comfortably in the snuggery with my wife. This was a favor seldom granted to any but very old friends, and I hardly knew what to think at seeing a stranger there. I suppose my wife's soft heart had been first drawn toward him by the report of his toothache; and as he took all the remedies recommended by her, she hardly knew how to praise him enough, and said he was the nicest gentleman she had seen for a long time.

I drove out Mr. and Mrs. Oldwink every forenoon. We visited every place of interest for miles round Tunstone; and Mr. Oldwink made me tell him everything I knew about each place we visited; and always added to what I said a few moral remarks of his own, so that I became more certain than ever that he was a clergyman away from home on a holiday; and when I just hinted the matter to him (for I confess I was curious about it), he only smiled, and said I might have been further out in my guess.

As for Mrs. Purkiss, I give you my word that he grew more of a puzzle to me every day.—Neither Jim nor I knew what to make of him; and when Jim didn't know what to make of a man, that gimlet eye of his always did double duty in the way of keeping watch. He and I laid our heads together about it, you may be sure; but the more we thought about it, the more in the dark we seemed to be: and though Mr. Purkiss was a quiet, inoffensive, civil-spoken man enough, yet, as I've always found, the less we know of people the more inclined we are to judge hardly of them. If he had any business to do in Tunstone, he seemed in no hurry to do it: for he seldom went out, and never for more than half an hour at the time—and that of itself was very suspicious—but was generally moving up and down the house from one room to another, as people having the toothache often will do: and Jim found it hard work dodging about after him so as not to let him know he was watched.

Well, Christmas Eve arrived, and all our guests departed except Mr. and Mrs. Oldwink and Mr. Purkiss, and they informed me that they intended staying over Christmas Day.—Now, during all the years I was in the public line, I made a point of asking any company we might have in the house to dine with me at my own table on Christmas Day; and I don't think that any of them could ever say that I gave them a shabby dinner or a poor bottle of wine at such times. I kept up the custom in the present instance, and was pleased that my invitation was not refused. My old friend Scatcher, who makes a capital fourth at a rubber, did not neglect to come; and we all sat down on Christmas Day as comfortable a little party as you need wish to look at. It would have done anybody's eyes good to have seen Mr. Oldwink, as he sat on my left hand, looking so beaming and affable as he uttered a grace for the seasonable bounties of roast goose and onion sauce.

As soon as the cloth was removed, I could see that Scatcher was fidgetting for the cards to be brought out; so I made bold to ask Mr. Oldwink whether he would make one at a quiet rubber.

"Why, really, my friends," he remarked, "it

is very seldom that I touch a card, in fact, I am a novice at all games of chance or skill; but, on an occasion of this sort, I should be very sorry to mar the festivity. Do not, however, expect much from me. Let the stakes be low, if you please; just sufficient to give an interest to the game. Say half-crown points—I could not conscientiously play for more; with, if you like, an extra shilling on the odd trick."

Scatcher and I opened our eyes; we had never played for more than a shilling a corner; but, of course, we did not say so; so it was settled at half-a-crown. As for Mr. Purkiss, when I asked him, he said in his quiet way that he should be happy to do as the rest of the company did. So we cut for partners; and, as it fell out, it was Scatcher and Mr. Oldwink against Mr. Purkiss and myself.

Mr. Oldwink passed me his snuff-box while Scatcher was dealing.

"A remarkable box, that, Jobson," he observed, seeing that I was admiring it. "It was presented to me by the Emperor of Russia, in return for a secret service which I rendered his Majesty during the time I was travelling through his dominions. He sent me this snuff-box, and an autograph letter of thanks. Diamonds trumps. Knave turned up."

Mr. Purkiss held out his hand for the box, but Mr. Oldwink took it up, and put it in his pocket; perhaps he did not like to have it fingered by strangers.

The luck of Scatcher and his partner was something astonishing; they won rubber after rubber, while our scores were scarcely worth counting; but I must say it was chiefly owing to the splendid cards held by Mr. Oldwink. I could not understand how it was that, when that gentleman dealt, he invariably turned up an honor, and had generally two more of the same suit to keep it company, with a long hand of something else to follow. I don't think I'm a bad-tempered fellow, but really I began to feel very aggravated at losing one half-crown after another in the manner I did; but Mr. Purkiss, who of course lost as much as I did, was so cool and quiet, that I was ashamed to display my ill-feeling. At the conclusion of the fourth rubber, Mr. Purkiss got up, turned his chair round three times, and then sat down again. Scatcher rubbed his chin, and was evidently puzzled. Mr. Purkiss smiled.

"When I was a lad," said he, "I remember hearing my grandmother say, that when you were unlucky at cards it was a good thing to turn your chair round three times; so we may as well try an old wife's remedy."

It may seem hard to believe, but it is nevertheless a fact, that, after my partner had turned his chair, he never failed, when it was his deal, to turn up an honor, and hold two more in his hand, so that the next two rubbers were won by us. At the end of the second, Mr. Oldwink got up, rather hastily as it seemed, and said he was tired of playing; and Mr. Purkiss had a quiet laugh to himself in a corner. So I opened a fresh box of cheroots, and the cards were put away.

Next morning, as I was coming down stairs, Mr. Oldwink called me into his room, and shut the door.

"Who is that Mr. Purkiss who was playing with us last night?" he asked.

"I know no more of him than you do, sir.—He sits in the commercial-room; he has been here four days; and how much longer he intends staying I don't know."

"To speak the truth, Jobson, I don't like the looks of the man."

"I'm no great admirer of him myself, sir."

"Mind, Jobson, I don't say the man is not an honest man, not a meritorious man, and I am merely speaking in your interest, Jobson—for such a matter can in no other way concern me—when I say, keep your eye on the spoons. I hope I am not wronging the man when I state it as my opinion—and conscientiously I state it—that he has somewhat of a hang-dog countenance."

I was much obliged to Mr. Oldwink for putting me on my guard, and so I told him. I then went down to Jim, and consulted with him as to what ought to be done. Jim had nothing to advise, except that he should still continue to keep his eye on Mr. Purkiss. He agreed with me that it was rather a suspicious case; and at last suggested that the opinion of Mrs. Jobson should be taken. So together we went to my wife, and opened the matter to her. We, however, gained no advantage by the proceeding. She called Jim and me a pair of old fools; declared that Mr. Purkiss was one of the nicest gentlemen she had ever come across, and gave it as her opinion that Mr. Oldwink was nothing better than a humbug. Jim and I retired discomfited, and talked the matter over again in the pantry. Jim's gimlet eye did double duty for the remainder of the day.

It was a relief to all parties when Mr. Purkiss asked for his bill next morning, and desired

that his carpet bag might be sent to the station. He took a very polite farewell of my wife, saying he hoped to have the pleasure of seeing her again.

When I told Mr. Oldwink that Mr. Purkiss was gone, he smiled blandly on me, and rubbed his fingers gently through his hair. "It is well," said he. "It was your interest I had at heart, Jobson, in saying what I did; but, if I am anything of a physiognomist, that man is destined either to be hanged or transported. And now, my good friend, in ten minutes Mrs. Oldwink and I will be ready for our matutinal drive."

Two mornings after this, Mr. Oldwink again sent for me up stairs.

"Jobson," said he, "be good enough to let me have my bill in half-an-hour from this time. Mrs. Oldwink and I departed by the 11.45 train; but previously we shall take a walk into the town to purchase few little mementoes of our visit to Tunstone. Mrs. Oldwink desires me to say that she has been very much gratified by your attention and evident desire to please.—Speaking for myself, I may also express a similar feeling; and I may add that I shall not fail to recommend the Red Lion to my friend Sir Rufus Bloomsbury, who, I believe, intends coming down here in May for a fortnight's fishing. In half-an-hour from this time if you please."

Mr. and Mrs. Oldwink went and returned in about half-an-hour, carrying two or three small parcels. The bill was looked over, and paid without a murmur. Mr. Oldwink's luggage stood ready to be conveyed to the station.

"Jobson," said that gentleman, suddenly, as if the thought had just struck him, "It would not be amiss, I think, if you were to get your trap out and drive Mrs. Oldwink and myself as far as Deepwood, the first station on the line to London. It is a suggestion of my wife's—and not a bad one, I think. By driving fast, we should be just in time to catch the 11.45 train from here. What say you? Would the mare do in the time?"

"I'll warrant her, sir," I replied. "The trap shall be ready in three minutes."

So it was—and we all three got in. The luggage, which was not heavy, was put under the seat, and down Highgate we whirled at a spanking pace, and in five minutes Tunstone was left behind. Our ride was pleasant, but short, for Deepwood was only five miles off. Mr. Oldwink praised my mare to the skies, and listened to me with much attention while I mentioned all her good points, and told him what way her best qualities might be brought out by one who understood her. We were just driving into Deepwood when I noticed Mr. Oldwink fumbling with his pockets. A moment after, he turned to me, looking very serious and alarmed.

"Jobson," said he, "I find that I have left my purse and a packet of very important paper on the sitting-room table of the Red Lion.—What is to be done?"

"Don't kown sir, I'm sure, unless we drive back for them," said I, letting the mare drop into a walk. "Or will you go forward, and let me send them to your address through post?"

"It's not that I care much for the purse, but the documents are of great importance to me.—Let me consider what will be the best plan to adopt."

He laid his finger on his lips, and thought for a few moments.

"I have it!" said he brightening up. "A train from Tunstone passes here in five minutes from this time. Jobson, will you return by it, and obtain the purse and the paper? We must let the 11.45 go on without us, but there is another train at 12.30 from Tunstone which stops here—you will just have time to get the articles and return by it. We will meet it at the station here, and go forward by it, after paying you for your trouble, and you will return home with the mare. Will you so far oblige me?"

Such a request it was impossible to refuse.—We saw the train approaching. I jumped out of the trap, ran to the station and took my ticket; and, looking out of the window as the train started, I saw Mr. Oldwink drawing up at the door of the railway hotel, and preparing to alight.

When I got out of the train at Tunstone, who should I see on the platform but Mr. Purkiss.—He gave me a nod and held up his finger; but, as I had no time to lose, I pretended not to have seen him, and dived into the crowd; but when I reached the door, there he was again.

"Mr. Jobson, I want to speak to you a minute."

"Can't stay now, Mr. Purkiss. Another time I shall be most happy."

"Another time won't do. Now listen to me. Where have you left Mr. Oldwink?"

"I don't know what right you have to ask the question, but I left the gentleman you name at Deepwood."

"Did he pay his bill before leaving the Red Lion?"

"Certainly he did. But really, Mr.—"

"Now don't lose your temper. He paid you with a twenty-pound Bank of England note, did he not?"

"He did."

"The note is a forged one. Got it about you?"

"No; it's at home."

"Well, I tell you again, it's a forged one; and, more than that, that your friend Mr. Oldwink, is one of the most notorious swindlers in the three kingdoms."

You might have knocked me down with a cork when I heard Mr. Purkiss say these words.

"And who are you, sir?" I at length contrived to stammer out. "And how came you to know all these things?"

"I am an officer of the Detective Force. I have had my eye on Mr. Oldwink for some time, but he is such a slippery customer that it was difficult to prove anything against him. I traced him to your house; and then, as I was quite a stranger to him, I took up my quarters there, in order to watch him more closely. But he began to suspect me after a while, as did you also, Jobson, in another fashion; so that I found it advisable to leave the Red Lion. But I did not lose sight of my gentleman; for though you thought I had left the town, I was in reality, snugly located at the Green Dragon, opposite your house; where I received confidential communications from your wife respecting Mr. Oldwink, by a trusty messenger, every two hours during the day. Don't look so wild, Jobson, or people will think you are losing your wits. Well, this morning I was informed that Oldwink was going to make a few purchases previous to leaving Tunstone by the 11.45 train; so I set my man to watch him, and note all the shops he favored with his custom. As soon as he was housed again in the Red Lion, I took a banker's clerk with me, and went the same round he had taken. The result was, that we found he had purchased nearly a hundred pounds' worth of jewelry at different shops, together with a small parcel of valuable velvets; for all of which he had paid with forged notes, receiving the change in gold and silver. This done I posted off to the station expecting to nab my gentleman on the platform with the property on him. But he was too deep for me; the 11.45 departed, and he never came; and my man has just been down to inform me that he and you had set off by road. And now I'm off to Deepwood by the train, which starts in five minutes; so do you just get a nip of brandy to keep your clock-work in order, and then go back with me; and slippery as he is, see if I don't lay hold of him yet."

Judge what my feelings were while I listened to Mr. Purkiss's story. I was ready to bite my thumbs off with vexation.

When we reached Deepwood, no Mr. Oldwink was to be seen; and my companion laughed at me when I expressed my surprise at not finding him there. "To think you should expect such a thing!" said he. "Why he is miles off by this time, unless your mare has broken down." Here was another blow for me, for I had no idea that he would take off my mare. "It would not do for him to travel by rail," said Mr. Purkiss, as an afterthought. "He was afraid of the telegraph."

We found on inquiry at the railway inn, that the old scamp had staid there about five minutes only, to bait the mare, and take some refreshments; and then, after asking a few questions respecting the roads, had set off at a good pace northward. In three minutes we had a gig out, a horse in the shafts, and ourselves seated behind it; and after learning the road which the fugitives had taken, set off after them as hard as we could go.

"And Mrs. Oldwink, what of her?" said I to my companion.

"Birds of a feather—you know the rest," he replied, biting off the end of a cigar.

It was a raw bitter afternoon, with showers of sleety rain at intervals. The horse that carried us along was a good one, pretty near equal to my mare, and fresh to begin with. So on we went, over hill and dale, through a very wild and lonely country; every mile, as it seemed, leading us farther away from any town or village; and with but one wayside inn to break the solitude, at which we stayed for a few minutes to bait our horse, and where we gathered tidings that made us hasten on again. We had got, perhaps, a matter of ten or twelve miles from Deepwood, when Purkiss suddenly flung the cigar out of his mouth, gave the horse a sharp lash that made it bound madly forward, and pushing his hat tighter over his brows, gave vent to a smothered "Hurrah!" There they were before us.

It was some minutes before they found out that they were followed. Mrs. Oldwink, happening to turn her head, was the first to see us; next her husband gave a backward glance; and then, half rising in his seat, lashed into my poor mare in a style that made my blood boil to see.