

# **The Ghost at the "Blue Dragon"**

William J. Wintle

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The "Blue Dragon" was one of the oldest and best hotels in Saltminster; and that was saying a good deal. Long before Saltminster became popular as a seaside resort; long before people got into the habit of going to the seaside for holidays or for health; the old market town had been a busy place, and its inns were both numerous and good. New ones had sprung up of recent years to meet the needs of the visitors; and as these styled themselves hotels, the older ones had to fall into line and adopt the more ambitious name as well.

But although the "Blue Dragon" now called itself an hotel, and found itself doing more and better business than ever, it had changed very little in the course of the years. It was still a delightfully old-fashioned place; the quaint old rooms remained unaltered; the old English cookery was still the same; and you would look in vain for anything foreign or new-fangled. The French cook and the German waiter had never found entrance; and that was one of the reasons why the place was in such repute. You needed to book your room well in advance if you wished to stay at the "Blue Dragon."

Now Professor Latham wanted to stay at the "Blue Dragon"; for he knew a good thing when he found it. At Cambridge, where he occupied the chair of Assyrian History, he was better known for his ability as a judge of port than as a lecturer; and, when he recommended an hotel, you might be quite sure that both table and cellar would prove to be above reproach. So he booked his room well in advance, and made his way to Saltminster in the middle of July to spend a quiet six weeks and incidentally to revise the manuscript of his forthcoming book.

At the "Blue Dragon" he found that he had been allotted a room which met with his full approval. It was in the quietest and most retired part of the house, at the end of a long corridor, and looked out upon the salt marshes that ran down to the sea. It was well away from the busier parts of the house, and was on the side remote from the road. And it was furnished in the style of our grandparents exactly the style that Professor Latham admired and loved.

But it had one drawback, which gave the newcomer a distinct shock when he saw it. There were two beds in the room! Having only one body, he had no use for two beds. Nor had he the least intention of sharing his room with anyone else. But mine host quickly reassured him. The room was occasionally let to people who required an extra bed, and thus had been provided with one; but of course it would not be in use while the Professor occupied the room. Mine host trusted the bed would not be in the Professor's way: it was only kept furnished with the usual bedding because a dismantled bed looked so uncomfortable. The Professor assured him that he did not mind in the least if the bed was not used: it would do to put things on.

So he proceeded to unpack his bag and to throw the contents about the room in the careless style that was the despair of his housekeeper at Cambridge. The spare bed was soon pretty well concealed beneath scattered articles of clothing, books, bundles of manuscript and other things.

Then he went for a walk, located the principal streets and buildings with the aid of the local map which was always his first purchase on arriving at any strange place, noted sundry second-hand book shops and curio shops for further investigation at leisure, and finally made his way down to the shore, gazed with disapproval at the

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mixed bathing, and then absorbed himself in the alleged history of the town as set forth in a local guide-book.

Now Professor Latham was an authority on history, and had a keen scent for fiction masquerading as fact. So he duly appreciated a detailed account of the visit of Queen Elizabeth to the town, and her stay at the "Blue Dragon," at a date when she was unquestionably lying ill at the Old Palace at Richmond, which she was never to leave alive. But he cared less for various ghost stories, all of which seemed to be connected in one way or another with the "Blue Dragon." If they were all to be believed, that famous hostelry must have been a somewhat exciting place to stay at in the olden days.

The Professor did not believe in ghosts. He dealt in facts and had no use for fancies. He had never yet met with a ghost story that would stand looking into, or even telling a second time.

Tales of that sort always crumbled to bits when you began to ask questions. Nobody whom he had met had ever seen a ghost, though plenty of them knew other people who had seen one: and he knew the worthlessness of second-hand evidence. Still, it was a little amusing to find that the "Blue Dragon" had been the scene of so many legends of this kind. It was just as well that he knew better than to trouble about such absurdities; or he might not have slept well. He would be able to tell his friends that he had stayed in a very nest of ghosts, and had proved by experience that there was nothing at all in it.

He returned to the hotel in time to dress for dinner, and at once noticed that the things he had left on the spare bed had been removed and placed carefully on the table. Evidently the chambermaid had been at work in his absence; but he rather wished she would leave things alone. He put them back on the bed and hoped she would take the hint. Then he dressed and went down to dinner.

The dinner met with his entire approval. The turbot was perfection, and the saddle of mutton was exactly as it should be. He sampled the famous fifty-eight port, of which he had heard good accounts; and he fully endorsed the accounts. He also finished the bottle. Professor Latham knew a good thing when he met it, and he never let it go to waste. Then he smoked a leisurely cigar, drank his coffee to the accompaniment of some particularly fine old brandy, and went up to bed on excellent terms with himself and with all the world beside.

When he reached his room, he paused and reflected. Surely he put those things back on the bed before he went down to dinner. And now they were on the table again! Confound that chambermaid! But was he quite sure that he put them back? He thought so—but really that port was uncommonly fine. . . and the brandy was the genuine article . . . but did he put those things back, or did he only intend to do so? Really it was too absurd that he could not remember a simple little thing like that . . . let's see, what was the date? Fifty-eight, of course: but why should the waiter meddle with his arrangements of the bedroom? No, not the waiter: it must have been the chambermaid. Or were the things on the table after all? Why couldn't he remember a simple little thing like that? It must be the sea air. Better go to bed and not bother any more about it.

So Professor Latham threw the things back on the bed, except those that fell on the floor, and turned into the other bed. He murmured "Fifty-eight" twice, and then slept the sleep of the man who has dined. Not for worlds would we suggest that Professor Latham was either merry, elevated, well oiled, three sheets in the wind, or anything other than as sober as a judge after an assize dinner.

Thus it can only be regarded as remarkable that his sleep should have been disturbed by persistent dreams. And it was still more remarkable that all his dreams had to do with that other bed. He dreamed that it was occupied. He dreamed that he was aroused by the sound of well, heavy breathing; and the sound came from the other bed. He struck a match and lit the candle that stood by his bedside. When it had left off spluttering he saw that the things he had laid on the other bed were no longer there. But a mountain seemed to have arisen in the midst of the bed.

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It was occupied! Now, who could have had the confounded impertinence . . . he would have a few plain words with the landlord in the morning about this.

Then he thought that he got carefully out of bed, said things to himself as his bare foot trod on a collar stud that some fool must have thrown on the floor, and made his way to the other bed to see who the intruder was. He had already noted that the man was an ugly looking fellow, red-headed and provided with a nose whose colour suggested that water disagreed with him.

Probably some drunken roisterer who had come home late and had mistaken the room. He would enlighten him on the subject.

He took the candle to the bedside of the intruder, turned back the sheet to reveal the face more completely, and saw himself! Then he seized himself by the shoulder and shook himself, with the result that himself woke up and hit him in the eye. A tremendous tussle followed. Himself jumped out of bed and knocked him down, but he got up again and tripped himself up and got the head of himself into chancery. When himself got free, it was clear that both of him were in a distinctly nasty temper. A stand-up fight followed, resulting in considerable damage to both himself and him; but finally he knocked himself down with a crash that shook the universe and woke up Professor Latham.

The Professor was quite annoyed. He usually slept well and was rarely troubled by dreams. He struck a light to see the time; and then noticed that all the things he had thrown on the other bed were now lying in a heap on the floor. Now this was beyond a joke. It could not be the chambermaid this time. Was it possible that when he threw the things on the bed over night his aim was not quite straight? The thought was not an agreeable one to a man like himself of strictly sober habits.

Anyway, the things could not lie on the floor: so he got out and once more put them on the other bed. Then he turned in and dozed and dreamed until the morning. And his dreams were still occupied with that second bed, which seemed fated to destroy his rest.

When he rose next morning, the first thing that met his eye was that troublesome bed: and what he saw made him rub his eyes and wonder if he were awake or asleep. The things he had put on it during the night were now once more scattered about the floor. But this was not all. The bed had apparently been slept in! The bed clothes were thrown back, as if someone had just risen; and there was a depression in the middle of the bed and on the pillow which could only be accounted for by someone having slept there.

But the thing was simply impossible. Professor Latham went straight to the door, and found that it was locked as he had left it over night. No one could have come in. Who then slept in that other bed? It was an uncomfortable kind of question.

There seemed to be only three possible explanations of the affair. He might have risen in his sleep and changed into the other bed. But if so, he must have changed back again, for he was in the right bed when he woke up. He was not addicted to walking in his sleep; and the thing seemed very improbable. Or the bed might have been disturbed without anyone sleeping in it.

But, if so, who disturbed it? No one could have done it but himself: so this did not help matters much. The third possible explanation was that someone other than himself had really been lying in that bed at some time during the night, but had gone before he woke up. But, if so, it must have been someone who could enter a locked room and leave it again without making any sign.

This was an unpleasant kind of suggestion; and he did not dwell on it. As we have said, he did not believe in ghosts: and besides, who ever heard of a ghost sleeping in a bed or anywhere else for the matter of that?

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He thought and thought; and the more he thought, the less he liked it. Mysteries were not in his line, and he did not want to be mixed up in any. So he dismissed the matter from his mind, with a private resolve to avoid the fifty-eight port at dinner, and went downstairs to breakfast. On his way he met the chambermaid and learnt from her that she had not moved any things off the bed in his room.

After breakfast, he went up to his room in search of a book that he intended to take with him and read out of doors, and was just going to enter when he heard someone talking in the room.

He paused and listened. Yes, there was certainly someone there, and he seemed out of temper.

What he was saying Professor Latham could not hear; but the tone of the voice was distinctly unamiable. And the oddest thing about it was that it sounded just like his own voice as he had once heard it in a gramophone!

But, whoever the intruder might be, he had no right in that room; and the Professor entered with the full intention of telling him so in unmistakable terms. He went in with a frown on his brow; but this changed at once to a stare of astonishment. The room was empty. But apparently somebody had recently been there, for the very book he had come for had been thrown into the fireplace! And his pet cigar case was lying beside it!

Yet the door of the room had been locked till he opened it. No one could have entered the room, except the chambermaid who was provided with a master key; but inquiry proved that she had been in another part of the house since Professor Latham went down to breakfast. It was of course possible that some thief might have provided himself with a skeleton key; but there was nothing to suggest any attempt at robbery. Nothing had been interfered with, except the articles that were thrown into the fireplace. Besides, the Professor had heard the voice of the intruder immediately before entering the room.

The landlord was called, and he listened to the story with a patient smile. His explanation was a very simple one; but it did not convey much consolation to his guest.

"My dear Sir," he said, "in an old house like this, full of long passages and odd corners communicating with one another, all kinds of small sounds get carried along and mixed up; so that the echo of a voice or sound in one part of the house seems to come from another. If we were to take any notice of all the slight sounds that one hears when all is quiet at night, we should begin to think that every room in the place was haunted. All those silly tales about this house in the local guide-book have no doubt been started in this way. We simply take no notice of them."

But this did not explain the removal of the things from the bed, nor the disturbance of the bed clothes, nor the throwing of the book and cigar case into the fireplace; and it did not impress Professor Latham much. So he shrugged his shoulders, took up his book, and started for his walk. And then another queer thing happened.

Passing a photographer's shop, he was startled to see in the window an excellent portrait of himself! As he had never been to the place before, and had never in his life been photographed with his hat on his head as this portrait represented him he was considerably astonished. He went into the shop, and remarked:

"I see you have in your window a photograph of Professor Latham of Cambridge. May I ask when it was taken?"

"I fear you are mistaken, Sir," said the photographer. "We do not know the name and have certainly not taken any gentleman giving that name. Would you mind pointing out the portrait?" The bewildered professor indicated the photograph, and received the explanation that it was that of a gentleman who had stayed at the "Blue Dragon" two years before, and who declined to give any name.

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"But it is really a very good portrait of yourself," said the photographer. "Possibly it is yours, and you have forgotten the occurrence?"

Professor Latham could only assure him that he had never been in Saltminster before, and had certainly not sat for that portrait. It could only be regarded as a very curious and extraordinary coincidence. He wondered if he possessed a double.

Then another odd thing happened. In the course of his walk he met a man who raised his hat and said, "Let me take the opportunity of apologising for my clumsiness in colliding with you in the hotel last night. It was caused by catching my foot in the edge of the carpet."

The Professor assured him that he was mistaken. No one had collided with him: it must have been someone else. But the man persisted that it was he whom he had knocked against just outside the door of room No. 39, which was that which Professor Latham was occupying. These mistakes were very strange.

But a still more curious mistake awaited him on his return to the hotel. On entering his room, he found the chambermaid putting an extra blanket on the spare bed. He asked what this meant, as the bed was not to be used, and was told that he himself had asked her to do it as he felt cold in the night. The Professor denied this, and pointed out that he slept in the other bed. The maid said that both of the beds had been slept in, which she did not understand, and that she was quite sure she had seen him about half an hour previously, coming out of the room, and that he had been very particular to explain which bed was to have the extra blanket!

The bewildered Professor could not make it out at all. Had all the world gone mad in Saltminster? Or was he in the throes of a nightmare and would presently wake up and find it all a dream? And then came another shock. He presently went to the mirror to brush his hair; and over his shoulder he distinctly saw the exact double of himself going out through the door of the room. He turned quickly and was just in time to see the door close. He ran across the room and flung the door open; but no one was visible in the corridor. Yet he had been so quick, and the corridor was so long, that no one could have got away in the time.

A few minutes later he went down to lunch. As he entered the dining-room, he noticed that the waiter looked at him with some surprise. Then the man asked if he had changed his mind about lunching. The Professor asked what he meant, and was informed that as he went out of the house a few minutes before he had said in answer to the waiter's inquiry that he would not be in to lunch. Things were getting complicated. Evidently someone was being mistaken for him. This might be accounted for by personal resemblance; but what about the incidents in the bedroom? And these things were not happening after dinner; so that the blame could not be laid at the door of the fifty-eight port.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Professor Latham dined with as much satisfaction as on the day before, but he drank a lighter wine than port; he had a game at billiards after dinner; he avoided the old brandy; and he retired to rest in good time.

The sea air had made him sleepy, and he hoped to make amends for the restlessness of the previous night. On the whole he slept soundly, but twice in the night he was disturbed by dreams that he heard someone breathing heavily in the room. On thinking the matter over afterwards he was not quite sure whether he dreamed this or actually heard it when half awake. He was inclined to think that the latter was the case; for in the morning he found to his disgust that the spare bed had evidently been slept in again.

And there was a fresh development. On a chair beside the spare bed lay a piece of paper, torn out of the Professor's pocket book as it proved; and on this had been scribbled some verses of a music-hall song of a particularly ribald and vulgar character. And the handwriting was that of Professor Latham! He could not deny it. Though the song was quite unknown to him and was of a kind that he would never think of either writing or

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repeating, he could not get away from the fact that the handwriting was his own. He began to feel thankful that he had not left his cheque-book about.

But during the day things took a still more unpleasant turn. The landlord sought an interview with him; and after some hesitation told him that he must ask him to find other accommodation.

He indignantly inquired the reason, and was told that a gentleman who attempted to kiss the chambermaid on the stairs was not the kind of patron that was desired at the "Blue Dragon"!

Imagine the feelings of Professor Latham, who was the last man in the world to do such a thing!

But the chambermaid persisted in her story, in spite of his denials and assurances that it must have been someone else; and the unfortunate man had to agree to leave the next day. By this time he had had more than enough of Saltminster, and decided to return to Cambridge rather than seek other accommodation in the place. But the delay till the next day was to prove very nearly fatal to him.

That same evening, as he went up to bed, he distinctly heard muttered laughter in his room just before he opened the door to go in; and he found that the clothes of the spare bed had been turned back as if someone was about to get into it. He also noticed that one of his razors had been taken out of its case and was lying open on the dressing-table. He put it back and it was as well for him that he did so.

He undressed and was about to get into bed when he turned to the window to see what kind of weather it was. The moon was shining brightly, and he stood there for a minute or two with the window open. Then he suddenly found himself caught in the grip of someone behind him; and at the same moment an accidental glance at the mirror showed him the face of his antagonist over his shoulder. It was his own face!

He saw at once that it was to be a struggle for life. The horror that had him in its grip was evidently trying to throw him out through the window. For some minutes the issue was uncertain. Twice he was pressed against the window-sill and was almost over; but each time by a supreme effort he managed to get back into the room. Dressing-table and chairs were overturned in the struggle, and no doubt a great noise was thus made; but he was unconscious of everything but the struggle for life.

But the noise was the saving of Professor Latham. It attracted the notice of other guests, who came out of their rooms to see what it was. Then followed a loud knocking at his door; and at the same moment he found himself alone!

He left Saltminster the next morning; and he has expressed no opinion on ghost stories since.

Nor has he ever been known to recommend the "Blue Dragon" as a nice quiet place for a holiday.