Hosts and Guests

Max Beerbohm

Table of Contents

Hosts and Guests

Max Beerbohm

BEAUTIFULLY vague though the English language is, with its meanings merging into one another as softly as the facts of landscape in the moist English climate, and much addicted though we always have been to ways of compromise, and averse from sharp hard logical outlines, we do not call a host a guest, nor a guest a host. The ancient Romans did so. They, with a language that was as lucid as their climate and was a perfect expression of the sharp hard logical outlook fostered by that climate, had but one word for those two things. Nor have their equally acute descendants done what might have been expected of them in this matter. H™te and ospite and huesped are as mysteriously equivocal as hospes . By weight of all this authority I find myself being dragged to the conclusion that a host and a guest must be the same thing, after all. Yet in a dim and muzzy way, deep down in my breast, I feel sure that they are different. Compromise, you see, as usual. I take it that strictly the two things are one, but that our division of them is yet another instance of that sterling common sense by which, etc., etc.

I would go even so far as to say that the difference is more than merely circumstantial and particular. I seem to discern also a temperamental and general difference. You ask me to dine with you in a restaurant, I say I shall be delighted, you order the meal, I praise it, you pay for it, I have the pleasant sensation of not paying for it; and it is well that each of us should have a label according to the part he plays in this transaction. But the two labels are applicable in a larger and more philosophic way. In every human being one or the other of these two instincts is predominant: the active or positive instinct to offer hospitality, the negative or passive, instinct to accept it. And either of these instincts is so significant of character that one might well say that mankind is divisible into two great classes: hosts and guests.

I have already (see third sentence of foregoing paragraph) somewhat prepared you for the shock of a confession which candor now forces from me. I am one of the guests. You are, however, so shocked that you will read no more of me? Bravo! Your refusal indicates that you have not a guestish soul. Here am I trying to entertain you, and you will not be entertained. You stand shouting that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Very well. For my part, I would rather read than write, any day. You shall write this essay for me. Be it never so humble, I shall give it my best attention and manage to say something nice about it. I am sorry to see you calming suddenly down. Nothing but a sense of duty to myself, and to guests in general, makes me resume my pen. I believe guests to be as numerous, really, as hosts. It may be that even you, if you examine yourself dispassionately, will find that you are one of them. In which case, you may yet thank me for some comfort. I think there are good qualities to be found in guests, and some bad ones in even the best hosts.

Our deepest instincts, bad or good, are those which we share with the rest of the animal creation. To offer hospitality, or to accept it, is but an instinct which man has acquired in the long course of his self−development. Lions do not ask one another to their lairs, nor do birds keep open nest. Certain wolves and tigers, it is true, have been so seduced by man from their natural state that they will deign to accept man's hospitality. But when you give a bone to your dog, does he run out and invite another dog to share it with him? — and does your cat insist on having a circle of other cats around her saucer of milk? Quite the contrary. A deep sense of personal property is common to all these creatures. Thousands of years hence they may have acquired some willingness to share things with their friends. Or, rather, dogs may; cats, I think, not. Meanwhile, let us not be censorious. Though certain monkeys assuredly were of finer and more malleable stuff than any wolves or tigers, it was a very long time indeed before even we began to be hospitable. The cavemen did not entertain. It may be that now and again — say, toward the end of the Stone Age — one or another among the more enlightened of them said to his wife, while she plucked an eagle that he had snared the day before, "That red−haired man who lives in the next valley seems to be a decent, harmless sort of man. And sometimes I fancy he is rather lonely. I think I will ask him to dine with us to−night," and presently, going out, met the red−haired man and said to him: "Are you doing anything to−night? If not, won't you dine with us? It would be a great pleasure to my wife. Only ourselves. Come

just as you are." "That is most good of you, but," stammered the red−haired man, "as ill−luck will have it, I am engaged to−night. A long−standing, formal invitation. I wish I could get out of it, but I simply can't. I have a morbid conscientiousness about such things." Thus we see that the will to offer hospitality was an earlier growth than the will to accept it. But we must beware of thinking these two things identical with the mere will to give and the mere will to receive. It is unlikely that the red−haired man would have refused a slice of eagle if it had been offered to him where he stood. And it is still more unlikely that his friend would have handed it to him. Such is not the way of hosts. The hospitable instinct is not wholly altruistic. There is pride and egoism mixed up with it, as I shall show.

Meanwhile, why did the red−haired man babble those excuses? It was because he scented danger. He was not by nature suspicious, but — what possible motive, except murder, could this man have for enticing him to that cave? Acquaintance in the open valley was all very well and pleasant, but a strange den after dark — no, no! You despise him for his fears. Yet these were not really so absurd as they may seem. As man progressed in civilization, and grew to be definitely gregarious, hospitality became more a matter of course. But even then it was not above suspicion. It was not hedged around with those unwritten laws which make it the safe and eligible thing we know to−day. In the annals of hospitality there are many pages that make painful reading; many a great dark blot is there which the Recording Angel may wish, but will not be able, to wipe out with a tear.

If I were a host, I should ignore those tomes. Being a guest, I sometimes glance into them, but with more of horror, I assure you, than of malicious amusement. I carefully avoid those which treat of hospitality among barbarous races. Things done in the best periods of the most enlightened peoples are quite bad enough. The Israelites were the salt of the earth. But can you imagine a deed of colder−blooded treachery than Jael's? You would think it must have been held accursed by even the basest minds. Yet thus sang Deborah and Barak, "Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be; blessed shall she be among women in the tent." And Barak, remember, was a gallant soldier, and Deborah was a prophetess who "judged Israel at that time." So much for ideals of hospitality among the children of Israel.

Of the Homeric Greeks it may be said that they, too, were the salt of the earth; and it may be added that in their pungent and antiseptic quality there was mingled a measure of sweetness, not to be found in the children of Israel. I do not say outright that Odysseus ought not to have slain the suitors. That is a debatable point. It is true that they were guests under his roof. But he had not invited them. Let us give him the benefit of the doubt. I am thinking of another episode in his life. By what Circe did, and by his disregard of what she had done, a searching light is cast on the laxity of Homeric Greek notions as to what was due to guests. Odysseus was a clever, but not a bad man, and his standard of general conduct was high enough. Yet, having foiled Circe in her purpose to turn him into a swine, and having forced her to restore his comrades to human shape, he did not let pass the barrier of his teeth any such winged words as "Now will I bide no more under thy roof, Circe, but fare across the sea with my dear comrades, even unto mine own home, for that which thou didst was an evil thing, and one not meet to be done unto strangers by the daughter of a god." He seems to have said nothing in particular, to have accepted with alacrity the invitation that he and his dear comrades should prolong their visit, and to have prolonged it with them for a whole year, in the course of which Circe bore him a son, named Telegonus. As Matthew Arnold would have said, "What a set!"

My eye roves, for relief, to those shelves where the later annals are. I take down a tome at random. Rome in the fifteenth century: civilization never was more brilliant than there and then. I imagine; and yet — no, I replace that tome. I saw enough in it to remind me the Borgias selected and laid down rare poisons in their cellars with as much thought as they gave to their vintage wines. Extraordinary! — but the Romans do not seem to have thought so. An invitation to dine at Palazzo Borghese was accounted the highest social honor. I am aware that in recent books of Italian history there has been a tendency to whiten the Borgias' characters. But I myself hold to the old romantic black way of looking at the Borgias. I maintain that though you would often in the fifteenth century have heard the snobbish Roman say, in a would−be offhand tone, "I am dining with the Borgias to−night," no Roman ever was able to say, "I dined last night with the Borgias."

To mankind in general Macbeth and Lady Macbeth stand out as the supreme type of all that a host and hostess should not be. Hence the marked coolness of Scotsmen toward Shakespeare, hence the untiring efforts of that proud and sensitive race to set up Burns in his stead. It is a risky thing to offer sympathy to the proud and sensitive, yet I must say that I think the Scots have a real grievance. The two actual, historic Macbeths were no

worse than innumerable other couples in other lands that had not yet fully struggled out of barbarism. It is hard that Shakespeare happened on the story of that particular pair, and so made it immortal. But he meant no harm, and, let Scotsmen believe me, did positive good. Scotch hospitality is proverbial. As much in Scotland as in America does the English visitor blush when he thinks how perfunctory and niggard, in comparison, English hospitality is. It was Scotland that first formalized hospitality, made of it an exacting code of honor, with the basic principle that the guest must in all circumstances be respected and at all costs protected. Jacobite history bristles with examples of the heroic sacrifices made by hosts for their guests, sacrifices of their own safety, and even of their own political convictions, for fear of infringing, however slightly, that sacred code of theirs. And what was the origin of all this noble pedantry? Shakespeare's "Macbeth."

Perhaps if England were a bleak and rugged country, like Scotland, or a new country, like America, the foreign visitor would be more overwhelmed with kindness here than he is. The landscapes of our countryside are so charming, London abounds in public monuments so redolent of history, so romantic and engrossing, that we are perhaps too apt to think the foreign visitor would have neither time nor inclination to sit dawdling in private dining−rooms. Assuredly there is no lack of hospitable impulse among the English. In what may be called mutual hospitality they touch a high level. The French entertain one another far less frequently. So do the Italians. In England the native guest has a very good time indeed — though of course he pays for it, in some measure, by acting as host, too, from time to time.

In practice, no, there cannot be any absolute division of mankind into my two categories, hosts and guests. But psychologically a guest does not cease to be a guest when he gives a dinner, nor is a host not a host when he accepts one. The amount of entertaining that a guest need do is a matter wholly for his own conscience. He will soon find that he does not receive less hospitality for offering little; and he would not receive less if he offered none. The amount received by him depends wholly on the degree of his agreeableness. Pride makes an occasional host of him; but he does not shine in that capacity. Nor do hosts want him to assay it. If they accept an invitation from him, they do so only because they wish not to hurt his feelings. As guests they are fish out of water.

Circumstances do, of course, react on character. It is conventional for the rich to give, and for the poor to receive. Riches do tent to foster in you the instincts of a host, and poverty does create an atmosphere favorable to the growth of guestish instincts. But strong bents make their own way. Not all guests are to be found among the needy, nor all hosts among the affluent. For sixteen years, after my education was, by courtesy, finished — from the age, that is, of twenty−two to the age of thirty−eight — I lived in London, seeing all sorts of people all the while; and I came across many a rich man who, like the master of the shepherd Corin, was "of churlish disposition" and little recked "to find the way to heaven by doing deeds of hospitality." On the other hand, I knew quite poor men who were incorrigibly hospitable.

To such men, all honor. The most I dare claim for myself is that if I had been rich I should have been better than Corin's master. Even as it was, I did my best. But I had no authentic joy in doing it. Without the spur of pride I might conceivably have not done it at all. There recurs to me from among memories of my boyhood an episode that is rather significant. In my school, as in most others, we received now and again "hampers" from home. At the midday dinner, in every house, we all ate together; but at breakfast and supper we ate in four or five separate "messes." It was customary for the receiver of a hamper to share the contents with his messmates. On one occasion I received, instead of the usual variegated hamper, a box containing twelve sausage−rolls. It happened that when this box arrived and was opened by me there was no one around. Of sausage−rolls I was particularly fond. I am sorry to say that I carried the box up to my cubicle, and, having eaten two of the sausage−rolls, said nothing to my friends that day about the other ten, nor anything about them when, three days later, I had eaten them all alone.

Thirty years have elapsed, my school−fellows are scattered far and wide, the chance that this page may meet the eyes of some of them does not much dismay me; but I am glad there was no collective and contemporary judgment by them on my strange exploit. What defense could I have offered? Suppose I had said, "You see, I am so essentially a guest," the plea would have carried little weight. And yet it would not have been a worthless plea. On receipt of a hamper, a boy did rise, always, in the esteem of his mess−mates. His sardines, his marmalade, his potted meat, at any rate while they lasted, did make us think that his parents "must be awfully decent," and that he was a not unworthy son. He had become our central figure, we expected him to lead the conversation, we liked listening to him, his jokes were good. With those twelve sausage−rolls I could have dominated my fellows for a

while. But I had not a dominant nature. Leading abashed me, I was happiest in the comity of the crowd. Having received a hamper, I should have passed muster. I suppose I was always glad when it was finished, glad to fall back into the ranks.

Boys (as will have been surmised from my record of the effect of hampers) are all of them potential guests. It is only as they grow up that some of them harden into hosts. It is likely enough that if I, when I grew up, had been rich, my natural bent to guestship would have been diverted, and I, too, have become a (sort of) host. And perhaps I should have passed muster, I suppose I did pass muster whenever, in the course of my long residence in London, I did entertain friends. But the memory of those occasions is not dear to me — especially not the memory of those that were in the more distinguished restaurants. Somewhere in the back of my brain, while I tried to lead the conversation brightly, was always the haunting fear that I had not brought enough money in my pocket. I never let this fear master me. I never said to any one, "Will you have a liqueur?" — always, "What liqueur will you have?" But I postponed as far as possible the evil moment of asking for the bill. When I had, in the proper casual tone (I hope and believe), at length asked for it, I wished always it were not brought to me folded on a plate, as though the amount were so hideously high that I alone must be privy to it. So soon as it was laid beside me, I wanted to know the worst at once. But I pretended to be so engrossed in talk that I was unaware of the bill's presence, and I was careful to be always in the middle of a sentence when I raised the upper fold and took my not (I hope) frozen glance. In point of fact, the amount was always much less than I had feared. Pessimism does win us great happy moments.

Meals in the restaurants of Soho tested less severely the pauper guest masquerading as host. But to them one could not ask rich persons — nor even poor persons unless one knew them very well. Soho is so uncertain that the fare is often not good enough to be palmed off on even one's poorest and oldest friends. A very magnetic host, with a great gift for bluffing, might, no doubt, even in Soho's worst moments, diffuse among his guests a conviction that all was of the best. But I never was good at bluffing. I had always to let food speak for itself. "It's cheap" was the only p¾an that in Soho's bad moments ever occurred to me, and this of course I did not utter. And was it so cheap, after all? Soho induces a certain optimism. A bill there was always larger than I had thought it would be.

Every one, even the richest and most munificent of men, pays much by check more light−heartedly than he pays little in specie. In restaurants I should have liked always to give checks. But in any restaurant I was so much more often seen as guest than as host that I never felt sure the proprietor would trust me. Only in my club did I know the luxury, or rather the painlessness, of entertaining by check. A check — especially a club check, supplied for the use of members, not a leaf torn out of his own book — makes so little mark on any man's imagination. Offering hospitality in any club, I was inwardly calm. If my guest was by nature a guest, I managed to forget somewhat that I myself was a guest by nature. But if my guest was a true and habitual host, I did feel that we were in an absurdly false relation; and it was not without difficulty that I could restrain myself from saying to him, "This is all very well, you know, but — frankly: your place is at the head of your own table."

The host as guest is far, far worse than the guest as host. He never even passes muster. The guest, in virtue of a certain hability that is part of his natural equipment, can more or less ape the ways of a host. But the host, with his more positive temperament, does not even attempt the graces of a guest. By "graces" I do not mean to imply anything artificial. The guest's manners are, rather, as wild flowers springing from good rich soil — the soil of genuine modesty and gratitude. He honorably wishes to please in return for the pleasure he is receiving. He wonders that people should be so kind to him, and, without knowing it, is very kind to them. But the host, as I said earlier in this essay, is a guest against his own will. That is the root of the mischief. He feels that it is more blessed, etc., and that he is conferring rather than accepting a favor. He does not adjust himself. He forgets his place. He leads the conversation. He tries genially to draw you out. He never comments on the goodness of the wine. He looks at his watch abruptly and says he must be off. He doesn't say he has had a delightful time. In fact, his place is at the head of his own table.

His own table, over his own cellar, under his own roof — it is only there that you see him at his best. To a club or restaurant he may sometimes invite you, but not there, not there, my child, do you get the full savor of his quality. In life or literature there has been no better host than Old Wardle. Appalling though he would have been as a guest in club or restaurant, it is hardly less painful to think of him as a host there. At Dingley Dell, with an ample gesture, he made you free of all that was his. He could not have given you a club or a restaurant. Nor, when

you come to think of it, did he give you Dingley Dell. The place remained his. None knew better than Old Wardle that this was so. Hospitality, as we have agreed, is not one of the most deep−rooted instincts in man, whereas the sense of possession certainly is. Not even Old Wardle was a communist. "This," you may be sure he said to himself, "is my roof, these are my horses, that's a picture of my dear old grandfather." And "This," he would say to us, "is my roof: sleep soundly under it. These are my horses: ride them. That's a portrait of my dear old grandfather: have a good look at it." But he did not ask us to walk off with any of these things. Not even what he actually did give us would he regard as having passed out of his possession. "That," he would muse, if we were torpid after dinner, "is my roast beef," and "That," if we staggered on the way to bed, "is my cold milk punch." "But surely," you interrupt me, "to give and then not feel that one has given is the very best of all ways of giving." I agree. I hope you didn't think I was trying to disparage Old Wardle. I was merely keeping my promise to point out that from among the motives of even the best hosts pride and egoism are not absent.

Every virtue, as we were taught in youth, is a mean between two extremes; and I think any virtue is the better understood by us if we glance at the vice on either side of it. I take it that the virtue of hospitality stands midway between churlishness and mere ostentation. Far to the left of the good host stands he who doesn't want to see anything of any one; far to the right, he who wants a horde of people to be always seeing something of him. I conjecture that the figure on the left, just discernible through my field−glasses, is that of old Corin's master. His name was never revealed to us, but Corin's brief account of his character suffices. "Deeds of hospitality" is a dismal phrase that could have occurred only to the servant of a very dismal master. Not less tell−tale is Corin's idea that men who do these "deeds" do them only to save their souls in the next world. It is a pity Shakespeare did not actually bring Corin's master on to the stage. One would have liked to see the old man genuinely touched by the charming eloquence of Rosalind's appeal for a crust of bread, and conscious that he would probably go to heaven if he granted it, and yet not quite able to grant it. Far away though he stands to the left of the good host, he has yet something in common with that third person discernible on the right — that speck yonder, which I believe to be Lucullus. Nothing that we know of Lucullus suggests that he was less inhuman than the churl of Arden. It does not appear that he had a single friend, or that he wished for one. His lavishness was indiscriminate except in that he entertained only the rich. One would have liked to dine with him, but not even in the act of digestion could one have felt that he had a heart. One would have acknowledged that in all the material resources of his art he was a master, and also that he practised his art for sheer love of it, wishing to be admired for nothing but his mastery, and cocking no eye on any of those ulterior objects but for which some of the most prominent hosts would not entertain at all. But the very fact that he was an artist is repulsive. When hospitality becomes an art it loses its very soul. With this reflection I look away from Lucullus and, fixing my gaze on the middle ground, am the better able to appreciate the excellence of the figure that stands before me — the figure of Old Wardle. Some pride and egoism in that capacious breast, yes, but a great heart full of kindness, and ever a warm spontaneous welcome to the stranger in need and to all old friends and young. Hark! he is shouting something. He is asking us both down to Dingley Dell. And you have shouted back that you will be delighted. Ah, did I not suspect from the first that you, too, were perhaps a guest?

But — I constrain you in the act of rushing off to pack your things — one moment: this essay has yet to be finished. We have yet to glance at those two extremes between which the mean is good guestship. Far to the right of the good guest, we descry the parasite; far to the left, the churl again. Not the same churl, perhaps. We do not know that Corin's master was ever sampled as a guest. I am inclined to call yonder speck Dante — Dante Alighieri, of whom we do know that he received during his exile much hospitality from many hosts and repaid them by writing how bitter was the bread in their houses, and how steep the stairs were. To think of dour Dante as a guest is less dispiriting only than to think what he would have been as a host had it ever occurred to him to entertain any one or anything except a deep regard for Beatrice; and one turns with positive relief to have a glimpse of the parasite — Mr. Smurge, I presume, "whose gratitude was as boundless as his appetite, and his presence as unsought as it appeared to be inevitable." But now, how gracious and admirable is the central figure — radiating gratitude, but not too much of it; never intrusive, ever within call; full of dignity, yet all amenable; quiet, yet lively; never echoing, ever amplifying; never contradicting, but often lighting the way to truth; an ornament, an inspiration, anywhere.

Such is he. But who is he? It is easier to confess a defect than to claim a quality. I have told you that when I lived in London I was nothing as a host; but I will not claim to have been a perfect guest. Nor indeed was I. I was

a good one, but, looking back, I see myself not quite in the center — slightly to the left, slightly to the churlish side. I was rather too quiet, and I did sometimes contradict. And, though I always liked to be invited anywhere, I very often preferred to stay at home. If any one hereafter shall form a collection of the notes written by me in reply to invitations, I am afraid he will gradually suppose me to have been more in request than ever I really was, and to have been also a great invalid, and a great traveler.