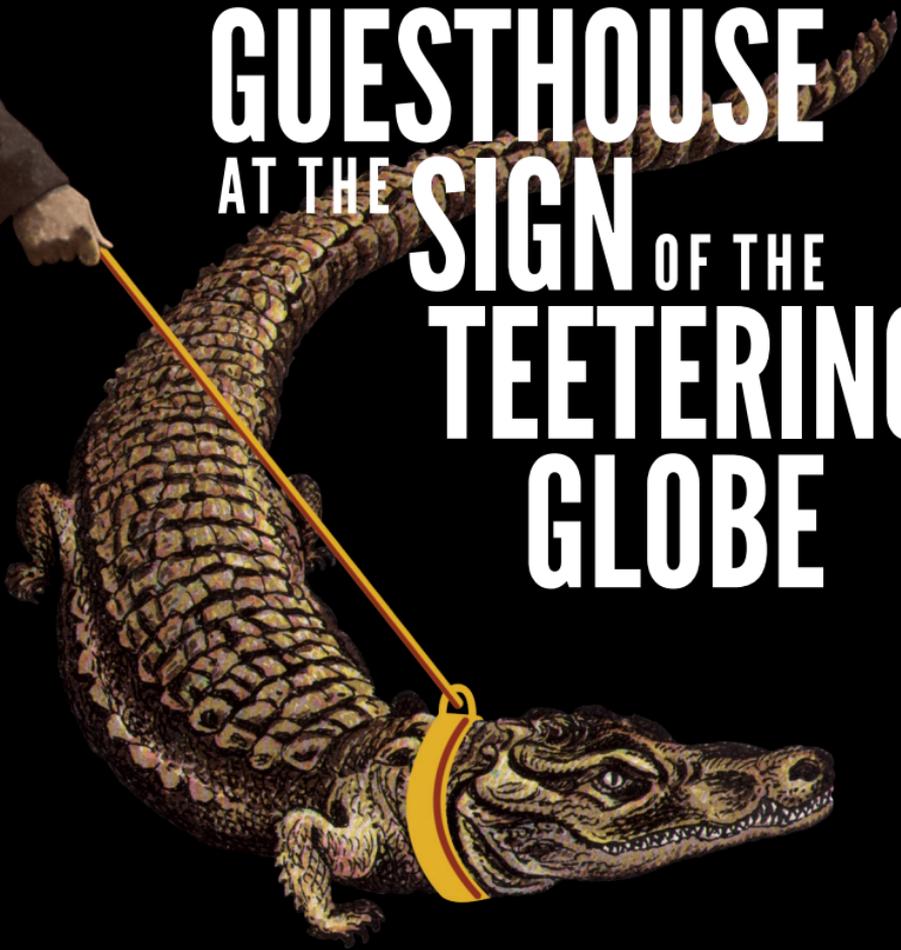




THE
GUESTHOUSE
AT THE **SIGN** OF THE
TEETERING
GLOBE



FRANZISKA ZU REVENTLOW

Translated by James J. Conway

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PREVIEW

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THE GUESTHOUSE AT THE SIGN OF THE TEETERING GLOBE

We came across him – Hieronymus Edelmann, that is – on a Spanish island, where he had been up to no good for years. How did he come to be there? God, how anyone comes to be anywhere, or so we initially thought. And later we didn't know what to make of the matter at all. In any case he was here now, and none of us was in a position to elude his acquaintance.

Whenever a ship docked he would turn up on board to ferret out compatriots or other foreigners and then promptly present them with his card. This card consisted of a photograph of himself in postcard format with the attractively stylised signature, 'Hieronymus Edelmann', and it strayed so far from convention as to cause confusion, all the more so because the photograph bore no resemblance to him whatsoever. It wasn't taken from life, rather – as he immediately explained – from a portrait painted in his younger years, which showed him with a moderately developed beard and a striking checked suit; so strikingly checked, in fact, that only

secondarily did the observer manage to record other details, such as his facial features. The suit must have long worn out or been discarded, and its owner had since grown a monstrous red beard that was trimmed in a fan shape. The sole similarity lay in a black-framed monocle from which he never parted, and which the portraitist had captured with the utmost fidelity.

And so this first moment would invariably find the fresh arrival standing there, perplexed and bewildered. But Hieronymus was ready with advice, eyeing the arrival victoriously through his monocle and steering the acquaintanceship forward with a few words of explanation.

He would remark that he had lived there for a long time and that he derived particular pleasure from helping new visitors find their way. And, might he enquire, was there a hotel already booked? No? Well then, he could recommend the Guesthouse at the Sign of the Teetering Globe without hesitation; he himself lodged there, and one was always well looked after.

The result was almost always the same – still half dazed by the crossing, overwhelmed by the gentleman's extraordinary appearance and conduct, the arrival would forfeit all self-determination and end up in the Guesthouse at the Sign of the Teetering Globe.

Once at the guesthouse, Hieronymus Edelman would continue to conduct himself in this persuasive manner, introducing newcomers to the guests already lodging there, and in such a way that each believed the other to be an old acquaintance of their mutual patron, and so relations would begin under false assumptions

from the outset.

In fact everything here transpired under more or less false assumptions. The guesthouse itself was a somewhat dubious abode – a two-storey old shack of gabled design, it stood on a hillside a short distance from the seashore and certain qualities of the terrain determined that it was in the habit of sinking lower year by year, such that the windows of the ground floor were coming ever closer to the ground itself. While this was of little import to those of us not minded to stay indefinitely, the owner, a square-built Dutchman with skewed blue eyes, would often conduct a circuit of the building with a concerned expression, then ascertain that it had indeed sunk a few inches since last spring.

We, the victims of Hieronymus, stayed in the parterre of the left wing, which we assertively proclaimed to be the European Quarter. Above us lived an old Frenchman, Monsieur Mouton, who treated the modest port town as though it were Paris itself. He never came home before three o'clock in the morning, sleeping until the afternoon whereupon he would descend to the garden and disappear behind his *Matin* until the approach of cocktail hour. Then he would set out for the town once more to stroll and drink absinthe. Also, he owned a live anteater that accompanied him wherever he went. In the same part of the house dwelt an older American lady who, such was the general assumption, was also given to alcoholic overindulgence. She, too, was given to stepping out of an evening; she claimed to be visiting a relative, a lord who owned a villa there. On her return she would often set herself down halfway up the

stairs, declaring that she had the right to sit wherever she wanted. Faced with objections on the grounds that this represented a disruption to traffic, she simply would not budge, and this led to lively scenes between her and the staff. The top of the left wing was shrouded in mysterious obscurity, with a detached vestibule and its own staircase on the garden side, and one never really knew what went on there.

And finally, topmost, high above it all in the gable rooms was where Hieronymus Edelmann lived and operated.

Zoology numbered among his numberless interests, and he rhapsodised about rare and bizarre animals. He could pore over his animal book for hours, lost in the thought of owning some creature or other, and creating even rarer specimens through experimental breeding. To date he had not managed to achieve this, and so he contented himself with keeping guinea pigs in a shed next to the garden house and fervently envying Monsieur Mouton his anteater. Still, he expected greater things of his guinea pigs than one might ordinarily expect of them. For he had postulated the theory that if left entirely to their own devices, they might perhaps develop into a new species, and maybe even cross-breed with other animals. And so they had the free run of the garden, constantly getting under the guests' feet, but they never changed in the least, keeping entirely to themselves and never giving birth to anything other than entirely normal guinea pigs.

From these and other details it became clear that Hieronymus was possessed of a restless, fantastical

spirit and, because the guinea pigs were not his first disappointment, he was constantly pondering new and creative ways to occupy himself. And so he had settled on this island and chosen the Guesthouse at the Sign of the Teetering Globe as his own, modest, sphere of influence. He was the soul of the building, so to speak, personally and persistently intervening to organise the flow of travellers between its sinking walls, so too its day-to-day life, organising the personal relationships that transpired from his organising, as well as relations between the landlord and the guests. With his tall, rather shaky and somewhat carelessly attired form, his monstrous, fan-shaped beard and his ever-present monocle, he would ascend or descend the stairs, as the case may be, appearing in our midst or departing from it and tumbling headlong to the port whenever a ship approached. In poor weather he would gird himself for this purpose with an improbably short loden cape that only reached his hips and a tiny, meagre hat on his head. In sunny weather, on the other hand, he would wear a pith helmet which augmented the general dissonance of his toilette, of which he himself was most likely unaware. With our number now grown to six people of different sexes and no further visitors arriving, Hieronymus Edelmann staged a kind of meeting to acquaint us all with one of his pet plans. There was a Sister of Mercy and a young merchant who had both come from Africa to recuperate from the climate there, an assistant doctor with damaged lungs who was also hoping for recuperation, as well as a gentleman from Bacharach, said provenance inspiring the young merchant to christen

him 'Loreley', along with a young gymnastics teacher we referred to as Miss Trapeze. It was evening, and we were in the garden seated at a large round table set with lanterns, fending off the numerous mosquitoes, and Hieronymus Edelmann's monocle glinted compellingly in the night as he delivered a stirring, if somewhat muddled address. Yes, he too, like most of us in this century, had given thought to his contribution to the refinement of mankind and its way of life, and further claimed that he had found a good means of achieving said ambition. The most important thing, it seemed, was to find the right people and establish relations between them. He had already laid the groundwork by joining a correspondence association, and further noted that he had enrolled all of us as members as well. The initial aims of the association were purely practical – reciprocal information on living conditions in one place or another, questions of a professional nature and such. But then Hieronymus became involved with the organisational side and expanded its purview so that members now shared points of view, opinions – personal, erotic and so forth. Why, he himself was corresponding with an unemployed lady's companion from Seville about free love and had convinced her of the necessity of said institution... Just now he was about to embark for the mainland to meet her in person and possibly return with her. His monocle glinted at the thought, and he granted us ever deeper insights into his way of thinking. The association, ah yes, the association was merely a means to an end. He needed an extensive human stock from which to make a narrower selection and then –

there followed a few dubious terms such as freedom, beauty, pleasure, doubly perturbing words issuing from him – in short, he wanted to form a federation to this effect, to be called the ‘Flame Federation’, which would afford tremendous pleasure to all involved. His address complete, he looked around the table in expectation of applause and acclamation, and added that he had already talked to the landlord about hiring part of the building for his purposes, then he put his pith helmet back on and rushed to the port to embark on his journey to the mainland. It had just been announced that the ship that was expected to sail the next day would instead embark this very night.

END OF PREVIEW

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