

The Visitor



On the morning of October 11, 1948, Reginald made his way down a flight of stairs from his apartment to his antique shop. Since Reginald lived on the second-story of the building, he liked to brag to his customers that he'd never once been late for work.

At the base of the staircase was a walkway, the only clear pass to the store's front door. Reginald walked the route slowly, as he did every morning. He shuffled past the rare and beautiful furniture, tables where the picture frames and wooden toys were on display, shelves of books, boxes of rusty bicycle wheels, and all of the other treasures that symbolized his last forty years as the shop's proprietor.

Reginald grabbed the OPEN sign, walked to the door, and pulled back its bolt. Then he hung the sign on its hook, letting people know that his shop was open for business.

As Reginald sat behind his desk and enjoyed his coffee, he started to read a biography about a seamstress who had been a spy during the war. Soon, his first customer of the day bought a porcelain doll.

A few minutes later, a man wearing a long coat and a black hat came into the shop. Reginald looked up from his book. "Good morning," he said to the visitor.

The man grunted as he disappeared into the section of the store filled with shelves of antique china.

"Let me know if there's anything I can help you with," Reginald called. He knew that customers liked him to be available, but they preferred not to be watched constantly.

The visitor reappeared in the walkway, frowning as he held a china cup. Reginald recognized the piece. No item in his shop, however tiny, escaped his memory.

"That's part of a set from a town called Arras, in France," he explained.

"I am well aware. That's the problem," the man replied, with his frown firmly in place.



Reginald stood as the visitor approached him; he was becoming concerned.

"I don't see why that is a problem," Reginald responded firmly.

"I'm certain the police would be interested in knowing that you're selling contraband in your store," said the man. His diction was precise, as though he was an actor in a play.

"I beg your pardon! I'm sure you're mistaken," huffed Reginald, who was an honest businessman.

The man set the cup on the desk, a little too roughly. Then he stepped back and pointed an accusing finger at Reginald.

"I'm certain that I'm *not* mistaken! These are very rare and valuable dishes, and anyone who knows about antiques would know that it's illegal to take them out of France."

"That's ridiculous," Reginald insisted, plunking himself back down into his chair. "Get out right now, or *I'll* call the police."

Reginald returned to his book, pretending to ignore the intruder and hoping he would leave. A silent minute passed, and Reginald could feel the man's eyes upon him the entire time. Finally, Reginald looked up.

"I believe I asked you to leave," Reginald said sternly.

"You can deny what's going on all you want," the man persevered with his accusations. Reginald could see now that the man was nervous.

"If you don't let me take this set of dishes back to France immediately, I will have no other choice," the man began. A lost, desperate look entered the man's eyes. He froze for a moment before continuing, "I'll throw them to the floor and break them."

"I will not allow you to threaten me or damage anything in my store," pressed Reginald, as he grabbed the phone and dialed the operator.

"Please connect me to the sheriff's office, it's an emergency," Reginald said.



"Wait. I'm begging you," the man choked. His voice was barely audible and had a slight French accent. Reginald looked up at him and paused.

It wasn't the visitor's breaking voice that prompted Reginald to say into the phone, "Never mind, it's alright now."

It wasn't the visitor's slouching, defeated manner that made Reginald add, "Yes, it's fine. I was mistaken, and I apologize."

It was the tears welling in the visitor's eyes that made Reginald change his mind.

"My good man," Reginald said kindly as he hung up the phone, "Please sit down and explain to me exactly what you're up to."

The man placed a rickety chair in front of Reginald's desk as Reginald reached into a drawer and withdrew a clean handkerchief. The man took the hankie, gratefully, and blotted each of his moist eyes.

"I have been looking for that set of dishes for two years now," the man said. "I've spent all my money tracking them down. Now I can't afford to buy them. I thought that maybe I could scare you. I was so stupid."

"Tell me what is so special about the dishes," Reginald said, moved by the man's obvious sadness.

"They belonged to my parents," the man replied. "Those dishes were the only possessions they could take with them when they fled to your country during the war. The people at the immigration bureau put the dishes in storage, and then they were either lost or stolen. My parents live quite far from here and are getting very old. I promised them that I'd find them. I didn't want to steal them, and I'm too proud to beg."

The man stopped, unable to say more. He hung his head and put a hand on the desk in a silent apology.

Reginald patted the man's trembling hand.

"If what you're saying is true, and I've got a feeling it is, then those dishes were stolen from your folks in the first place. I got them at a government sale and paid almost nothing for them," Reginald said.

The man looked up. His expression was one of hopefulness.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" he asked.

Reginald smiled. "I am, indeed. You're welcome to them, my friend."