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THE UN-WELCOME VISITORS

Deerymea was only a small village yet it was very popular for a time. Visitors would come from far and wide, usually on their way to somewhere else; but they had to pass through Deerymea because there was only one road. Many stopped to look around the quaint old houses with their pretty cottage gardens; and while there they would often buy some of the local produce like fruit and vegetables, jams and pickles, and especially the different flavours of honey for which the village was renowned. Then there was the souvenir shop selling all kinds of locally-made gifts including the also-famous corn dollies crafted from dried corn heads. As the cars drove out of the village they had to pass by the gates of a large country estate which might have been a memorable place to visit; except that Bigtoffs Manor was not open to the public.

Here was the ancestral home of Major Sprightly Notte. He had been in the army until he retired, returning to manage the Manor after the passing of his only other relative, his grandfather Sir Twitmane Notte. Twitmane used to have a number of the village people to help with the running of the estate, and the farms that were a part of it brought in some income; but the really profitable source was the shooting. At set times of year, rich people came and would pay lots of money just to shoot things - game birds, ducks, rabbits, and whatever else was allowed. This sounds very cruel, and it is. Sprightly thought so too, and despite having been in the army he had never liked killing, certainly not defenceless animals; so he stopped that side of the business altogether.

It did mean bills were harder to pay, and the many who had been working for him lost their jobs and they too had to struggle; but the village folk understood the Major's reason was simple kindness and they were quite proud of him for stopping the shooting. Although everyone in Deerymea had to make changes to their lives they managed to cope; and as long as the visitors kept coming they were sure they would be alright. Even Major Notte had plans to make some extra money by opening up to the public, charging them a small fee to come and look around the manor house and gardens. A little later he talked a travelling funfair into setting up in one of the empty paddocks. And it all worked well for a while. Then disaster struck; and much more besides.

Someone decided that the traffic from elsewhere needed a wider, faster road that didn't go through a sleepy little village; so they built one. The locals didn't like the idea and neither did Sprightly; but their complaints were ignored and the new road went ahead anyway. Maybe it was during construction, certainly after the road was finished and traffic began using it, visitors stopped coming. The village businesses suffered; and of course, no-one went to Bigtoffs Manor anymore. If this wasn't bad enough, the new road sparked something totally unexpected. Day and night more cars began using the road and also noisy trucks; and some particular residents became very disturbed.

Not really there in person anymore, having passed away, they had been buried in the Deerymea cemetery, right alongside of which ran the noisy new road. If the bodies of those in

their graves continued to rest in peace, their ghosts did not. "Never mind the noise," said the ghost of Carver Legroast the butcher, adding to the complaints of the others. "What about the vibrations as those heavy trucks go past? And it seems to be getting worse."

"Well, I don't know about you folk," put in Mrs Proud, "But I'm leaving."

"To go where?" asked Jed Stalker.

"Back to our old home of course," she replied emphatically. "You must remember that, Jed – Bigtoffs Manor where you were the gamekeeper and I was housekeeper. Maybe we won't be able to do what we used to, but it would be a lot quieter than here."

It was decided then: the ghosts of the people buried in the cemetery would return to their former homes; and once night closed in they came up out of the graves and headed for Deerymea. Some walked, many floated; and John Strapper who had been Sir Twitmane's groom rode Samson, the horse that had died along with John when they had taken a tumble. Each returned to the places where they had lived before. Being new to this kind of visitation, none of them realised what would happen when they were seen by the people who were living there now. Certain families had lived in Deerymea for generations, and despite showing surprise and astonishment on seeing ghosts floating through their rooms and hallways, as soon as they recognised a spectre as a relation who had passed away, they were happy to welcome them back as one of their own.

Major Sprightly was at first lost for words on the arrival of his three former employees. Following a few deep breaths he said finally: "I'm flabbergasted! Why have you come? What do you want here?"

"Peace and quiet," said Mrs Proud. "The new road's making the cemetery too noisy."

"I want to roam the woods and fields to see how my animals and birds are going," said Jed the former gamekeeper.

"And I'd just like to ride Samson around the estate again," said John the ex-groom.

"And you won't cause any trouble...?" queried Sprightly. When they all agreed not to make a nuisance of themselves, the Major declared: "Alright, then. You served Bigtoffs Manor well over the years. I think you deserve to stay; and welcome home all of you."

Unfortunately it wasn't like this for many of Deerymea's residents. They had bought houses from people who wanted to leave the village to live somewhere else; and, of course, the ghosts who suddenly appeared in their homes were total strangers to them. Not only that, but most grown-ups were afraid of them; and despite the plea: "Can we keep him?" from a few wide-eyed, delighted children, the parents decided they had no option but to sell their houses. That proved harder than it sounded, because every time a buyer came to look the place over, the resident ghost would appear to scare them off.

Deerymea was in crisis. The people who wanted to leave couldn't sell their houses, and that meant they would have no money to buy another somewhere else; so they were stuck in a village that was growing poorer by the day because no visitors came anymore. It seemed that, just like the former residents whose bodies remained in its cemetery, the village of Deerymea would die unless someone could come up with an answer to a huge problem.

Sprightly Notte had been pondering the very same question long and hard. Sitting in his armchair staring at the flames licking up from the logs burning in the grate, he said quietly: "There must be something we can do to breathe life back into the village again."

The words had really been to himself, but someone had overheard. "I think there is," said Mrs Proud as she drifted in from the kitchen. "Ghosts – *WE* are the answer, Major."

Sprightly frowned. "I don't understand, Mrs Proud. From what I've heard around the village, ghosts are a big part of the problem." Realising he might have upset her, he added: "Not you, of course. I'm getting used to having you and the other two around, but most of the villagers are afraid. They want the ghosts gone from their homes."

“And they can be, Major,” said his former housekeeper. “I read once that there are people who go ghost hunting; and not only that, they are always on the lookout for haunted houses where they can stay overnight to try and get just a glimpse of a ghost, even photograph them.”

“I know that,” said Sprightly, “But how does it help us?” Mrs Proud first called in Jed and John before explaining her idea, and when she had it seemed it might work. “So, we open up Bigtoffs Manor as a kind-of haunted hotel, bringing in all the ghosts from the village to spook our guests.”

“Only the ones who aren’t welcome where they are now,” put in Jed.

“That’s quite a lot of ghosts,” said John. “Maybe too many for Bigtoffs, but I’ve had another idea. Some of them could spook around the funfair, and the ghost train could have some real ghosts; and I could have a few with me as Samson and I take people on guided tours.”

The Major was nodding in agreement. “We will have to advertise, of course, but you can leave that to me.” Finally he sat back and declared: “Righty-o, let’s do it.”

Over the coming weeks Major Sprightly Notte and his ghostly staff put the plans into action. At one stage John was riding his horse past the Notte family graveyard and must have disturbed Sir Twitmane. The old man’s ghost floated up out of the grave and was annoyed to have his spooky dreams interrupted; but only at first. When the groom’s ghost told him about what was going on, he said in his old blustering voice: “Sprightly can’t organise this on his own! It’s too big a project for him – he’ll make a diabolical mess of it. Lead the way, John lad. I’m coming with you.”

Not that Sprightly welcomed the interference of his grandfather, but the old ghost did have some good ideas, including bringing in a film crew to make a TV commercial. Slowly but surely, the visitors began to return to the village until it reached the point where Bigtoffs Manor was full and could take no more guests. Anyone wanting to stay then had to book well in advance, and this inconvenience only served to make the haunted hotel ever-more popular. Even some of the village people decided they could take in a guest or two; but realising visitors were really just coming to see the ghosts they asked the Major if they could borrow their own ghost back, and maybe another as well.

Although it wasn’t wanted in the first place, it certainly seemed that the new road had done everyone a big favour. And this was how the once-sleepy village of Deerymea became a number one tourist destination and was able to get back to normal. Well, almost...