

An Uninvited Guest

Sharon and Ken had lived in the village for a year now. They had always hankered after a life in the country, thinking it would be a better place than the city for bringing up children.

Sharon had been appointed as headmistress to the local primary school and had enjoyed her first year there; she was now on Summer break but looking forward to getting back to working with the village children again.

Ken's job was in software development and he was able to work mostly from home; fortunately the village had good broadband connexion. He would go into his office in the nearby city at least once each week and, as this was not far distant, the journey was easily made.

Sharon and Ken had been keen to enter into village life. They had got to know many of the villagers well. It was a relaxing place. People seem to know everyone else and no one seemed bothered about locking doors. People called on one another as when they pleased and helped out one another.

One day, when Ken was working from his office in the city, Sharon arrived back at their cottage in the afternoon after walking their dog and was surprised to find a old man she did not recognize sitting in their main room. The dog growled a little and ran on round the back. Sharon apologized for the dog's behaviour.

"Oh, that's all right, my dear," the man said. "I'm used to that."

"Oh," said Sharon, not quite knowing what to make of that. "I suppose you know who I am. But who are you? I don't think I've seen you around the village? Why have you called?"

"My goodness," replied the man. "What a lot of questions. As for knowing who you are, you suppose right, my dear. As for being around the village, well, I've been part of the village for a very long time – a very long time indeed. Why have I called? Why? To say hello to you, my dear; I've been a bit remiss about that."

"Thank you," said Sharon, "the villagers have already made me welcome."

"Ah," he said, "but you haven't been welcomed by me who's been here the longest."

"Ah well," Sharon said, "as you're here, would you like a cup of tea, or maybe coffee. And I've got a bit of coffee and walnut cake."

"Tea would be very nice, thank you," the stranger said, "milk and one sugar, if you please - and that cake sounds mighty inviting."

"Right ho!" said Sharon as she went out into the kitchen.

She returned shortly with two mugs of tea and the coffee and walnut cake.

"There you are, Mr er um," said Sharon. "Sorry, I don't think you told me your name."

"So I didn't. I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "It's Tom, Tom Goodchild."

"And you've been here a long time, you say," said Sharon.

"Oh yes, that I have; a long time," he replied.

He told Sharon some of the old things about the village and they chatted away together until Tom suddenly looked up and said, "Well it was nice chatting with you, my dear; and thank you for the tea and cake. It was very nice. But I'd best be getting along; I like to be home before dusk."

With that he said good-bye and left.

When Ken got back from the office, Sharon said "I had an uninvited guest today."

"That's not unusual in this village where everyone seems to know everyone else," Ken replied.

"No," said Sharon, "it wasn't like that. Villagers usually give a knock even if they don't wait for an answer and walk in, or they call out. And I recognize them. But I've never seen this person before and he was already in the house when I got back from walking the dog."

"Oh," said Ken, "what he was like? Was he on the cadge or what?"

"Nothing like that," Sharon said. "He was an old man called Tom Goodchild. It's funny we'd not heard of him before. He chatted away about old times in the village. I wonder where he lives. He said he liked to be home before dusk."

"What!" laughed Ken, "in case he turns into a toad or something?"

"Don't be silly," said Sharon. "He was nice old man."

After they had their evening meal, Sharon had to go to a meeting with the governors of the primary school, so Ken dropped along to the local pub. As he was chatting with some of the locals, he mentioned Sharon's meeting with Tom Goodchild.

"Oh, she's seen him, then?" said one of them.

"What do you mean? Do you know him?" asked Ken.

"We knows *of* him," said another, "but we don't know him personally like. It's only woman and children that ever sees or meets him."

"What do mean?" said Tom. "Sharon said he's lived here a long time. What do you mean you don't know him?"

"We means what we says," answered another and, he added laughing, "he's certainly been here a long time."

The others joined in the laughter.

Ken was perplexed. "What's going on?" he asked.

"I reckon your missus will find out soon enough," said another.

They continued laughing away and Ken could get no sense from them. When he finished his pint, he said good-bye and went back home.

Sharon's meeting hadn't lasted long and she got back soon after Ken. Ken told her what the locals had said in the pub; she agreed it was odd.

"He seemed such a nice old gentleman," she said. "I'll ask Mabel about it tomorrow when I see her; she been in the village since she was a child so she must be able to tell me."

The next day Sharon did ask her neighbour Mabel.

"Oh, you've met Tom, then," she said in a knowing way.

"Yes," Sharon replied, "but why haven't I heard of him before? How long has he been here? Where does he live?"

“I’ll show you,” said Mabel.

She took Sharon along to the village churchyard and moved among the gravestones till they came across one that read: “Thomas Goodchild – Jan. 1632 – Nov. 1715”

“You mean he’s a ghost?” said Sharon horrified. “You mean my uninvited guest was a ghost?”

“Don’t distress yourself,” said Mabel. “There’s nothing scary or evil about Tom. He’s the kindest person I know.”

“But why did he come to see me?” asked Mabel.

“Because, my dear,” said Mabel, “you’re going to have a baby.”

“What?” said Sharon in surprise.

“That’s all right,” said Mabel, “he always visits us when we’re going to have a child – may visit more than once. And he likes children; he keeps an eye out for the children of the village to make sure they’re safe. You ask the children about Old Tom; they’ll tell you.”

Sharon was not sure what to make of this. When she got home she told Ken about it.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of a ghost,” she said, “no matter how friendly he might be.”

“Ghost?” laughed Ken. “Since when have ghosts drunk tea and eaten coffee and walnut cake? No, you mark my words. It’s some old village tradition. Your Tom Goodchild’s no more real than Santa Claus. It’s some old bloke they get to do this to keep up the tradition.”

“You think so?” said Sharon. “But why Tom Goodchild?”

“Well,” replied Ken, “you saw the grave, you said. The surname must have started the legend. Goodchild is common enough East Anglia where I grew up, but it’s pretty rare in this part of Britain. I expect the tradition began as a way to explain the unusual surname.”

“I suppose you’re right, Ken,” she said. “But how could the villagers know I was pregnant? I only had it confirmed two days ago.”

“You know the village,” said Ken, laughing, “nothing stays secret here.”

“I suppose so,” Sharon murmured.

But she could not help wondering about her strange visitor. Had he been just an uninvited guest or had it been an uninvited ghost?