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# The uninvited guest

A story for Halloween, by Mike Roden

It was getting crowded in the function room of the pub and though of course I had no trouble seeing Leo, head and shoulders above everyone else as always, he and Harriet were pretty well surrounded by the latest group of newly-arrived well-wishers.

Thankfully, despite the date, nobody had worn fancy dress for the occasion. Not like the group of noisy young people outside the bar on Battersea Bridge road plastered with gruesome makeup and dressed as vampires, zombies or other assorted movie monsters.

'You're always the same at parties.' My wife glared at me. 'Standing around looking miserable. What on earth are you brooding about now?'

'These things are always the same,' I said, 'Full of people I don't know.'

She shrugged, 'Anniversary parties are always like that. Loads of family members turning up for free food and drink.'

'I haven't seen a canapé recently,' I grumbled. 'And I can't understand why Leo and Harriet got married at Hallowe'en... Not very propitious.'

'Well it's worked so far,' she snapped 'Anyway let's get another drink and go and say hello to them.'

'If we can get near them,' I retorted. Before I could follow her a voice next to me said chirpily 'Good do, isn't it?' He was probably in his late seventies, wearing an old-fashioned rather greasy-looking double-breasted suit. He thrust out his hand, 'Uncle Bill. But you can call me Bill. Ah the stories I could tell you about that pair.'

## Clammy

It was an unpleasantly clammy handshake and I gave a little inward groan, feeling like one of the wedding guests being stopped by the Ancient Mariner. He was clearly about to embark on a long string of amusing and possibly risqué tales about one or other of my friends or perhaps both.

'Ah, they were too young to get married.' He rubbed a hand over his bald head. 'Everybody told them that. Said it wouldn't last.' He sniffed. 'Shows how wrong folk can be,

doesn't it? Harriet and Leo married for fifty years. Seems like only yesterday.'

Looked over my shoulder, he started. 'Oh I didn't know he was here. 'Scuse me. I'll go and bother someone else...'

## Uneasy

And to my relief he disappeared into the crush. There was something about him that made me uneasy. It was definitely time to refill my glass. But I was interrupted again.

'I've been looking for you,' Leo's eldest son Ben eased his way through a little group of guests. 'I expected to see you moving among the guests taking notes. And why aren't you drinking?'

'Chance'd be a fine thing,' I grumbled.

'Anyway, I wondered what you'd make of this.'

I took the photograph off him. It was clearly a reprint of a much older sepia tinted photograph. It showed a group of soldiers in First World War uniform standing in front of an old barn. One or two had their thumbs up towards the cameraman, others looked drawn and weary. Some wore their helmets, others were bareheaded.

'I wonder how many of those young men survived...?'

'From what I've been told,' said Ben with a studied casualness, 'One of them was already dead when this picture was taken. The one standing back – on the left, nearer the barn.'

There was something wistful in that tired face, old before its time. He was bareheaded, his helmet dangling from his hand.

'His name's Sam Galliers,' Ben told me. 'He was Dad's great uncle. Born on 31 October 1893.'

'Really?' I said suspiciously. 'Another Hallowe'en? What a coincidence.'

Ben didn't rise to that, 'He was killed on 25 October 1916, just a few days before his birthday. Turn over the photo.'

I did so - written in very faded, very neat handwriting, I saw, "A farm near

Amiens – October 31st 1916."

'I don't know some of the details,' said Ben, 'But eventually the picture got back to Sam's wife. Imagine what she felt when she saw him there and saw what date it was taken. Did he really come back on his birthday, to be with his mates? Makes you shiver, doesn't it?'

Cold logic swept over me. 'Frankly no, Ben it doesn't. For a start who's to say those dates are accurate? Did Leo put you up to this? How come I've never seen this photograph before?'

'It's been missing for years,' Ben told me. 'You know how chaotic Dad's filing system is. But I found it a couple of weeks ago. Wanted to show it to Alex. We'd just taken him to see *Journey's End* so I told him our family First World War story.'

Alex was Ben and Jill's thirteen-year old son. I'd spotted him earlier, thick as thieves with one of his cousins. 'And what does he make of the photo?'

'Hasn't seen it yet,' replied Ben. 'I've been letting a photographer friend check it over. I'll show him later, and you can tell him what you think.'

'OK, I'll believe you up to a point. But even if the dates are accurate, who's to say the photo isn't a fake? Back then it wasn't unknown for pictures of a dear departed to be superimposed onto a family group.'

'Early form of Photoshopping. Quite right,' confirmed Ben, 'My friend's taken a close look at it – blown it right up and so on. Says he couldn't be sure whether it was faked. Not without the negative ... Good story though, maybe you could make something of it?'

## Scruffy

'I'll add it to the long list of tales I've been told which would make a good story!' We headed off towards the bar. 'Incidentally who's the chap in the shabby black suit? Like a scruffy undertaker, bald head. From what he told me he was at your parents' wedding.'

'Well I certainly wasn't!' retorted Ben. 'And I haven't seen anyone in a suit.'

'Did Alex enjoy *Journey's End*?' I asked as he brought me back a drink. 'You know what kids are like. They



know too much. Said he'd heard all about this kind of thing in a *Horrible Histories* episode.'

'There you are.' Leo joined his son and now they both towered above me. 'Is my son bothering you?'

Harriet came up too and gave me a kiss. 'Thanks for coming. And thank you for circulating.'

'Not much of that,' I said, 'I got rather stuck with your Uncle Bill regaling me with lurid anecdotes about your wild youth.'

'Uncle Bill?' Harriet stared. 'You must have misheard. Uncle Bill's been dead for twenty years or more.'

I raised a weary hand. 'All right, I know it's Hallowe'en, but I do get the feeling that everyone's trying to provide me with creepy story material. It's always the same when you're a writer.'

I suddenly spotted the bald-headed man in the shabby suit. 'There he is. That's Uncle Bill. A very solid-looking ghost.'

As all eyes turned to him, Bill put on a surprising turn of speed for one of his age, and headed off down the stairs.

'You don't know him then?' I said, stating the obvious.

'He's a complete stranger.' Harriet burst out, 'How did he know I had an Uncle Bill?'

'Well, most people have an Uncle Bill somewhere in their past,' I said. 'And it'd be easy for him to get in and – circulate. He'd soon pick up enough information to pass as an invited guest.'

'I feel rather proud,' said Leo, 'I've heard that only parties of quality attract gate crashers. And talking of gate crashers. Shouldn't you be in bed, young Alexander?'

### **Message**

Alex looked up at his grandfather with all the knowledge and sadness of youth. 'You normally go to bed earlier than I do, Grandpa.' He paused, allowing the grownups to chuckle

patronisingly, 'Anyway, there's a message for you. From your Uncle Sam. Says he's wishes you and Gran well, and that he's sure he'll get to meet you both someday.'

He paused again, 'Oh yes, and sorry he can't stop.'

'Alex,' interrupted Ben sharply, 'What are you playing at?'

'He was over there...' said Alex, waving vaguely over towards the far side of the room. 'Dressed like the people in the play the other night.' He brightened, 'Is he an actor, dad? Is he related to us?'

He had a sudden thought, 'Course, he was a bit young to be your uncle, Grandpa. Anyway, like I said, he couldn't stop. It's his birthday and he had to get back to see his mates. S'pose he'll be having a party.'

Leo blinked, and said rather shakily, 'Yes, Alex, I'm sure Uncle Sam and his mates will have a great party.'

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