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Opening extract from

The Ministry of Ghosts

Written by

Alex Shearer

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Prologue

Some of the best and most interesting things in life are often right under your nose. Yet you don't even notice them, for you are too busy looking elsewhere.

Perhaps many of you lose yourselves in daydreams of big adventures in far-away places, but fail to see the possibilities of what is just around the corner. Home, you may think, is a dull, everyday sort of place. Not much excitement there, just the endless same again . . .

At least that was what young Thruppence Coddley thought, and her school friend Tim Legge, if asked, would no doubt have agreed with her.

Adventures were what you hoped to find on your holidays, on a desert island, or up a mountain, or in a forest, or a swamp. There would probably be a crocodile involved. You didn't think to find excitement and danger just down the road and round the corner, along a boring old street with drab buildings in it.

Yet that is the great thing about adventures: they creep up on you softly and tap you on the shoulder when you least expect it.

‘Excuse me, Thruppence,’ they say. ‘I’ve been looking for you.’

‘Pardon me, Tim,’ they whisper. ‘But have you got a minute?’

And startled, amazed, a little nervous, but expectant and excited, Thruppence Coddley would have said, ‘Hello. You’re an adventure are you? I’m glad to meet you then, as I’ve been wanting one for quite some time.’

As for Tim Legge, he’d have gripped that adventure tightly by the arm. ‘You’re not getting away,’ he’d have told it. ‘You stay right there and don’t move. And don’t talk to anybody else. You’re mine.’

Such is the way of adventures and of the people who have them. Some lucky people attract them, the way magnets attract bits of metal, and their lives are nothing but adventures, all the way to the end.

Maybe if one tapped you on the shoulder too, you might not turn it away either. Even if it scared you half to death.

As adventures often do.

Especially spooky ones.

1

Bric-a-Brac Street

The Ministry of Ghosts was one of those obscure, unknown, tucked-away places that you only usually ever come across by accident, if you come across them at all.

Were you looking for the Ministry of Ghosts, or making enquiries in that direction, the chances are that you would never find it. But were you searching for somewhere else entirely, you might easily stumble across it, quite unexpectedly and out of the blue.

And then there you would be: looking with awe, maybe with bafflement, perhaps with incredulity and the feeling that some hoax – or trick – was being played upon you, as you gazed at the unpolished and seriously tarnished nameplate by the door.

If you glanced to the windows, you would see cobwebs in their corners, long unbothered by draughts and feather dusters, as if inside were a vacuum of the undisturbed past.

On a summer's day, a sense of chill radiated out from the

Ministry building, as if the place were a fridge. In winter, its offices seemed at one with the cold, bitter streets. It would be a hard place to keep warm in, you would think, as you wrapped your scarf around your neck and buttoned your coat tighter against the cold. And yet . . .

There was also something intriguing about the place; something that bade you to loiter, to scrutinise its elegant, if ancient facade; something that drew you in; some curiosity that would have you lingering, peeking in through the dusty windows, pressing your nose to the cold glass in an effort to see inside.

But what would you see there in the Ministry of Ghosts? Not much, apparently. Not, at least, if that look through the front window was anything to go by.

There was just a big, uncomfortable-looking room, lined with obscure and seldom read books: old, misshapen, leather-bound volumes, many with shabby spines, that looked as if they would simply fall apart if opened. But others seemed as though they might never have been opened at all, and could be just as pristine inside as on the day of their creation.

Some of those books were in Latin, some in other languages. Most were in English, but even then, often of an ancient and complicated kind, unfamiliar to a modern eye.

The more legible of the books bore curious titles. *Ghosts and How to Catch Them. A Ghost Catcher's Manual – Written by a Person of Great Experience. Poltergeists – Detection and Laying to Rest. Apparitions From the Other Side – by a Gentleman. Memoirs of a Lady Psychic.* And so on. Books written with a straight face and a fancy pen,

by authors who took themselves very seriously – and who expected their readers to do the same.

Yes, there were useful books on every aspect of ghosts, except on one particular point, for not one line in one paragraph of those dense and innumerable pages ever questioned whether ghosts actually existed. It was taken for granted that they did, and that only a fool would think otherwise.

Because ghosts *had* to exist, or there was no point in the Ministry of Ghosts existing. And then those who worked there would be out of a job. Which would be highly inconvenient for them. So there was every reason and incentive for them to go on believing the unprovable and contestable assertion that ghosts were real.

Yet ghosts, like many other supernatural matters, are more items of faith than demonstrable fact. People of a logical turn tend not to believe in them; people of a more spiritual inclination often do.

Some people swear that they have seen them, felt their presence and proximity, been bothered by them, terrified by them, that ghosts have chucked their furniture about, and flushed the loo incessantly, in the middle of the night. Others put these phenomena down to bad dreams occasioned by eating cheese and pickle sandwiches before bedtime, or to magnetic and electrical forces, or to overactive imaginations, or to watching the wrong films. People say they've got ghosts in the attic, or they're living up the tap. But ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it just turns out to be bad plumbing or squirrels.

Yes, most people believe what suits them. Faith conquers reason. It often even boldly defies logic and plain common sense. Once, for instance, it was thought shocking to believe that the earth revolved around the sun, and not the other way round. Yet now, thanks to astronomy, the fact cannot be denied.

But faith in the spiritual, or supernatural, also has another powerful enemy: money. Or rather, the lack of money, and the necessity of paying one's way, of making ends meet and of balancing the books.

And all this brings us now to a man clad in a drab suit and carrying a leather briefcase who was currently making his way towards the Ministry of Ghosts on that Monday morning. He had a map and directions with him, and so was unlikely to get lost.

His name was Franklin Beeston and, like the current occupants of the Ministry, he was a government employee, a civil servant, no less. Franklin Beeston was neither young nor old, ugly nor handsome, fat nor thin. His briefcase contained a few official papers, but its main purpose was for the transportation of his lunch, which was sandwiches in a plastic, resealable container, and a flask of tea (milk, no sugar). Mr Beeston was not a man for cappuccinos and other such expensive extravagances. By making his own sandwiches and bringing his own tea, Mr Beeston estimated that he was saving one thousand pounds a year in lunch money alone. No small sum, either. Not to a man with a family to support. Even though Mrs Beeston also worked in the Civil Service, and brought in a good salary of her

own. Mr Beeston took care of the pennies and the pounds, perhaps a little too much. But then, while his work was steady and secure, his profession was not an occupation to grow rich in, more one to remain contented in for the next thirty years, until he finally retired, on a decent pension.

Mr Beeston's department was 'Cuts'. That was not its official name, but such was its purpose. It was there to effect economies, to bring down unnecessary government expenditure, to reduce the burden on the taxpayer and the public sector's wages bill. Politicians had made promises, and had been elected on such promises, and now they were going to implement those promises, to keep faith with their voters.

Significant cuts had been pledged (for cuts, when politicians speak of them, are always significant and never anything less). Red tape was going to be slashed. Dead wood was to be axed. Bureaucracy was to be reduced. Unnecessary expenditure was to be trimmed. All government departments would need to 'justify their existence' or they would be for the chop. Redundancies would no doubt (sadly and regrettably) be inevitable but necessary, for the public good. Times were hard. It was an austerity budget, and nothing would stand in its way.

Thus Mr Beeston was heading for the Ministry of Ghosts, to determine to what extent – if any – its continuing existence could be justified. If no justifications could be made (and while not wishing to prejudge the case, he thought it highly unlikely) then closure would be inevitable. Those who worked in the Ministry of Ghosts would be redeployed

in less exciting and less esoteric roles, or they would find themselves on the scrapheap.

Mr Beeston did not consider it likely that those who had spent years working at the Ministry of Ghosts would find it easy to obtain or to adjust to alternative employment. Indeed, their past experience might even weigh against them. For Mr Beeston was of the opinion that ghosts did not exist, and never had.

'There are,' he would tell anyone prepared to listen, 'no ghosts. There never have been and never will be. There are people's imaginations, that's all. And ghosts are but figments of the imagination.'

The Ministry was a relic of another age, he felt – one of those government agencies that had long since outlived its usefulness. It had become an irrelevance, an outmoded, outdated institution, along the lines of the Department of Horse-Drawn Vehicles, or the Ministry for the Subjugation of the Colonies, or the Department for the Inspection of Steam Engines.

Why the Ministry of Ghosts had not been closed down years ago was something of a mystery to Mr Beeston. He could not think how its existence had ever been allowed to continue, or how it had so long escaped the axe of financial constraint.

Maybe it was because the place was so well hidden and buried away, down a warren of narrow, antiquated streets, full of buildings of equally antique appearance. It was like another world here, a place that time had forgotten. Here went on trades, which you might think had long been

rendered obsolete. Here were small shops with weather-faded signs outside, boasting dates of origin going back hundreds of years. Deglemann and Sons – Hatters and Milliners, for example. Or Spiegler & Co. – Sword Makers to the Gentry. Or Thoroughgood and Partners – Bespoke Tailors. Wortinbrass and Fanglewood – Shoe and Bootmakers and Stockists of Finest Spatterdashes. And Mrs Runciward – Supplier of Ladies' Corsets, Whalebone Reinforcements a Speciality.

Yes, here, Mr Beeston decided, as he made his way along the ever-narrowing alleyways, was, in a word, yesterday. This part of the city was the 'yesterday' area. It reeked of nostalgia, of old-world charm, and, equally, old-world discomforts. He even – hard as it was to believe – saw a horse-drawn cart pass by. It must have been a brewer's dray, he thought, glancing at the old-fashioned lettering of the unfamiliar name, kept on as a public relations and advertising gimmick. Maybe it was stabled down here somewhere, and it trotted out every now and again to entertain the public and promote the sale of beer.

Mr Beeston noted with distaste that the carthorse had left some droppings behind it. He stepped around the mess, on the one hand considering that it would be good for his tomato plants, on the other thinking that if dog owners had doggie bags, then why didn't horse owners have horse ones?

Then he looked at his map again, and despite all his best efforts and logical dimensions, found himself slightly lost. He reoriented himself, turned to the left, and headed down Casement Way, which, he felt confident, would lead

to Bric-a-Brac Street, and there he would find his fellow civil servants – colleagues in a way and yet strangers too – at their desks and at their labours (were there any, and he doubted it) in the Ministry of Ghosts.

The horse and the dray turned a corner, and were gone with a clopping of hooves and a rattling of ironclad wheels. Yet, the instant the cart disappeared from view, so did the sound of it vanish from earshot. Almost as if the cart had been an illusion, a figment of someone's imagination or, perhaps, even an apparition – some kind of a hologram maybe, a spectre, a trick of the light, even a ghost.

2

1792

Despite outward appearances of inactivity, the Ministry of Ghosts was a place of steady – if not exactly dynamic – endeavour. It ticked over like an idling engine, chugging steadily, even if not really going anywhere.

It was a minor establishment, as government ministries went, but that did not mean that paperwork was neglected, or that the necessary forms were not completed in the appropriate manner with the prescribed colour of ink. Far from it. Progress reports were issued – as required – every quarter, and annual appraisals were made every September.

The conduct of the staff was generally – even invariably – held to be satisfactory, often more than that. Sometimes it was ranked as exemplary, though it was hard to understand why. For the fact of the matter was that the Ministry of Ghosts, for all its plodding efforts, had not found a ghost, or produced any evidence for the existence of a ghost, in over two centuries. All they ever really had were their suspicions.

‘They’ve done damn all that’s useful in years!’ Mr Beeston had told his underlings back at the Economies Office.

‘Yet they seem to be reasonably busy, sir,’ his assistant, Mrs Peeve, said. ‘At least busier than the Ministry of Sleep Research – otherwise known as the Ministry of Nodding Off, of course.’

‘Seem to be busy. Say they’re busy. But what do they actually do?’

‘Well,’ Mrs Peeve said, thumbing through some ancient papers marked ‘Articles of Establishment’, ‘it appears that the Ministry of Ghosts was founded in 1792 –’

‘Seventeen ninety-two!’ Mr Beeston exclaimed. ‘I’m very surprised to hear that the place has been going so long – and achieving so little.’

‘I believe that back in the 1790s, people were a little more open minded in some respects –’

‘You mean gullible?’ Mr Beeston snorted.

‘Certainly of a more enquiring nature, perhaps,’ Mrs Peeve said. (For she had her own views on the matter of the afterlife, which she was not prepared to elaborate on in the presence of a cynic.) ‘After all, people had more open minds back then, as regards the supernatural, what with science still in its infancy and –’

‘Well, it’s grown up a bit since, hasn’t it?’ Mr Beeston said.

‘Do you think so, sir?’

‘Indeed I do. Look what we have now – computers, the internet, planes, cars, space travel, smartphones, microwave ovens, smoothies – not that I buy them, or any such extravagant refreshments. I save a fortune staying out

of coffee places and juice bars. I bring my own sandwiches and save at least a thousand a year.'

'Good for you,' Mrs Peeve said – who had a daily latte herself.

Mr Beeston reached over for the Articles of Establishment and read them through. The ancient, yellowing document had a ribbon in its lower corner, fastened in place by dried sealing wax. It had been signed with a flourish by some now long dead and – even back then – indecipherable hand.

The Ministry of Ghosts, the document read, is hereby established under instruction of Parliament, for the investigation into the existence or otherwise of those paranormal bodies known in the vernacular as 'ghosts'. The duties and responsibilities of the Ministry of Ghosts will entail investigation, regular reportage of such investigations, and ultimately the reaching of a conclusion – one way or another – as to the existence of such paranormal entities and activity.

It will further be within the responsibility and domain of said Ministry – should conclusive proof of such supernatural entities be found – to investigate the manner of their coming into being, the means of their continuing existence, their wants, needs, intentions and purposes, their ultimate fate, and – in the case of bothersome ghosts – their possible eradication. (Subcontractors may be used in this field, subject to the usual approvals, competitive quotations, authorisations and budgetary constraints.)

'Hmm,' Mr Beeston said. 'So the place was set up over two hundred years ago to find out if ghosts actually exist,

and if so, how to get rid of them?'

'When they *need* getting rid of,' Mrs Peeve said. 'I mean, if they aren't bothering you, why should you . . .' She lapsed into silence, aware that Mr Beeston was regarding her with a disapproving eye. 'That is,' she picked up, determined not to be browbeaten by her superior, 'live and let live.'

'Maybe so,' Mr Beeston said. 'Only ghosts aren't alive, are they? I thought they were supposed to be dead.'

'Well, the people they belong to are certainly dead, I suppose,' Mrs Peeve said. 'But maybe, in a sense, their ghosts . . . live on.'

Mr Beeston gave a snort. 'It seems to me,' he said, 'that these people round at this Ministry of Ghosts are onto a cushy little number, and have been for quite some time. How many work round there?'

'Four, I believe,' Mrs Peeve said, consulting the records. 'Four, plus a cat, as far as I can make out.'

'A cat? You mean a cat is down as an employee?'

'Well. It's an expense,' Mrs Peeve said. 'It keeps the mice down, apparently.'

'And it gets paid for that?'

'No, but it gets a food and bedding allowance.'

'Food and bedding!'

'And all vets' fees paid.'

'Extraordinary,' Mr Beeston said. 'Why couldn't they just buy a mousetrap? Be an awful lot cheaper.'

'You'd still have to buy the bait,' Mrs Peeve pointed out.

'Even so. Sheer extravagance, employing a cat. That cat'll be out on its ear, if I have anything to do with it. This is

taxpayers' money we're responsible for. What would people think if they discovered that their money was going on cats?'

'It could be going to worse places,' Mrs Peeve muttered.

'So who do we have working round there?' Mr Beeston asked. 'Do we have a record? I assume we must.'

'Well,' Mrs Peeve said, thumbing through the file, 'apparently there used to be seventeen people working there.'

'How many?!' Mr Beeston demanded. 'Seventeen? Seventeen people on full-time wages, just to find out whether or not ghosts exist!'

'Plus the cat, of course.'

'Seventeen people and a cat! Sheer waste and extravagance!'

'But staffing numbers have been trimmed over the years,' Mrs Peeve told him. 'So it says here. Apparently the staffing levels were intermittently reviewed, firstly in 1876, when they were reduced to twelve, then in 1916, when they were reduced to four –'

'Probably the war effort,' Mr Beeston said.

'And have remained at that level since. Four plus the cat.'

'Presumably not the same cat?' Mr Beeston said.

'I imagine it would be more like a succession of cats,' Mrs Peeve said. 'The staffing at the Ministry has now been at the same level for decades, comprising one senior civil servant, two junior and a secretary.'

'And a cat.'

'Just so,' Mrs Peeve said.

'And in all that time, and all those cats, and all those people, and all that money, what have they found?'

'One moment,' Mrs Peeve said, rummaging again through

the file. ‘Ah, here we are. The quarterly progress reports.’

‘And?’

She flicked through them.

‘It would appear that investigations are still underway –’

‘Huh!’ Mr Beeston gave vent to another of his snorts.

‘But, as yet, no firm conclusions have been reached one way or the other.’

‘Let me see that!’

Mr Beeston took the file and spun it around.

‘There are several other boxes down in the archives,’ Mrs Peeve said. ‘If you want to see them. In longhand, some of them. Dating right back to the 1790s.’

‘No thank you,’ Mr Beeston said, picking up the most recent report, which despite its relative newness, already seemed be impregnated with the odour of must and decay. ‘Four quarterly reports for over two hundred years – there must be getting on for a thousand of them down there.’

‘True,’ Mrs Peeve said. ‘If the rats and beetles haven’t eaten a few.’

‘All saying the same thing too, no doubt. That investigations are “ongoing”, that evidence is “being collected”, that the results are “being weighed up and considered” and that “conclusive proof one way or the other is still lacking – but being diligently pursued”. You know what they’re doing round at this so-called Ministry of Ghosts, Mrs Peeve?’

‘What is that, sir?’

‘They’re taking the mick. That’s what they’re doing. They’re swinging the lead. They’re pulling a fast one. They’ve got themselves a nice little cushy number and they’re hoping

it'll go on forever, until they can retire on handsome pensions, after a life spent on a wild goose chase –'

'More of a ghost –'

'Ghost chase, goose chase, same difference, Mrs Peeve. These characters are taking the taxpayer for a ride and it's time it stopped. Because if you can't prove, after two hundred years' worth of investigations, that ghosts are real, then there's only one possible conclusion.'

'And what is that, sir?'

'They're not real. They don't exist. They're all in people's heads.'

'But what about –?'

'Yes, yes. I know all about people who swear they've seen them, Mrs Peeve. I also know people who swear they've seen flying saucers, and that they've been abducted by aliens. The sad and the deluded are always with us. But I tell you this – these skivers and time-wasters won't be round at the Ministry of Ghosts for much longer. I'm going to issue an ultimatum, and then I shall shut the place down.'

'But sir –'

'Oh, I shall be following the proper procedures, Mrs Peeve, don't you worry about that. I shall be doing it by the book – by every letter of the book. I shall give them their chance to justify their continuing existence, and when they fail to do it, which I have no doubt they will, then the department will be closed down and they can be redeployed to more productive work.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Four civil servants, plus a cat, plus cost of premises,

heating, lighting – we could easily save the taxpayer hundreds of thousands, Mrs Peeve. If not millions – or at least that's what the costs could mount up to if this is allowed to go on.'

'Yes, sir.'

'We must all tighten our belts, Mrs Peeve, and pull up our braces.'

'I don't actually wear –'

'First thing next week, I shall commence my investigation.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'll need to start by visiting the place, obviously.'

'Yes, sir. Would you wish me to let them know . . . ?'

'Let them know I'm coming? Give them a chance to look busy? Certainly not. I shall turn up unannounced and unexpected. I shall probably catch them all napping – if they're there at all – and find the cat idling on a cushion somewhere. No, Mrs Peeve, stealth and surprise are our weapons here in the Economies Office. I shall go forth first thing next Monday morning and see what they're up to. And if I discover that they aren't up to anything at all, and are just sitting there drinking tea and doing the crossword, then the fur shall fly, Mrs Peeve. Rest assured of that. The fur shall most definitely fly! And that includes the cat.'

'Yes, sir. Is that all for now?'

'Yes, you can take those files away for the moment, thank you.'

Mrs Peeve did as asked and carted the files back to the archive. As she left her superior's office, she heard the sound of a final snort.

'Ghosts, indeed!' Mr Beeston said disparagingly. 'Ghosts.

I never heard such nonsense. Not in all my born days.'

Mrs Peeve walked away, wondering if perhaps Mr Beeston was right after all. Maybe there were no such things as ghosts. Maybe there was no spirit world, just the overwrought imaginations of the living, and their desire to see their lost loved ones again, even if only fleetingly, as wraiths in the night, or as tremulous mirages, briefly glimpsed in the shimmering heat haze of some sunny afternoon.