Blackmask Online Presents: Old Applejoy's Ghost

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OLD APPLEJOY'S GHOST

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The large and commodious apartments in the upper part of the old Applejoy mansion were occupied exclusively, at the time of our story, by the ghost of the grandfather of the present owner of the estate.

For many years old Applejoy's ghost had wandered freely about the grand old house and the fine estate of which he had once been the lord and master. But early in that spring a change had come over the household of his grandson, John Applejoy, an elderly man, a bachelor, and−−for the later portion of his life−−almost a recluse. His young niece, Bertha, had come to live with him, and it was since her arrival that old Applejoy's ghost had confined himself to the upper portions of the house.

This secluded existence, so different from his ordinary habits, was adopted entirely on account of the kindness of his heart. During the lives of two generations of his descendants he knew that he had frequently been seen by members of the family, but this did not disturb him, for in life he had been a man who had liked to assert his position, and the disposition to do so had not left him now. His skeptical grandson John had seen him and spoken with him, but declared that these ghostly interviews were only dreams or hallucinations. As to other people, it might be a very good thing if they believed that the house was haunted. People with uneasy consciences would not care to live in such a place.

But when this fresh young girl came upon the scene the case was entirely different. She was not twenty yet, and if anything should happen which would lead her to suspect that the house was haunted she might not be willing to live there. If that should come to pass, it would be a great shock to the ghost.

For a long time the venerable mansion had been a quiet, darkened, melancholy house. A few rooms only were occupied by John Applejoy and his housekeeper, Mrs. Dipperton, who for years had needed little space in which to pass the monotonous days of their lives. Bertha sang; she danced by herself on the broad piazza; she brought flowers into the house from the gardens, and, sometimes, it almost might have been imagined that the days which were gone had come back again.

One winter evening, when the light of the full moon entered softly through every unshaded window of the house, old Applejoy's ghost sat in a high−backed chair, which on account of an accident to one of its legs had been banished to the garret. Throwing one shadowy leg over the other, he clasped the long fingers of his hazy hands and gazed thoughtfully out the window.

"Winter has come," he said to himself. "And in two days it will be Christmas!" Suddenly he started to his feet. "Can it be," he exclaimed, "that my close−fisted grandson John does not intend to celebrate Christmas! It has been years since he has done so, but now that Bertha is in the house, will he dare to pass over it as though it were but a common day? It is almost incredible that such a thing could happen, but so far there have been no signs of any preparations. I have seen nothing, heard nothing, smelt nothing. I will go this moment and investigate."

Clapping his misty old cocked hat on his head and tucking the shade of his faithful cane under his

arm, he descended to the lower part of the house. Glancing into the great parlors dimly lit by the moonlight, he saw that all the furniture was shrouded in ancient linen covers.

"Humph!" ejaculated old Applejoy's ghost. "He expects no company here!" Forthwith he passed through the dining room and entered the kitchen and pantry. There were no signs that anything extraordinary in the way of cooking had been done, or was contemplated. "Two days before Christmas," he groaned, "and a kitchen thus! How widely different from the olden time when I gave orders for the holidays! Let me see what the old curmudgeon has provided for Christmas."

So saying, old Applejoy's ghost went around the spacious pantry, looking upon shelves and tables. "Emptiness! Emptiness! Emptiness!" he exclaimed. "A cold leg of mutton, a ham half gone, and cold boiled potatoes−−it makes me shiver to look at them! Pies? there ought to be rows and rows of them, and there is not one! And Christmas two days off!

"What is this? Is it possible? A chicken not full grown! Oh, John, how you have fallen! A small−sized fowl for Christmas day! And cider? No trace of it! Here is vinegar−−that suits John, no doubt," and then forgetting his present condition, he said to himself, "It makes my very blood run cold to look upon a pantry furnished out like this!" And with bowed head he passed out into the great hall.

If it were possible to prevent the desecration of his old home during the sojourn of the young and joyous Bertha, the ghost of old Applejoy was determined to do it, but to do anything he must put himself into communication with some living being. Still rapt in reverie he passed up the stairs and into the chamber where his grandson slept. There lay the old man, his eyelids as tightly closed as if there had been money underneath them. The ghost of old Applejoy stood by his bedside.

"I can make him wake up and look at me," he thought, "so that I might tell him what I think of him, but what impression could I expect my words to make upon a one−chicken man like John? Moreover, if I should be able to speak to him, he would persuade himself that he had been dreaming, and my words would be of no avail!"

Old Applejoy's ghost turned away from the bedside of his descendant, crossed the hall, and passed into the room of Mrs. Dipperton, the elderly housekeeper. There she lay fast asleep. The kindhearted ghost shook his head as he looked down upon her.

"It would be of no use," he said. "She would never be able to induce old John to turn one inch aside from his parsimonious path. More than that, if she were to see me she would probably scream−−die, for all I know−−and that would be a pretty preparation for Christmas!"

Out he went, and getting more and more anxious in his mind, the ghost passed to the front of the house and entered the chamber occupied by young Bertha. Once inside the door, he stopped reverently and removed his cocked hat.

The head of the bed was near the uncurtained window, and the bright light of the moon shone upon a face more beautiful in slumber than in the sunny hours of day. She slept lightly, her delicate eyelids trembled now and then as if they would open, and sometimes her lips moved, as if she would whisper something about her dreams.

Old Applejoy's ghost drew nearer and bent slightly over her. If he could hear a few words he might find out where her mind wandered, what she would like him to do for her.

At last, faintly whispered and scarcely audible, he heard one word, "Tom!"

Old Applejoy's ghost stepped back from the bedside, "She wants Tom! I like that! But I wish she would say something else. She can't have Tom for Christmas−−at least, not Tom alone. There is a great deal else necessary before this can be made a place suitable for Tom!"

Again he drew near to Bertha and listened, but instead of speaking, she suddenly opened her eyes. The ghost of old Applejoy drew back, and made a low, respectful bow. The maiden did not move, but fixed her lovely blue eyes upon the apparition, who trembled for fear that she might scream or faint.

"Am I asleep?" she murmured, and then, after turning her head from side to side to assure herself that she was in her own room, she looked full into the face of old Applejoy's ghost, and boldly spoke to him. "Are you a spirit?" said she. If a flush of joy could redden the countenance of a ghost, his face would have glowed like d sunlit rose "Dear child," he exclaimed, "I am the ghost of your uncle's grandfather. His younger sister, Maria, was your mother, and therefore, I am the ghost of your great−grandfather."

"Then you must be the original Appljoy," said Bertha, "and I think it very wonderful that I am not afraid of you. You look as if you would not hurt anybody in this world, especially me!"

"There you have it, my dear!" he exclaimed, bringing his cane down upon the floor with a violence which had it been the cane it used to be would have wakened everybody in the house. "I vow to you there is not a person in the world for whom I have such an affection as I feel for you. You have brought into this house something of the old life. I wish I could tell you how happy I have been since the bright spring day that brought you here."

"I did not suppose I would make anyone happy by coming here," said Bertha. "Uncle John does not seem to care much about me, and I did not know about you."

"No, indeed," exclaimed the good ghost, "you did not know about me, but you will. First, however, we must get down to business. I came here to−night with a special object. It is about Christmas. Your uncle does not mean to have any Christmas in this house, but I intend, if I can possibly do so, to prevent him from disgracing himself. Still, I cannot do anything without help, and there is nobody to help me but you. Will you do it?"

Bertha could not refrain from a smile. "It would be funny to help a ghost," she said, "but if I can assist you I shall be very glad."

"I want you to go into the lower part of the house," said he. "I have something to show you. I shall go down and wait for you. Dress yourself as warmly as you can, and have you some soft slippers that will make no noise?"

"Oh, yes," said Bertha, her eyes twinkling with delight. "I shall be dressed and with you in no time."

"Do not hurry yourself," said the good ghost as he left the room "We have most of the night before us."

When the young girl had descended the great staircase almost as noiselessly as the ghost, she found her venerable companion waiting for her. "Do you see the lantern on the table?" said he. "John uses it when he goes his round of the house at bedtime. There are matches hanging above

it. Please light it. You may be sure I would not put you to this trouble if I were able to do it myself."

When she had lighted the brass lantern, the ghost invited her to enter the study. "Now," said he as he led the way to the large desk with the cabinet above it, "will you be so good as to open that glass door and put your hand into the front corner of that middle shelf? You will feel a key hanging upon a little hook."

"But this is my uncle's cabinet," Bertha said, "and I have no right to meddle with his keys and things!"

The ghost drew himself up to the six feet two inches which had been his stature in life. "This was my cabinet," he said, "and I have never surrendered it to your uncle John! With my own hands I screwed the little hook into that dark corner and hung the key upon it! Now I beg you to take down that key and unlock that little drawer at the bottom."

Without a moment's hesitation Bertha took the key from the hook unlocked and opened the drawer. "It is full of old keys all tied together in a bunch!" she said.

"Yes," said the ghost. "Now, my dear, I want you to understand that what we are going to do is strictly correct and proper. This was once my house−−everything in it I planned and arranged. I am now going to take you into the cellars of my old mansion. They are wonderful cellars; they were my pride and glory! Are you afraid," he said, "to descend with me into these subterranean regions?"

"Not a bit!" exclaimed Bertha. "I think it will be the jolliest thing in the world to go with my great−grandfather into the cellars which he built himself, and of which he was so proud."

This speech so charmed the ghost of old Applejoy that he would instantly have kissed his great−granddaughter had it not been that he was afraid of giving her a cold.

"You are a girl to my liking!" he exclaimed. "I wish you had been living at the time I was alive and master of this house. We should have had gay times together!"

"I wish you were alive now, dear Great−grandpapa," said she. "Let us go on−−I am all impatience!"

They then descended into the cellars, which, until the present owner came into possession of the estate, had been famous throughout the neighborhood. "This way," said old Applejoy's ghost. "Do you see that row of old casks nearly covered with cobwebs and dust? They contain some of the choicest spirits ever brought into this country, rum from Jamaica, brandy from France, port and Madeira.

"Come into this little room. Now, then, hold up your lantern. Notice that row of glass jars on the shelf. They are filled with the finest mincemeat ever made and just as good as it ever was! And there are a lot more jars and cans all tightly sealed. I do not know what good things are in them, but I am sure their contents are just what will be wanted to fill out a Christmas table.

"Now, my dear, I want to show you the grandest thing in these cellars. Behold that wooden box! Inside it is an airtight box made of tin. Inside that is a great plum cake put into that box by me! I intended it to stay there for a long time, for plum cake gets better and better the longer it is kept. The people who eat that cake, my dear Bertha, will be blessed above all their fellow mortals!

"And now I think you have seen enough to understand thoroughly that these cellars are the abode

of many good things to eat and to drink. It is their abode, but if John could have his way it would be their sepulchre!"

"But why did you bring me here, Great−grandpapa?" said Bertha "Do you want me to come down here and have my Christmas dinner with you?"

"No, indeed," said old Applejoy's ghost. "Come upstairs, and let us go into the study." Once they were there, Bertha sat down before the fireplace and warmed her fingers over the few embers it contained.

"Bertha," said the spirit of her great−grandfather, "it is wicked not to celebrate Christmas, especially when one is able to do so in the most hospitable and generous way. For years John has taken no notice of Christmas, and it is our duty to reform him if we can! There is not much time before Christmas Day, but there is time enough to do everything that has to be done, if you and I go to work and set other people to work."

"And how are we to do that?" asked Bertha.

"The straightforward thing to do," said the ghost, "is for me to appear to your uncle, tell him his duty, and urge him to perform it, but I know what will be the result. He would call the interview a dream. But there is nothing dreamlike about you, my dear. If anyone hears you talking he will know he is awake."

"Do you want me to talk to Uncle?" said Bertha, smiling.

"Yes," said old Applejoy's ghost. "I want you to go to him immediately after breakfast tomorrow morning and tell him exactly what has happened this night; about the casks of spirits, the jars of mincemeat, and the wooden box nailed fast and tight with the tin box inside holding the plum cake. John knows all about that cake, and he knows all about me, too."

"And what is the message?" asked Bertha.

"It is simply this," said the ghost. "When you have told him all the events of this night, and when he sees that they must have happened, I want you to tell him that it is the wish and desire of his grandfather, to whom he owes everything, that there shall be worthy festivities in this house on Christmas Day and Night. Tell him to open his cellars and spend his money. Tell him to send for at least a dozen good friends and relatives to attend the great holiday celebration that is to be held in this house.

"Now, my dear," said old Applejoy's ghost, drawing near to the young girl, "I want to ask you−−a private, personal question. Who is Tom?"

At these words a sudden blush rushed into the cheeks of Bertha. "Tom?" she said. "What Tom?"

"I am sure you know a young man named Tom, and I want you to tell me who he is. My name was Tom, and I am very fond of Toms. Is he a nice young fellow? Do you like him very much?"

"Yes," said Bertha, meaning the answer to cover both questions.

"And does he like you?"

"I think so," said Bertha.

"That means you are in love with each other!" exclaimed old Applejoy's ghost. "And now, my dear, tell me his last name. Out with it!"

"Mr. Burcham," said Bertha, her cheeks now a little pale.

"Son of Thomas Burcham of the Meadows?"

"Yes, sir," said Bertha.

The ghost of old Applejoy gazed down upon his great−granddaughter with pride and admiration "My dear Bertha," he exclaimed, "I congratulate you! I have seen young Tom. He is a fine−looking fellow, and if you love him I know he is a good one. Now, I'll tell you what we will do, Bertha. We will have Tom here on Christmas."

"Oh, Great−grandfather, I can't ask Uncle to invite him!" she exclaimed.

"We will have a bigger party than we thought we would," said the beaming ghost. "All the invited guests will be asked to bring their families. When a big dinner is given at this house, Thomas Burcham, Sr., must not be left out, and he is bound to bring Tom. Now skip back to your bed, and immediately after breakfast come here to your uncle and tell him everything I have told you to tell him."

Bertha hesitated. "Great−grandfather," she said, "if Uncle does allow us to celebrate Christmas, will you be with us?"

"Yes, indeed, my dear," said he. "And you need not be afraid of my frightening anybody. I shall be everywhere and I shall hear everything, but I shall be visible only to the loveliest woman who ever graced this mansion. And now be off to bed without another word."

"If she hadn't gone," said old Applejoy's ghost to himself, "I couldn't have helped giving her a good−night kiss."

The next morning, as Bertha told the story of her night's adventures to her uncle, the face of John Applejoy grew paler and paler. He was a hard−headed man, but a superstitious one, and when Bertha told him of his grandfather's plum cake, the existence of which he had believed was not known to anyone but himself, he felt it was impossible for the girl to have dreamed these things. With all the power of his will he opposed this belief, but it was too much for him, and he surrendered. But he was a proud man and would not admit to his niece that he put any faith in the existence of ghosts.

"My dear," said he, rising, his face still pale, but his expression under good control, "although there is nothing of weight in what you have told me−−for traditions about my cellars have been afloat in the family−−still your pretty little story suggests something to me. This is Christmastime and I had almost overlooked it. You are young and lively and accustomed to the celebration of holidays. Therefore, I have determined, my dear, to have a grand Christmas dinner and invite our friends and their families. I know there must be good things in the cellars, although I had almost forgotten them, and they shall be brought up and spread out and enjoyed. Now go and send Mrs. Dipperton to me, and when we have finished our consultation, you and I will make out a list of guests."

When she had gone, John Applejoy sat down in his big chair and looked fixedly into the fire. He would not have dared to go to bed that night if he had disregarded the message from his grandfather.

Never had there been such a glorious Christmastime within the walls of the old house. The news that old Mr. Applejoy was sending out invitations to a Christmas dinner spread like wildfire through the neighborhood. The idea of inviting people by families was considered a grand one, worthy indeed of the times of old Mr. Tom Applejoy, the grandfather of the present owner, who had been the most hospitable man in the whole country.

For the first time in nearly a century all the leaves of the great dining table were put into use, and the table had as much as it could do to stand up under its burdens brought from cellar, barn, and surrounding country. In the very middle of everything was the wonderful plum cake which had been put away by the famous grandfather of the host.

But the cake was not cut. "My friends," said Mr. John Applejoy, "we may all look at this cake but we will not eat it! We will keep it just as it is until a marriage shall occur in this family. Then you are all invited to come and enjoy it!"

At the conclusion of this little speech old Applejoy's ghost patted his grandson upon the head. "You don't feel that, John," he said to himself, "but it is approbation, and this is the first time I have ever approved of you!"

Late in the evening there was a grand dance in the great hall, which opened with an old−fashioned minuet, and when the merry guests were forming on the floor, a young man named Tom came forward and asked the hand of Bertha.

"No," said she, "not this time. I am going to dance this first dance with−−well, we will say by myself!"

At these words the most thoroughly gratified ghost in all space stepped up to the side of the lovely girl, and with his cocked hat folded flat under his left arm, he made a low bow and held out his hand. With his long waistcoat trimmed with lace, his tightly drawn stockings and his buckled shoes, there was not such a gallant figure in the whole company.

Bertha put out her hand and touched the shadowy fingers of her partner, and then, side by side, she and the ghost of her great−grandfather opened the ball. With all the grace of fresh young beauty and ancient courtliness they danced the minuet.

"What a strange young girl," said some of the guests, "to go through that dance all by herself, but how beautifully she did it!"

"Very eccentric, my dear!" said Mr. John Applejoy when the dance was over. "But I could not help thinking as I looked at you that there was nobody in this room that was worthy to be your partner."

"You are wrong there, old fellow!" was the simultaneous mental ejaculation of young Tom Burcham and of old Applejoy's ghost.