

Burgher
and
the Woebegone
by
Kim Chatel

This story is dedicated to my mother, Claire for giving me a sense of whimsy and a love of literature.

Burgher and the Woebegone

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Chapter 1: Wherein Burgher finds a toenail

Spring came to Oxtail Orchard with ash-gray skies and dingy horizons. The stunted apple trees shook on the little hillock like a clutch of old hens left out in the cold.

What's that? Spring isn't supposed to be about cold chickens? It's supposed to be about hopeful flashes of green and blossom scented breezes? You're right, of course, but Oxtail Orchard had been gray and dismal for too many springs. No one remembered it any other way.

You can thank Burgher for that. He drove the Apple Tree Man away.

Burgher was a gnome, which is just another way of saying an ugly elf. He was fat, but still managed to have knobby knees and elbows. He wore the same clothes everyday, until they were tattered, greasy rags. His beard was as gray as his heart and tangled with bits of twigs and last night's dinner.

He didn't care that the scurrying squirrels pined for fresh fruit or the birds, so newly arrived from the south, were confused to find the orchard bare and gray. Burgher liked gray. He worked in his garden bed, plucking the few green shoots that dared to poke through the mud. Only fungus and slugs were allowed in his garden. Slugs were dependable and no one ever made a fuss over fungus.

Burgher had been growing gray things for so long; the grayness had crept inside him. But, dear reader, Burgher was about to learn that color, like hope cannot be kept from this world forever.

Just as he was enjoying his crop of slugs and moss, his trowel turned over a green toenail. Not green like his own moldy hobnobs, but green like eager spring leaves.

Burger pulled his beard. He stomped his foot.

Only one person had toenails like these.

The Apple Tree Man was back.

“. . . good for nothing . . . ruin everything . . .” Burgher mumbled. He slipped the toenail in his pocket and looked up at his apple tree home. A small rain cloud hung over the branches like a pork-pie hat.

It was true! Tiny green buds sparkled on the branches. He stared at the little nubs for a full minute, unbelieving. Buds meant blossoms, leaves, apples and all the infuriating creatures that came with them.

Burgher’s hearing wasn’t so good, and the constant thunder rumbling from the storm cloud didn’t help, but he thought he could just make out the chirping of birds.

“. . . wretched tree.” He kicked at a root. “Blasted buds. . .”

Burgher did not believe in finishing sentences. Finished sentences were whole thoughts, promises that couldn’t be taken back.

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“ . . . bees . . . too many bees. And butterflies. . . ”

Burgher hated butterflies.

He sat heavily on a damp mushroom and wondered how he would rid the orchard of the Apple Tree Man once again. Jonny Gold (as the Apple Tree Man was known) was a legend, even to the legends. Flowers sprang up where he walked. Baby critters followed him with big, sappy smiles. The apple trees bowed in the wind when he passed.

Burgher cared less than a fig for the mysterious Apple Tree Man. When he saw the young field mice and bunny kits at Jonny’s knee, listening to tales of bumblebee heroes, Burger cringed. When he heard Jonny’s flute lilting notes into the moonlight, he gritted his teeth.

You see, reader, Burgher suffered from the most dreadfully incurable disease. He had a broken heart, and he blamed his misery on Jonny Gold.



*Now, dear reader, you have some choices.
Where would you like Burgher’s story to go?*

If you would like to read about the legend of the Apple Tree Man, turn to page 9. If you would like to learn how Burgher tricked the pixies into driving the Apple Tree Man away, turn to page 13. If you would like to learn why Burgher hates Spring, turn to page 19. If you’d like to continue with Burgher’s story, turn to page 25.