

The Apple Golem

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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Daß ist die alte, alte Liebesgeschichte.

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Baltasar wearied of the affairs of princes. They built their fiefdoms into kingdoms and their kingdoms into empires. Then they died, and their sons brought everything to dust. New princes arose, and their wars echoed the wars of their forebears like the notes of a tune heard too often, too often. Such things happened as they had always happened, and they would go on, Baltasar knew, for a very long time, with Baltasar there to witch the weather and concoct the poisons and cast the oracles, or without him.

So, he thought, let it be without.

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He followed the path into the mountains, and went on where there was no path, between the knife-edged peaks and across the fields of ice. On the other side, in another country, he descended into forest. There was a place where apple trees grew wild and each year dropped hard and bitter fruit. Here Baltasar built a hut of stones and lived in silence.

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How did he live? Did he draw some vital substance from the very air? Did sunlight nourish him? Perhaps it was simpler than that. He might have set snares. Mushrooms abounded in that black soil. He might have eaten of the apples.

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In silence, he lived. In silence, and alone.

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And finally, it began to gnaw at him, the old, old hunger. It worried at his bones all winter long, nameless, keeping him from sleep as the snows piled soft and deep.

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Spring came. Still the hunger was with Baltasar, and still he had no name for it. Then overnight, the apple blossoms opened all at once. Baltasar, blinking in their morning whiteness, clutched at his cloak. In their perfume, he recognized and named the hunger. Once named, it gnawed at him all the harder.

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With summer, green apples grew heavy on the trees. Baltasar began to pick them, and with a little knife, he peeled and shaped the fruit. Artfully, he pieced the silvery flesh together on his table, joining piece to piece with wooden slivers, and by some craft he knew, he kept it from corruption. The fruit did not turn brown or shrivel in the air. Long days he worked, correcting often for some flaw that he perceived, sometimes starting over, until the feet that he had carved and pieced from apple flesh lay finished on the table.

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And then he made the legs, from apples growing rounder on their branches. Into the night sometimes he worked, seeing by a witchlight that he conjured in his room. The hips were broad, but not unseemly so. Delicately, he carved her apple heart and lungs, covered them in apple ribs, and overlaid her chest in apple skin. Shoulders, then. Her arms. Her hands.

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Her face was the labor of a week. Green-apple-skinned he made her, save for her red-skinned lips and the aureole of her breasts.

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"Live," he said, and other words, such as his kind would know. And then he kissed her, touching with his pulsing tongue her apple-tasting one.

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She blinked. She stirred. And even as he lingered in the kiss, she began to move beneath him. He touched her apple knee, the yielding, now-warm skin of her apple-flesh-made thigh. He felt along the length of her, and where he touched her skin it knit together and was whole. His fingers traced her cheeks, her lips, and gently crossed her throat. He caressed her breasts and sides, breathed softly on her eyes to make them clear. When his hands had brushed her everywhere, brought all of her to life, he pressed his knee between her legs to make her yield.

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The thing that gnawed at him no longer gnawed. For a time, Baltasar was satisfied. He lived as he had lived before.

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The apple golem, after that first night, lived among the apple trees, moving in the forest shadows like a wild thing, silent. Baltasar, searching, could never quite catch sight of her. Always, it seemed, she was in the corner of his eye, then gone. But she was obedient. She came to Baltasar whenever his need was upon him, and in silence, she did as he required. Even when the leaves fell, when the last apples came to earth, when the snows began to descend heavy and wet, she remained among the trees and was with him only when he summoned her.

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And when the first snows turned to ice and the later snows began to fall soft and deep, something again began to gnaw at Baltasar. He called the golem, and she came to him. He looked at her, standing warm and naked in the brittle cold of his doorway. Her skin was green and supple as spring buds. Her eyes met his plainly, frankly. She would do anything, anything at all that he commanded. *This is not enough*, he thought.

He seized her wrist. She did not resist him. He pulled her sharply against him, fell with her to the floor. He bruised her flesh with his fingers, pinched and pulled at the green skin of her breasts. He battered her with his hands, grabbed sharply at her neck to force her against him. She went willingly.

Not enough, he thought. *This is not enough*.

He coupled with her, battered her, clutched hard at the flesh of her hips. When release came to him, it was not release enough. He lay still, and she gazed into his eyes as before, malleable. His creature. Too much his creature.

He pulled her closer, roughly caressed her neck. The apple smell of her skin was strong. He pressed his tongue against her shoulder, tasting, probing. And then dug his teeth into her, bit down hard even as she began to pull away. His teeth met. She rolled away from him, and her mouth was open in a soundless cry as her fingers touched emptiness he had made in her.

Yes, Baltasar thought.

She would not meet his gaze.

* * *

She would not meet him with her eyes again. She was his. She could not fail to come when he called, but that frank gaze had left her. If he took her face with his hand, her eyes would dart to the side.

Yes. This was what he had longed for.

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All that winter, he had her. All that winter, he was free of the thing that had gnawed at him. Nearly every day, he satisfied his appetite for her, taking small bites from her shoulders, her neck, her breasts and her legs. Nearly every day, he would call to her and always she would come, but always her eyes were elsewhere.

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In the spring, she was a skeleton of silvery apple flesh, darting between the trees where the apple blossoms were starting. As before, he continued to summon her nearly every day, and every day he marveled at how she had begun to change. At first, it was only the smell of her, the rich scent of apple blossoms that clung to her and aroused him as never before. But when the apple tree buds began to open, when the leaves began to uncurl, the golem's wounds began to heal. The flesh that grew into the wounds was pink. When he bit it, it did not yield so easily to his teeth, and it tasted not so much like apple flesh as meat and blood. The apple golem seemed all the more pained, all the more frightened, when he bit these places. To Baltasar's delight.

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It could entertain him for a century, he thought. He could go on for a long time, indeed, taking painful bites from the flesh of his creation.

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One night, late in summer, the apples were heavy again on the branches. When Baltasar summoned

the golem to the glow of witchlight, when he seized her chin in his hand and looked into her eyes, she looked back.

Plainly and frankly, she looked back.

Fixedly and certainly, she looked back.

She was a flesh thing now, he realized. Not an apple thing.

And slowly she opened her jaw, curled back her lips, and Baltasar saw that the inside of her mouth was pink and lined with row after row of teeth. Tiny, white teeth.

Her hands closed around his wrist. She had a strength he had not guessed at. She had never resisted him.

"No!" he said, but the word was only a word, for she was no longer what she had been, and before he could summon the other words he knew, the ones that might destroy her even if he could not control her, she was bending toward him for a kiss. A very hungry kiss.

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What binds one may bind the other.

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Day by day, she called to him. Day by day, he was compelled to come to her from his place among the apple trees and submit. For a time, he still had a will of his own, still remembered the words that might release him, but he could not speak them. He had no tongue.

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There are still places where no one goes. Perhaps, one day, wandering in the woods, you will go to one of them. Losing your way, you will find yourself in deeper and deeper forest, and then find a little clearing where apple trees grow wild and bear their hard and bitter fruit. A stone hut stands there. Perhaps you will knock and find the woman who lives there. If she smiles, it will be a tight-lipped smile. She will not speak. Most likely, she will not answer your knock at all.

Out of the corner of your eye, you may see something moving beneath the tangled apple branches. Look fast enough, and you will glimpse a thing that you will be sure you cannot have really seen.

But if you were sure you had, indeed, seen it, and if you wanted a name for it, you could call it this: bone golem.

It had another name once, but that was long ago.

Daß ist die alte, alte Liebesgeschichte:

This is the old, old story of love.

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