

# THE APPLE TREE

By Marcel Maranello

The one hundred year old Gothic revival house looked every minute its age. Its enormous blocky design was offset by its decaying gingerbread millwork that held what was left of its last coat of yellow paint. The steeply pitched original slate roof leaked in several places. Even its once locally produced bricks needed re-chinked. I wouldn't say it looked haunted, but it definitely belonged to another era.

The overgrown yard complemented the house perfectly. An apple tree of some long forgotten variety towered next to the building; one side of its half-dead upper limbs very nearly touching the structure. One large main branch looked completely dead. Its gnarled leaning trunk had a crack in its bark that spiraled upward.

The stale air inside the house gave one the impression it was abandoned, but it contained one living occupant, Miss Naomi Gray. She was the last living descendent of her family. I had been her handyman and groundskeeper for over ten years, she had always treated me fairly.

She occupied only two small rooms in the museum-like dwelling; the kitchen, that was unchanged since 1950, and the living room where she spent most of her time. The living room contained an old brass bed, three antique rocking chairs, a bookcase, a China cabinet, and an old Zenith television set that she never watched.

I knocked on the back door, but knowing she was partly deaf, I opened the door and yelled, "Yoo hoo Miss Gray." She didn't answer so I went in the kitchen and walked toward the living room, "Yoo hoo it's me Jerry."

She was in her rocker facing the window. She jumped slightly then turned her head to look at me.

"Oh hello Jerry. Have a seat," she said while pulling a hand knitted shawl tighter around her shoulders.

"How have you been?" I asked. Not a good question to ask someone a century old.

"Miserable, I'm cold and no one has come to see me for a week. I had a terrible night's sleep. I lay awake till three in the morning," she was always cold even in mid-July.

“I guess you wanted your grass cut,” I offered trying to change the subject.

“Yes it is getting a might shaggy,” several strands of her dry white hair floated over her head as she spoke.

“By the way those low branches on the apple tree really need pruned,” I spoke loudly so she could hear me, but I had to repeat myself anyway.

Her eyes glared and her voice got angry, “Don’t touch that tree! My father planted it when I was a baby.”

We went through this every year and every year I got the same answer.

“It’s really hard to mow under the tree. Pruning won’t hurt it; it will only help it,” I pleaded my case but already knew the outcome.

“Just use those boards to prop up the limbs,” she replied as expected.

“OK, OK, don’t get excited. Well I better get started,” I said while getting up to leave.

As I was mowing, my mind wandered about Miss Gray. Her life had been one of stoic sacrifice; she had spent forty years talking care of her disabled sister. She never married. She was born in the house that was built by her father. He was a

carpenter who worked the twelve hour days of his era. She hardly ever spoke of her mother.

I knew she didn't have much money; she seemed to keep her house going on sheer willpower. She still managed to cook for herself; getting around by using a wooden stool for a walker. She could make a cabbage and a few potatoes last for a week. But she was fighting a losing battle with the upkeep of the house. The strain on her was mounting. Whenever I mentioned the leaky roof, she didn't want to hear about it.

I think she owed her longevity to a lack of any vices; she didn't even drink coffee or tea. Her long life was more of a curse than a blessing, however, having outlived most of her friends and her entire family.

I found an opening in the low hanging branches, then entered the cave-like area under the apple tree. Only one type of broadleaved weed grew under its light blocking canopy; the ground was black and damp. I repositioned the long thin boards in a futile attempt to hold up the massive drooping limbs. "This is hopeless," I muttered.

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