

The Spirit of Christmas

A ghostly Christmas story

by Rob Keeley

Exclusive to www.robkeeley.co.uk

Please print, read and enjoy!

The Spirit of Christmas

by Rob Keeley

“I only wanted *one*.”

Edward, heir to Inchwood Manor and the Fitzberranger estates, the younger child of Mr and Mrs C.G. Fitzberranger, aimed a kick at the kitchen dresser, rattling the willow pattern china and causing one of the Manor’s more nervous kitchen-maids to jump in the act of whipping cream.

“I’ve told you, Master Edward.” Mrs Roberts moved to the table and carefully removed a plate of mince pies from Edward’s reach. “Your father says they’re not to be touched until Christmas Day. There’s some ginger snaps left in the tin, if you want one.”

“I have those all year round.” Edward put up a hand to fiddle with the stiff Eton collar he wore with his best suit. “Why I can’t have just one, before the hungry hordes arrive, I don’t know. They’ll all be circling around that dining table like vultures.”

“Now then, Master Edward.” Mrs Roberts returned from placing the mince pies safely in the larder. “That’s no way to talk about your family.”

“They’ll all be here.” Edward moved to pick at the sugar-coated decorations on the family Christmas cake. Mrs Roberts hastily picked it up. “My sister’s rotten fiancé, and my Aunt, and Uncle, and my cousin. That ghastly little horror, Patience. I never could abide small children.”

“She’s only a year younger than you, Master Edward, isn’t she?” Mrs Roberts paused to look at a very long list of food items that stood on the corner of the table. “Anyway, you just look forward to tomorrow. Roast goose. With your favourite apple stuffing.”

Edward pouted.

“The *better* households nowadays are having turkey.”

He turned to see Stratton the butler towering over him.

“Your father requires your presence in the drawing room immediately, Master Edward. He instructed me to tell you your guest has arrived.”

Edward pulled a face.

“That means Patience, I suppose. Which means my own is about to be sorely tested.” He made a final grab for the table and a plate of jam puffs. Mrs Roberts removed them. “You do know I could have you sacked?”

Mrs Roberts smiled.

“No, you couldn’t.”

“Would you like me to explain to your father that you’re engaged elsewhere, Master Edward?”

Edward grimaced. He moved past Stratton and headed for the door.

The butler and the cook exchanged a smile.

On the wall, the heavy wood-mounted calendar displayed the date to all the Manor’s servants.

December 24th, 1896.

Edward walked through the green baize door and across the black-and-white-checked floor of the Manor’s entrance hall. As he passed the cellar door, he paused at the sound of distant hammering, coming from below.

He tugged at the sleeve of the second footman, who was drifting back to the kitchen with

an empty tray.

“I say. Horace. What’s going on down there?”

Horace grinned.

“Work was meant to be finished last week, wasn’t it, Master Edward? Your father’s furious. Don’t s’pose you heard anything, stuck up there in that nursery.”

“What are they doing?”

“Found another part to the cellar.” Horace jerked a thumb downwards. “A whole other room. Been walled up, couple of hundred years, Mr Stratton says. Anything could be hidden down there.”

“The family treasure?”

“I shouldn’t wonder.” Horace lowered his voice. “Or a few nice bottles of port, anyway. Reckon that’s what your Pa’s hoping for.”

Edward grinned.

At the same moment, two stern voices were heard, one from the drawing room, the other from beyond the green baize door.

“Edward!”

“Horace!”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Duty calls.”

“Yeah.” Horace felt in his pocket and produced a paper bag. “Humbug to keep the young master happy?”

“Absolutely.” Edward took one. “When I’m master of this house, Horace, you’ll be butler. Just remember that.”

Horace straightened his tie. He disappeared towards the kitchen.

Edward popped the sweet into his mouth.

He entered the drawing room. For a moment, no one seemed to notice him. It was already dark outside, and the candles on the Christmas tree were lit. His mother and Aunt Phyllis were discussing the guest list for Christmas luncheon. His father and Uncle Allyn stood conversing by the fireplace. A warm fire was burning.

“Edward!”

Edward’s face fell as he saw Patience floating towards him, all frills and flounces, her fair hair in ringlets.

“I’ve been simply longing to see you again!”

“Yes,” Edward said through the humbug. As Patience hugged him, he took the opportunity to slip the half-sucked sweet into the pocket of her dress. “Me too.”

“I’ve ever so much to tell you,” Patience went on. “Mummy and Daddy sent me to a lovely school. And I’m captain of hockey for my form!” She smirked. “Daddy says you got expelled from yours!”

All the adults turned. Edward reddened.

“We’ve been expecting you for some time, Edward,” Mr Fitzberranger said. He turned to his wife. “Shall we have tea now, my dear? Mortimer won’t get here ‘til later and, as expected, Sally isn’t back.” He addressed his guests. “She’s helping at some shindig at the village hall. More good works for the poor and idle.”

“You can come and sit by me, Edward.” Patience sat on a low stool near the fire. “And then you can hear all about my poems. I’ve written nearly eight now, you know. And Daddy’s going to pay to have them published. If you like, I’ll sign a copy for you.”

“Horrendous,” Edward muttered.

“What was that, Edward?” Mr Fitzberranger asked.

Edward met his eye. “I said... tremendous, Father. Patience becoming a poet, like Wordsworth, and all those other chaps. Daffodils and so on. Top-hole.”

“I’ve got a secret,” Edward said, after the bread and butter. Patience was nibbling shortcake and looking angelic. “I bet you can’t guess.”

He smiled to himself as he saw Patience looking curious. He sank his voice into a whisper.

“Deep beneath this house, there’s a secret cellar. And even as we speak, men are digging their way through to a sealed room. No one knows what might be hidden there!”

He saw Patience’s eyes widen.

“They can’t be sure. But they think it might be... the Lost Treasure of the Fitzberrangers.”

Patience giggled.

“The what?”

“The Lost Treasure of the Fitzberrangers,” Edward repeated firmly. “Legend has it... that a boy and a girl will find the treasure. Wealth untold. They’ll marry, and live happily ever after.”

He turned away from her, gazing into the fire.

“Of course, I don’t suppose *you’d* be brave enough. To go down there and look.”

Edward was fortunate. It was after five o’clock. The last of the workmen had left, heading for

Christmas and the village inn. There was no one around as he and Patience slipped from the drawing room and towards the door to the cellar.

Edward opened it. "This way."

Together, they moved to the bottom of the steep, stone steps. The cellar was dark, with the only light coming from the hall above.

Patience pulled a face. "Pooh! It smells!"

Edward sniffed. She was right. There was a strong smell of brick dust.

He pointed to his left.

"Look! Far end of that passage. I've been down here before. There used to be a wall there. That must have been the one they put up in the olden days."

Patience gave a shriek as she walked into a cobweb. She quietened, and brushed it from her face, as she saw Edward grinning.

"I don't like it down here, Edward."

"Where's your spirit of adventure?" Edward asked. "It's what we British are known for."

He advanced further, entering the passage.

"I say..."

He pointed ahead of them.

"Look! Crikey, look!"

They found themselves standing in a large, square chamber. There were more cobwebs, and the smell of brick dust was growing stronger.

In the centre of the chamber were several large, wooden barrels. They were as tall as Edward, and the wood was darkened and rotted with age.

"That doesn't look like treasure," Patience said. "Treasure's in chests."

“Looks like Pater was right,” Edward said. “Wine... or port... Gosh! They must have kept a good cellar here in those days.”

Patience paused.

“Edward. There’s no light in this room, is there?”

“Course not,” Edward said. “We’re underground.”

“Then... how can we see these barrels?”

“Well –” Edward stopped. “Ah...”

Their eyes met. At the same moment, they realised the light was coming from behind them.

Very slowly, they turned.

Standing before them, brilliantly lit, was the figure of a man. He was richly dressed in velvet and lace, wore a broad-brimmed hat, and sported a long wig and a moustache.

He was transparent, with the walls of the chamber visible behind him, and hovered a full foot above the ground.

His hand reached out, in the direction of the barrels. His mouth opened, and let out a moan.

And Edward yelled even louder than Patience.

They ran for the cellar steps, Patience letting out another scream as they passed straight through the advancing figure.

As they reached the hall, Edward cannoned straight into his father.

“Edward!” Mr Fitzberranger glared. “What were you doing down there? That cellar isn’t a playroom!”

“I...” Edward gasped.

He was saved any further explanation as Patience reached into the pocket of her cobweb-covered dress for a handkerchief and found herself holding Edward's half-sucked humbug. She gave another yell.

His father reddened.

“Go upstairs immediately! Go to your room, and stay there! And you will not attend dinner this evening, or the firework display tomorrow!”

Edward slowly met Patience's eye.

Edward decided that “your room” meant the nursery. It was cosier in there than in his bedroom, and a low fire was still burning. He'd had lessons right up to that morning, when his governess, Miss McKendrick, had left to spend Christmas with her mother. Mr Fitzberranger didn't believe in idleness.

Edward took several deep breaths. Then he found a bar of chocolate he'd hidden among the bookshelves for emergencies. He ate it quickly. Sugar had to be the best medicine for shock.

As he was wiping the last of the chocolate from his fingers, Patience entered. She was wearing another immaculate dress and carried a large book.

“You really are a little toad, Edward,” she greeted him. “I believe you took me down there simply to frighten me, and spoil my new dress.”

Edward smirked.

“They're not punishing *me*,” Patience went on. “It was all your fault, and I said so. So *you're* missing dinner. Though you might be in luck with the firework display. I asked them to let you off.”

Edward hooted. “They're not setting fire to me, are they?”

Patience ignored him. “While you’ve been up here eating chocolate and behaving like the silly little boy you are, I’ve been behaving like a lady, and being sensible. I’ve found out about the ghost we saw.”

“There aren’t such things as ghosts,” Edward said.

“Then what did we see downstairs?” Patience placed the book on the nursery table.

“There *is* a spirit world, Edward, and some people are sensitive to it. Sally told me, ages ago. In a house with the history of Inchwood, there must be lots of ghosts.”

She opened the book and pointed.

“I found this in the library.”

Edward looked. The book was the history of the Fitzberranger family.

And the picture on the page before them showed the man they had seen, correct in every detail. The velvet coat... the hat... the moustache...

The caption read:

Sir Brandon Fitzberranger.

“I say.” Edward looked impressed. “That’s pretty smart work, for a girl. When was this fellow on the go, then? Renaissance, or Iron Age?”

“English Civil War.” Patience tutted. “It’s high time you went back to school, Edward. Don’t you know anything? King against Parliament? King Charles the First?”

“Wasn’t he the chap, had his head cut off?” Edward looked at the book. “If his hair was like that, I’m not surprised.”

“Inchwood Manor was a Cavalier stronghold in the early part of the war,” Patience told him. “That means our family supported the King. And Parliament’s forces, the Roundheads, wanted to capture the place. Sir Brandon Fitzberranger was one of the King’s most loyal

supporters.

‘Then, one Christmas, the Roundheads caught the King’s men off guard. Sir Brandon was hiding in the priest’s hole, underground. He’d meant to use the tunnels to get away. But the Roundheads were guarding all the exits. They left him down there to starve to death.’

“Crikey.” Edward stared into the Cavalier’s stern face. “Bit of a coward, wasn’t he? Hiding down there and letting all his men be slain?” He sniffed. “*Not* the behaviour one would expect of a Fitzberranger.”

“When *you* were so brave?” Patience asked. “Down there in the cellar?”

Edward hastily turned the page.

“There has to be more to it than that. Surely he’d have made a plan? And if he was hiding in the tunnels, why did we see him in the cellar? What was he doing, before he went into hiding?”

Patience frowned.

Edward and Patience lay awake in their rooms long into the night, watching in case the ghost of Sir Brandon should appear. But Christmas Day arrived peacefully.

They had no more time, for the moment, to discuss family history. After morning service at the village church, the family returned to the Manor for present-giving. Edward received some new cottages and trucks for his train set and *The Boy’s Book of Railways*. Patience seemed delighted by a doll and rose-scented notepaper.

Not wanting to starve like his ancestor, Edward ate too much at Christmas luncheon, and missed tea. He was sent upstairs to the nursery to recover. The history book was still there, and he spent the time reading the whole chapter on Sir Brandon Fitzberranger. The book said he

had determined to defend the Manor “to the last man”.

Why had they seen him in the cellar? And what was in those barrels?

Edward had always been told his ancestors were so brave and noble. Surely there had to be more to learn?

Then he read the final pages of the chapter and discovered that there was.

Edward wasn't sure whether the sentence of the previous night had been lifted, but at seven o'clock Horace was sent to tell him to join the rest of the family on the terrace. After the firework display, there would be supper. Edward was sure he was recovered enough for that.

He donned overcoat and scarf and went to stand alongside Patience. She was wearing a white fur-trimmed coat and looked sweeter than ever. Their parents were there, and Edward's sister Sally, and Mortimer, her fiancé. Stratton had been given the task of setting off the fireworks. Edward grinned. He could see that Stratton was counting the minutes until he could join Christmas dinner in the servants' hall.

He and Patience stood watching as rockets soared into the sky and the tall chestnut trees of Inchwood were silhouetted against a blaze of coloured lights.

“Did you read that bit about Sir Brandon's nephew?” Edward asked, as soon as he was sure none of the adults was listening. “And the woman he married?” Patience nodded. “I wonder what his plan was? Those barrels... I'm sure they remind me of something.”

Patience laughed as more fireworks took flight.

“Probably Guy Fawkes' Night. You know... he had lots of them stored underneath Parliament, full of gunpowder. And he was going to...”

Edward's eyes grew. And at the same moment, Patience's hand flew to her mouth.

“Oh, gumdrops!”

“Edward!” Patience ran along the hallway after her cousin. “We should tell the grown-ups!”

Edward was already halfway down the cellar steps.

“This house is my inheritance! I’m not going to let it go off pop!”

“They’ll be wondering where we are!” Patience followed him.

Edward hurtled into the hidden chamber. Then he stopped.

He and Patience stood, paralysed with fear, at the sight of Sir Brandon Fitzberranger. He was holding a lighted taper over a long fuse.

And the fuse led straight into the heart of the central barrel.

“Get out!” Both the children cowered as they heard the spirit speak. “You must leave here, at once! All of you! After two and a half centuries, at last I shall have victory.”

“That *was* the idea, then?” Edward asked. “Take the whole place sky-high, and your enemies with it? And you never got the chance.” He paused. “But you’d have died, too.”

“My life meant nothing.” Sir Brandon started to lower the taper towards the fuse. “To save the life of His Glorious Majesty, and his realm from traitors.”

“Things have changed a bit since then,” Edward said. “Your enemies aren’t here now. They left you to starve to death, and the cellar was walled up. No one can have realised what was down here.” He was shaking. “For all that time...”

“Why do it now?” Patience asked. “You’ll kill innocent people.”

“Innocent?” Sir Brandon asked. “What of the innocent men who died that Christmas night? Cromwell’s army butchered them in cold blood. Now, this house shall form a monument

to their memory.”

He lit the fuse.

“Wait!” Edward yelled. The fuse was hissing and sparking. The flame was moving nearer and nearer to the barrels. “There are things you don’t know! Your nephew, Todd. After you died. He married a Roundhead woman. Anne...”

Sir Brandon stared.

“No. This cannot be.”

“It is!” Patience put in. “He didn’t support Parliament any more than you, but he wanted the Fitzberranger family to survive. And it did. Once he joined the Roundhead side, the rest of the family went with him.”

“Traitors!” Sir Brandon looked fiercer than ever. “Then their house of treachery shall be destroyed.”

Patience blinked helplessly towards the fuse. Sir Brandon stood between them and the sputtering flame.

“You may have lost your King. But our family lived on. This house... Edward and I... we’re only here because of what Todd did.”

“We’re an old and noble family,” Edward said. “We’ve been here since William the Conqueror. Why destroy it all now?”

He looked right into the eyes of the spirit.

“It’s too late to change the past. But what about the future?”

There was a long, agonising silence.

Then Sir Brandon pointed a finger towards the fuse.

The flame died.

Edward and Patience caught their breath. Sir Brandon smiled.

“Then fare thee well, Edward. The latest of our kin...”

His smile faded.

“And the last.”

A moment later, Edward and Patience found themselves standing alone in the dark, empty chamber.

On the morning of Boxing Day, the family took a walk to the village.

Edward crossed the courtyard with Patience. “You know, you’re not bad, for a girl. Always wanted a friend like you.”

“And you’re not bad either,” said Patience. “For a silly little boy.”

She frowned.

“What did he mean – Sir Brandon? That you were the last? The last of the Fitzberrangers?”

Edward pulled up the collar of his overcoat.

“Absolute rot. I’ve got *years* ahead of me, yet. I fully intend to marry. Just you wait and see.” He caught Patience’s eye. “And no. I *shan’t* be marrying you.”

“Thank goodness.” Patience stopped, and Edward stared, at the sight of a horse and cart at the side of the house. It was Joss Wilkins, the local carrier, and he and his boy were lifting something aboard.

Four of the barrels from the cellar.

“Well done, Wilkins.” Mr Fitzberranger was watching the cargo. He turned to Uncle Allyn. “They’re for a business friend of mine. I’m having them delivered to his house at

Oldchester. Might put some further work our way. And considering how long those barrels have been down there, the wine should be a fine vintage. Might help his New Year celebrations go with a bang.” He caught sight of the children. “Eh, Edward?”

“Yes, father.” Edward smiled. Patience seemed about to say something, and he silenced her. “I’m sure they will.”

The Spirit of Christmas
© Rob Keeley 2015

If you’d like to read more ghostly stories with Edward, read:

Childish Spirits

The Spirit of London

The Sword of the Spirit – coming soon!

Details at www.robkeeley.co.uk

Happy Christmas!