

THE PHANTOM FIDDLER

AND
OTHER NOTABLE TALES



JOE MCHUGH

**The
Phantom
Fiddler
&
Other Notable Tales**

written by
Joe McHugh

This book is dedicated to all the fiddlers,
past and present, who love and carry forward
this venerable tradition.



*And I never started to plow in my life
That some one did not stop in the road
And take me away to a dance or picnic.
I ended up with forty acres;
I ended up with a broken fiddle—
And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,
And not a single regret.*

~ from “Fiddler Jones” by Edgar Lee Masters

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THE PHANTOM FIDDLER



You have heard it said that people do not change. Well, don't you believe it. They *do* change, and sometimes for the better. It doesn't happen often, I'll grant you that, but take Otto Grumgenhoff, for instance. A bachelor by temperament and choice, he emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1886 after deserting from the Prussian Army. He wasn't the only one stealing across a border at night or smuggling himself onto a ship. Many young men came to America to avoid military service. You could say, and rightfully so, that our country was settled by a bunch of draft dodgers.

As fate would have it, Grumgenhoff settled in Pittsburgh, where he got a job in a tannery on the north side of the city. For generations his father's family in Germany had been in the leather business, so Grumgenhoff knew the trade, and in time the owners made him a foreman.

Every evening after returning to his small room at the boarding house, he would sit on the bed and count his

earnings. He never spent money on drink or to pay for a meal at a restaurant. And God forbid he should buy a ticket to a dance hall or take in a minstrel show. No, Grumgenhoff had a dream. He wanted above all things to own and operate his own hotel like the hotels his mother's brothers owned in Frankfurt and Cologne. But that meant saving every cent he could lay his hands on. Never a churchgoer, he even took up usury, having no scruples in that direction. Whenever a German immigrant was hard pressed for money and couldn't get a loan from a bank, Grumgenhoff would lend him the dough, provided the man was desperate enough to agree to pay three times the interest the bank charged.

In this way, Grumgenhoff managed in the span of ten years to save up enough to buy his hotel. Only he couldn't afford a city hotel, so he cast about until he found one for sale high up in the mountains of West Virginia. The hotel was called the Mountain Laurel.

Now, why a man like Grumgenhoff wanted to buy a hotel in the first place is a mystery because there never was a person less suited to the role of innkeeper. Heavy-set, with florid features and lamb chop sideburns, and a starched apron draped like a revival tent over his prodigious girth, the German bossed his guests about with the stiff irritability of a schoolmaster suffering from piles. He never laughed at a joke and you would as soon get a friendly word out of him about the weather, the price of coal, or how the governor's son was found shot dead in a cathouse in Huntington as you would get beer out of a Salvation Army tambourine. And thus you might conclude that a person with that kind of temperament would fail in the hotel business. The widow Mrs. Strale predicted as much after she sold the Mountain Laurel to Grumgenhoff. That was after her husband Gideon

died of tuberculosis of the bone.

“That cranky German must eat a fistful of tacks every morning for breakfast,” she told Willis Plumbly, the local mail carrier, “he’s so gruff and short with people. Now you take Gid, God rest his soul, he knew how to jolly up the guests. He’d ask after their wives and children, shake his head and frown if they complained that business wasn’t so good. You hear what I’m saying? Grumgenhoff doesn’t give a fig what people do or say so long as they behave themselves and pay their bill. I doubt a year will pass before he sells up and moves on.”

But Grumgenhoff didn’t sell up and move on. Instead, each year he watched his profits grow, if only modestly. And why, you might ask? Because the Mountain Laurel was the only hotel for miles around. Built the year the Civil War ended, the hotel straddled a pass in the mountains that separated the capital city of Charleston from the coal mining towns in the southern part of the state. A rambling, two-story, wood-framed structure with a covered porch facing the road, the Mountain Laurel provided the weary wagoners, drovers, and peddlers who passed that way bug-free beds and affordable meals.

All through the late spring, summer, and fall the Mountain Laurel bustled with activity. Many a night guests were forced to share their beds with fellow sojourners, the hotel was that crowded. In winter, however, snow closed the pass and few travelers would venture that way. In anticipation of this, Grumgenhoff would swing the heavy window shutters closed and bolt them from the inside. He would then drop a beam across the kitchen door and lock the front door with a key before driving his trap down the mountain to Charleston where he would catch a train that took him first

to Baltimore and then to Georgia. That is where his spinster sister lived and he would stay with her through the winter months and not return to the Mountain Laurel until the Ides of March. Then he would fling the shutters open, haul the linens outside to air them, replace any broken shingles, uncover the well, and drive the squirrels from the attic. This took him three days and on the fourth, March 19th, he would open for business.

Year after year it was the same routine, the hotel slumbering like a bear through the winter months while its owner sat in his sister's parlor smoking cigars, drinking peppermint schnapps, and expecting the poor woman to wait on him hand and foot.

The year was 1902 and a fraternal organization in Charleston decided to host a fiddle contest to raise money for the wives and children of coal miners who had died in mine accidents. The event committee included some of the leading citizens of the city and they were preparing to go whole hog for the big day.

The first thing they did was rent the Odd Fellows Hall and set the date for the contest for the first Saturday in December. They then printed up twelve-inch by twenty-inch full-color posters and ran advertisements in newspapers throughout West Virginia, as well as three neighboring states. The prize for first place, they trumpeted, was fifty dollars, with the second place winner pocketing half that amount. The third place winner would receive an eighteen-pound smoked ham. Each winner would also receive a colored silk ribbon that he could tie to the scroll of his fiddle to show off when he got back home.

The head judge for the contest was none other than the

legendary fiddler Pop Moran. He was assisted by Bernie McQuire, choir director at Saint Mark's Methodist Church, and Angelo Nocida, known throughout the city as the "singing cobbler."

At last the night for the big contest arrived and the Odd Fellows Hall was decked out in patriotic bunting and Christmas wreaths. Gaslights mounted along the walls illuminated the hall and every seat was occupied, with several dozen more folks standing shoulder to shoulder along the back wall. Shrouds of tobacco smoke hung in the air and coins clinked as moonshine dealers slipped fruit jars from under their coats into the hands of thirsty customers.

When all was in readiness, the judges filed into the hall and took up their posts at a table on the floor in front of the stage. Pop Moran took the middle seat, his hair so white that from the back he looked like a fence post after a winter storm.

The crowd was in high spirits. The racket of their excited conversation, laughter, and hearty salutations filled the hall.

Then Harlen Griffin, the mayor, who had agreed to serve as master of ceremonies, stepped out onto the stage, and the crowd quieted down.

"Are we here to have a good time tonight?" the mayor boomed in his familiar vote-for-me baritone.

He was answered with hoots and hollers and thunderous applause. Feuds were forgotten and worries left at home by the hearthside; tonight everyone was intent on having fun and hearing some top-notch fiddle music.

"I know you have already shelled out for a ticket to this wonderful event. But let me remind you that we are raising money for a worthy cause. Consider the noble, hardworking miner who goes underground every day to provide us with

the coal we need to run our factories and heat our homes. But then the roof falls in or there's an underground gas explosion and the unfortunate man loses his life. Who, I ask you, will look after his wife and little ones? Well, ladies and gentlemen, that's what we're doing here tonight, and if my assistants will now come forward, see if you can give just a little bit more so that your fellow West Virginians will not have to suffer."

Alert for their cue, four pretty teenage girls appeared at the back of the hall and marched down the middle and side aisles carrying brand-new milk buckets, courtesy of Grinnell's Hardware Store. When they reached the front, each commenced passing her bucket down one row of seats and then collecting the bucket that reached her coming down the next row. In this manner, the girls slowly worked their way to the back of the hall, men and women dropping coins and sometimes a dollar bill into the buckets, so that by the time the last row was reached each bucket was more than half full.

"Are you ready now to hear some of the best fiddling this side of Jordan?" the mayor shouted as the girls with their buckets filed out into the lobby where Maury Taylor, the club's treasurer, awaited them with a stack of cloth sacks, the words KANAWHA VALLEY BANK stenciled on each one.

Inside the hall there were more hoots and hollers. The mayor was having a spanking good time.

"Then let me call onto the stage our first contestant. The order was determined by drawing lots, and each contestant will play a breakdown followed by a waltz."

A man in his fifties with a drooping mustache sauntered out unto the stage. He carried a blond violin and pinned to the back of his red gingham shirt was a square of paper

with the number 1 centered on it. He was accompanied by a guitar player who carried himself with a limp.

The crowd grew silent as the fiddler launched into a spirited rendition of *Billy in the Low Ground*. He followed this up with *The Fifty-Years-Ago Waltz*, also know as *The Anniversary Waltz*. The next to play in the contest was a short, balding fiddler whose excited blue eyes shone like those of a child on Christmas morning. He already had ribbons streaming from the scroll of his fiddle, having won or placed in previous contests in other towns. He offered up his music to the judges and the audience unaccompanied: *Fisher's Hornpipe* followed by *Lorena*, which, although not a waltz, elicited spirited applause.

Thus it continued throughout the evening. Many of the contestants were dressed to the nines, as befitted the occasion, with starched collars and freshly polished shoes. A few, however, wore bib overalls, as if they had just walked from the milking barn to the stage. One fiddler was blind, and he held his fiddle and bow in one hand so he could rest his other on his wife's shoulder as she led him to the center of the stage. He then played the fiddle while she played backup on the banjo.

It was nearly midnight before the last breakdown and waltz were played, and then the party continued into the early hours of the morning in hotel rooms throughout the city.

Now it happened that one of the fiddlers, contestant number 12, was a farmer named Shelby Armstrong. He lived near Oak Hill, West Virginia, and operated a ninety-acre dairy farm that he had inherited from his father. But it was his Uncle Brice, his mother's brother, who taught him how to

play the violin. The uncle lived for some years down in the Ozarks, so Shelby knew some lively Missouri tunes as well as most of the West Virginia standards. All the same, Shelby had never played in a contest before. And he wouldn't have played in the Charleston contest if it hadn't been for his neighbors who urged him to.

"You're as good and a darn sight better than most of them city fiddlers," boasted Dale Appleton, who ran the feed store where Shelby traded. "Why, the tunes you played at Miss Guthrie's wedding were some of the prettiest I've ever heard. Isn't that right, Marlen?"

Marlen James, another dairyman, nodded his head in agreement. "Go up there and make us proud of you, Shelby. I'll send my boy Walter over to help with the milking while you're away."

Shelby thought it over and had to admit that December was as good a month as any to go off on a frolic. He was caught up on his farm work except, of course, with feeding and milking the cows, which never had an end.

"What the heck," he told himself. "Maybe I can show them boys up in Charleston a thing or two."

So Shelby had his wife drive him to the station where he could catch the train that would carry him to Charleston.

"You take care of yourself, dear," his wife said as she handed him a poke containing of couple of sandwiches and three apples. "Don't run off with some floozy."

Shelby didn't care much for trains, the clatter of the cars and the way coal smoke would blow back in through the windows; some fool was always opening a window, even in the winter. Sitting across from him was a drummer who peddled sewing notions and rubber galoshes.

"I always wanted to learn to play the violin," the man said

eyeing the fiddle case on the seat next to Shelby. "Do you play professionally?"

"I just play here and there," Shelby replied. "Mostly for fun."

"Take your fiddle everywhere you go?"

He's a nosey son-of-a-gun, Shelby thought. He was having trouble placing the drummer's accent but suspected that he was a Yankee.

"I'm on my way to play in a fiddle contest."

"A fellow drummer told me about that contest. When is it?"

"Tomorrow night at the Odd Fellows Hall."

"The Odd Fellows Hall? You don't say. Why, I might just go."

"There's nothing to stop you unless they've sold out the tickets."

"That won't be a problem," the man bragged, flashing a smile, a pair of gold crowns glittering in the back of his mouth. "I'm well liked in Charleston. A salesman's got to be, if he hopes to get on. What line of work are you in, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm a dairyman."

"A dairyman? You don't say. Why, my pappy was a dairyman. And his biggest complaint was how the rain and manure kept ruining his shoes. Why, I just happen to represent a line of high-quality galoshes. They're made from the sap of rubber trees that grow along the Amazon River in South America . . ."

Now that the agitation of the contest was over, Shelby found himself lying in bed in the hotel, staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. He had gone up against some tip-top

fiddlers and come away empty-handed. Maybe he should have played that Missouri tune, the one called *Jimmy in the Swamp*. He had added a dandy third part to the tune several months ago and changed the name to *Devil in the Swamp With His Corncob Pipe*. The title alone would have caught the judges' attention. Instead, he played it safe: *Blackberry Blossom* for his breakdown and *The Gold and Silver Waltz* for his slow tune.

"Stop fretting about what's over and done with," he scolded himself. "You can't do a blessed thing about it now."

But late night worries are hard to tame, and his thoughts now went to the sorry state of his wallet. He added up the price of the train ticket and lodging for two nights, along with the cost for his meals plus the entry fee for the contest, which, at two dollars, was nothing to sneeze at.

The room was warm and stuffy, so he got up and opened the window. But instead of frigid air, a pleasant, warm breeze wafted in and brushed his skin. The moon, almost full, rose above the rooftops of the city and shone like the headlamp of a locomotive. An idea came to him. He could save the cost of a return train ticket by making the journey home to Oak Hill on foot. He had made the footslog twice in the past, although that had been during the summer. All the same, given how unseasonably warm it was, he calculated he could make the trip in two days, arriving home late on the evening of the second day. He could find some farmer willing to put him up for a night, and if not, he had a thick coat and could sleep out of doors. "Yep, that's what I'm going to do," he muttered to himself as he at last drifted off.

Shelby Armstrong started off at the crack of dawn. By mid-day he was south of Charleston, where the road began to

wind its way up into the mountains. It had grown so warm he was beginning to sweat, which made him laugh because Christmas was only a couple of weeks away.

A bootblack in the city had sold him a strip of leather, which he attached to his fiddle case so he could sling it over his shoulder. He had also cut himself a staff from a hickory sapling to ward off any dogs or snakes he might encounter.

The road climbed steadily into a forest leaving the farms and villages of the Kanawha Valley behind. For two hours he made good progress, passing only one homestead, which was protected by a barking yellow mongrel, who, minding the hickory staff, came no further than the gate to the yard. The afternoon was well advanced and Shelby considered approaching the owners and asking if he could camp out in their barn. But he didn't like the look of the snarling, ill-mannered canine and knew that owners often took after their dogs. Besides, he reasoned, if he kept going he would likely come upon another farm before nightfall and be that much closer to home.

As he trudged along he began to hum a fiddle tune to himself. It was called *Rye Straw* and had four parts, the second and the fourth parts being nearly the same. Then he realized *Rye Straw* was the tune the winner of the fiddle contest had played. Shelby thought the man played all the notes and then some, but his bowing of the third part was on the raggedy side. But it didn't matter what he thought. The crowd and judges loved his playing and the man went home to Youngstown, Ohio, with fifty dollars in his pocket and a blue silk ribbon to hang from the scroll of his violin.

Shelby quit humming *Rye Straw* and switched over to *Cold Frosty Morning*. Now, maybe it was nothing more than coincidence, but as he hummed the tune the wind kicked

up and the temperature began to drop. It dropped so fast, in fact, that it caught Shelby by surprise. The first thing he noticed was that he had stopped sweating. More than that, he had begun to shiver. He stopped walking long enough to button up his coat. All about him were dark, silent trees, the road under his feet the only sign of human endeavor.

“I don’t care for this weather,” he addressed the empty trees, “maybe I should turn back.” But that meant walking two hours in the wrong direction and then maybe the farmer with the barking dog would take him or maybe he wouldn’t. No, he would press on. He should reach the pass soon, where he remembered there was a hotel. He couldn’t recall the name, but he had spent the night there once and recalled it as tolerable.

He began walking again, quickening his step, but had not gone far when the wind began to stiffen. One powerful gust blew his hat off, and he had to chase after it and snatch it off the ground. He jammed the hat back on his head and soldiered on, but a seed of worry was germinating inside his mind. What if he got caught out in a winter storm? He knew the weather was fickle in December. Had he been a fool to try and cross the high mountains without the guarantee of shelter?

He slipped his free hand into the pocket of his coat hoping to find some matches, but all he fished out was a ball of lint and two Indian head pennies. Why hadn’t he thought to bring matches?

“Because,” he told himself, “you allowed brooding over the loss of the fiddle contest to distract you. Well, there is nothing you can do about it now.”

Shelby pulled up his coat collar; the wind was stronger and beginning to spit small flakes of icy snow into his eyes.

“The hotel can’t be much farther,” he muttered, keeping his head down so as not to lose his hat again.

The road was now white with snow, the falling, swirling flakes getting larger and heavier the higher he climbed. Again, he quickened his pace, ignoring the protests coming from his thigh and calf muscles. He began to sing *The Devil and the Farmer’s Wife*. It was an old ditty that his mother used to sing, and told how the devil one day carried a farmer’s wife down to hell only to find that she intended to wreck the place, killing a peck of the little demons in the bargain, so he had to lug her back home again. Shelby liked the last two verses the best:

*“I’ve been a devil all of my life,
But I’ve never been in hell till I met your wife.”
Sing fi, diddle aye, diddle aye, dee,
diddle aye diddle aye, dae.*

*“And that proves that women are better than men,
They can go down to hell and come back again.
Sing fi, diddle aye, diddle aye, dee,
diddle aye diddle aye, dae.”*

The snap of branch off to his right made him stop and turn. Was it the storm or a bear? Maybe a panther. He peered into the forest looking for the glint of malevolent eyes, but all was dark, cold emptiness. He trudged on. Singing *The Devil and the Farmer’s Wife* usually worked to cheer him up; it was the only time when he was a kid he could say the word “hell” and not get a switching. But this time singing it just seemed like work and he abandoned the effort.

His right foot slipped on the snow, but the hickory staff

kept him from falling. Exhaustion was turning his legs to wood, his feet into numb mallets beating the snowy ground with every step. He was tempted to leave the road and seek shelter in among the trees. He was so tired, but he knew that to fall asleep was to never again awaken.

Step after step, each an effort of will. He stopped and scooped up a handful of snow and wet his lips. He threw aside his walking stick and thrust his smarting hands into his pockets. Even the violin that hung about his neck was a burden. He kept pulling on the strap to shift the weight. It was the violin's fault. What a conceited fool he was to believe he could win the contest. And to waste all that money on a train ticket and a room and the entry fee. With a little luck, come the spring, he would sell enough calves to recoup the loss.

He continued walking. His fatigue was such that he could sense the slightest change in the grade of the road, and after another mile he felt it begin to level out. That meant he was nearing the pass. Up ahead was a clearing. And yes, there, against the now dark sky he could just make out the silhouette of a large building. The sight gave his spirits a tremendous lift and the fatigue fell from his limbs. He began to jog, but as he drew nigh unto the hotel he became puzzled, because he saw no lights burning. Maybe the shutters were closed to keep out the storm. The wind had begun to howl as gusts conjured up swirling ghost-like shapes from the snow that lay on the ground.

At last Shelby reached the building and climbed the steps onto the porch. He tried to open the door, but it was locked. He banged on the door with his fist. The insistent cold reached deep into his bones and made him sleepy. He put his hand on the doorknob again and tried to turn it, the cold

metal grabbing the skin of his palm and not letting go. Then he attempted to force the door open, but the lock held firm. He slid down into a sitting position with his back to the door, and pulled his coat around him as tightly as he could. The air smelled of snow and pine resin, fingers of wind reached in under the eaves to both mock and caress him. His head fell forward on his chest as sleep, at last, overtook him.

Monday morning, after the storm played itself out, Willis Plumbly trotted up over the pass with his saddlebags full of mail for the settlement of Soap Creek three miles further south. He reined in his horse when he noticed a dark shape on the porch of the Mountain Laurel. He studied the shape, but cautiously, in case it was a rabid animal of some kind. When it didn't move, he spurred his horse forward. And there on the porch, he found a man all huddled up in a heap and covered with a thin layer of snow blown in on top of him during the storm. Next to the man was a violin case, it too dusted with fresh snow. Willis dismounted and attempted to rouse the man.

"Wake up, fellow," Willis said as he shook the man's shoulder. "Is something wrong? Are you sick?"

When that elicited no response, Willis took off his glove and touched the man's face. It was stiff and cold as a block of ice. He unbuttoned the stranger's coat and put his ear down on the man's chest and listened for a heartbeat. There was none.

Willis bowed his head and said a short prayer for the benefit of the unfortunate man's soul. He remounted his horse and set off to summon help.

As you might imagine, the news of the fiddler's death caused quite a stir in that part of the country with everyone keen

to discover the stranger's identity. The sheriff telegraphed the man's description to towns throughout the region, and two days later Shelby Armstrong's wife and his brother Matt arrived with a horse and buckboard wagon to claim the body. It was a sad affair, but life, like a mountain stream, flows on.

Come the following March, Grumgenhoff returned to the Mountain Laurel and set about getting the hotel ready and open for business. What he discovered, however, and much to his annoyance, was that people only cared to talk about one thing: the fiddler's untimely death.

"It's an awful shame the way that man died trying to get into your hotel," a neighbor would say to Grumgenhoff.

"It is not my fault," an angry Grumgenhoff would reply, "the fool had no more sense than a turnip, trying to cross the mountains that time of year."

"No one blames you," the neighbor would hasten to placate the irate innkeeper, while secretly enjoying the rise he had gotten out of the old sourpuss.

Grumgenhoff, meanwhile, filled his larder and aired the rooms, and the first night the hotel was open he counted a dozen lodgers. He fed everyone and waited until they finished their smokes and went to bed before banking the coals in the large fireplace of the common room, locking up, and going to bed himself. He had no trouble falling asleep, but he was awakened sometime later by a queer sound. He lit the candle he kept next to the bed and looked at his watch. It was just on midnight and he could hear the standing clock downstairs in the hallway chiming out the hour. The other sound, the one that woke him, he realized, was someone playing the fiddle. This made him angry because he enforced strict rules when it came to music-making after ten o'clock at night. Once he turned a luckless drummer out into the

night with a weighty clout to the man's ear because he was drunk and wouldn't stop playing his French harp. There was no arguing with Otto Grumgenhoff when his blood was up.

Throwing his stout legs over the side of the bed, he stood and pulled on his robe. He tugged the belt tight about his generous torso, picked up the candle, and started down the upstairs hallway meaning to have it out with the inconsiderate and, he suspected, inebriated fiddler who would annoy the other guests at such an hour.

Grumgenhoff, however, discerned that the music wasn't issuing from any of the upstairs guest rooms as he expected, so he went to the top of the stairs and listened. No question about it. The music was coming from downstairs—and not just downstairs, but from inside his office across the hallway from the foot of the stairs. This discovery fueled his anger, but puzzled him, too, because he always kept the door to his office locked and he couldn't understand how someone could have gotten inside.

He clomped down the stairs, the candle held out in front of him so he wouldn't trip, while the fiddle music played on, a plaintive and lonesome sound, not at all the kind of tune you would expect from a man well into his cups.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Grumgenhoff crossed the hall and tried to open the door to his office, but it was locked, as it should be. He reached into the pocket of his robe and removed a ring of keys. His hand trembled with rage as he thumbed through the keys to find the right one. He pictured in his mind the hickory ax handle he kept leaning against the wall just inside the office, next to the door. If there needed to be a physical confrontation, he was ready for it. Taking a deep breath, he fit the key into the lock, turned it, and pushed open the door.

The music stopped—abruptly—the faint echo of the melody fading away to nothingness. Grumgenhoff held the candle aloft so that he might peer into the corners where the shadows covered. But no one was in the room. The office was empty. He stepped forward and moved the candle from side to side surveying the condition of the office. Everything seemed normal, until he came around behind his desk. There he discovered that someone had rifled through the drawers and littered the floor with their contents.

Grumgenhoff struggled to make sense of what he saw. Had he interrupted a burglary? If so, then where was the burglar? He went to the windows and checked them. They, like the door, were locked. And why would a burglar call attention to himself by playing music? Nothing made sense.

For the next half hour, Grumgenhoff conducted a thorough inventory of the papers and items in his desk, and, as far as he could tell, nothing was missing. Eventually he went back to bed, but he slept fitfully, his contentment undermined by troubled dreams that, like the mysterious fiddler in his office, flitted away just out of reach through the passageways of his unconscious mind.

The next night, the same thing happened again. At the stroke of twelve, Grumgenhoff was awakened by the sound of music. Again he got up and followed the sound until it led him to his office, where, with a sinking heart, he unlocked the door and pushed it open only to find the room empty. This time, however, it wasn't his desk that had been violated. The top drawer of a filing cabinet was pulled out and papers scattered all over the floor. After further inspection, however, Grumgenhoff convinced himself that nothing had been taken.

Thus it continued each and every night. The music

would begin at midnight, always mournful and yet full of yearning, and it would draw Grumgenhoff downstairs to his office where he would discover that some other part of the office had been ransacked and yet nothing was ever missing.

And it wasn't just the innkeeper who heard the soul-chilling music. The guests heard it too, and word spread faster than rabbits in a pea patch that the hotel was haunted by the ghost of the fiddler who was found frozen to death on the porch of the hotel. That is what people believed and who could blame them? But it was an explanation Grumgenhoff refused to accept. He convinced himself that it just was a mean-spirited prank, an elaborate practical joke, and he would get to the bottom of it, and then watch out! The culprits would pay and pay dearly.

Still, the ghost story proved a disaster for his business. Within a week, people stopped coming to his hotel. Nobody dared spend the night in the company of some restless spirit. What if the fiddler got bored with haunting the innkeeper's office and decided to visit one of the guest rooms? This possibility was too much for people, so they stayed away.

Then for several nights, Grumgenhoff refused to get up when he heard the music. He just lay in bed with his pillow wrapped tight around his head in a vain attempt to block it out. And on those nights when he didn't get up and go downstairs, the music continued unabated all night long and only stopped with the coming of dawn, always the same heartbreaking melody, played over and over again. It threatened to drive the poor German crazy.

Then one day Willis Plumbly stopped at the Mountain Laurel to deliver a letter from Grumgenhoff's sister, and the sight of the hotel owner was enough to stop his breath. Grumgenhoff had lost so much weight and color that Willis

scarcely recognized him. His hollowed-out eyes had a crazed cast to them that caused the mail carrier genuine concern.

“There’s a woman hereabouts who might be able to help you get shut of that ghost of yours,” he told Grumgenhoff.

“There is no ghost,” Grumgenhoff replied, his voice flat and distant.

“Her name is Rennie Sharewood. I’m sure you’ve heard of her.”

Grumgenhoff had often heard of people talk about the Sharewood woman, but he had never met her. When adults spoke her name, they did so with respect. Not so the children. They were convinced Rennie Sharewood was a witch, because she was old and she lived off in the mountains by herself and talked and acted strangely. “She knows things,” they whispered to each other, “secret things.”

And in some ways this was true, because Rennie knew more about the wild plants that grew in that part of the country than anyone else. If you had a toothache, she would make you a paste to rub on the gum near the offending tooth, and the pain went away, at least long enough so you could get to a dentist or work up the courage to yank the tooth yourself. For lice, she made a powder by grinding up the bark of a certain tree and it sure did the trick. The lice packed their bags and hunted up some other poor scalp on which to dine.

But most of the time it was an anxious husband or midwife who sent for Rennie to help with a birth. She would come and brew up an odd-smelling concoction made from herbs and roots that helped relieve the pain and make the birthing go easier. This set the doctors against her and some preachers, too, because the Bible taught that Eve tempted Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit and part of her punishment was

that all women must suffer the pain of childbirth. Anyone who interfered with God's judgment in this regard must be wicked and of the Devil. One mountain preacher, Reverend Alfus T. Snodgrass, a dyspeptic man with a hooked nose and eyebrows like woolly worms, preached against the old woman regularly from his pulpit and that is probably where the children got the idea that she was a witch. Most people, however, regarded Snodgrass as cracked and were sincerely glad to have a wise woman like Rennie Sharewood living in the vicinity.

For some time, Grumgenhoff refused to go to the old woman for help, but in the end it got so bad he had no choice. It was either that or burn down the hotel.

So one Saturday morning, he screwed up his nerve and set out for Rennie's place. As he marched up through the small meadow that sloped down from her hewn-log house, he spied her sitting on her porch, rocking back and forth in a chair, facing his direction as if she had been expecting him all along. This impression gave Grumgenhoff the jumps.

"Miss Sharewood," he said as he reached her, "I am Otto Grumgenhoff. I own—"

"I know who you are," she cut him off, her dark eyes fixed on his, "and I've a pretty good notion why you're here."

She motioned to an empty chair next to her and he sat down. She struck a match on the arm of her chair and held it up to the bowl of a corncob pipe. She sucked on the pipe until her mouth filled with smoke and then blew it out in a narrow stream. Grumgenhoff took this as a signal to tell his story. She didn't interrupt him, just puffed on her pipe and smiled now and again, revealing her nut-brown, tobacco-stained teeth. He noticed her skin, too. It had acquired the hue and texture of old saddle leather from spending so much