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Title: Fiddles

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Release date: December 3, 2007 [eBook #23698]

Most recently updated: February 25, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIDDLES ***

FIDDLES

By F. Hopkinson Smith

1909

This is Marny's story, not mine. He had a hammer in his hand at the time and a tack between his teeth.

"Going to hang Fiddles right under the old fellow's head," he burst out. "That's where he belongs. I'd have given a ten-acre if he could have drawn a bead on that elk himself. Fiddles behind a .44 Winchester and that old buck browsing to windward"—and he nodded at the elk's head—"would have made the village Mayor sit up and think. What a picturesque liar you are, Fiddles"—here the point of the tack was pressed into the plaster with Marny's fat thumb—"and what a good-for-nothing, breezy, lovable vagabond"—(Bang! Bang! Hammer at play now)—"you could be when you tried. There!"

Marny stepped back and took in the stuffed head and wide-branched antlers of the magnificent elk (five feet six from skull to tips) and the small, partly faded miniature of a young man in a student cap and high-collared coat.

I waited and let him run on. It is never wise to interrupt Marny. He will lose the thread of his talk if you do, and though he starts off immediately on another lead, and one, perhaps equally graphic, he has left you suspended in mid-air so far as the tale you were getting interested in is concerned. Who Fiddles was and why his Honor the Mayor should sit up and think; why, too, the miniature of the young man—and he *was* young and remarkably good-looking, as I well knew, having seen the picture many times before on his mantel—should now be suspended below the elk's head, would come out in time if I loosened my ear-flaps and buttoned up my tongue, but not if I reversed the operation.

"Ah, you young fraud," he went on—the position of both head and miniature pleased him now—"do you remember the time I hauled you out from under the table when the hucksters were making a door-mat of your back; and the time I washed you off at the pump, and what you said to the gendarme, and—No, you never remembered anything. You'd rather sprawl out on the grass, or make eyes at Gretchen or the landlady—fifty, if she was a day—maybe fifty-five, and yet she fell in love" (this last was addressed directly to me; it had been reminiscent before that, fired at the ceiling, at the hangings in his sumptuous studio, or the fire crackling oil the hearth), "fell in love with that tramp—a boy of twenty-two, mind you—Ah! but what a rounder he was! Such a trim, well-knit figure; so light and nimble on his feet; such a pair of eyes in his head, leaking tears one minute and flashing hate the next. And his mouth! I tried, but I couldn't paint it—nobody could—so I did his profile; one of those curving, seductive mouths you sometimes see on a man, that quivers when he smiles, the teeth gleaming between the moist lips."

I had lassoed a chair with my foot by this time, had dragged it nearer the fire, and had settled myself in

another.

"Funny name, though for a German," I remarked carelessly—quite as if the fellow's patronymic had already formed part of the discussion.

"Had to call him something for short," Marny retorted. "Feudels-Shimmer was what they called him in Rosengarten—Wilhelm Feudels-Shimmer. I tried all of it at first, then I bit off the Shimmer, and then the Wilhelm, and ran him along on Feudels for a while, then it got down to Fuddles, and at last to Fiddles, and there it stuck. Just fitted him, too. All he wanted was a bow, and I furnished that—enough of the devil's resin to set him going—and out would roll jigs, lullabys, fandangoes, serenades—anything you wanted: anything to which his mood tempted him."

Marny had settled into his chair now, and had stretched his fat legs toward the blaze, his middle distance completely filling the space between the arms. He had pushed himself over many a ledge with this same pair of legs and on this same rotundity, his hand on his Winchester, before his first ball crashed through the shoulder of the big elk whose glass eyes were now looking down upon Fiddles and ourselves—and he would do it again on another big-horn when the season opened. You wouldn't have thought so had you dropped in upon us and scanned his waist measure, but then, of course, you don't know Marny.

Again Marny's eyes rested for a moment on the miniature; then he went on:

"We were about broke when I painted it," he said. "There was a fair of some sort in the village, and I got an old frame for half a mark in a pawnshop, borrowed a coat from Fritz, the stableman, squeezed Fiddles into it, stuck a student's cap on his head, made it look a hundred years old—the frame was all of that—and tried to sell it as a portrait of a 'Gentleman of the Last Century,' but it wouldn't work. Fiddles's laugh gave it away. 'Looks like you,' the old man said. 'Yes, it's my brother,' he blurted out, slapping the dealer on the back."

"Where did you pick Fiddles up?" I asked.

"Nowhere," answered Marny; "he picked me up. That is, the gendarme did who had him by the coat collar."

"This fellow insists you know him," said the officer of the law. "He says that he is honest and that this rabbit"—here he pointed to a pair of long ears sticking out of a game bag—"is one he shot with the Mayor this morning. Is this true?"

"Now if there is one thing, old man," continued Marny, "that gets me hot around the collar, it is to see a brother sportsman arrested for killing anything that can fly, run, or swim. So I rose from my sketching stool and looked him over: his eyes—not a bit of harm in 'em; his loose necktie thrown over one shoulder; trim waist, and so on down to the leather leggings buttoned to his knees. If he was a poacher and subject to the law, he certainly was the most picturesque specimen I had met in many a day. I had, of course, never laid eyes on him before, having been but a few days in the village, but that made the situation all the more interesting. To rescue a friend would be commonplace, to rescue a stranger smacked of adventure.

"I uncovered my head and bowed to the ground. 'His Honor shoots almost every day, your Excellency,' I said to the gendarme. 'I have seen him frequently with his friends—this young man is no doubt one of them—Let—me—think—was it this morning, or yesterday, I met the Mayor? It is at best a very small rabbit'—here I fingered the head and ears—and would probably have died of hunger anyway. However, if any claim should be made by the farmer I will pay the damages'—this with a lordly air, and I with only a week's board in my pocket.

"The gendarme released his hold and stood looking at the young fellow. The day was hot and the village lock-up two miles away. That the rabbit was small and the Mayor an inveterate sportsman were also undeniable facts.

"Next time,' he said sententiously, with a scowl, 'do you let his Honor carry the game home in his own bag,' and he walked away.

"Oh, you just ought to have seen Fiddles skip around when a turn in the road shut out the cocked hat and cross-belts, and heard him pour out his thanks. 'His name was Wilhelm, he cried out; it had only been by chance that he had got separated from his friends. Where did I live? Would I let him give me the rabbit for a stew for my dinner? Was I the painter who had come to the inn? If so he had heard of me. Could he and his friends call upon me that night? He would never forget my kindness. What was the use of being a gentleman if you couldn't help another gentleman out of a scrape? As for Herr Rabbit—the poor little Herr Rabbit—here he stroked his fur—what more honorable end than gracing the table of the Honorable Painter? Ah, these dogs of the law—when would they learn not to meddle with things that did not concern them?"

"And did Fiddles come to your inn, Marny?" I asked, merely as a prod to keep him going.

"Yes, a week later, and with the same gendarme. The cobbler in the village, who sat all day long pegging at his shoes, and who, it seemed, was watch-goose for the whole village and knew the movements of every inhabitant, man, woman, and child, and who for some reason hated Fiddles, on being interviewed by the gendarme, had stated positively that the Mayor had *not* passed his corner with his gun and four dogs on the day of Fiddles's arrest. This being the case, the gendarme had rearrested the culprit, and would have taken him at once to the lock-up had not Fiddles threatened the officer with false arrest. Would the Herr Painter accompany the officer and himself to the house of the Mayor and settle the matter as to whether his Honor was or was not out hunting on that particular morning?"

"All this time Fiddles was looking about the dining-room of the inn, taking in the supper-table, the rows of mugs, especially the landlady, who was frightened half out of her wits by Cocked Hat's presence, and more especially still little Gretchen—such a plump, rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed little Dutch girl—with two Marguerite pig-tails down her back. (Gretchen served the beer, and was the life of the place. 'Poor young man!' she said to the landlady, who had by this time come to the same conclusion—'and he is so good-looking and with such lovely eyes.')

"When we got to the Mayor's the old fellow was asleep in a big armchair, his pipe out, his legs far apart—a keg-shaped kind of a man, with a head flattened on his shoulders like a stove-lid, who said 'Ach Gott' every five minutes, and spluttered when he talked.

"I went in first, leaving the two on the porch until I should send for them. I didn't know how things were

going to turn out and had become a little anxious. I had run up from Munich for a few weeks' outdoor work and wanted to stay out, not behind iron bars for abetting crime.

"Your Supreme Highness,' I began, 'I have heard of your great prowess as a sportsman, and so I wanted to pay my respects. I, too, am a shootist—an American shootist.' Here I launched out on our big game (I had been six months in the Rockies before I came abroad, and knew what I was talking about). He was wide awake by this time and was listening. Dropping into the chair which he had drawn up for me, I told him of our elk—'As big as horses, your Honor'; of our mountain lions—savage beasts that could climb trees and fall upon the defenseless; of our catamounts, deer, wolves, bears, foxes—all these we killed without molestation from anybody; I told him how all American sportsmen were like the Nimrods of old. How galling, then, for a true shootist to be misunderstood, decried, denounced, and arrested for so insignificant a beastie as a rabbit! This indignity my very dear friend, Herr Wilhelm Fuedels-Shimmer, had suffered—a most estimable young man—careless, perhaps, in his interpretation of the law, but who would not be—that is, what sportsman would not be? I had in Wilhelm's defense not only backed up his story, but I had gone so far as to hazard the opinion to the officer of that law, that it was not on some uncertain Tuesday or Friday or Saturday, but on that very Wednesday, that his Supreme Highness had been wont to follow with his four accomplished dogs the tracks of the nimble cotton-tail. Would his Highness, therefore, be good enough to concentrate his giant brain on his past life and fish from out his memory the exact day on which he last hunted? While that was going on I would excuse myself long enough to bring in the alleged criminal.

"Fiddles stepped in with the easy grace of a courtier accustomed to meeting a Mayor every day of his life, and, after a confirmatory wink from me, boldly asserted that he had followed behind his Honor—had really assisted in driving the game his way. His Honor might not remember his face, but he surely must remember that his Honorable Honor had extraordinarily good luck that day. The rabbit in controversy—a very small, quite a baby rabbit—was really one his Honorable and Most Supreme Highness had himself wounded, and which he, Fiddles, had finished. He was bringing it to his Honor when the estimable gendarme had stopped him.

"And what day was that?' interrupted the Mayor.

"On last Wednesday.'

"The cobbler said it was Tuesday,' insisted Cocked Hat. 'On this point hangs the case. Now on which day did your Honor take the field with your dogs?'

"There was a dead silence, during which the Mayor's eyes rested on the culprit. Fiddles returned the look, head up, a smile on his lips that would have fooled the devil himself. Then his Honor turned to me and said: 'My memory is not always very good, but this time the cobbler's—who is a meddlesome person—is even more defective. Yes, I think it quite possible I was hunting on last Wednesday. I can sympathize with the young man as to the size of the rabbit. They are running very small this year. My decision, therefore, is that you can let the young man go.'

"Oh, but that was a great night at the inn. Gretchen was so happy that she spilled the beer down the apothecary's back and the landlady could talk of nothing but Fiddles's release. But the real fun began an hour later, when shouts for the Herr Mahler, interwoven with the music of a concertina, made me step to the door. Outside, in the road, stood four young men—all pals of Fiddles, all bareheaded, and all carrying lanterns. They had come to crown the American with a gold chaplet cut from gilt paper, after which I was to be conducted to the public house where bumpers of beer were to be drunk until the last pfennig was spent.

"On hearing this, Gretchen, the landlady, the apothecary, the hostler, and the stable-boy—not the cobbler, you may be sure—burst forth with cries of: 'Hip! Hip!—Hock! Donder und Blitzen!' or whatever they do yell when they are mad with joy.

"Then the landlady broke out in a fresh place: 'No public-house for you! This is my treat! All of you come inside. Gretchen, get the mugs full—all the mugs—Sit down! Sit down! The Herr Painter at the top of the table, the Herr Feudels-Shimmer on the right; all the other Herrs anywhere in between. Hock the Mahler! Hock the Hunter! Hock everybody but the cobbler!' Here a groan went round. 'Hock! Hip and Blather skitzen for the good and honorable Mayor, who always loves the people!'

"And Hock! too, for the honorable and good gendarme!' laughed Fiddles, dropping into his chair. 'But for him I would be in the lock-up instead of basking in the smiles of two such lovely women as the fascinating landlady and the bewitching Gretchen.'

"After that Fiddles and I became inseparable. That I hadn't a mark over my expenses to give him in return for his services—and there was nothing he would not do for me—made no difference. He wouldn't take any wages; all he wanted was to carry my traps, to sit by me while I worked; wake me up in the morning, be the last to wish me good night. Soon it became a settled fact that, while the landlady fed two mouths—mine and Fiddles's—and provided two beds—Fiddles in the garret—my single board bill covered all the items. 'That is the Herr Painter and his servant,' she would say to inquiring strangers who watched us depart for a day's work, Fiddles carrying my easel and traps.

"This went on for weeks—might have gone on all summer but for the events which followed a day's outing. We had spent the morning sketching, and on our way home had stood opposite a wide-open gate—a great baronial affair with a coat of arms in twisted iron, the whole flanked by two royal lamps.

"Step inside, Master,' said Fiddles. 'It is hot, and there is a seat under that tree; there we will get cool.'

"It's against the rules, Fiddles, and I don't know these people.'

"Then I'll introduce you.'

"He was half-way across the grass by this time and within reach of a wooden bench, when an old lady stepped out from behind a tree—a real old aristocrat in black silk and white ruffles. She had a book in her hand, and had evidently been reading.

"You should have seen the bow Fiddles gave her, and the courtesy she returned.

"Madame the Baroness,' said the rascal, with an irradiating smile as I approached them, 'has been good enough to ask us to accompany her to the house. Permit me, Madame, to present my friend, a distinguished

American painter who is visiting our country, and who was so entranced at the beauty of your grounds and the regal splendor of your gate and chateau that rather than disappoint him—'

"'You are both doubly welcome, gentlemen,' 'This way, please,' replied the old lady with a dip of her aristocratic head; and before I knew it we were seated in an oak-panelled dining-room with two servants in livery tumbling over each other in their efforts to find the particular wine best suited to our palates.

"Fiddles sipped his Rudesheimer with the air of a connoisseur, blinking at the ceiling now and then after the manner of expert wine tasters, and complimenting the old lady meanwhile on the quality of the vintage. I confined myself to a glass of sherry and a biscuit, while Fiddles, rising from his seat, later on, stood enraptured before this portrait and that, commenting on their coloring, ending by drawing an ancient book from the library and going into ecstasies over the binding and type.

"On our way home to the inn from the chateau there was, so far as I could see, no change in Fiddles's manner. Neither was his speech or gait at all affected by the bottle of Rudesheimer (and he managed to get away with it all). I mention this because it is vitally important to what follows. Only once did he seem at all excited, and that was when he passed the cobbler's corner. But then he was always excited when he passed the cobbler seated at work—so much so sometimes that I have seen him shake his fist at him. To-day he merely tightened his jaw, stopped for a moment as if determined to step in and have it out with him (the cobbler, I afterward found out, was to leave the village for good the next day, his trade having fallen off, owing to his being so unpopular), and then, as if changing his mind, followed along after me, muttering: 'Spy—informer—beast—' as I had often heard him do before.

"Judge of my astonishment then, when, an hour later, Gretchen came running into my room wringing her hands—I had caught him kissing her the night before—and burst out with:

"'He is under the table—the huckster's feet on him—He is there like a dog—Oh, it is dreadful! Mine Herr—won't you come?'

"'Who is under the table?'

"'Wilhelm.'

"'Where?'

"'At the public-house.'

"'How do you know?'

"'Fritz, the stable-boy has just seen him.'

"'What's the matter with him?'

"Gretchen hung her head, and the tears streamed down her cheeks,

"'He is—he is—Oh, Meinherr—it is not the beer—nobody ever gets that way with our beer—it is something he—'

"' Drunk!'

"'Yes, dead drunk, and under the table like a hog in the mud—Oh, my poor Wilhelm! Oh, who has been so wicked to you! Oh! Oh!' and she ran from the room.

"I started on the run, Gretchen and the good landlady close behind. If the Rudesheimer had upset Fiddles it had worked very slowly; maybe it had revived an old conquered thirst, and the cheap cognac at the public-house was the result. That he was not a man of humble birth, nor one without home refinements, I had long since divined. Had I not suspected it before, his manner in presenting me to the old Baroness, and his behavior in the dining-hall, especially toward the servants, would have opened my eyes. How then could such a man in an hour become so besotted a brute?

"And yet every word of Gretchen's story was true. Not only was Fiddles drunk, soggy, helplessly drunk, but from all accounts he was in that same condition when he had staggered into the place, and, falling over a table, had rolled himself against the wall. There he had lain, out of the way, except when some dram-drinking driver's heavy cowhide boots had made a doormat of his yielding body—not an unusual occurrence, by the way, at the roadside taverns frequented by the lower classes.

"We worked over him, calling him by name, propping him up against the wall, only to have him sag back; and finally, at the suggestion of one of the truckmen—he was in a half-comatose state really from the liquor he had absorbed—we carried him out into the stable yard, and I held his shapely head, with its beautiful hair a-frowze, while a stream of cold water from the pump struck the back of his head and neck.

"The poor fellow stared around wildly as the chill reached his nerves and tried to put his arm around me, then he toppled over again and lay like a log. Nothing was left but to pick him up bodily and carry him home; that I did with Fritz's, the stable-boy's, help, Gretchen carrying his cap, and the landlady following behind with his coat, which I had stripped off when his head went under the pump. The bystanders didn't care—one drunken man more or less made no difference—but both of the women were in tears, 'Poor Wilhelm! Somebody had drugged him; some wicked men had played a trick, etc., etc. I thought of the Rudesheimer, and then dismissed it from my mind. Something stronger than Rhine wine had wrought this change.

"We laid him flat out on a cot in a room on the second floor, and dragged it near the open window so he could get the air from the garden, and left him, I taking the precaution to lock the door to prevent his staggering downstairs and breaking his neck.

"The next morning, before I was dressed, in fact, a row downstairs brought me into the hall outside my door, where I stood listening over the banister. Then came the tramp of men, and three gendarmes mounted the steps and halted at Fiddles's door.

"Bang! bang! went the hilt of a short-sword on the panel. 'Open, in the name of the law.'

"'What for?' I demanded. Getting drunk was not a crime in Rosengarten, especially when the offender had been tucked away in bed.

"'For smashing the face of a citizen—a worthy cobbler—the night before, at the hour of eight,—just as he was closing his shutters. The cobbler lay insensible until he had been found by the patrol. He had, however,

recognized Fuedels-Shimmer as the—'

"'But, gentleman, Herr Fiddles was dead drunk at eight o'clock; he hasn't stirred out of the room since. Here is the key,' and I unlocked the door and we all stepped in, Gretchen and the landlady close behind. They had told the officers the same story downstairs, but they would not believe it.

"At the intrusion, Fiddles rose to a sitting posture and stared wonderingly. He was sober enough now, but his heavy sleep still showed about his eyes.

"The production of the key, my positive statement, backed by the women, and Fiddles's wondering gaze, brought the gendarmes to a halt for a moment, but his previous arrest was against him, and so the boy was finally ordered to put on his clothes and accompany them to the lock-up.

"I got into the rest of my duds, and began waving the American flag and ordering out gunboats. I insisted that the cobbler had lied before in accusing Fiddles of shooting the rabbit, as was well known, and he would lie again. Fiddles was my friend, my servant—a youth of incorruptible character. It is true he had been intoxicated the night before, and that I had in consequence put him to bed, but that was entirely due to the effects of some very rare wine which he had drunk at a luncheon given in his honor and mine by our very dear friend the Baroness Morghenslitz, who had entertained us at her princely home. This, with the heat of the day, had been, etc., etc.

"The mention of the distinguished woman's name caused another halt. Further consultation ensued, resulting in the decision that we all adjourn to the office of the Mayor. If, after hearing our alibi—one beyond dispute, and submitting our evidence (Exhibit A, the key, which they must admit exactly fitted the lock of Fiddles's bedroom door), his Honor could still be made to believe the perjured testimony of the cobbler—Fiddles's enemy, as had been abundantly proved in the previous rabbit case, when the same mendacious half-sole and heeler had informed on my friend—well and good; but if not, then, the resources of my Government would be set in motion for the young man's release.

"The Mayor's first words were: 'Ah, you have come again, is it, Meinherr Marny; and it is the same young man, too, Herr Fuddles. Well, well, it is much trouble that you have.' (I'd give it to you in German, old man, but you wouldn't understand it—this to me in a sort of an aside.)

"Fiddles never moved a muscle of his face. You would have thought that he was the least interested man in the room. Only once did his features relax, and that was when the cobbler arrived with his head swathed in bandages. Then a grim smile flickered about the corners of his mouth, as if fate had at last overtaken his enemy.

"Of course, the Mayor dismissed the case. Gretchen's tearful, pleading face, the landlady's positive statement of helping put the dear young gentleman to bed; the key and the use I had made of it; the reluctant testimony of the officers, who had tried the knob and could not get in until I had turned the lock, together with the well-known animosity of the cobbler (and all because Fiddles had ridiculed his workmanship on a pair of shoes the boy had left with him to be half-soled), turned the tide in the lad's favor and sent us all back to the inn rejoicing.

"Some weeks later Fiddles came into my room, locked the door, pulled down the shades, looked under the bed, in the closet and behind the curtains, and sat down in front of me. (I had to return to Munich the next day, and this would be our last night together.)

"You have been very good to me, Master,' he said with a choke in his voice. 'I love people who are good to me; I hate those who are not. I have been that way all my life—it would have been better for me if I hadn't.' Then he leaned forward and took my hand. 'I want you to do something more for me; I want you to promise me you'll take me home to America with you when you go. I'm tired dodging these people. I want to get somewhere where I can shoot and hunt and fish, and nobody can stop me. I snared that rabbit; been snaring them all summer; going to keep on snaring them after you're gone. I love to hunt them—love the fun of it—born that way. And I've got something else to tell you'—here a triumphant smile flashed over his face—I smashed that cobbler!

"You, Fiddles!' I laughed. 'Why, you were dead drunk, and I put you under the pump and—'

"Yes, I know you thought so—I intended you should. I heard every word that you said, and what little Gretchen said—dear little Gretchen, I had studied it all out, and to play drunk seemed the best way to get at the brute, and it was; they'd have proved it on me if I hadn't fooled them that way—' and again his eyes snapped and his face flushed as the humor of the situation rose in his mind. 'You'll forgive me, won't you? Don't tell Gretchen.' The light in his eyes was gone now. I'd rather she'd think me drunk than vulgar, and it was vulgar, and maybe cowardly, to hit him, but I couldn't help that either, and I'm not sorry I did it.'

"But I locked you in,' I persisted. Was this some invention of his fertile imagination, or was it true?

"Yes, you locked the door,' he answered, as he broke into a subdued laugh. 'I dropped from the window sill when it got dark—it wasn't high, about fifteen feet, and the waterspout helped—ran down the back way, gave him a crack as he opened the door, and was back in bed by the help of the same spout before he had come to. He was leaving the next day and it was my only chance. I wasn't out of the room five minutes—maybe less. You'll forgive me that too, won't you?'"

Marny stopped and looked into the smouldering coals. For a brief instant he did not speak. Then he rose from his chair, crossed the room, took the miniature from the wall where he had hung it and looked at it steadily.

"What a delightful devil you were, Fiddles. And you were so human."

"Is he living yet?" I asked.

"No, he died in Gretchen's arms. I kept my promise, and two months later went back to the village to bring him to America with me, but a forester's bullet had ended him. It was on the Baroness's grounds, too. He wouldn't halt and the guard fired. Think of killing such an adorable savage—and all because the blood of the primeval man boiled in his veins. Oh, it was damnable!"

"And you know nothing more about him? Where he came from?" The story had strangely moved me. "Were there no letters or notebooks? Nothing to show who he really was?"

“Only an empty envelope postmarked ‘Berlin.’ This had reached him the day before, and was sealed with a coat of arms in violet wax.”

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIDDLES ***

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