

THE GHOST OF FIDDLER'S ELBOW

By Jackie Vivelo

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“SEE, IT DOUBLES BACK ON ITSELF,” Uncle Fred explained. “It’s just the lay of the land here. The stream bends the way a fiddler bends his arm to hold his bow.”

Marcy and Colin stood looking down on the rushing waters below them. Sutkins Creek, it was called. But this point where the stream passed then bent double and came back again, was known as Fiddler’s Elbow.

They had come out to answer a question, walked through the light rain—several degrees above freezing. Now that they’d heard the answer to their question, the explanation didn’t seem to be enough. They stood staring at the water, waiting for more. At last Colin said, “What about the ghost?”

Uncle Fred shook his head and flopped one hand at them. “No such thing as ghosts,” he said dismissively. “Now I’m going straight on across there to the barn. Do you want to come with me or do you want to go on back to the house?”

Marcy would have liked to go on to the barn, but Colin wanted to go back to the house. Because he had a cold, she gave in.

Feeling a little let down, they watched their uncle follow the crest of the hill back toward the barn. They had come out to hear the story of Fiddler’s Elbow, and all they had done was to look again at the funny loop of the stream.

Instead of snow, they had a misting rain for Christmas. Instead of the ghost story they had been promised, they had heard how the area got its name.

“I bet there isn’t any ghost of Fiddler’s Elbow,” Colin said disgustedly.

Older by eleven months, Marcy spoke from her superior experience, “I didn’t expect a ghost; I just wanted a ghost story.”

She was especially fond of ghost stories, and the ones she liked best were the ones about ghosts who haunted the same house, or place, or family, for generation after generation.

She had thought it would be great to meet a ghost who had also met her grandmother. But, of course, it wasn't going to happen. It was like all the promises that don't come true. Well, the ghost hadn't been a promise exactly. The ghost was just one of those things that sound better than they turn out to be.

"I don't want to go back along the path," Colin said.

"We could still catch up with Uncle Fred," Marcy suggested hopefully.

"Let's walk around the 'elbow' and follow the road back to Grandma's house."

Marcy agreed even though the hillside looked wet and slippery. In fact, it turned out to be a great deal worse than it looked. About halfway down she slipped, lost her footing, and slid to the bottom on the seat of her jeans. Scrambling up again, she could see that the road was much farther away than it had appeared from the top of the hill.

As Colin and Marcy reached the bend in the creek, they broke into as much of a run as the long grass and dead leaves would allow, but they were still about a hundred yards from the road when the light rain became a downpour.

We should have taken the path back, Marcy thought, but she didn't blame Colin. She had wanted more adventure. Getting caught in a rainstorm, however, wasn't what she had in mind.

Beside the creek was a bit of orchard that belonged to their grandmother. The two dodged between the trees to reach a fence beside the road that, like the creek, was known as Fiddler's Elbow.

"Get in!" someone called. "I saw you a-coming."

Marcy peered through the rain to see a horse-drawn buggy.

"Who is it?" Colin asked.

"He must be Amish," Marcy told him.

"Are you Amish?" Colin called out to the man in the wagon.

"Come on," he called back laughing. "I'll give you a ride up to the house."

Marcy and Colin knew all the rules about not riding with strangers but no rule had included horse-drawn wagons. Deciding it would be as easy to jump out again as it would be to climb in through the open sides, Marcy said, "Let's go."

Having come to the same decision on his own, Colin was in the wagon before she finished speaking.

"If you aren't Amish, why do you have a wagon?" Colin asked.

“Amish aren’t the only ones to have wagons. This is a genuine U.S. mail wagon. Hadn’t been a-raining so hard, you could have seen that for yourselves on the side. I’m not supposed to pick anyone up, but of course I always do in the rain.”

“Doesn’t the horse mind the rain?” Marcy asked, because she was always concerned about animals.

“Not the rain nor the snow nor the ice. Nothing I can think of is as dependable as Baskins and this wagon and me. Whoa! See here, we brought you safe home.”

One more mad dash through the now-blinding rain took them to their grandmother’s door.

“I was just telling Fred he should never have left you,” Aunt Sylvia said, as she met them at the door with their baby cousin under her arm. “He and your dad are putting on waders to go search for you. Run to the back porch and stop them.”

By the time they’d reclaimed Dad and Uncle Fred and changed into dry clothes, Grandmother had gingerbread cookies ready to be decorated. In the rush of Christmas preparations, the wagon ride was forgotten. Twisting bags of icing, the children added eyes and noses and mouths to gingerbread men. Marcy gave one a red suit with white icing trimming and a white icing beard.

A wood fire burned in the kitchen stove where mulled cider simmered, adding its scent to the smell of the fir tree and the spices of the baked goods. Linda, Marcy’s mom, sat by the stove, rocking Aunt Sylvia’s baby.

“It’s an old-fashioned Christmas house,” Marcy said to her grandmother. “Can we sit around the fire and tell stories after supper?”

“Can we tell ghost stories?” Colin asked.

Grandmother looked thoughtfully from one to the other and said, “When I was a little girl, we always told ghost stories on Christmas Eve. I didn’t think anyone did that any more.”

“Well, we want to. We want a real, old-fashioned Christmas even if we don’t have snow.”

Grandmother turned over the bowl she’d been stirring, tumbling a large ball of golden dough onto a floured board, and began to flatten the dough. She handed Marcy a rolling pin and showed her how to press the dough out as flat as possible. Colin was allowed to climb onto a counter to get a big cookie jar off the top shelf.

In Grandmother's kitchen, the top shelf was right up at the ceiling. When he emptied out the jar, cookie cutters of all descriptions spilled over the table.

Marcy chose a star shape and Colin took a Christmas tree.

"I think I'll start us off with a Christmas story while we finish up the cookies," Grandmother suggested. "When I was just a girl, we used to sell apples every autumn right out there on Fiddler's Elbow. My sister, brother, and I would sit out there with the baskets and collect the money. Every year my father—that's your great-grandfather—would store bushels of apples in the cellar so we'd have them all winter."

Colin was using a wreath-shaped cutter and Marcy switched to an angel cookie cutter as Grandmother slid the first pan of cookies into the oven.

"So what happened with the apples?" Colin asked.

"Just before Christmas, we three children would take another dozen or so baskets of apples up to the roadside and sell them. Well, one Christmas, Mr. Kohler stopped and asked for some apples. My brother Davy told him the apples were fifty cents a basket, but Mr. Kohler laughed and said he didn't have any money, but he had a strong hankering for some apples.

"My sister Jenny May said, 'You can have an apple.' But that wouldn't do; he wanted a whole basket.

"I tell you what,' he said. 'You give me a basket of those apples and I'll give you a ride to school any time the weather's bad.'

"I had already made up my mind he was to have the apples anyway, so I said yes."

"That's not much of a Christmas story," Colin said, "except for the fact that it happened at Christmas."

"That's because you haven't heard the end," Grandmother said.

Marcy looked the cutters over to make another selection. She liked sticking with one shape for at least a dozen cut-outs, but Colin had already cut a pig, a chicken, an owl, a moon, a heart, and even a whale.

"How can you make those things look like Christmas cookies?" she asked him, taking an elf-shaped cutter.

"We didn't know it," Grandmother continued, "but Mr. Kohler's wife was sick. It turned out she almost died that winter, but at the time we didn't know why

he wanted the apples. It seems all their money was going for doctor bills and medicine.

“After Christmas, when we went back to school in the one-room schoolhouse, we all had to say something we had gotten for Christmas. One by one each of the Kohler children said they had gotten stockings filled with apples and nuts. About that time word got around about how sick Mrs. Kohler was, and all the farm families around here started to help.

“When somebody smoked hams, they left a ham for Mr. Kohler. On baking day, there’d be an extra loaf of bread, or sometimes it would be eggs or a cake.”

“That’s a nice story,” Marcy said. “Did Mrs. Kohler get well?” She picked up an apple-shaped cutter for her next row of cookies.

“Yes, she did, but Mr. Kohler never forgot us or that basket of apples.”

Somehow supper was ready by the time the cookies were decorated. As soon as the meal was over and the dishes were washed, Grandmother set Marcy and Colin to work stringing cranberries and popcorn beside the fire in the living room.

“Can we hear ghost stories now?” Colin asked.

Toby, Aunt Sylvia’s baby, had fallen asleep, but the rest of them sat by the fire and listened to the stories.

Uncle Fred told about two brothers who had to sleep in a haunted room in an old farmhouse. In the middle of the night, the ghost came and stood at the foot of their bed, “giving off a strange glow and smelling of the grave.”

“You’re going to make Colin and Marcy afraid to go to bed,” their mother protested.

“No, he won’t. I love ghost stories,” Colin said.

“I wish we could see a **real** ghost,” Marcy said.

“Didn’t you say that Fiddler’s Elbow is haunted? What did you start to tell us in the car?”

“Oh, the story is,” Mother began hurriedly, having thought better of telling them about the haunting of the place they had come to visit, “that here where the river doubles back, time doubles back also. What has happened may happen again.”

“I have a ghost story,” Dad said before Marcy could ask the questions that her mother’s remarks had raised. He told a long story about a castle—faraway and nothing like Grandmother’s house—where steps were heard on the stairs each night.

“So eventually,” he concluded at last, “the family grew so accustomed to the ghost that they’d each smile and nod and sometimes say ‘Good evening’ as they passed him on the stairs.”

Soon after that Marcy and Colin got ready for bed. Colin settled down on a pallet in their parents’ bedroom and Marcy went to bed on the cot in the kitchen.

“Are you sure you can sleep here?” her grandmother asked for the fourth time. “I wish you’d take my bed and let me sleep in the kitchen. I’m always the first one up anyway.”

“I wake up early too. I can help you when you come in to start breakfast. Can I help with more baking in the morning?”

“Oh, yes! I still have to make the eggnog cake, and we have to make orange-nut stuffing for the turkey. There will be lots of things you can do.”

“Then I’ll want to get up early and not miss any of it. Besides, I want to be here,” Marcy assured her. “It’s nice to fall asleep with people nearby,”

“As long as we don’t keep you awake,” Grandmother said.

“I’m almost asleep already.”

But Marcy had spoken too soon. On crisp white sheets, with the warm glow still coming from the wood stove, she lay awake, happily smelling dried apples and a lingering scent of cinnamon. She found she could hear the voices of the adults clearly over the crackle of the fire in the next room.

“I hope we didn’t give the children nightmares from the ghost stories,” Aunt Sylvia was saying.

They’re wrong to think we’re scared, Marcy thought. *I still wish I could see a ghost just once.*

“I could tell you didn’t want them to hear about our Fiddler’s Elbow ghost,” Grandmother said. “I had gotten it all started for them while we were working on the cookies, but luckily I didn’t say a word about the ghost.”

“That was just too close to home!” Mother said.

“What’s the story? I’ve never heard that one,” Uncle Fred said.

Then, of course, nothing could have persuaded Marcy to stop listening.

“When I was young,” Grandmother began, “my brother, sister, and I gave some apples to a man who couldn’t pay us for them. In return, he told us that when it was raining or snowing, he’d stop and pick us up and give us a ride to save us the usual mile-long walk to school. He was as good as his word. Whenever the weather

was bad, he'd be there waiting for us. We knew we could depend on him, and in rain or snow we looked for him. Well, I grew up and had been away from home for a few years before we came back here to live and raise our family.

"I was out walking one day, when I was expecting Sylvia. Before long I knew I had made a mistake; the baby was coming sooner than we had thought. In fact, the baby was on the way. I was out there on the road just opposite the bend in the river, and I heard a wagon. I was surprised to find there were still wagons around, but then I saw it was Mr. Kohler. He stopped for me and drove me up to the house. After that came the race to the hospital and the baby's birth. With all the excitement, I didn't think to mention Mr. Kohler until much later. That's when I learned he had died several years before. Of course, no one believed my story about getting a ride with a ghost."

"But we believe you," Marcy heard her dad say. "Before we were married, Linda and I were visiting here and went walking down beyond where the apple orchards used to be."

The steady sound of the wind, the warmth of the bed by the kitchen stove, and the voices in the next room began to blend for Marcy. She closed her eyes and found herself right away in a dream of walking hand-in-hand with her mother and grandmother along the creek called Fiddler's Elbow. Behind them she heard the sound of a horse approaching at a steady trot.

"We knew snow was coming," continued the voice that Marcy could no longer hear. "But it hadn't started and the weather seemed mild enough. We were just turning back when the clouds opened. A whole blanket of snow seemed to fall at once. Huge, blinding flakes were coating us and everything around. I figured we'd be lost out there. That's when we reached the road and found the old buggy waiting for us."

As she slept under the covers by the black stove in the kitchen, Marcy smiled at her dream.

"We accepted the ride and thought nothing of it," Marcy's mother took up the story, "until we got safely back to the house and told Mother about the man who had picked us up."

Uncle Fred snorted. "I'd like to believe in ghosts as much as the next person, but here you are right in the middle of Amish country. Plenty of people have horse-

drawn buggies. In both cases, you probably just ran into a good Samaritan, not a ghost at all.”

“You’re forgetting that I knew Mr. Kohler. I recognized him,” Grandmother said. “But there is something more. When we were kids and Mr. Kohler gave us rides, he was breaking the rules. You see, he was the mailman for this district. He wasn’t supposed to let anyone ride in that buggy. He always said rules are rules, but people are people and sometimes you have to bend a rule to do the human thing. I recognized Mr. Kohler, and I recognized that mail buggy too.”

“It was also a mail buggy that we rode in,” Marcy’s dad said. “And how many of those do you think are still around? The man said that nothing was as dependable as he and his buggy and that horse.”

“I even recognized his horse,” Grandmother added. “If I hadn’t been so preoccupied with bringing you into the world, Sylvia, I would have known there was something strange about that ride. I hadn’t known Mr. Kohler had died, but his wagon had long been replaced and his old horse Baskins had been dead for years even then. I do believe that, just as Linda said, the land and the water and time itself double back here at Fiddler’s Elbow.”

Deep in her own dream, Marcy shivered again, not from cold and not from fear but from pure delight at a wish come true.