

The Millionaire's Piano

By Harry Steven Ackley

Markley's Antique Shop was nestled in a narrow alley off Curry Street. On a cloudy afternoon in November, Theodore Markley's daughter Elizabeth and her four-year-old daughter Sarah were up from the city for the day. As Markley tinkered with an old cash register, Elizabeth looked over the inventory while Sarah chased Gus, Markley's cat.

"Will you please make Sarah settle down?" snapped Markley. "She's going to knock over something valuable."

"She's a kid, dad. She's bored. She just wants to pet the cat."

"I'm afraid Gus is not used to children," said Markley. "He's very high-strung."

"Gus is not the only one who's high-strung," said Elizabeth.

"Just please have Sarah sit for a while," said Markley.

Elizabeth plopped Sarah down on a stool behind a Victorian style square grand piano. It had an ornate music rack and thick legs carved with scrollwork.

"I need to go to the car and get something," said Elizabeth. "Can I leave Sarah here?"

"Fine," said Markley.

Not a minute passed before Sarah started banging on the piano keys.

"No!" shouted Markley as he bolted across the floor. "No," he repeated.

Markley firmly took hold of his granddaughter's hands. "You can't play it like that, Sarah. It's an antique."

"What's an antique?" asked Sarah.

"It's something that's very old," said Markley. "Like Grandpa."

He looked at the piano. With his thin lips he gave his granddaughter a devilish smile.

"You know that big old house that you see when you drive into town?"

Sarah nodded. "The one with the plants growing on it?"

"Yes, that's the one," said Markley. "Those plants are called vines."

"This piano belonged to the man who lived there. His name was Mr. Pierce. He was a famous businessman—he was a millionaire. That doesn't mean a lot today. But when Mr. Pierce was alive, over a hundred years ago, that was a lot of money."

“The piano was a gift for his wife for when they moved into that house.

“But sadly Mrs. Pierce died shortly after they moved in.

“When she died, Mr. Pierce was so upset he just played the piano all night. He sat there and drank wine and cried. At one point he spilled wine all over the keys, but he just kept playing.”

“What song did he play?” asked Sarah.

“Well, he really didn’t know how to play. He just banged on it like you were doing. Finally, Mr. Pierce slammed down the lid and shouted in a hoarse voice, ‘No more music!’”

Markley reached down with his bony pale hands and firmly shut the lid over the keyboard. He leaned close to Sarah’s face and harshly whispered, “No more music.”

Sarah screamed, sprang up, and ran toward the front door to be met by her mother, who was just coming in.

“What are you doing, Dad?” asked Elizabeth.

“We were just having some fun,” said Markley.

“Grandpa scared me!” shouted Sarah. “He told me about a scary man.”

“What did you tell her, Dad?”

“Nothing. It was nothing.” Markley then repeated the story to Elizabeth.

“Geez, Dad, c’mon. She’s four years old. I have enough trouble with nightmares and monsters. I don’t need you to add fuel to the fire.”

“Sorry,” said Markley.

“I think we’re gonna hit the road,” said Elizabeth. “Sarah’s getting tired and I want to make it home before dark. Plus, it looks like it’s gonna rain.”

Markley walked his daughter and granddaughter to their car. After Elizabeth got Sarah into her seat, she turned to her dad. “Was any of that story true? I mean about the Pierces?”

“Only that the wife died. An accident, I think. When that happened, old man Pierce boarded up the place.”

“And the piano?” asked Elizabeth.

“Oh yeah, it’s from the estate. It was here when I took over the shop.”

When Markley went back inside, Gus was lying in his favorite burgundy-colored wingback chair. “Maybe we’ll get some peace now, hey Gussy?” said Markley.

After having told his daughter about the Pierces, Markley grew curious about Mrs. Pierce’s death. He searched the web and found her obituary. There was a photo—she was very young and delicate-looking. Though her death had been ruled

an accident, the circumstances were curious. Mrs. Pierce's body had been found in the music room slumped over the piano. Markley noticed the date she died was November 9th, 1894. *Today's date*. He looked over at the piano along the far wall and felt a chill.

By the time Markley was ready to leave the shop, it had begun to rain.

Sitting in his car, Markley noticed that there was a light left on inside.

"Dammit," he said.

As soon as he got inside the shop, he heard a WHAP from behind. A gust of wind had shut the door. He tried to open it and it was locked. He then realized his keys were still in the door, locked on the outside.

He needed to call someone to come and unlock the door, but his phone was in his car. He was stuck. He'd have to wait until someone came down the alley.

After about an hour, with the storm raging outside, the power went out.

In pitch black darkness, Markley slowly felt his way to the back of the store to get a flashlight.

After finding the flashlight, there was a bang on the piano keys. Markley spun around in the direction of the sound. *But I shut the lid*, thought Markley.

"Gus?" he shouted. He shined the light. He didn't see the cat. Then there was a louder bang.

Markley moved through the store and finally arrived at the piano. He pointed the flashlight and saw wine spilt across the keys, leaking into the cracks between the ivory. He reached down to touch the keys. The lid suddenly slammed down, causing Markley to jump and drop the flashlight.

A voice from behind Markley hissed, "No more music."