

Old Stories Revised by George Ade



GEORGE ADE

Rip Van Winkle

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ONE WEEK after the return of Rip Van Winkle to his native town he sat in the tavern hitting up a few schnapps with one of the few remaining friends of his youth. While he was feeling a mite squiffy he opened up and told what had really happened to him during his long absence.

Things had certainly been coming soft for Rip since his sensational entry along Main street. A good many people when they first saw him hiding behind the mat of whiskers thought he was a divine healer or a come-on who was advertising some new kind of medicine. Later on, when it was told around that he had been asleep in the mountains, within three miles of the Courthouse, for 20 long years, all the other town liars pulled down the green blinds and went out of business.

It was a hard blow to a thriving and ambitious young city to have the prize tank come floating back after all these years. His relatives and acquaintances had to make the best of it. They shook hands with him and slapped him on the back and told him how well he was looking, which was more or less of a joke, because they had hoped that he never would show up again, and when they saw the fringe around the trousers and the coat torn up the back they knew he had come home to sponge a living in the only town that would stand for him. They chipped in and gave him enough money to get a shave and a hair-cut and a serviceable ready-made suit. Within three days he felt strong enough to get out and work the old familiar circuit. All he had to do was to wander into a buffet and begin his yarn about meeting the little men with the keg up in the Catskills and how they juggled the drinks on him and had him in the hay for 20 years and he could always find some one who would buy

just to keep him going. Not a barkeep in town believed his story, but they strung him along because he encouraged trade and they wanted to see how far he would go, and he thought he was getting away with it.

A week had elapsed and he was still basking in the sunlight of publicity and standing on the most prominent corners so that he could be pointed out as a celebrity. Aleck von Kidder, who had been a friend of his boyhood and was now the venerable and respected Alderman from the Second Ward, happening to meet him in front of the Y. M. C. A., suggested that they stroll down to the Elite Cafe to shake the box and try to whip-saw house. "I don't like to go in there," remarked Rip. "They have an old tap against me and I may get the seltzer bottle."

"It has been 20 years since you stood them up," said Aleck. "Mebbe they have forgotten all about it."

So they went down an alley and entered the Elite by the back door, because Aleck, who was in politics,

lost all track of baseball averages and I don't dare to talk politics because I find that the great parties have swapped issues. The red-handed revolutionist has become the conservative leader, and the talk that was regarded as anarchic when I did my famous disappearing act is now commended as safe and sane reasoning. A few years ago the man who had money was admired and respected; now he seems to be regarded as a little worse than a horse thief and not quite as bad as a murderer. Twenty years ago I was a bum. I come back now to find that I am an advanced Socialist.

"Come off," said the Alderman. "I admire a good piece of fiction as well as anyone, and I will give you credit for making your story seem plausible, but don't try to hand it to me. Now, just between the two of us, tell me, on the dead level, where have you been for the last 20 years?"

Rip looked behind and all around to make sure that no one was listening, and then he said, confidentially: "Keep this under

out drops in it to kill a horse. I passed away, and when I came to they had done the skidoo. I slept until the next afternoon, and when I woke up the sun was shining in my face and I had an awful case of bust-head. I was afraid to come home, and I knew that I had about played my string in this town, so, after sitting there a while and thinking over the situation, I hit the long trail for the West. By telling a new hard-luck story in every town that I struck I soon cultivated my imagination and became more than ever convinced that a man who can live by conversation is foolish to go out and work eight hours every day. I finally landed in Pittsburg, where I became a promoter and a merger. I would find two men competing in some line of manufacture and would induce them to combine two plants worth \$5000 each into a stock company and issue \$100,000 worth of stock, and I would get half of the stock for providing the conversation. It was a great scheme while it lasted, but finally a man whose

life. You might not think that I could put that kind of a story across and make it stick, but I have, and if my reputation keeps on growing I wouldn't be a bit surprised to receive a good offer to go on the lecture platform."

"You are certainly a wonder," said Alderman von Kidder. "Next to the Interstate Commerce Commission, I have no doubt that your sleep is the longest on record. I won't tip off the truth to anyone. You stand by me in politics and I'll indorse your official record and I'll indorse your story about the long sleep, and that will be about a stand-off."

So of all the people in that thriving young city, Von Kidder was the only one who knew for a certainty that Rip Van Winkle was a fake. The story was repeated over and over, with increasing wonderment. At last, it got into the newspapers, with big four-column pictures of Mr. Van Winkle before and after his remarkable experience in the Catskills, with pictures of his wife, his old homestead, the gun, the whiskers, the dog, etc., with a map of the Catskill Mountains and an X mark indicating the spot where he slept, and then the most doubting soul seemed to be convinced.

All except one. There had lately come to town a young doctor who was working hard to build up a practice. He had no reputation and it was contrary to the ethics of his profession to advertise by the ordinary methods, but he sent for a reporter and had himself interviewed as an expert upon the possibility of a human being remaining in a state of coma for a period of 20 years. In this interview the doctor was mentioned as a "celebrated specialist," both his house address and his office address being mentioned and a two-column picture ran with the story. The doctor demonstrated that it would be absolutely impossible for the essential organs of the body to resume their normal functions after a period of suspension exceeding in length a few weeks. He quoted numerous authorities; he staked his whole reputation upon the bold assertion that Mr. Rip Van Winkle had deceived the public and was an impostor of the most barefaced and shameless description.

After this arraignment had been printed the reporter came to see Mr. Van Winkle to get his side of the case. Mr. Van Winkle had gone so far that he could not afford to back water, and so he repeated the whole preposterous mess of stuff about taking the drink and hunting a soft place under the trees and lying there 20 years, at last awakening to find the rotted gun and the skeleton of the dog alongside.

Then the expert came back with a letter to the editor and wanted to know why the dog hadn't slept too and come out all right, and he offered to give a large sum of money to any charitable institution that might be named if Mr. Van Winkle would consent to lie on a mattress in some public place and give an exhibition nap of just one short month in order to prove his case.

As soon as the young doctor began to hammer the venerable and respected Mr. Van Winkle and apparently had him on the run the

public, with its unerring instinct of contempt for a tottering idol, joined in the general outcry. Mr. Van Winkle had made the great mistake of coming home as a hero. He should have known that in America no hero ever lasts. The dean people boast some nice old man up on a high pedestal just that they can have a good fair target at which to shily their brick-bats.

As soon as Rip Van Winkle was on the down grade and moving at an accelerated speed the newspapers joined in with enthusiasm to do him up completely. The editor who had printed the full page story about his marvelous adventure in the mountains sent private detectives over the ground and proved that the small boys of the town had gathered hickory nuts every year on the very spot where this hoary old humbug claimed that he had been asleep. When Mr. Van Winkle was asked to explain away the damning proof piled up against him he took refuge in dignified silence, and the public, as usual, construed his silence into an absolute admission of guilt.

Mr. Van Winkle, instead of be-

mythical legend or a fragment of sweet, poetic folklore got with that bunch of narrow-minded commercial clams? My ticket for the nut college is now being stamped on the back. I can see the booby hatch yawning for one old man that got too gay with his talk. No matter how successful a liar a man may be, there is always a danger that he will reach for a tall one and land on his neck."

What could poor Rip Van Winkle do? If he disowned the whole story about sleeping in the mountains and told the candid truth about his 20 years of jumping board bills, running up bad debts and moving from town to town, would anyone believe him? And if they did believe him, and even if he could prove it, would his situation be improved? Was it better to be a crook than a lunatic.

He took a desperate chance and told without rhetorical flourish the sweet and simple story that had so charmed the townspeople on the day of his return. He told of the dark night on the mountain pathway, of the rumbling thunder and the vivid flashes of lightning, of meeting the two elfish little



"I CAN MAKE OUT MY FINISH," MURMURED MR. VAN WINKLE.

did not wish to queer himself with the pious element by going in from the street.

There had been many changes in the old taproom since Rip had seen it, 20 years before. Two new slot machines had been installed. The picture of the welterweight champion had been moved to the other side of the icebox, and a strangely complicated device, known as a cash register, was backed up against the large mirror. But there was the same old line of empty Benedictine bottles on the top shelf and the lunch was apparently the same.

Rip got stuck for the first round, which meant that the Alderman had to produce, and then the two old friends sat at a quiet side table to talk of the happy days of yore.

"There have been many changes in 20 years," sighed Rip. "I have

your hat and I will put you wise to the whole thing. You remember the night I left here and went up into the mountains after I had that awful scrap with my wife? Well, I DID meet two men carrying a keg of liquor. That part of it is straight. Whenever you find men up in a lonely part of the mountains cutting through the underbrush with a keg of corn whiskey you can gamble on it that they're moonshiners. I knew they wouldn't dare refuse me a drink, so I fell in with them and tried to be friendly, and finally they set 'em up. They must have figured that I was a revenue officer or some other kind of Government employe, first, because I couldn't afford to wear very good clothes, and second, because I had my gun with me. So when they gave me this drink they put enough knock-

flow of language was a little stronger than mine came along and took all of my stock companies and put them into one big company and froze me out.

"Well, I wandered about from one place to another, accepting any employment which did not call for actual labor. My qualifications consisted of being a good fellow and having a thirst that never faltered. I was a lobbyist and a real estate boomer and secretary of a campaign committee. Finally when I had worked every graft I could think of I decided to come back to my native town and live on my relations and old friends. You may have noticed that when a man has petered out everywhere else he always lands back on his kin. They can't shake him without getting themselves talked about. I knew that all of my debts here had been wiped out under the statute of limitations, and that I could come back here and get busy with a new generation. It was a long walk, but I finally arrived. I didn't want to own up to my record for the last 20 years, and I knew that even a liar of my exuberant fancy would have hard work to fill in imaginary details for such a long period, so I fell back on the old gag. You know, when a fellow goes off on a bat and his family have the police looking for him, and he is last seen in Chicago, and then wakes up in a hotel in Providence three weeks later, the only way for him to square himself is to say that he doesn't remember anything that happened. So I fixed up the story about being in a trance. With the hair and the whiskers and the bad suit of clothes, I certainly looked as if I had been curled up in the weeds for at least 20 years. I remembered where I had planted the gun because I had been too lazy to carry it, so I went and dug up the rusty old barrel and landed in here and handed the natives what I believe to be one of the masterpieces of American fiction. You can see for yourself what a hit I've made. I don't have to answer any embarrassing questions. I have discovered the only sure method of wiping out a long and crooked past. I simply say that I have been asleep for 20 years and have been leading a blameless



"I BECAME A PROMOTER."

ing a petted and pampered celebrity, now found himself in a class with the United States Senator who has been written up in the magazine. His humiliated relatives and close friends, who had been glad to share with him the first glories of his sensational return, now looked around for some good pretext for railroading him into the remote background. They were inclined to take a charitable view of his case. Instead of publicly denouncing him as a deliberate and vicious falsifier they agreed among themselves that he was mentally unbalanced. So they had him put away in a private sanitarium, and sent the young doctor and other famous experts to peek at him through the bars and make notes as to his eccentricities.

When Mr. Van Winkle was brought into the courtroom he looked across at the jurybox and saw six dignified, sad-eyed representative American business men. "I can make out my finish," murmured Mr. Van Winkle. "What chance has a beautiful

strangers and how they beckoned him to the mountain top, there in the gathering gloom of the night, and of the strange revels, the stupefying draught and then—forgetfulness! Also of that strange awakening in a new and unfamiliar world, and how he had groped his way back to the scenes of his happy youth.

When he had concluded, the hardware clerk, the man who worked in the grain elevator, the assistant Postmaster, the proprietor of the feed store, the owner of the Gem Grocery and the prescription clerk from McIntyre's drugstore, all seated gravely in the jurybox, exchanged significant winks and whispered one to another. "There's nothing to it—he's dippy."

Next week Mr. Van Winkle, like many another man who attains a skyrocket popularity, found himself down and out and forgotten. He was in a snug little apartment at a state institution, engaged in writing his memoirs on the whitewashed wall with a broken nail.



(AT LAST IT GOT INTO THE NEWSPAPERS.)



"MAY GET THE SELTZER BOTTLE."