

Children's Stories That Never Grow Old

RIP VAN WINKLE

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MANY years ago, in a small village in the Catskill mountains, there lived a simple, good-natured fellow, named Rip Van Winkle. All the children of the village loved Rip, and nothing pleased him more than to fly kites and shoot marbles with them. Rip loved to fish and hunt, too. He would tramp miles through the woods with a gun on his shoulder. But while Rip spent his days in this way, the fences on his farm were all falling down, his place was going to rack and ruin and his children were dressed in rags.

He was happy. In fact, he would rather starve than work. When his wife told him how idle and careless he was, Rip shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, cast up his eyes and said nothing.

Rip had a dog, called Wolf, whom he loved dearly, but Mrs. Van Winkle disliked Wolf, for she said he was lazy and good for nothing, too.



HE WOULD often say to Wolf: "Poor old man, Mrs. Van Winkle leads you truly a dog's life at home; but never mind, I will always stand by you."

Wolf would wag his tail and look into his master's face as if he understood.

One day Rip took his gun and started off with Wolf into the mountains. He thought if he shot some squirrels and took them home to his wife they would put her in a good humor. After walking a long way, he lay down to rest, and while he lay musing he heard afar off voices calling, "Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!"

He sat up and looked around, but seeing nothing, he thought he was dreaming. He had hardly started homeward when he heard again:

"Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!" Wolf wrinkled up his back, growled and stalked up to his master.



ONE of them, who seemed to be the commander, was old and fat. He was dressed in green, and he wore a high-crowned hat, red stockings and black shoes, with rosettes on them.

As Rip and his companion came upon them, they all stopped playing and stared at Rip. His knees knocked together with fright. They ran to Rip, took the keg, and all began to drink in turn from it. They then offered it to Rip, who, in fear and trembling, took a drink. All this time not a word was spoken.

By and by, Rip grew bolder and took another, and still another, drink from the keg, for he found it the very best thing he had ever tasted. But soon his eyes began to swim and his head fell forward in deep sleep.



RIP saw down in the glen a strange little figure, slowly toiling up the rocks. The figure was that of a strange little man, with thick, bushy hair and grizzled beard. As he came nearer, Rip saw that he carried on his shoulder a keg. When he saw Rip, he asked him to help him with his load. Rip, always willing to help any one, took the keg and followed this queer little figure up a narrow gully.

During all their long climb, Rip and his companion spoke not a word. At last they reached the top of the mountains, and there, on a level spot, were a number of these odd-looking men playing ninepins. No two were dressed alike, but every one had a knife in his belt. One had a long head, with a broad face, and small, piggy eyes. Another seemed to be all nose, and wore a big, white hat, with a long, red cock's tail coming out of it.



WHEN Rip awoke, the sun was shining bright. He rubbed his eyes and said to himself, "I must have slept all night." Slowly the memory of the strange little men and the wine keg came back to him.

"Oh! that wine! That wicked wine!" cried Rip. "What shall I say to my wife?"

He looked around for his gun, but there in its place was an old one, all rusty and falling apart. He thought that the queer little men had stolen his good gun, and, as a joke, had put the old one in its place. Wolf, too, had gone. He whistled for Wolf and shouted his name, but still he did not come. He rose to walk, but "Oh! oh!" he cried, with pain in his limbs. "This sleeping out of doors does not agree with me. I seem to be old."

He was so stiff that he could hardly get through the thickets and branches.



HE FELT very hungry, too, and weak, and, though he dreaded to meet his wife, he felt he must go on or starve among the mountains. When he reached the village, he saw many people, but none he had ever seen before. They all stared at him with surprise, and the children pointed at his long, white beard.

Everything seemed strange, and, strangest of all, he appeared like an old man.

Poor Rip was very much worried, and said to himself, "That drink last night has addled my poor head."

With difficulty, he found his way to his own house, expecting every moment to hear the voice of his scolding wife. But no, all was quiet.

A poor, half-starved dog lay by the house. It looked like Wolf, and Rip called him by name, but he only showed his teeth and passed by.



"MY DOG has forgotten me," thought Rip. He went up to the house, but it was empty. He called aloud for his wife and children, but all was silence. He then, with fear in his heart, turned his poor, tottering steps to the village street again.

He had just strength enough left to get to the old tavern, and here some men, hearing the noise of the children who followed him, came out to see what was the matter. To their surprise, they saw a ragged old man, with a long, white beard, carrying a rusty old gun in his hand.

"Who are you, and whence came you?" they asked him.

"I am Rip Van Winkle," he said.

At this they all laughed, and one man said:



"WHAT, it is twenty years since Rip Van Winkle left here. He went away from home with his gun, and has never been heard of since. His dog came home without him, but whether he shot himself or was carried away by the Indians, no one can tell. His wife has been dead these ten years back. Why, old man, you must be dreaming."

"No, I am not dreaming," said Rip. "I was young Rip Van Winkle once. Now I am old Rip Van Winkle. Does nobody know me?"

Just at this moment a woman, tottering out among them, put her hand to her brow and, peering into his face, said:

"Sure enough, it is Rip Van Winkle himself. Why, where have you been these twenty years?"

Rip's story was soon told. He had slept on the mountains twenty years!

To this day, when the people in the Catskill mountains hear thunder, they say it is little mountain man playing ninepins.

