

Fiction Excerpt 3: “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving

In a village in the Catskill Mountains, there lived a simple, good-natured fellow by the name of Rip Van Winkle. He was a kind neighbor, and the children would shout with joy whenever he approached. The great fault in Rip’s nature, though, was his aversion to profitable labor. He did not lack diligence or perseverance: he would sit on a wet rock holding a long and heavy rod and fish all day even if he never got a single nibble. He trudged for hours through woods and swamps to shoot a few squirrels or wild pigeons. He would never refuse to assist a neighbor even in the roughest toil. In fact, Rip was ready to attend to anybody’s business but his own. But as to keeping his own farm in order, he found it impossible, and his children were as ragged as if they belonged to nobody.

Rip was one of those happy fools who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown, whichever can be got with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound. If left to himself, he would have whistled his life away in perfect contentment, but his wife was continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family. Rip would shrug his shoulders, shake his head, cast up his eyes, but say nothing. This always provoked a fresh volley from his wife, so that he left the house to go outside—the only side which belongs to a henpecked husband.

Rip used to console himself, when driven from home, with the company of a group of sages and fellow idlers who convened on a bench in front of an inn. Sitting beneath a portrait of His Majesty King George the Third, for New York was in those days still a province of England, they talked over village gossip and told stories. If by chance an old newspaper should fall into their hands from some passing traveler, they would listen as Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, read them its contents, and it would have been worth any statesman’s money to hear the discussions that followed. Nicholas Vedder, a patriarch of the village, made his opinions known by the manner in which he smoked his pipe. Short puffs indicated anger; but when he was pleased, he would inhale the smoke slowly and emit it in light and delicate clouds. But even so august a personage could not escape the scolding of Dame Van Winkle when she appeared in search of her husband.

One day, seeking to escape the labor of the farm and the clamor of his wife, Rip shouldered his gun and walked high into the Catskills in search of squirrels. All day the mountains echoed and re-echoed with the reports of his gun. Finally he threw himself on a green knoll that looked down into a deep glen, wild and lonely. Rip lay musing on the scene as evening gradually advanced, and sighed as he thought of going home.

As he was about to descend, he heard a voice calling, "Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!" He perceived a strange figure toiling up the rocks, and bending under the weight of something on his back. He was surprised to see any human being in this lonely place, but supposing it to be one of his neighbors in need of assistance, he hastened down to help. The stranger was a short old fellow with a grizzled beard. His dress was of the antique Dutch fashion and he bore a stout keg that Rip supposed was full of liquor. He made signs for Rip to assist him, and together they clambered up a narrow gully. Every now and then long rolling peals like thunder seemed to issue out of a deep ravine. Passing through this ravine, they came to a hollow that looked like a small amphitheater.

In the center was a company of odd-looking persons playing at ninepins. The thunderous noise Rip had heard from afar was the sound of the ball rolling towards the pins. Like Rip's guide, they were dressed in an outlandish fashion, with long knives in their belts and enormous breeches. What seemed particularly odd to Rip was that though these folks were amusing themselves, they maintained the gravest faces, the most mysterious silence, and were, in fact, the most melancholy party he had ever witnessed. They stared at Rip in such a way that his heart turned within him and his knees banged together for fear.

Rip's guide emptied the keg into large flagons. The company quaffed the liquor in profound silence and then returned to their game. As Rip's apprehension subsided, he ventured to taste the beverage. One taste provoked another, and at length his senses were overpowered and he fell into a deep sleep.

Upon waking, he found himself on the green knoll whence he had first seen the old man. It was a bright sunny morning. "Surely," thought Rip, "I have not slept here all night." He recalled the strange men—"Oh! That wicked flagon!" thought Rip. "What excuse shall I make to Dame Van Winkle?" He looked around for his gun, but found only an old firelock encrusted with rust. Suspecting he had been robbed, he determined to revisit the scene of the previous evening to demand his gun. As he rose to walk, he found himself stiff in the joints. With some difficulty, he found the gully up which he and his companion had ascended, but could find no traces of the ravine that had led to the amphitheater. He shouldered the rusty firelock, and, with a heart full of trouble, turned his steps homeward.

As he approached the village he met a number of people, but none whom he knew, which somewhat surprised him, for he had thought himself acquainted with everyone in the country round. Their dress, too, was of a different fashion. They all stared at him with surprise, and stroked their chins. When Rip did the same,

he found to his astonishment that his beard had grown a foot long! A troop of children ran at his heels, hooting after him and pointing at his gray beard. There were houses in the village that he had never seen before, with unfamiliar names inscribed over the doors. He began to wonder whether both he and the world around him were bewitched. "That flagon last night," thought he, "has addled my poor head sadly!"

With some difficulty he found his own house. The roof had fallen in and the door was off its hinges. He entered and called for his wife and children, but all was silent. He spotted a dog that looked like his own and called out to him, but the dog snarled and showed his teeth. "My own dog has forgotten me," sighed poor Rip.

He hastened to the village inn. Before it there now hung a flag adorned with stars and stripes. He recognized on the sign the face of King George, but now the red coat was blue, the head wore a cocked hat, and underneath the figure was printed GENERAL WASHINGTON. There was a crowd of people around the door, but none that Rip knew.

He inquired, "Where's Nicholas Vedder?"

There was silence, then an old man replied, "Nicholas Vedder! Why he is dead and gone these eighteen years!"

"Where's Van Bummel, the schoolmaster?"

"He went off to wars, and is now in Congress."

Rip's heart sank at hearing of these sad changes. He said in despair, "I'm not myself. I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and everything's changed, and I can't tell who I am!"

The bystanders looked at each other in puzzlement. Then a comely woman pressed through the throng. She had a child in her arms, which, frightened by the gray-bearded man's looks, began to cry. "Hush, Rip," cried she, "the old man won't hurt you." The name of the child and the air of the mother awakened a train of recollections in his mind. He caught the mother and child in his arms and said to the woman, "I am your father—young Rip Van Winkle once—old Rip Van Winkle now! Does nobody know poor Rip Van Winkle?"

All stood amazed, until an old woman, peering into his face for a moment, exclaimed, "Sure enough! It is Rip Van Winkle! Welcome home again, old neighbor. Why, where have you been these twenty years?"

Rip's story was soon told, for the whole twenty years had been to him but as one night. Many were skeptical, but an old man who was well-versed in the local traditions corroborated his story in the most satisfactory manner. He assured the company that the Catskill Mountains had always been haunted by strange beings; that the great discoverer Hendrick Hudson kept a vigil there with his crew of the *Half Moon*; that his father had once seen them in their old Dutch clothing playing at ninepins in the hollow of the mountain.

Rip's daughter took him home to live with her, her mother having died some years before after breaking a blood vessel in a fit of passion. Having arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle with impunity, Rip took his place once more on the bench at the inn door and was revered as one of the patriarchs of the village. He used to tell his story to every stranger that arrived. Some doubted the truth of it, but the old Dutch villagers almost universally gave Rip full credit. Even to this day, whenever a thunderstorm comes up on a summer afternoon, they say that Hendrick Hudson and his crew are at their game of ninepins; and it is a common wish of all henpecked husbands in the neighborhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draft out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon.