



***CHARLES
M. SKINNER***

***MYTHS AND
LEGENDS
OF OUR OWN
LAND -
COMPLETE***



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Myths and Legends of Our Own Land — Complete

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PREFACE

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It is unthinkingly said and often, that America is not old enough to have developed a legendary era, for such an era grows backward as a nation grows forward. No little of the charm of European travel is ascribed to the glamour that history and fable have flung around old churches, castles, and the favored haunts of tourists, and the Rhine and Hudson are frequently compared, to the prejudice of the latter, not because its scenery lacks in loveliness or grandeur, but that its beauty has not been humanized by love of chivalry or faerie, as that of the older stream has been. Yet the record of our country's progress is of deep import, and as time goes on the figures seen against the morning twilight of our history will rise to more commanding stature, and the mists of legend will invest them with a softness or glory that shall make reverence for them spontaneous and deep. Washington hurling the stone across the Potomac may live as the Siegfried of some Western saga, and Franklin invoking the lightnings may be the Loki of our mythology. The bibliography of American legends is slight, and these tales have been gathered from sources the most diverse: records, histories, newspapers, magazines, oral narrative—in every case reconstructed. The pursuit of

them has been so long that a claim may be set forth for some measure of completeness.

But, whatever the episodes of our four historic centuries may furnish to the poet, painter, dramatist, or legend-building idealist of the future, it is certain that we are not devoid of myth and folk-lore. Some characters, prosaic enough, perhaps, in daily life, have impinged so lightly on society before and after perpetrating their one or two great deeds, that they have already become shadowy and their achievements have acquired a color of the supernatural. It is where myth and history combine that legend is most interesting and appeals to our fancy or our sympathy most strongly; and it is not too early for us to begin the collation of those quaint happenings and those spoken reports that gain in picturesqueness with each transmission. An attempt has been made in this instance to assemble only legends, for, doubtful as some historians profess to find them, certain occurrences, like the story of Captain Smith and Pocahontas, and the ride of General Putnam down Breakneck Stairs, are taught as history; while as to folk-lore, that of the Indian tribes and of the Southern negro is too copious to be recounted in this work. It will be noted that traditions do not thrive in brick and brownstone, and that the stories once rife in the colonial cities have almost as effectually disappeared as the architectural landmarks of last century. The field entered by the writer is not untrodden. Hawthorne and Irving have made paths across it, and it is hoped that others may deem its farther exploration worthy of their efforts.

THE HUDSON AND ITS HILLS

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RIP VAN WINKLE

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The story of Rip Van Winkle, told by Irving, dramatized by Boucicault, acted by Jefferson, pictured by Darley, set to music by Bristow, is the best known of American legends. Rip was a real personage, and the Van Winkles are a considerable family at this day. An idle, good-natured, happy-go-lucky fellow, he lived, presumably, in the village of Catskill, and began his long sleep in 1769. His wife was a shrew, and to escape her abuse Rip often took his dog and gun and roamed away to the Catskills, nine miles westward, where he lounged or hunted, as the humor seized him. It was on a September evening, during a jaunt on South Mountain, that he met a stubby, silent man, of goodly girth, his round head topped with a steeple hat, the skirts of his belted coat and flaps of his petticoat trousers meeting at the tops of heavy boots, and the face—ugh!—green and ghastly, with unmoving eyes that glimmered in the twilight like phosphorus. The dwarf carried a keg, and on receiving an intimation, in a sign, that he would like Rip to relieve him

of it, that cheerful vagabond shouldered it and marched on up the mountain.

At nightfall they emerged on a little plateau where a score of men in the garb of long ago, with faces like that of Rip's guide, and equally still and speechless, were playing bowls with great solemnity, the balls sometimes rolling over the plateau's edge and rumbling down the rocks with a boom like thunder. A cloaked and snowy-bearded figure, watching aloof, turned like the others, and gazed uncomfortably at the visitor who now came blundering in among them. Rip was at first for making off, but the sinister glare in the circle of eyes took the run out of his legs, and he was not displeased when they signed to him to tap the keg and join in a draught of the ripest schnapps that ever he had tasted,—and he knew the flavor of every brand in Catskill. While these strange men grew no more genial with passing of the flagons, Rip was pervaded by a satisfying glow; then, overcome by sleepiness and resting his head on a stone, he stretched his tired legs out and fell to dreaming.

Morning. Sunlight and leaf shadow were dappled over the earth when he awoke, and rising stiffly from his bed, with compunctions in his bones, he reached for his gun. The already venerable implement was so far gone with rot and rust that it fell to pieces in his hand, and looking down at the fragments of it, he saw that his clothes were dropping from his body in rags and mould, while a white beard flowed over his breast. Puzzled and alarmed, shaking his head ruefully as he recalled the carouse of the silent, he hobbled down the mountain as fast as he might for the grip of the rheumatism on his knees and elbows, and entered his

native village. What! Was this Catskill? Was this the place that he left yesterday? Had all these houses sprung up overnight, and these streets been pushed across the meadows in a day? The people, too: where were his friends? The children who had romped with him, the rotund toppers whom he had left cooling their hot noses in pewter pots at the tavern door, the dogs that used to bark a welcome, recognizing in him a kindred spirit of vagrancy: where were they?

And his wife, whose athletic arm and agile tongue had half disposed him to linger in the mountains how happened it that she was not awaiting him at the gate? But gate there was none in the familiar place: an unfenced yard of weeds and ruined foundation wall were there. Rip's home was gone. The idlers jeered at his bent, lean form, his snarl of beard and hair, his disreputable dress, his look of grieved astonishment. He stopped, instinctively, at the tavern, for he knew that place in spite of its new sign: an officer in blue regimentals and a cocked hat replacing the crimson George III. of his recollection, and labelled "General Washington." There was a quick gathering of ne'er-do-weels, of tavern-haunters and gaping 'prentices, about him, and though their faces were strange and their manners rude, he made bold to ask if they knew such and such of his friends.

"Nick Vedder? He's dead and gone these eighteen years." "Brom Dutcher? He joined the army and was killed at Stony Point." "Van Brummel? He, too, went to the war, and is in Congress now."

"And Rip Van Winkle?"

"Yes, he's here. That's him yonder."

And to Rip's utter confusion he saw before him a counterpart of himself, as young, lazy, ragged, and easy-natured as he remembered himself to be, yesterday—or, was it yesterday?

“That's young Rip,” continued his informer. “His father was Rip Van Winkle, too, but he went to the mountains twenty years ago and never came back. He probably fell over a cliff, or was carried off by Indians, or eaten by bears.”

Twenty years ago! Truly, it was so. Rip had slept for twenty years without awaking. He had left a peaceful colonial village; he returned to a bustling republican town. How he eventually found, among the oldest inhabitants, some who admitted that they knew him; how he found a comfortable home with his married daughter and the son who took after him so kindly; how he recovered from the effect of the tidings that his wife had died of apoplexy, in a quarrel; how he resumed his seat at the tavern tap and smoked long pipes and told long yarns for the rest of his days, were matters of record up to the beginning of this century.

And a strange story Rip had to tell, for he had served as cup-bearer to the dead crew of the Half Moon. He had quaffed a cup of Hollands with no other than Henry Hudson himself. Some say that Hudson's spirit has made its home amid these hills, that it may look into the lovely valley that he discovered; but others hold that every twenty years he and his men assemble for a revel in the mountains that so charmed them when first seen swelling against the western heavens, and the liquor they drink on this night has the bane of throwing any mortal who lips it into a slumber

whence nothing can arouse him until the day dawns when the crew shall meet again. As you climb the east front of the mountains by the old carriage road, you pass, half-way up the height, the stone that Rip Van Winkle slept on, and may see that it is slightly hollowed by his form. The ghostly revellers are due in the Catskills in 1909, and let all tourists who are among the mountains in September of that year beware of accepting liquor from strangers.

CATSKILL GNOMES

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Behind the New Grand Hotel, in the Catskills, is an amphitheatre of mountain that is held to be the place of which the Mohicans spoke when they told of people there who worked in metals, and had bushy beards and eyes like pigs. From the smoke of their forges, in autumn, came the haze of Indian summer; and when the moon was full, it was their custom to assemble on the edge of a precipice above the hollow and dance and caper until the night was nigh worn away. They brewed a liquor that had the effect of shortening the bodies and swelling the heads of all who drank it, and when Hudson and his crew visited the mountains, the pygmies held a carouse in his honor and invited him to drink their liquor. The crew went away, shrunken and distorted by the magic distillation, and thus it

was that Rip Van Winkle found them on the eve of his famous sleep.

THE CATSKILL WITCH

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When the Dutch gave the name of Katzbergs to the mountains west of the Hudson, by reason of the wild-cats and panthers that ranged there, they obliterated the beautiful Indian Ontiora, "mountains of the sky." In one tradition of the red men these hills were bones of a monster that fed on human beings until the Great Spirit turned it into stone as it was floundering toward the ocean to bathe. The two lakes near the summit were its eyes. These peaks were the home of an Indian witch, who adjusted the weather for the Hudson Valley with the certainty of a signal service bureau. It was she who let out the day and night in blessed alternation, holding back the one when the other was at large, for fear of conflict. Old moons she cut into stars as soon as she had hung new ones in the sky, and she was often seen perched on Round Top and North Mountain, spinning clouds and flinging them to the winds. Woe betide the valley residents if they showed irreverence, for then the clouds were black and heavy, and through them she poured floods of rain and launched the lightnings, causing disastrous freshets in the streams and blasting the wigwams of the mockers. In a frolic humor she would take the form of

a bear or deer and lead the Indian hunters anything but a merry dance, exposing them to tire and peril, and vanishing or assuming some terrible shape when they had overtaken her. Sometimes she would lead them to the cloves and would leap into the air with a mocking “Ho, ho!” just as they stopped with a shudder at the brink of an abyss. Garden Rock was a spot where she was often found, and at its foot a lake once spread. This was held in such awe that an Indian would never wittingly pursue his quarry there; but once a hunter lost his way and emerged from the forest at the edge of the pond. Seeing a number of gourds in crotches of the trees he took one, but fearing the spirit he turned to leave so quickly that he stumbled and it fell. As it broke, a spring welled from it in such volume that the unhappy man was gulfed in its waters, swept to the edge of Kaaterskill clove and dashed on the rocks two hundred and sixty feet below. Nor did the water ever cease to run, and in these times the stream born of the witch's revenge is known as Catskill Creek.

THE REVENGE OF SHANDAKEN

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On the rock platform where the Catskill Mountain House now stands, commanding one of the fairest views in the world, old chief Shandaken set his wigwam,—for it is a mistake to suppose that barbarians are indifferent to

beauty,—and there his daughter, Lotowana, was sought in marriage by his braves. She, however, kept faith to an early vow exchanged with a young chief of the Mohawks. A suitor who was particularly troublesome was Norsereddin, proud, morose, dark-featured, a stranger to the red man, a descendant, so he claimed, from Egyptian kings, and who lived by himself on Kaaterskill Creek, appearing among white settlements but rarely.

On one of his visits to Catskill, a tavern-lounging Dutchman wagered him a thousand golden crowns that he could not win Lotowana, and, stung by avarice as well as inflamed by passion, Norsereddin laid new siege to her heart. Still the girl refused to listen, and Shandaken counselled him to be content with the smiles of others, thereby so angering the Egyptian that he assailed the chief and was driven from the camp with blows; but on the day of Lotowana's wedding with the Mohawk he returned, and in a honeyed speech asked leave to give a jewel to the bride to show that he had stifled jealousy and ill will. The girl took the handsome box he gave her and drew the cover, when a spring flew forward, driving into her hand the poisoned tooth of a snake that had been affixed to it. The venom was strong, and in a few minutes Lotowana lay dead at her husband's feet.

Though the Egyptian had disappeared into the forest directly on the acceptance of his treacherous gift, twenty braves set off in pursuit, and overtaking him on the Kalkberg, they dragged him back to the rock where father and husband were bewailing the maid's untimely fate. A pile of fagots was heaped within a few feet of the precipice

edge, and tying their captive on them, they applied the torch, dancing about with cries of exultation as the shrieks of the wretch echoed from the cliffs. The dead girl was buried by the mourning tribe, while the ashes of Norsereddin were left to be blown abroad. On the day of his revenge Shandaken left his ancient dwelling-place, and his camp-fires never glimmered afterward on the front of Ontiora.

CONDEMNED TO THE NOOSE

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Ralph Sutherland, who, early in the last century, occupied a stone house a mile from Leeds, in the Catskills, was a man of morose and violent disposition, whose servant, a Scotch girl, was virtually a slave, inasmuch as she was bound to work for him without pay until she had refunded to him her passage-money to this country. Becoming weary of bondage and of the tempers of her master, the girl ran away. The man set off in a raging chase, and she had not gone far before Sutherland overtook her, tied her by the wrists to his horse's tail, and began the homeward journey. Afterward, he swore that the girl stumbled against the horse's legs, so frightening the animal that it rushed off madly, pitching him out of the saddle and dashing the servant to death on rocks and trees; yet, knowing how ugly-tempered he could be, his neighbors were

better inclined to believe that he had driven the horse into a gallop, intending to drag the girl for a short distance, as a punishment, and to rein up before he had done serious mischief. On this supposition he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to die on the scaffold.

The tricks of circumstantial evidence, together with pleas advanced by influential relatives of the prisoner, induced the court to delay sentence until the culprit should be ninety-nine years old, but it was ordered that, while released on his own recognizance, in the interim, he should keep a hangman's noose about his neck and show himself before the judges in Catskill once every year, to prove that he wore his badge of infamy and kept his crime in mind. This sentence he obeyed, and there were people living recently who claimed to remember him as he went about with a silken cord knotted at his throat. He was always alone, he seldom spoke, his rough, imperious manner had departed. Only when children asked him what the rope was for were his lips seen to quiver, and then he would hurry away. After dark his house was avoided, for gossips said that a shrieking woman passed it nightly, tied at the tail of a giant horse with fiery eyes and smoking nostrils; that a skeleton in a winding sheet had been found there; that a curious thing, somewhat like a woman, had been known to sit on his garden wall, with lights shining from her finger-tips, uttering unearthly laughter; and that domestic animals reproached the man by groaning and howling beneath his windows.

These beliefs he knew, yet he neither grieved, nor scorned, nor answered when he was told of them. Years sped on. Every year deepened his reserve and loneliness,

and some began to whisper that he would take his own way out of the world, though others answered that men who were born to be hanged would never be drowned; but a new republic was created; new laws were made; new judges sat to minister them; so, on Ralph Sutherland's ninety-ninth birthday anniversary, there were none who would accuse him or execute sentence. He lived yet another year, dying in 1801. But was it from habit, or was it in self-punishment and remorse, that he never took off the cord? for, when he drew his last breath, though it was in his own house, his throat was still encircled by the hangman's rope.

BIG INDIAN

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Intermarriages between white people and red ones in this country were not uncommon in the days when our ancestors led as rude a life as the natives, and several places in the Catskills commemorate this fact. Mount Utsayantha, for example, is named for an Indian woman whose life, with that of her baby and her white husband, was lost there. For the white men early found friends among these mountains. As far back as 1663 they spared Catherine Dubois and her three children, after some rash spirits had abducted them and carried them to a place on the upper Walkill, to do them to death; for the captives raised a Huguenot hymn and the hearts of their captors were softened.

In Esopus Valley lived Winnisook, whose height was seven feet, and who was known among the white settlers as "the big Indian." He loved a white girl of the neighborhood, one Gertrude Molyneux, and had asked for her hand; but while she was willing, the objections of her family were too strong to be overcome, and she was teased into marriage with Joseph Bundy, of her own race, instead. She liked the Indian all the better after that, however, because Bundy proved to be a bad fellow, and believing that she could be happier among barbarians than among a people that approved such marriages, she eloped with Winnisook. For a long time all trace of the runaway couple was lost, but one day the man having gone down to the plain to steal cattle, it was alleged, was discovered by some farmers who knew him, and who gave hot chase, coming up with him at the place now called Big Indian.

Foremost in the chase was Bundy. As he came near to the enemy of his peace he exclaimed, "I think the best way to civilize that yellow serpent is to let daylight into his heart," and, drawing his rifle to his shoulder, he fired. Mortally wounded, yet instinctively seeking refuge, the giant staggered into the hollow of a pine-tree, where the farmers lost sight of him. There, however, he was found by Gertrude, bolt upright, yet dead. The unwedded widow brought her dusky children to the place and spent the remainder of her days near his grave. Until a few years ago the tree was still pointed out, but a railroad company has now covered it with an embankment.

THE BAKER'S DOZEN

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Baas [Boss] Volckert Jan Pietersen Van Amsterdam kept a bake-shop in Albany, and lives in history as the man who invented New Year cakes and made gingerbread babies in the likeness of his own fat offspring. Good churchman though he was, the bane of his life was a fear of being bewitched, and perhaps it was to keep out evil spirits, who might make one last effort to gain the mastery over him, ere he turned the customary leaf with the incoming year, that he had primed himself with an extra glass of spirits on the last night of 1654. His sales had been brisk, and as he sat in his little shop, meditating comfortably on the gains he would make when his harmless rivals—the knikkerbakkers (bakers of marbles)—sent for their usual supply of olie-koeks and mince-pies on the morrow, he was startled by a sharp rap, and an ugly old woman entered. “Give me a dozen New Year's cookies!” she cried, in a shrill voice.

“Vell, den, you needn' sbeak so loud. I aind teaf, den.”

“A dozen!” she screamed. “Give me a dozen. Here are only twelve.”

“Vell, den, dwalf is a dozen.”

“One more! I want a dozen.”

“Vell, den, if you vant anodder, go to de duyvil and ged it.”

Did the hag take him at his word? She left the shop, and from that time it seemed as if poor Volckert was bewitched,

indeed, for his cakes were stolen; his bread was so light that it went up the chimney, when it was not so heavy that it fell through the oven; invisible hands plucked bricks from that same oven and pelted him until he was blue; his wife became deaf, his children went unkempt, and his trade went elsewhere. Thrice the old woman reappeared, and each time was sent anew to the devil; but at last, in despair, the baker called on Saint Nicolaus to come and advise him. His call was answered with startling quickness, for, almost while he was making it, the venerable patron of Dutch feasts stood before him. The good soul advised the trembling man to be more generous in his dealings with his fellows, and after a lecture on charity he vanished, when, lo! the old woman was there in his place.

She repeated her demand for one more cake, and Volckert Jan Pietersen, etc., gave it, whereupon she exclaimed, "The spell is broken, and from this time a dozen is thirteen!" Taking from the counter a gingerbread effigy of Saint Nicolaus, she made the astonished Dutchman lay his hand upon it and swear to give more liberal measure in the future. So, until thirteen new States arose from the ruins of the colonies,—when the shrewd Yankees restored the original measure,—thirteen made a baker's dozen.

THE DEVIL'S DANCE-CHAMBER.

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