

## Summary “Rip Van Winkle”

The story of Rip Van Winkle was found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old gentleman from New York who was especially interested in the histories, customs, and culture of the Dutch settlers in that state. It is set in a small, very old village at the foot of the Catskill Mountains, which was founded by some of the earliest Dutch settlers. Rip lived there while America was still a colony of Great Britain.

Rip Van Winkle is descended from gallant soldiers but is a peaceful man himself, known for being a kind and gentle neighbor. His single flaw is an utter inability to do any work that could turn a profit. It is not because he is lazy—in fact, he is perfectly willing to spend all day helping someone else with their labor. He is just incapable of doing anything to help his own household. He also is well-known for being an obedient, henpecked husband, for Dame Van Winkle has no problem shouting insults into the neighborhood and tracking him down in the village to berate him. All the women and children in the village love him and side with him against his wife, and even the dogs do not bark at him.

Indeed, when he tries to console himself and escape from Dame Van Winkle, he often goes to a sort of philosophical or political club that meets on a bench outside of a small inn. Here the more idle men actually gossip and tell sleepy stories about nothing, every once in a while discussing “current” events when they find an old newspaper. Nicholaus Vedder is the landlord of the inn and the leader of the group. He never speaks but makes his opinions clear based on how he smokes his pipe. Even here, Van Winkle cannot escape from his wife, who berates everyone for encouraging his idleness.

His indolence is probably to be blamed for his farm’s bad luck, so Dame Van Winkle has more than a little cause to berate him—which she does, morning, noon, and night. As the years pass, things continue to get worse, and his only recourse is to escape to the outdoors. His one companion in the household is his dog Wolf, who for no good reason is just as badly treated by the petticoat tyrant Dame Van Winkle.

On one trip to the woods, Van Winkle wanders to one of the highest points in the Catskills. Fatigued from the climb, he rests, and soon the sun has started to set. He knows he will not be able to get home before dark. As he gets up, he hears a voice call his name. A shadowy figure seems to be in need of assistance, so he approaches the man, who looks very strange. He is short and square, with thick bushy hair and a grizzled beard, dressed in the antique Dutch fashion. He asks Van Winkle for help climbing higher with a keg. They reach an amphitheatre in the woods, where a collection of similarly odd-looking men are

bowling, which makes the environs sound like it is thundering. Although they are involved in pleasurable pursuits, they are silent and grim.

The man starts to serve drinks from the keg and gestures to Van Winkle to help. He eventually takes a drink for himself. It tastes delicious, and he goes back for more and more until he is quite drunk and lies down to pass out.

When he wakes up in the morning, he is anxious about what Dame Van Winkle will say about his late return. He reaches for his gun but finds that it is now rusty and worm-eaten—perhaps the men tricked him and replaced his gun. Wolf also is gone and does not respond to Van Winkle's calls. He gets up and feels quite stiff. When he tries to retrace his steps, the amphitheatre appears to have become an impenetrable wall of rock, and some of the natural features of the area have changed.

Van Winkle returns to the village but recognizes nobody, which is strange for a small village, and he notices that everyone is strangely dressed. They look surprised to see him, too, and he realizes that his beard has grown a foot longer. The children hoot at him and the dogs bark. The village itself has grown larger. He begins to think he must be going crazy, for the natural scenery is the only thing that is recognizable. The flagon must have made him lose his mind.

At his house, he finds it in complete disrepair and abandoned. His wife and children are not there. The inn where he used to meet his friends has disappeared, and where there used to be a picture of George III there is now one of a certain George Washington. The new group of people at the new hotel there is full of completely different people, and their discussions are more argumentative than he remembers. The crowd asks him questions, especially about what political party he belongs to. He is confused and says he is still a loyal subject of the king. They declare him a traitor and a Tory. When he says he has just come looking for his friends, they tell him that Nicholaus Vedder has been dead for eighteen years and Van Bummel is now in Congress.

Rip Van Winkle becomes still more distressed and confused when he asks if they know Rip Van Winkle and the townspeople point out a different lazy-looking man. He begins to think he is crazy. A familiar woman approaches, and he finds out enough to decide that she is his daughter. She explains that her father went out with his gun one day twenty years ago and was never heard from since. Rip Van Winkle tells everyone that for him it has only been one night, which makes them think he is crazy, too. The one piece of good news is that Dame Van Winkle recently passed away.

Peter Vanderdonk, the town's oldest inhabitant, vouches for Rip Van Winkle and says that he has heard tales passed down about the ghosts of Hendrick Hudson and his men appearing once every twenty years;

they bowl and keep a guardian eye on the region that Hudson explored. The tale seems to fit with Rip's experience. Rip goes to live with his daughter, who is married to a cheerful farmer. He lives much happier than he ever was with Dame Van Winkle. Also, he is now old enough for his idleness to be socially acceptable, and he returns to the hotel and is again well-loved in the village. He eventually learns about the Revolutionary War and everything else that has passed, but the only yoke of government that he cares about having thrown off is that of Dame Van Winkle.

Knickerbocker closes the story with an impassioned declaration of its veracity on personal examination. He also gives a brief history of the magic and fables associated with the Catskills, suggesting that even the Indians tell of similar experiences in the area in their own stories and myths.