

Rip Van Winkle, M. D. (Medical Poem)

Oliver Wendell Holmes

AN AFTER-DINNER PRESCRIPTION  
TAKEN BY THE MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY,  
AT THEIR MEETING HELD MAY 25, 1870

CANTO FIRST

OLD Rip Van Winkle had a grandson, Rip,  
Of the paternal block a genuine chip,--  
A lazy, sleepy, curious kind of chap;  
He, like his grandsire, took a mighty nap,  
Whereof the story I propose to tell  
In two brief cantos, if you listen well.

The times were hard when Rip to manhood grew;  
They always will be when there's work to do.  
He tried at farming,--found it rather slow,--  
And then at teaching--what he did n't know;  
Then took to hanging round the tavern bars,  
To frequent toddies and long-nine cigars,  
Till Dame Van Winkle, out of patience, vexed  
With preaching homilies, having for their text  
A mop, a broomstick, aught that might avail  
To point a moral or adorn a tale,  
Exclaimed, "I have it! Now, then, Mr. V.  
He's good for something,--make him an M. D.!"

The die was cast; the youngster was content;  
They packed his shirts and stockings, and he went.  
How hard he studied it were vain to tell;  
He drowsed through Wistar, nodded over Bell,  
Slept sound with Cooper, snored aloud on Good;  
Heard heaps of lectures,--doubtless understood,--  
A constant listener, for he did not fail  
To carve his name on every bench and rail.

Months grew to years; at last he counted three,  
And Rip Van Winkle found himself M. D.  
Illustrious title! in a gilded frame  
He set the sheepskin with his Latin name,  
RIPUM VAN WINKLUM, QUEM we--SCIMUS--know

IDONEUM ESSE--to do so and so.  
He hired an office; soon its walls displayed  
His new diploma and his stock in trade,  
A mighty arsenal to subdue disease,  
Of various names, whereof I mention these  
Lancets and bougies, great and little squirt,  
Rhubarb and Senna, Snakeroot, Thoroughwort,  
Ant. Tart., Vin. Colch., Pil. Cochiae, and Black Drop,  
Tinctures of Opium, Gentian, Henbane, Hop,  
Pulv. Ipecacuanhae, which for lack  
Of breath to utter men call Ipecac,  
Camphor and Kino, Turpentine, Tolu,  
Cubebs, "Copeevy," Vitriol,--white and blue,--  
Fennel and Flaxseed, Slippery Elm and Squill,  
And roots of Sassafras, and "Sassaf'rill,"  
Brandy,--for colics,--Pinkroot, death on worms,--  
Valerian, calmer of hysteric squirms,  
Musk, Assafoetida, the resinous gum  
Named from its odor,--well, it does smell some,--  
Jalap, that works not wisely, but too well,  
Ten pounds of Bark and six of Calomel.

For outward griefs he had an ample store,  
Some twenty jars and gallipots, or more:  
\_Ceratum simplex\_--housewives oft compile  
The same at home, and call it "wax and ile;"  
\_Unguentum resinosum\_--change its name,  
The "drawing salve" of many an ancient dame;  
\_Argenti Nitras\_, also Spanish flies,  
Whose virtue makes the water-bladders rise--  
(Some say that spread upon a toper's skin  
They draw no water, only rum or gin);  
Leeches, sweet vermin! don't they charm the sick?  
And Sticking-plaster--how it hates to stick  
\_Emplastrum Ferri\_--ditto \_Picis\_, Pitch;  
Washes and Powders, Brimstone for the--which,  
\_Scabies\_ or \_Psora\_, is thy chosen name  
Since Hahnemann's goose-quill scratched thee into fame,  
Proved thee the source of every nameless ill,  
Whose sole specific is a moonshine pill,  
Till saucy Science, with a quiet grin,  
Held up the Acarus, crawling on a pin?  
--Mountains have labored and have brought forth mice  
The Dutchman's theory hatched a brood of--twice  
I've well-nigh said them--words unfitting quite

For these fair precincts and for ears polite.

The surest foot may chance at last to slip,  
And so at length it proved with Doctor Rip.  
One full-sized bottle stood upon the shelf,  
Which held the medicine that he took himself;  
Whate'er the reason, it must be confessed  
He filled that bottle oftener than the rest;  
What drug it held I don't presume to know--  
The gilded label said "Elixir Pro."

One day the Doctor found the bottle full,  
And, being thirsty, took a vigorous pull,  
Put back the "Elixir" where 't was always found,  
And had old Dobbin saddled and brought round.  
--You know those old-time rhubarb-colored nags  
That carried Doctors and their saddle-bags;  
Sagacious beasts! they stopped at every place  
Where blinds were shut--knew every patient's case--  
Looked up and thought--The baby's in a fit--  
That won't last long--he'll soon be through with it;  
But shook their heads before the knocked door  
Where some old lady told the story o'er  
Whose endless stream of tribulation flows  
For gastric griefs and peristaltic woes.

What jack-o'-lantern led him from his way,  
And where it led him, it were hard to say;  
Enough that wandering many a weary mile  
Through paths the mountain sheep trod single file,  
O'ercome by feelings such as patients know  
Who dose too freely with "Elixir Pro.,"  
He tumb--dismounted, slightly in a heap,  
And lay, promiscuous, lapped in balmy sleep.

Night followed night, and day succeeded day,  
But snoring still the slumbering Doctor lay.  
Poor Dobbin, starving, thought upon his stall,  
And straggled homeward, saddle-bags and all.  
The village people hunted all around,  
But Rip was missing,--never could be found.  
"Drowned," they guessed;--for more than half a year  
The pouts and eels did taste uncommon queer;  
Some said of apple-brandy--other some  
Found a strong flavor of New England rum.

Why can't a fellow hear the fine things said  
About a fellow when a fellow's dead?  
The best of doctors--so the press declared--  
A public blessing while his life was spared,  
True to his country, bounteous to the poor,  
In all things temperate, sober, just, and pure;  
The best of husbands! echoed Mrs. Van,  
And set her cap to catch another man.

So ends this Canto--if it's quantum suff.,  
We'll just stop here and say we've had enough,  
And leave poor Rip to sleep for thirty years;  
I grind the organ--if you lend your ears  
To hear my second Canto, after that  
We 'll send around the monkey with the hat.

## CANTO SECOND

So thirty years had passed--but not a word  
In all that time of Rip was ever heard;  
The world wagged on--it never does go back--  
The widow Van was now the widow Mac---  
France was an Empire--Andrew J. was dead,  
And Abraham L. was reigning in his stead.  
Four murderous years had passed in savage strife,  
Yet still the rebel held his bloody knife.

--At last one morning--who forgets the day  
When the black cloud of war dissolved away  
The joyous tidings spread o'er land and sea,  
Rebellion done for! Grant has captured Lee!  
Up every flagstaff sprang the Stars and Stripes--  
Out rushed the Extras wild with mammoth types--  
Down went the laborer's hod, the school-boy's book--  
"Hooraw!" he cried, "the rebel army's took!"  
Ah! what a time! the folks all mad with joy  
Each fond, pale mother thinking of her boy;  
Old gray-haired fathers meeting--"Have--you--heard?"  
And then a choke--and not another word;  
Sisters all smiling--maidens, not less dear,  
In trembling poise between a smile and tear;  
Poor Bridget thinking how she 'll stuff the plums  
In that big cake for Johnny when he comes;

Cripples afoot; rheumatics on the jump;  
Old girls so loving they could hug the pump;  
Guns going bang! from every fort and ship;  
They banged so loud at last they wakened Rip.

I spare the picture, how a man appears  
Who's been asleep a score or two of years;  
You all have seen it to perfection done  
By Joe Van Wink--I mean Rip Jefferson.  
Well, so it was; old Rip at last came back,  
Claimed his old wife--the present widow Mac----  
Had his old sign regilded, and began  
To practise physic on the same old plan.  
Some weeks went by--it was not long to wait--  
And "please to call" grew frequent on the slate.  
He had, in fact, an ancient, mildewed air,  
A long gray beard, a plenteous lack of hair,--  
The musty look that always recommends  
Your good old Doctor to his ailing friends.  
--Talk of your science! after all is said  
There's nothing like a bare and shiny head;  
Age lends the graces that are sure to please;  
Folks want their Doctors mouldy, like their cheese.

So Rip began to look at people's tongues  
And thump their briskets (called it "sound their lungs"),  
Brushed up his knowledge smartly as he could,  
Read in old Cullen and in Doctor Good.  
The town was healthy; for a month or two  
He gave the sexton little work to do.

About the time when dog-day heats begin,  
The summer's usual maladies set in;  
With autumn evenings dysentery came,  
And dusky typhoid lit his smouldering flame;  
The blacksmith ailed, the carpenter was down,  
And half the children sickened in the town.  
The sexton's face grew shorter than before--  
The sexton's wife a brand-new bonnet wore--  
Things looked quite serious--Death had got a grip  
On old and young, in spite of Doctor Rip.

And now the Squire was taken with a chill--  
Wife gave "hot-drops"--at night an Indian pill;  
Next morning, feverish--bedtime, getting worse--

Out of his head--began to rave and curse;  
The Doctor sent for--double quick he came  
\_Ant. Tart. gran. duo\_, and repeat the same  
If no et cetera. Third day--nothing new;  
Percussed his thorax till 't was black and blue--  
Lung-fever threatening--something of the sort--  
Out with the lancet--let him bleed--a quart--  
Ten leeches next--then blisters to his side;  
Ten grains of calomel; just then he died.

The Deacon next required the Doctor's care--  
Took cold by sitting in a draught of air--  
Pains in the back, but what the matter is  
Not quite so clear,--wife calls it "rheumatiz."  
Rubs back with flannel--gives him something hot--  
"Ah!" says the Deacon, "that goes nigh the spot."  
Next day a rigor--"Run, my little man,  
And say the Deacon sends for Doctor Van."  
The Doctor came--percussion as before,  
Thumping and banging till his ribs were sore--  
"Right side the flattest"--then more vigorous raps--  
"Fever--that's certain--pleurisy, perhaps.  
A quart of blood will ease the pain, no doubt,  
Ten leeches next will help to suck it out,  
Then clap a blister on the painful part--  
But first two grains of \_Antimonium Tart\_.  
Last with a dose of cleansing calomel  
Unload the portal system--(that sounds well!)"

But when the selfsame remedies were tried,  
As all the village knew, the Squire had died;

The neighbors hinted. "This will never do;  
He's killed the Squire--he'll kill the Deacon too."

Now when a doctor's patients are perplexed,  
A consultation comes in order next--  
You know what that is? In a certain place  
Meet certain doctors to discuss a case  
And other matters, such as weather, crops,  
Potatoes, pumpkins, lager-beer, and hops.  
For what's the use?--there 's little to be said,  
Nine times in ten your man's as good as dead;  
At best a talk (the secret to disclose)  
Where three men guess and sometimes one man knows.

The counsel summoned came without delay--  
Young Doctor Green and shrewd old Doctor Gray--  
They heard the story--"Bleed!" says Doctor Green,  
"That's downright murder! cut his throat, you mean  
Leeches! the reptiles! Why, for pity's sake,  
Not try an adder or a rattlesnake?  
Blisters! Why bless you, they 're against the law--  
It's rank assault and battery if they draw  
Tartrate of Antimony! shade of Luke,  
Stomachs turn pale at thought of such rebuke!  
The portal system! What's the man about?  
Unload your nonsense! Calomel's played out!  
You've been asleep--you'd better sleep away  
Till some one calls you."

"Stop!" says Doctor Gray--  
"The story is you slept for thirty years;  
With brother Green, I own that it appears  
You must have slumbered most amazing sound;  
But sleep once more till thirty years come round,  
You'll find the lancet in its honored place,  
Leeches and blisters rescued from disgrace,  
Your drugs redeemed from fashion's passing scorn,  
And counted safe to give to babes unborn."

Poor sleepy Rip, M. M. S. S., M. D.,  
A puzzled, serious, saddened man was he;  
Home from the Deacon's house he plodded slow  
And filled one bumper of "Elixir Pro."  
"Good-by," he faltered, "Mrs. Van, my dear!  
I'm going to sleep, but wake me once a year;  
I don't like bleaching in the frost and dew,  
I'll take the barn, if all the same to you.  
Just once a year--remember! no mistake!  
Cry, 'Rip Van Winkle! time for you to wake!'  
Watch for the week in May when laylocks blow,  
For then the Doctors meet, and I must go."

Just once a year the Doctor's worthy dame  
Goes to the barn and shouts her husband's name;  
"Come, Rip Van Winkle!" (giving him a shake)  
"Rip! Rip Van Winkle! time for you to wake!  
Laylocks in blossom! 't is the month of May--  
The Doctors' meeting is this blessed day,

And come what will, you know I heard you swear  
You'd never miss it, but be always there!"

And so it is, as every year comes round  
Old Rip Van Winkle here is always found.  
You'll quickly know him by his mildewed air,  
The hayseed sprinkled through his scanty hair,  
The lichens growing on his rusty suit--  
I've seen a toadstool sprouting on his boot--  
Who says I lie? Does any man presume?--  
Toadstool? No matter--call it a mushroom.  
Where is his seat? He moves it every year;  
But look, you'll find him,--he is always here,--  
Perhaps you'll track him by a whiff you know--  
A certain flavor of "Elixir Pro."

Now, then, I give you--as you seem to think  
We can give toasts without a drop to drink--  
Health to the mighty sleeper,--long live he!  
Our brother Rip, M. M. S. S., M. D.!

[The end]

Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem: Rip Van Winkle, M. D [Medical Poem]