

The Old Hermit

"There goes our hermit on one of his rambles. He loves to walk."

Van saw a tall, lean, bare-headed man with a mane of wavy white hair. He was carrying a heavy smooth stick and by his side walked a Black Curly-Coated Retriever. The old man nodded and raised his hand in greeting as he passed.

"He always walks as you see him now," said Sike, "at an even pace, not fast, not slow. He never wears a hat, and he always carries a hickory stick. His dog Jack is always at his side. Usually the old

man stops and talks a few minutes. He is worth listening to. He knows the history of our section from Indian days on - knows the names of all the first settlers who broke their way through the wilderness to make their homes here. My mother told me that he was the handsomest young man in these parts, and the smartest. He married a pretty city girl. They met at a vendue up here. Her people tried to stop the marriage but the girl wouldn't listen. It proved to be a happy marriage. They had been married fifteen years when their only child was born.

She grew up to be a handsome young woman, the image of her father when he was young, tall, dark, and graceful. Clare is in her late forties now, and is still handsome. You'll see her pass by one of these days. She often stops in to see Joe. Her mother's sister took a great interest in her, and sent her to college. The month Clare graduated, she got married, and married well. She is a widow now. Nice woman, Clare, no airs, never forgets her old friends. She drives up to see her father every two or three weeks. Her mother died five years ago, and her father has lived back on his farm alone ever since. Clare brings her maid Kazia with her to clean the old man's house.

Two years ago Clare decided she would take her father down to her house for the winter. On her way up she stopped to tell Zoe. She said she'd get him and the dog in the car and make believe Sike wanted to see him about something. Zoe and I were on the lookout. Clare drove down this hill so fast it's a wonder her car didn't turn turtle. She told me afterward that she speeded all the way to Essex Fels where she lives. She finally got the old man out of the car, he cussing all the way to the house, and some more, when he got inside. It was getting dark by this time, and he knew there was no use

of trying to go home that night. Clare said she gave him all the good food he liked for dinner, then she took him up to one of her best bedrooms with a private bath.

"And she expected me to take a bath in that china tub," he told me afterward. "I told her when I wanted to bathe I'd go down to my brook."

The old man lit out early the next morning. Kazia coming down the back stairs saw him go out of the kitchen door with his dog. She ran back upstairs and knocked on Clare's door. Clare hurriedly dressed, swallowed a cup of coffee and off up the turnpike she went in her car. She caught up with

35

the old man in Little Falls.

"Get into this car," she ordered.

"No, I won't," he snarled.

"I'm going to take you home," said Clare.

"No, you're not. I've walked so far, and I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Here Jack, get into the car with me. At least you, don't have to walk your poor old paws off;" but Jack wouldn't. He wagged his tail and kept on walking by the side of his master.

Clare ran her car as slow as she could by the side of the old man scolding him all the way. When they reached the Inn at Pompton she insisted that her father go in to breakfast. He

consented to that, and ate heartily.

"Bring me some more sausage and pancakes," he ordered, "and another cup of coffee."

When they reached our place Clare was still dining slow, and the old man was walking his usual pace with Jack still at his side. Clare called to me and I went out to the car. Joe stood in the doorway laughing.

"We wondered how it would turn out," she said when she could get her breath.

Clare's face flamed. "Never again, will I try to make him comfortable," she blazed. "He can freeze and starve to death in his old house. Sike will you drive him up home

in your Ford?" she asked. "I'm tired of driving at the rate of three miles an hour," and she turned her car around and drove off without giving her father a glance.

When Clare was out of sight the old man chuckled. "She won't try to boss me again in a hurry," he said, as he climbed into my car.

"That hot house of hers - I'd die inside of a week - Pink silk pajamas on my bed for me to sleep in! I chuckled 'em over on a chair and went to bed in my shirt."

"And here comes Clare now with Kazia. I bet the old man thought she'd be up this fine day, so

he lit out," laughed Sike.

The car stopped at Sike's gate, and out jumped a tall woman with a magnificent figure. A handsome woman, with unusually fine dark eyes.

"I want to see Zoe," she said.

"I'll wait one minute," said Sike. "I want you to meet our new neighbor."

Clare gave Dan a warm smile and a quick handshake, then passed on.

"A fine looking woman," said Dan. "She is so, and she's as smart as she is good looking."

Clare had a carrying voice. It reached Dan and Sike where they stood by the gate.

Said Clare to Goe. "My - I like the looks of that man! He has the honest rugged handsomeness that I admire." Sike chuckled, and Tom grinned.

Tom enjoyed walking and exploring Drimbeam country. One day he started off up the road that ran north from his place and discovered a new road, a narrow woodroad where the branches of trees met overhead. Soon there was a sharp bend in the wood-road, and ahead stretched a good sandy road, fairly wide, with all brush cleared away on either side. He had walked only a few yards on the sandy road when he saw the hermit walking ahead of
41.

him. When he came abreast of the old man, Tom said, "Good Morning - pleasant walking on this road."

"In my estimation it is the best road in the world," answered the hermit. "It leads to my home."

"I thought I was on a grassy old woodroad till I rounded the bend back yonder."

"That woodroad entrance is a camouflage," said the hermit. "I do that to keep every Tom, Dick, and Harry from driving in and ending up at my place. An automobilist isn't apt to take a road like that. The few people who come to see me understand, and are careful until they get around the bend." They walked side by side without speaking for several minutes, then

the hermit stopped and pointed with his hickory stick to a large yawning hole a little way off from the road.

"Bocker's Folly," he said. "An old Dutchman found some iron pyrite there and thought he had found gold."

They walked on silently for a while, then the hermit stepped off the road and made his way to a clearing. He beckoned to Van. "Do you notice any difference in the ground here?" he asked.

"Yes," said Van, as he stepped on the soft turf. "I know it is an old charcoal bottom."

The hermit nodded. "I once had a charcoal pit here," and he dug up bits of charcoal with his stick. "I owned a large track of woodland when

I was young and made quite some money selling charcoal to iron companies. They burned charcoal in their furnaces."

The road turned to the right and they crossed a plank bridge over a meadow brook that flowed through a wide meadow. "This is where I used to gather my hay. I don't farm anymore. I sell my hay to a man who cuts it and carts it away."

They climbed a gentle hill at the edge of an apple orchard and the path led on to a low rambling story and a half house with a porch the length of it, the porch only one step up from the stone-flagged dooryard.

The hermit and Van sat down on the doorstep.

"Shabby place now, but comfortable," said the old man. "I live in one room in the wintertime where I keep my kitchen stove."

"What do you do when you get snowed in - How do you get your groceries?"

My daughter sees to that. She brings me a car full of canned goods every fall. Ho you see that warm hollow on the south side of the hill? That's where I used to winter my hogs. I always had good luck raising hogs. I made almost as much money off of my hogs as I did from charcoal and wood. In the summertime I fenced in a rocky piece of ground that wasn't good for crops, and turned

the hogs in that to root. In the fall at butchering time I'd sell off all my hogs except the ones I wanted for breeding, then I'd fill that sunny hollow with dry leaves. In cold weather the hogs burrowed into the leaves. They were healthy hogs. You might not think it now, but this was once a good farm and I made a good living on it. I still have a good living. I store away a lot of apples. I buy potatoes and turnips and cabbage and store them away in my good dry cellar. With all the canned stuff my daughter brings to me I fare well.

"Suppose you should get sick back here a mile from your nearest neighbor."

"Come," said the hermit. "I'll show you something," and he led Van into

his kitchen. He pointed to a row of bottles on a shelf. "All tonics," he said "I had an uncle who was an herb doctor. He took me with him when he gathered herbs and taught me their uses. He was a great believer in slippery-elm. I have a tree back of my barn. Honey went into some of his medicines. I always keep honey on hand. I used to keep twenty-five hives of honey bees in ~~the~~ the bee-house at the edge of my apple orchard. I have only two now. Did you notice how thick the calamus grows along the woods? I flavor most of my tonics with calamus root."

Tom shook his head - "Tonics or not. It doesn't seem right for you to live back here alone."

The hermit beckoned for him to come to the door. "Do you see
41.

that old oak tree at the edge of the woods - that oak with bare white limbs. Not a sign of life in it, but it stands firm. Try to transplant it and what would happen! Try to transplant an old man like me! People like me don't like new ways of living. We get lonely sometimes, but leave us where we belong. There are many who can't stay where they belong. Take the farmers who owned the best farms in these mountains down Dranaque way. All underwater - the reservoir covers them all. I was one of the lucky ones I inherited this backwoods farm three miles from the reservoir.