

OLD NINETY-NINE'S CAVE

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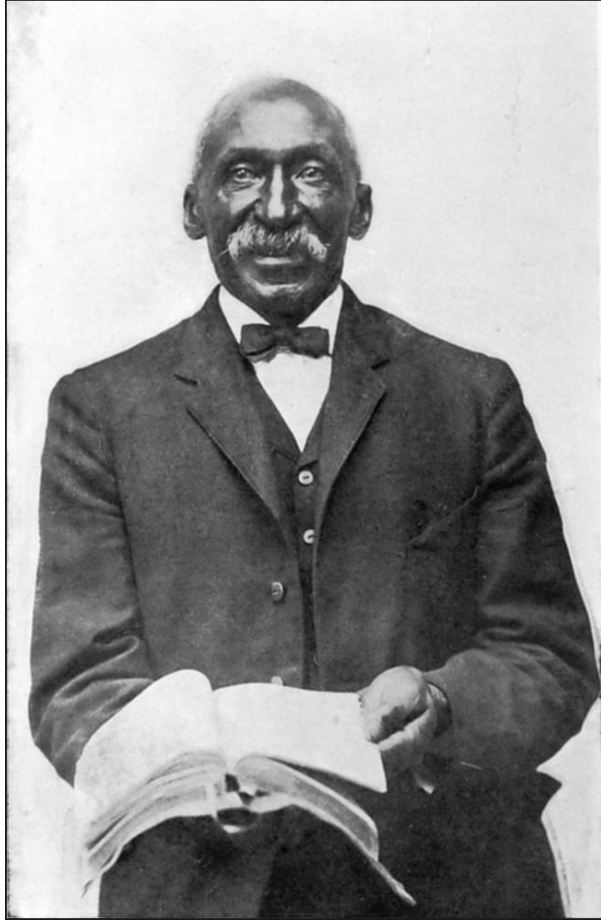
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Reuben

DEDICATED

*To the loving memory of my Father and in grateful
recognition to my friend J. F. C., whose
encouragement made this book possible.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourists in the Shawangunk region are unanimous in pronouncing it one of the most beautiful spots east of the Mississippi, and in some respects unique on this continent. Mokok and Minnewaska need no eulogy from any pen, Sam's Point tells its own story, while the entire Rondout Valley has a charm of its own.

It has been the author's good fortune to have access to old books and papers relating to the local tradition of "Old Ninety-Nine." He is said to have been the last of the Delawares in the Rondout Valley, and, excepting his death, on which tradition is silent, the account given is the one generally told.

The house of Benny De Puy is still standing and the "very spring from which old Ninety-Nine drank on his way to and from his cave" yet gushes out not far from the door.

The photographs of Sam's Point and Margaret are by V. T. Wright. That of Reuben and others used are by A. V. Turner.

The author feels indebted to "The Four Track News and Travel Magazine" for courteous permission to reprint parts of two articles by herself that were published by them.

Old Ninety-Nine's Cave

CHAPTER I

THE Shawangunk Mountains extend from near the center of Ulster County to the southwestern corner in an almost unbroken chain. The Catskills are in the northeastern part and between these two ranges is the Rondout Valley, which extends from the Delaware to the Hudson River, averaging in width about three miles.

Shawangunk is an Indian word meaning "Great Wall," and the range separates the Wallkill from this beautiful valley. Here flourish the trailing arbutus, azalea and laurel, and in July that glory of our continent—the American rhododendron—is found in perfection.

History and tradition have added charm to the natural beauty of this region, and every lake and mountain-pass has its legends.

Early settlers were Dutch, and French Huguenots who found the country disputed by different tribes of the Delawares. Those living in Ulster County were called the Esopus Indians, and their hunting-grounds embraced the territory between the Highlands on the south, Tendeyackemick on the north, the Hudson on the east, and the head waters of the Delaware on the west. They were, however, divided into clans which generally took the name of the place where they lived: thus those on the east side of the Shawangunk Mountains were called "Waconawankongs" and those on the west were called

“Wawarsings,” “Minisinks” and “Mamakatings.” Originally they were a portion of the Minqua or Delawares, who always claimed a protectorate over them and with whom they merged when driven westward by the settlements of the whites.

In the heart of this valley and nestling close to the base of Point Wawanda lay Nootwyck, a quaint little village and seemingly part of its surroundings. Huguenot Street intersected the village, running from east to west towards the mountain, and extended part way up its side.

It was in December, 1878, that John De Vere hurried up this street towards the home whose welcome lights glimmered through the falling snow; even the gaunt Lombardy poplars which lined the street were attractive in their soft mantle of white. At the extreme end of the street he turned into his grounds and ascended to the house by the winding road which led up to it. Being a scholarly man and an admirer of the Greek style of architecture, his house had been made to conform as nearly as possible to it. The broad piazza which extended around three sides commanded a fine view of the valley.

Springing up the broad steps, Mr. De Vere was soon in the midst of his family, who were seated at the supper-table. The family consisted of his mother, wife, and four children: Jack, a handsome young fellow of twenty-two; Celeste, a girl of twenty; Eletheer, sixteen; and Cornelia, six. Reuben and Margaret, the two blacks who served them, were husband and wife.

“Ugh!” said Mr. De Vere, “a bitter night and this snow added to what is already on the ground will make a heavy body of it.”

“I think the temperature is moderating,” said his mother, “and the snow will probably turn to rain.”

“Father,” said Jack, “Mr. Valentine Mills called at the office today. He seemed anxious to see you.”

“What can he want in the country at this season of the year?” returned his father.

“He said something about wishing to purchase your mining claim and erecting a sanitarium on Point Wawanda; he showed me his plans and I tell you the structure would be an ornament.”

“O, don’t sell it!” protested Eletheer, “you know that is to be the site of my hospital.”

“John, I don’t like that man’s looks and would have as little dealing as possible with him.”

“Why, mother, he seems very much of a gentleman.”

“Nevertheless, I mistrust him.”

Mrs. De Vere, or “Granny,” was a woman of positive ideas and, in her younger days, of great executive ability. A strict Calvinist, she had accepted the doctrines of her church as ultimate truth beyond which there was no cause for investigation; these questions had been settled for all time and those who differed from her were either deluded or wilfully in error. She never obtruded her religious beliefs on others, but, when asked, always gave them in a remarkably direct manner, which precluded all argument.

After supper she retired early, accompanied by Eletheer whose self-imposed duty it was to see her comfortably tucked in bed and then read her to sleep from her beloved Bible. Mr. and Mrs. De Vere went to the library where a bright fire crackled on the hearth, scenting the room with birch. Throwing himself on a couch, Mr. De Vere with a deep sigh said: "You know the mortgage on this place comes due January first, and probably Mills wants his money. I can't blame him either for Nootwyck is dead. One enterprise after another falls through for want of railway communication. Look at the iron mine, the blast-furnace and the rolling-mill. They cannot compete with like industries elsewhere and consequently fail."

"This town is bonded for the railroad and we are entitled to have it extended through to Kingston," his wife said.

"The business men of Elmdale do not want this extension, and I fear they have played a winning game."

A loud ring at the door announced the arrival of some one, and who should Reuben usher in but Mr. Mills himself.

"Good evening, Mr. Mills," said Mr. De Vere cordially. "Stormy night."

Divesting himself of overcoat and rubbers, Mr. Mills entered the library and shook hands graciously with both.

He was tall and spare, of about fifty-five, and his manner was that of a man of the world; but his unsteady glance never met one's frankly and his movements were restless.

Reuben brought in a tray on which were a plate of crullers and some cider and while they were sipping it, he replenished the fire.

“Where did you get that treasure?” inquired Mills after Reuben left the room.

“He was a porter in the college at Vicksburg, Mississippi, when I occupied the Chair of Ancient Languages there. He became enamored of Mrs. De Vere’s maid, Margaret, and begged me to buy him, which I did.”

“If not an impertinent question, may I ask what you paid for him?”

“Certainly. I gave one thousand dollars for him. He is not an ignorant man, as you can see.”

“How did he get his education?”

“I taught him and he still studies every spare moment of his time.”

“Your life has been an eventful one,” said Mills interestedly.

“Mrs. De Vere’s has,” her husband returned soberly. “Jack told me that you were at the office to-day.”

“Yes, I wanted to see you on some business connected with your mountain preserve.”

For some inexplicable reason, Granny at this juncture entered the room, leaning on Eletheer. Mills sprang to offer her a chair, and as soon as she was seated Eletheer left the room.

“A charming family, De Vere,” said Mills.

“A God-fearing one,” returned Granny, “all except Eletheer have accepted the Word of God, which is cause for great thankfulness.”

“God is good. His ways are inscrutable. Let us trust that the remaining lamb may be received into the fold,” said Mills reverently.

“She is a good child, but wilfully in error, I fear,” replied the old lady wiping her glasses. “Cornelia is a true De Vere and even at her age the family traits are pronounced in her.” Mills moved uneasily.

“We were discussing Mr. De Vere’s preserve on the mountain back of this house,” he remarked. “I should like to erect a sanitarium on it.”

“Eletheer has set her heart on that mining claim, and I think she ought to have it,” said her grandmother.

“As a mining claim, it is worthless. Experts say that gold is there but not in sufficient quantities to pay for mining. Instead of chasing a phantom, would it not be better to erect an institution where the sick and suffering may be benefited by the medicinal springs and balsamic air of these mountains?” Mills replied.

“That is just what she proposes doing.”

“But it takes money,” he answered with a sinister smile which no one saw. “Several charitable New York men are interested

in the scheme and wish to negotiate through me for the purchase.”

The old lady was momentarily won and Mills, seeing his advantage, continued: “The company wish to begin operations as soon as possible. That is what brings me into the country at this season of the year.”

“Well,” said Mr. De Vere, “there are reasons which must be carefully weighed before deciding, and I will let you know my decision within a week.”

Seeing that Mr. De Vere was determined and that nothing would be gained by prolonging the interview, Mills was obliged to be content and soon after left, fully convinced that his mission was accomplished.

CHAPTER II

JOHN DE VERE was born on a farm at Greenmeadow, New York. His grandfather, Benoni De Vere, came from Tarrytown to Greenmeadow in 1796 and was the first settler there.

John's father was a representative of the sturdy men of those stirring times and his mother was a woman of great strength of character. Nine children were reared in a veritable wilderness and their destinies were governed by the restrictions of the times. Six days of the week were spent in hard labor on the farm and the seventh lived in John's memory as a horrible dream. On this day, winter and summer, instead of five they arose at six o'clock. Milking and breakfast over, the whole family repaired to the parlor for family prayers, which ceremony lasted an hour. They then hurried off to church where for two mortal hours the good dominie preached Calvinism unabridged. Woe to the culprit who fidgeted or betrayed any lack of interest, and John sat on those hard seats without moving a muscle until his bones ached.

Relatives and friends usually dined with them on Sunday and the children "waited." After the sermon in all its bearings had been discussed, the sweetmeats and tea—which appeared on company days—were sparingly dealt out to the children and they took what else remained on the table, John inwardly vowing that when he grew up, he would have all the sweetmeats and tea he wanted.

Pilgrim's Progress, Baxter's Saints Everlasting Rest, Fox's Book of Martyrs and the Bible were the only books allowed, and a funereal atmosphere pervaded everything. When the guests left and the chores were done, the children went to bed thankful for the Sunday less.

Naturally a student, John worked hard, saved his money, studied every spare moment of his time and eventually was graduated with honors from Union College; then, broken in health, he went South to accept the Chair of Ancient Languages at Vicksburg College, Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he met and married Miss Bessie Ragsdale, a beautiful southern girl and an heiress; meantime pursuing the study of law and was admitted to the bar of that State two years after his arrival there.

In the sunny South on the bank of "The Father of Waters," their life was a poet's dream, "Where the sweet magnolia blossoms grew as white as snow, and they never thought that sorrow, grief nor pain would come." True, there were mutterings of war, but none believed they would amount to anything, and when the firing on Fort Sumpter was heralded abroad people said it would be a short war. After the secession of Mississippi and the formal election of Jefferson Davis as President of the Southern Confederacy, the defeat of Commodore Montgomery at Memphis, its occupation by the Union forces, and the concentration of forces upon Vicksburg, they knew then that war in all its horrors was upon them. This last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi which had refused to surrender to Farragut's fleet was strongly fortified. General Grant's attempt to change the channel of the river, leaving Vicksburg some distance back, had failed, and the people were still

confident until he attacked them from the rear. The railroads were destroyed and for six weeks the city was cannonaded unceasingly night and day. The siege of Vicksburg was John De Vere's last picture of Mississippi; the city battered to pieces, the streets red with blood, two gallant young Confederate officers shot dead at his door, his home in ruins.

Hearing that he was about to be pressed into the Southern Army, he managed, through the influence of his wife's family, to get on board a boat bound for St. Louis, taking what little money he could scrape together. His wife and children with the faithful Reuben and Margaret joined him the next morning and they started for the last-named city where he hoped to earn enough to take him North.

Will he ever forget that sail up the mighty stream so full of snags and timber from the far North? That river which has played so important a part in the destiny of our nation? In 1542, its muddy waters received the fever-racked body of its discoverer. Down this stream came Marquette with his devoted Canadian followers in their birch-bark canoes, "ready to seek new nations towards the South Sea who are still unknown to us, and to teach them of our God." LaSalle, Iberville, Bienville and many others floated before his mental vision. The levees, which were built before each river plantation by the owners' slaves, were simply artificial mud-banks sometimes strengthened by ribs of timber and sometimes not. These answered very well so long as kept in repair. An unusual flood, of course, was apt to destroy them, but slave labor was cheap. Mr. De Vere noted with dismay their present neglected condition. The largest and most substantial was the one over

Yazoo Pass twelve miles above Vicksburg; but this was in bad shape, and he pictured the wholesale destruction which would follow the inevitable spring flood, and the dank pools left by the receding waters, filling the air with deadly miasma.

On the fourth day of their journey they reached St. Louis. Mr. McElwee, a member of the "Christian Commission," which did such noble work in the armies, offered them the shelter of his home until work could be found and they gratefully accepted his offer. He used his influence and one day Thomas Murphy from a settlement near Lake Crevecoeur, about thirteen miles west of St. Louis, offered Mr. De Vere the position of teacher in their school at a salary of fifty dollars per month and the use of a log house belonging to him. Autumn found them installed in their new quarters. Mrs. De Vere, accustomed to every luxury, yet accepted her lot uncomplainingly; and with the assistance of Reuben and Margaret the rude house was made to appear quite home-like. It consisted of two rooms, a living-room and a sleeping-room. Mr. and Mrs. De Vere and the children occupied the latter, and all that the bed would not hold were stored away on the floor. Reuben and Margaret slept on the floor of the living-room.

Time passed more quickly than they feared it would. Christmas came and went, but Mr. De Vere's step was not so springy as formerly. His head ached continually and memory failed. All night long he tossed and moaned but stern duty demanded his services and when morning came he sought the school-house tired in mind and body. No butter nor milk; coarse corn bread, sweet potatoes and pork constituted their daily fare, but no

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