Keeper of the Spirit

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OLD PAP sat humped in a Windsor rocker in front of the fireplace. The red coals and the reflected glow in his great dog-like eyes were the only lights in the room.

Jim Brady, huge and glowering, stood over the old man. "You hacked my new still with a double-bitted axe, you dithering old idiot. You know you done it!"

Old Pap was quiet. His talon fingers, following the rocker arms around their curved ends, did not twitch nor quiver. "I'd snap you like a dry twig ef you weren't so old and touched I daren't!" The cords in Jim's neck stood out like strands of taut rope under his leathery skin.

Old Pap ran a long hand over the mat of his hair, spongy, as though grown through with gray mould. Slowly, he tugged at his great moustache. It was soggy thick, like his eyebrows. He held his head thrust forward, turtlewise; he had gone through the years unwilling to draw it back into the bony shell of his body.

"You ain't foolin' me, none, you ol' scarecrow!" Jim clinched and opened his clubby fingers that itched for the old man's throat. "You're tough like a hickory withe, and slinky lean like a weasel, ferretin' out hid stills, gashin' new copper! You ought to be hewn through—" Anger burned away the end of his sentence.

Old Pap sat woodenly. His legs and arms were stiffly jointed sticks, pinned to his narrow body.

"You're mouldy clean through." Jim leered at the old man. "So mouldy old the lichens grow on you like on old logs. Ef you'd drunk a mite like other men folks, the fire o' liquor'd burned the dank mould out o' ye. Never a swig all these years—that's why ye're queer."

THE ROOM was very still; the quiet popping of the logs as the flames ate through their centers was the only sound.

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Big shadows jigged over the walnut ceiling beams and painted the two figures, huge and black, on the whitewashed wall opposite the fire.

Somewhere above, a board creaked. It was sudden, like the cold night pop of frozen earth. The coals in the old man's eyes glowed brighter. A weighty step sounded high above the walnut ceiling beams. Another step, heavy-booted.

"Who's here?" Jim's voice was churlish.

A door creaked beyond the wall where their black shadows hulked. Outside, the night wind rattled dry leaves against the window. The boots walked—again—three paces now. It was a lame walk, not directly above, but close enough that they could hear the sag of the wood under the shifting weight.

"It's the doctor, Jim." Old Pap's black eyes were fire beneath the overhanging brush of his eyebrows.

"What Doc?"

"Ol' Doctor John."

"Loon! He died twenty-five years ago. He was coming to our house, but he was in that runaway and died the day before mammy borned me alone."

Step, drag, step.

A log fell down into the coals with a fluttering of sparks. Old Pap's eyes shot green flame like a startled night animal's.

"You're keepin' someone here, and I mean to know." Jim started for the hall.

Step, creak—A blast of wind drowned the third step.

"I'm tellin' you, Jim, but you got to set." The rusty voice was a hoarse whisper. Jim dropped to a chair, impatiently.

Tramp, pause, heavy tramp.

"Ol' Doc was the least one in the big pack o' chillrun raised here, y' know, Jim." Ol' Pap's voice was hardly louder than the burning wood.

"He loved every tree and rock like they was live things. After that runaway, when they told him he'd got to die, all he said was that he wanted to be waked here. He figgered he'd
git off to a good start to heav'n ef he done his earth-lingerin' here."

Tramp—

"'Twas a powerful cold day when the news come to go to the Springs to git him."

Drag, Step. Old Pop shivered and flopped his long arms across his chest.

"I nearly froze on the way to the Springs, but I didn't stay to git thawed, fer I knew it'd hustle me to git back. They had him nailed in a great oak box. It rattled awful agin the wagon bed goin' over the froze ground. It gits dark quick in Spruce-pine Holler and I had no mind to be alone, and cold, and listenin' to that heavy box rattlin', after night. Well, Jim, I took a few heavy pulls at the bottle to kinda warm my inners."

"You?" Jim was unbelieving. "You drank?"

"I kept takin' little swigs, and every swaller made that noise in the wagon box louder. I whupped up the team, and the sound pounded inside my ears like thunder rollin'."

Old Pap's voice was a low whisper. Jim leaned forward to catch his words.

"Somehow, fordin' Sleepy Creek the box musta lost out the back of the wagon, fer they found it there next mornin'. But the poundin' of it kept in my ears for a long spell after, and I hear it yet on cold nights when the wind howls."

Step. High above, and faint.

"THEY buried him next day, and he never got waked, Jim. But Ol' Doc's still projeckin' round waitin' for his earth-lingerin' to be done. 'Twas his lame walk ye been hearin', Jim! When I can't stand it no more, I gets out my double-bitted axe, and starts lookin' for copper down in the laurel thickets. Then sometimes I don't hear him fer quite a spell."

Old Pap was shaking like a wind-trembled leaf. A blast of wind rattled the panes, and blew smoke down the chimney. When he looked up, Jim had gone. A half-empty flask lay on the chair where he had sat, catching glints of light in its amber fluid.

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