

AN OLD HERMIT MISSING.

A CONNECTICUT GENTLEMAN WHO HAS BURIED HIMSELF IN A WILDERNESS.

DINGMAN'S FERRY, Penn., July 23.—Austin Sheldon, the old hermit who has lived for 44 years alone in the Pike County wilderness, nine miles back of this village, has been missing from his hovel for nearly three weeks, and as he never voluntarily went far enough away from his retreat to keep him absent more than a few hours, it is generally believed that he has either wandered away into the woods and died, or been robbed of a small sum of money and a watch which were known to be in his possession and murdered. The money and watch were not to be found in the hermit's hovel. Sheldon is nearly 80 years old. His presence in Pike County was first discovered in the fall of 1850, by a party of hunters. According to his own story he had then been living 10 years in the small rock cabin, subsisting on wild game he managed to trap and on wild fruit and roots. Until seen by the hunters he did not know in what locality he was living. The story of his life was not known until years afterward, as he stubbornly refused to say anything about it. In 1874 a local paper printed a paragraph about the hermit, mentioning his name and eccentricities. Some weeks later a fashionably dressed and distinguished looking middle-aged lady and gentleman appeared in this village. The lady said she had read the paragraph about the hermit in a Connecticut paper. She lived in that State, and in 1832 her brother, Austin Sheldon, a well-to-do business man, of Stony Creek, Conn., had mysteriously disappeared soon after the death of his young wife, of whom he was passionately fond. No tidings of him had ever been received, and the lady believed the Pike County hermit and her long-missing brother were one and the same. She and her companion, who was her husband, were guided to the wild spot where the hermit lived. He proved to be the brother of the Connecticut lady, but he received her coldly and turned a deaf ear to all her appeals to him to leave his wretched surroundings and return with her to a home of luxury. The visitors were overtaken by darkness and were obliged to spend the night in the foul and cramped hovel in the rocks. Every year since then Sheldon's sister has pleaded with him in vain to abandon his life of privation and solitude. Last Winter word was sent her from this place that her brother was liable to die alone at any time in his isolated retreat. She and her husband came on at once, and in spite of the hermit's vigorous protests and resistance they forced him to accompany them back to Connecticut. He refused to become reconciled to his new life, and grieved so constantly and intensely for his hovel in the Pike County wilderness that his relatives were compelled last May to return him to his old retreat. His joy was unbounded on arriving here once more, and he lost no time in clothing himself in the rags which he boasted he had worn constantly, day and night, for more than 30 years. Since his return it became apparent to all who visited him that he was failing rapidly both in mind and body.

Austin Sheldon was an educated man and affected great piety. He read the Bible almost constantly when in his hut, and frequently carried it with him strapped to his side in his jaunts in the woods. He was a typical hermit in appearance, with long, unkempt gray hair and beard, a bent form which he supported with a long staff, and which was barely covered by the tattered garments he wore. During his long life in the mountain hovel, which was barely 6 feet square, he had many narrow escapes from death by forest fires, which frequently surrounded his hovel, and kept him fighting sometimes day and night to keep them from sweeping it and himself away. Both himself and hut had many times been covered deep beneath snow drifts, and to the thoughtfulness and kindness of neighbors, who, although living miles away, came and dug him out in the nick of time, he often owed his life. He was once kept out of his hut several days and nights by a family of bears that had taken possession of it during his absence, and held possession of it until it suited them to change their quarters.

Sheldon once fell from a chestnut tree, and lay for days beneath it with a broken leg before his condition was discovered. It was a favorite declaration of his that he had once lived a whole month with nothing to eat but a quart of dried raspberries, being lame and unable to seek other sustenance. He had more than once been saved from death by starvation by the timely appearance of neighbors, and his other narrow escapes from death by violence were numerous. He gave credit to no human intervention for help in any emergency, saying that he was in the hands of God, and that everything done for him was due to promptings from Him.

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