

VANGUARD PRODUCTIONS

The Ice-Skating Phantom Of Hickory Creek

by Charles Gregory

Due to corporate business, a well-oiled executive moves his wife and 10-year-old son to the great Northwoods where they get involved with an eccentric 80-year-old forest recluse who delights in acquainting them with the local legends.

They learn about the giant Hen Hotten bird, for example, a creature whose very presence heralds natural disasters such as the severe blizzard that rages about them throughout the story. They also hear about the Fledgy Finders, night flying birds that have helped rescuers find lost hikers, both dead and alive. But, of course, the best tale of all is the one about the Ice-Skating Phantom of Hickory Creek, an 18 foot apparition who skates down Hickory Creek when the signs are right: huge snow storm, followed by full moon, followed by extreme winds.

The son, of course, loves the old man, but the father detests him, since they are total opposites in every way. The father is a corporate trouble shooter whose profession is straightening out companies even if it involves polluting the environment which he is secretly plotting. The old man, on the other hand, reveres nature to the opposite extreme, calling her "the old girl," and totally dedicated to saving her from people like the father.

The old man thinks he has won a major victory when he rescues the father after a car accident that occurs during the storm. In exchange for leading the father to safety, the old man makes him agree to a pledge to help the old girl. Once safe, however, the father scoffs at the idea, even though he is warned that breaking the pledge could be dangerous.

The story peaks when the son, convinced that the signs are perfect for producing the Ice-Skating Phantom, sneaks down to the creek, in the dead of night, with a neighborhood friend of the same age, to witness the phenomenon. Thinking that they see the Phantom, in a scene that is terrifying without being specific, the boys separate and bolt. The executive's son chooses to run down the center of the frozen creek where he panics and ends up falling through the ice into the icy water. He is given up for dead.

The ending is unusual, to say the least. The boy's parents are naturally devastated, the neighbors are horrified, and the sheriff's police are summoned to the area with lights and equipment to dredge the creek for the boy's body.

While, alone and in a state of shock, the grieving father, believing that he is somehow responsible for the tragedy by breaking the old man's pledge, pleads quietly yet tearfully with a full moon and a semicircle of ghost-like northern pines to give him back his son. He even makes a sobbing "bargain" with nature to change his polluting ways and spend the rest of his life in the service of "the old girl."

In an ending that involves shrieking birds, a skating phantom, hysterical parents, shouting policemen, and out and out pandemonium, the story turns from tragedy and sadness to an elevated feel-good finale that involves the mysteries of nature, the importance of the environment, and the wonders of life itself.