

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

Washington Irving, 1820



The Legend of Sleepy Hollow is one of the earliest pieces of American fiction and one of the first pieces of American horror literature. Read the beginning and the end of the story.

In one of those spacious coves which indent the eastern shore of the Hudson, at that broad expansion of the Tappan Zee River, lies a small town called Tarry Town. Not far from this village, perhaps about two miles, is a little valley, among high hills, which is one of the quietest places in the whole world. A small brook glides through it, with just murmur enough to lull one to repose; and the occasional whistle of a quail, or tapping of a woodpecker, is almost the only sound that ever breaks the tranquility.

From the listless repose of the place and its peculiar inhabitants, who are descendants from the original Dutch settlers, this little glen is been known by the name of Sleepy Hollow. A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land and pervade the very atmosphere. Some say that the place was bewitched by a German doctor during the early days of the settlement; others, that an old Indian chief, the prophet or wizard of his tribe, held his powwows there before the country was discovered by explorers. Whatever it may be, the place exists under the sway of some witching power that holds a spell over the people, causing them to walk in a continual reverie. As such, the whole neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and superstitions. Stars shoot and meteors glare across the valley more than in any other part of the country, and the nightmare seems to make it the favorite scene of her adventures.

The most famous spirit that haunts this region is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a trooper whose head had been carried away by a cannon-ball in some battle during the revolutionary war; and who is forever seen by the country folk, hurrying along in the gloom of night as if on the wings of the wind. His haunts are not confined to the valley, but extend at times to the adjacent roads, and especially near the church. Though historians are sure that the body of the trooper is buried in the churchyard, they still claim that the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head; and that the speed with which he passes along the Hollow is because he is in a hurry to get back to the churchyard before daybreak.

This legend has furnished many a wild story in that region of shadows; and the spectre is known to all as the Headless Horseman. What's remarkable is that the story is not confined to the native inhabitants of the valley, but to everyone who resides there, even for a little while. However wide awake they may have been before they entered that sleepy region, they are sure soon enough to inhale the witching influence of the air, and begin to grow imaginative—to dream dreams, and see apparitions.

How did it feel to read the first part of the story? Write down five feelings you had while reading it here.

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It was the very late when Ichabod, heavy-hearted and crest-fallen, traveled homewards along the lofty hills above Tarry Town, which he had traversed so cheerily in the afternoon. The hour was as dismal as himself. Far below him, the Tappan Zee spread its dusky waters, with here and there the tall mast of a sloop riding quietly beside him. In the dead hush of midnight, he could even hear the faint barking of the watch-dog from the opposite shore of the Hudson.

No signs of life occurred near him but the occasional chirp of a cricket, or perhaps the guttural twang of a bull-frog, from a neighboring marsh.

All the stories of ghosts and goblins that he had heard in the afternoon now came crowding upon his recollection. The night grew darker and darker; the stars seemed to sink deeper in the sky, and clouds occasionally hid them from his sight. He had never felt so lonely and dismal. He was, moreover, approaching the very place where many of the scenes of the ghost stories had been laid. In the centre of the road stood an 'enormous tree, which towered like a giant above all the other trees of the neighborhood, and formed a kind of landmark. Its limbs were gnarled; large enough to form trunks for ordinary trees, twisting down almost to the earth and rising again into the air. It was connected with the tragic story of Major André, who had been taken prisoner; and was universally known as Major André's tree. The common people regarded it with a mixture of respect and superstition, partly out of sympathy for the fate of its namesake, and partly from the tales of strange sights and doleful lamentations seen and heard near it.

As Ichabod approached the tree, he began to whistle. He thought his whistle was answered, but it was the wind sweeping through the dry branches. As he approached, he thought he saw something white hanging in the midst of the tree—he ceased whistling; but on looking more narrowly, saw that it was a place where the tree had been struck by lightning, and the white wood laid bare.

Suddenly, he heard a groan—his teeth chattered and his knees smote against the saddle, but it was the rubbing of one bough upon another as they swayed about by the breeze. He passed the tree in safety, but new perils lay before him.



About two hundred yards from the tree, a small brook crossed the road and ran into a marshy, thickly-wooded glen. A few logs, laid side by side, served for a bridge over this stream. On that side of the road where the brook entered the wood, a group of oaks and chestnuts, matted thick with wild vines, threw a cavernous gloom over it. It was at this spot that the unfortunate André was captured. This has since been considered a haunted stream, and fearful is the man who has to pass it alone after dark.

As he approached the stream his heart began to thump. He summoned up all his resolution, gave his horse a kick in the ribs, and attempted to dash briskly across the bridge. But instead of starting forward, the animal made a lateral movement, and ran against the fence. Ichabod, whose fears increased with the delay, jerked the reins on the other side, and kicked hard with the contrary foot. It was all in vain: His steed started, it is true, but it was only to plunge to the opposite side of the road into a thicket of brambles and bushes.

Ichabod now bestowed both whip and heel upon old Gunpowder, who dashed forward, but came to a stand just by the bridge, with a suddenness that had nearly sent his rider sprawling over his head. Just at this moment a plashy tramp by the side of the bridge caught the ear of Ichabod. In the dark shadow of the grove, on the margin of the brook, he beheld something huge, black, and towering. It stirred not, but seemed gathered up in the gloom, like some gigantic monster ready to spring upon him.

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Ichabod's hair rose upon his head with terror. What was to be done? To turn and fly was now too late; and besides, what chance was there of escaping a ghost or goblin, which could ride upon the wings of the wind? Summoning up courage, he stammered—"Who are you?" He received no reply. He repeated his demand in a more agitated voice. Still there was no answer. Once more he cudgelled the sides of the inflexible Gunpowder, and, shutting his eyes, broke into a whistle again.

Just then the shadowy object put itself in motion, and, with a scramble and a bound, stood in the middle of the road. Though the night was dark and dismal, Ichabod could make out a horseman of large dimensions, mounted on a huge black horse. He kept aloof on one side of the road, jogging along on the blind side of old Gunpowder, who had now got over his fright and waywardness.

Ichabod, who had no relish for this strange companion, now quickened his steed in hopes of leaving the dark figure behind. The stranger, however, quickened his horse to an equal pace. Ichabod fell into a walk, thinking to lag behind—the other did the same. His heart began to sink. He tried to resume his tune, but his parched tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and he could not utter a note. There was something in the dogged silence of this companion that was mysterious and appalling.

It was soon accounted for. On mounting a hill, which brought the figure of his fellow traveller in relief against the sky, Ichabod was horror-struck to see that he was headless!—but his horror was still more increased, on seeing that the head, which should have rested on his shoulders, was carried before him on the pommel of his saddle. His terror rose to desperation; he rained a shower of kicks and blows upon Gunpowder, hoping, by a sudden movement, to give his companion the slip—but the spectre started full jump with him. Away they dashed, stones flying and sparks flashing at every bound. Ichabod's flimsy garments fluttered in the air, as he stretched his lanky body away over his horse's head in the eagerness of his escape.

They had now reached the road which leads to Sleepy Hollow; but Gunpowder, who seemed possessed with a demon, made a wrong turn, and plunged downhill to the left. As yet, the panic of the steed had given his unskillful rider an apparent advantage in the chase; but just as he had got halfway through the hollow, the saddle gave way, and he felt it slipping from under him.

He had just enough time to save himself by clasping old Gunpowder round the neck when the saddle fell to the earth, and he heard it trampled under foot by his pursuer. The goblin was hard on his haunches; and he worked hard to maintain his seat; sometimes slipping on one side, sometimes on another, and sometimes jolted on the high ridge of his horse's backbone, with a violence that he feared would cleave him asunder. An opening in the trees, he saw the walls of the church dimly glaring beyond.

Suddenly, he remembered where the Horseman had always disappeared in stories. "If I can reach that bridge," thought Ichabod, "I am safe." Just then he heard the black steed panting close behind him; he even felt his hot breath. Another convulsive kick in the ribs, and old Gunpowder sprang upon the bridge. He thundered over the planks; and gained the opposite side. Now Ichabod looked behind to see if his pursuer might vanish, as in the legends, in a flash of fire. Just then he saw the goblin rising in his stirrups in the very act of hurling his head at him. Ichabod tried to dodge the horrible missile, but too late. It hit his head with a tremendous crash, and he tumbled headlong into the dust as Gunpowder and the goblin rider passed him by.



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The next morning Gunpowder was found without his saddle, and with the bridle under his feet, soberly cropping the grass at his master's gate. Ichabod did not make his appearance at breakfast. Dinner-hour came, but no Ichabod. His students assembled at the school-house, and strolled idly about grounds, but no schoolmaster. An inquiry was set on foot, and after diligent investigation they came upon his traces. In one part of the road leading to the church was found the saddle trampled in the dirt; the tracks of horses' hoofs deeply dented in the road at furious speed. The tracks were traced to the bridge, beyond which, on the bank of the brook, was found Ichabod's hat, and close beside it a shattered pumpkin. The brook was searched, but the body of Ichabod was never found.

The mysterious event caused much speculation. Gossip collected in the churchyard, at the bridge, and at the spot where the hat and pumpkin had been found. Many of the old stories were called to mind; and when they had diligently considered them all, and compared them with the symptoms of the present case, they shook their heads, and came to the conclusion that Ichabod had been carried off by the Headless Horseman.

It is true, an old farmer, who had been down to New York on a visit several years after, and who told this story all across town, claimed that Ichabod Crane was still alive. The old country wives, however, maintain to this day that Ichabod was spirited away by supernatural means; and it is a favorite story often told about the neighborhood round the winter evening fire. The bridge became an object of superstitious awe, and that may be the reason why the road has been altered, so that it approaches the church by the border of the mill-pond. Ichabod's school-house soon fell to decay, and was reported to be haunted by a ghost. The ploughboy, walking homeward of a still summer evening, has often heard a voice at a distance, whistling a melancholy tune among the tranquil solitudes of Sleepy Hollow.

How did you feel reading the second part of the story? Did your feelings change? Write down five feelings you had reading the ending of the story here.

