

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow by Washington Irving (1820)

Adapted by Lori Tolbert—Advanced Version (B2+)

Not far from the Hudson River lies a quiet, peaceful valley. Within it sits a village known as Sleepy Hollow, a place that seems to exist somewhere between dream and reality. Time moves slowly there. The call of a quail or the hollow tapping of a woodpecker often breaks the silence, but otherwise the air hangs heavy and still.

People say that Sleepy Hollow is enchanted. A dreamy, almost magical atmosphere envelopes the land, and its residents often fall into daydreams, believing in all kinds of superstitions. They whisper about strange visions and restless spirits. The most famous among them is the Headless Horseman, believed to be the ghost of a soldier whose head was shot off by a cannonball during the Revolutionary War. Each night, the specter reportedly rides through the valley searching for his missing head before disappearing into the churchyard at dawn.



In this peculiar place lived a schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane. The villagers had never seen a more comical figure. He was tall and lanky, with spindly arms and bony legs that stuck out awkwardly from his narrow frame. His feet were as big as shovels, and his head—small and flat—sat unsteadily on a fragile neck like a weather vane ready to spin in the wind. His ears stuck out like sails, his nose jutted forward like a bird's beak, and his glassy green eyes bulged with curiosity. On windy days, walking along a ridge, Ichabod looked more like a living scarecrow than a man.

Ichabod taught the village children in a one-room schoolhouse. It was dimly lit and worn with age. The sagging roof let in more rain than it kept out, the windows were patched with torn pieces of old books, and the groaning floorboards complained under every step. In the middle sat a huge stone fireplace that cast more shadows than warmth. Some people claimed that this humble house of learning had secrets of its own, whispering them through the cracks in the walls whenever the wind blew in.

As a teacher, Ichabod balanced strictness with kindness. He disciplined with a wooden stick, but once lessons ended, he played games with the older boys and walked the younger ones home. Since he had no house of his own, he stayed with different farming families from week to week, earning both his room and his meals. He was especially fond of the meals; he may have been skinny as a snake, but he ate like a hog.

The older women of Sleepy Hollow admired the schoolmaster. He was intelligent, polite, and listened eagerly to their ghost stories. On winter nights, sitting by their fires, he absorbed their tales of witches and ghouls with wide-eyed fascination. However, the stories left him on edge when it came time to head home. To calm his nerves, he sang church hymns into the darkness.

Ichabod's heart—and his ambition—focused on Katrina Van Tassel, the only daughter of a prosperous Dutch farmer. She was lively, cheerful, and admired for her beauty. Ichabod dreamed of winning her love but even more of securing her wealth—the extensive estate she would one day inherit. In his imagination, her father's cattle became delicious meals, her orchards became sweet preserves, and her home and barns became a treasure chest of future riches.

But Katrina had many admirers, and the most prominent was Brom Bones, a big, fearless horseman famous for his mischievous pranks. Riding his stout horse, Daredevil, Brom was the undisputed leader among the village youth. When his horse stood tied outside Katrina's door, few rivals dared to enter. Ichabod, however, persisted. He became Katrina's singing teacher so he could spend even more time with her.

Brom was determined to drive Ichabod away. He tormented him with ridicule and tricks—once even bringing a dog to howl along with Ichabod's music lessons. Yet Ichabod refused to be provoked, stubbornly clinging to his hopes.

One crisp autumn afternoon, a servant of the Van Tassel's showed up at the schoolhouse with an invitation to a grand party. Ichabod was elated. He dismissed his pupils early, put on his finest clothes, and borrowed a worn-out plow horse named Gunpowder. The animal was awkward, but Ichabod sat tall as he rode through the brilliant autumn landscape—past fields filled with plump pumpkins and orchards heavy with apples—dreaming of feasting and dancing.

The Van Tassel house blazed with light and celebration. Guests crowded the rooms, music filled the air, and tables strained under a bounty of roasted meats, pastries, and cider. Ichabod danced tirelessly with Katrina under the admiring gaze of other guests. Later, the group gathered to share ghost stories. The tales grew darker, always returning to the Headless Horseman, who haunted the church bridge nearby. Ichabod, both thrilled and unsettled, added his own eerie stories to the collection.

Finally the guests departed, leaving Ichabod behind to speak privately with Katrina. This was the moment he had been waiting for—his chance to propose marriage and secure his future. What passed between them remains unknown, but he left the house looking crushed. Mounting Gunpowder, he began the long, lonely ride home.

With a heavy heart, he slouched in the saddle. The night was starless, and the woods whispered with every gust of wind. Shadows loomed threateningly, and every rustling leaf put Ichabod more on edge. As he approached the great, gnarled tree near the haunted bridge, dread seized him. Suddenly, a towering horseman appeared out of nowhere, silent and menacing. Ichabod called out, but the rider gave no answer. Ichabod urged Gunpowder forward, but the mysterious figure kept pace. And then Ichabod's blood froze when he caught a glimpse of his tormentor: the horseman carried his head, not on his shoulders but in his hands.

Desperate, Ichabod spurred Gunpowder toward the bridge, praying that the ghost would vanish once they crossed. They thundered across the wooden planks, but as Ichabod looked back, the rider hurled his head—striking Ichabod and knocking him clean off his saddle.

The next morning, when Gunpowder wandered home alone and Ichabod failed to show up for school, the townsfolk went out looking for him. They found his hat near the bridge, beside a shattered pumpkin. But they found no Ichabod. He had vanished without a trace.

Even today, people in Sleepy Hollow tell this mysterious story on dark autumn nights. In their hearts they are convinced that the Headless Horseman took Ichabod Crane away forever.