



Stay On the Path

A Scouting Ghost Story for Around the Campfire

by Lauren Duquette

“Stay on the path,” Akela Bob warned. “It’s getting dark and we don’t want anyone getting lost. People say the souls of lost hikers and the spirits of the past haunt these woods and surrounding cliffs. Hey, let’s tell our own ghost stories on our way to camp. Say, has anyone heard the one about Ichabod Crane and the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow?”

“This is stupid,” Gordon grumbled to Derrick as they lagged behind the rest of the troop. “Don’t go off the path,” he mimicked. Gordon had just joined the troop and had not decided yet whether going on hiking expeditions was going to be his *thing* - and telling ghost stories, even if this was Hallowe’en, was certainly kid stuff.

“Look at that flat-topped rock out there,” Akela Bob exclaimed when they had reached a small clearing. He pointed to a tall narrow rock that stood about five feet, separate from the main cliff wall.

“They say that’s where the ancient native elders held their secret meet-

ings. There’d be no interruptions,” he laughed.

“How’d they get there?” Amy asked.

“They extended a plank from the mainland to the meeting rock, walked across it and then drew the plank back in again to ensure privacy.”

“Look at the drop. What if they fell?”



“I sure hope none did,” Akela Bob agreed. “Hope they had good balance. Now, back to the story of the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow. They say that...”

“I’m tired of hearing ghost stories,” Gordon whispered, nudging Derrick. “Come on, let’s go. We’ll be back before they know we’re gone.”

“Well, I don’t know...” Derrick hesitated.

“Oh, c’mon. Akela just wants to make our hike scary because it’s Hallowe’en.”

“Well, okay.”

It was much darker in the woods than it was on the trail, and much cooler. A grey mist had settled into all the hollows in the forest floor. Still, they could hear their troop’s footsteps marching along and they followed the sound, keeping just out of sight.

“We better go back now,” Derrick said. “Listen, I think I hear Akela calling us.”

They listened. Sure enough they heard voices: “Boys, boys, come this way.” It was hard to be certain whether it was in fact voices or just the sound of the increasing wind.

“Sounds weird. Why do their voices sound so weird?”

“Like I say, they’re just trying to make it spooky,” Gordon laughed, somewhat uneasily. “Anyway their voices are coming from the right. Let’s go right.”

The woods fell silent except for the crunch of crisp brown leaves beneath their feet. A shrill call pierced the silence.

“What’s that?” Gordon asked.

“Owl,” Derrick replied.

They stayed close to each other. “Listen,” Derrick whispered. “They’re calling us again. This time it’s from the left.”

“Come this way,” said the voice again. “This way, this way.”

"We're coming. Keep your shirt on," Gordon added in a low tone of bravado but even he had had enough of their adventure in the woods on Hallowe'en night and was in a hurry to be reunited with Akela and the troop. They ran but soon the footsteps that they followed fell silent.

"Where are they?" Gordon asked in exasperation. "Sometimes it's from the left, sometimes from the right."

A shadow swooped before them, followed by a high-pitched scream as the shadow rose again carrying with it something whose feet dangled helplessly.

"Owl's caught a rabbit," Derrick whispered.

"This way," they heard again. The calls reverberated throughout the woods bouncing from one black tree to another. The woods were now almost as dark as the black silhouettes which looked not so much like trees as they did tall spirit guides whose dark arms waved in the growing wind.

"We shouldn't have left the path," Derrick grumbled, "we should stay where we are until they find us," Derrick directed, remembering the cardinal rule for anyone lost in the woods.

They heard the shuffling of footsteps only metres away. They followed, tripping now and then over fallen branches and the gnarly roots of the old black trees, content now that they had found their troop.

Their relief turned to shock when they saw that the troop they had been following...was not their own. It was a group of about eight boys, seemingly of their own age but eerily silent. Each carried a tall walking stick that it appeared they had whittled themselves.

"Look at what they're wearing," Gordon whispered.

"Derrick, this is creepy. Where'd they get those uniforms? Nobody wears those any more."

The boys before them wore sturdy hiking boots, tall woollen knee socks, short pants and Stetsons like those worn in Lord Baden-Powell's day.

Gordon tried to joke, "Maybe from their grandfathers. Let's follow them - they might lead us out of the woods and we'll be able to find a road and a phone where we can call our parents."

The trail climbed higher and higher until it emerged from the forest onto an open spot atop a high cliff.

"Look," Derrick exclaimed, "They're having a meeting just like Akela said!"

Upon the flat-surfaced rock, a group of figures sat around a small fire. The pink orb of the setting sun was just visible in the western sky.



"We have been expecting you."

A distinguished-looking man approached - his greying hair and ceremonial costume showed him to hold a position of high standing.

"We have been expecting you." His voice was kind but hollow. An aide extended the plank so that it created a bridge between the mainland and the meeting place. One by one the boys before them stepped onto the plank, took the helping hand of the aide and crossed to the other side.

"Hey, this is great," Derrick said to Gordon. "Wait until we tell Akela Bob where we were."

Gordon and Derrick stood at the precipice waiting their turn to cross. From their position on the cliff they could see great distances and in every direction the land was beautiful. To their right were the lines of

the cliffs and forest, to the left the dusky sky reached to touch green grassland.

The last boy before them extended a gloved hand to Derrick who was just about to take his first step across the chasm. "You take hold of my other hand," he said to Gordon.

Gordon suddenly remembered Akela Bob's words. This rock was the meeting place of the *ancient* elders; the woods were haunted by souls of the past.

"No Derrick, don't go!" Gordon yanked on his friend's hand in an attempt to pull him back, but the figure pulled too. It was then that the entire troop turned and the boys, for the first time, saw that their eyes, or lack of them, were huge black empty sockets in white skeletal faces. Their bared teeth seemed to smile in a perpetual grin but they possessed no sight and no voice.

"No Derrick, don't let him pull you there! They're all dead! If we go, we'll be dead too!"

Gordon struggled to pull Derrick toward the main cliff. The ghastly hiker pulled Derrick toward the meeting rock and Derrick remained on the plank torn between the land of the living and the dead. Finally Gordon gave one last tug which brought Derrick back to the mainland. Derrick's foot kicked the plank and set it falling - turning this way and that until it finally disappeared from sight into the abyss below.

Gordon felt a touch on his jacket. Derrick felt one too. Both of the boys jumped.

"Eh eh, boys. Don't go off the path. Looked to me like you were about to venture into the woods." It was Akela Bob and the rest of their troop. It was just getting dark and apparently no time had elapsed. "As I was saying," Akela said, "They say these woods and surrounding cliffs are haunted. It's a spooky story, but of course I don't believe they are really haunted." The boys exchanged knowing glances.

"We do," they replied in unison. ^

- *Laureen Duquette is an award-winning short story writer. When not concocting tales, she works in the National Office as Leader Magazine's Circulation/Advertising Coordinator.*