

A PLACE OF HAUNTS

BY ROBERT CULP

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For Cotton and me, Halloween was mostly a secondhand experience. We heard all manner of fearsome tales from the older folks and from our schoolmates in town. But we lived out in the hills, a far piece from other kids, and our orders absolutely forbid us from going back to town on Halloween night. This time, howsomever, Halloween came to us.

The Halloween sky was turning night blue. It promised to be a dark night; there was only the slimmest slice of a fingernail moon setting behind the oak trees. I was standing stock-still, trying to locate the hooty owl in the orchard, when Cotton slipped up and hooted in my ear.

“Thunderation, Cotton: You scared me skinny. You oughtn’t sneak up like that.”

“I’m practicing for tonight, Rooster.”

“Who you gonna scare? The pigs?” He knew as well as I did we were supposed to stick close to home.

“Want to get back at Garvey for trying to steal our honey and your Pa’s pigs?”

Now, technically, the old man hadn’t tried either one of those schemes, but I thought it would be picky to say so. Garvey Bockenweiler was an old codger who lived alone just beyond the second ridge. He was a queersome critter Cotton and I figured to be the meanest man this side of perdition. We had a skedillion reasons to fear Garvey. He had no use for people in general, nor in particular.

Pa wasn’t so hard on Garvey, though he always warned us to steer clear of the old man’s place. Pa said we must make allowances, but he didn’t say why. For example, those things Cotton mentioned. Cotton and I found a bee tree. Garvey came along and tried to take our honey. He didn’t get it, but he tried. Then Pa pointed out that if we had marked the tree ours like we should have, Garvey probably would have left it alone. On the second point, now and again, Garvey caught and butchered one of our pigs. I figured that was stealing. But Pa said since the pigs ran wild, they weren’t rightly ours. I didn’t understand. For

grownups, it was complicated. For us kids, it was simple: just the thought of that no-account varmint made our innards go wobbly.

Did I want to get back at Garvey? Can a squirrel climb trees? Does a fish like water? “How?” I asked.

“Garvey’s in town. I met him walking down the trace before supper. Clomping along in those heavy boots of his.”

“So? Did you say boo, or howdy?”

“You think I’m crazy in the head? I hid in the bushes till he passed.”

“For sure, I bet that scared him. Showed him not to mess with you.”

Cotton gave me a look of pure-dee exasperation. “Rooster, you want to hear my plan or not?”

“Shoot.”

“When Garvey goes to the general store, you know he always hangs around past dark. Just standing back in the corner listening to folks talk.”

“Yeah.”

“And when he comes home he takes the low trail through the pecan grove.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s it, Rooster. I reckon we got about an hour before he comes traipsing home.”

Of course I went along with it. The plan was downright genius. We look three minutes to swipe a sheet from Ma’s laundry basket and an empty flour sack from the pantry. On the way across the ridge to the pecan meadow, we broke off a middling-size forked branch from a deadfall, and that was all we needed.

With the sheet draped over the limbs, and the flour sack stuffed with leaves and tied tight to the fork of the branch, we had the spookiest ghost that ever haunted a dark place.

The path Garvey took going home from town cut across the upper end of the pecan grove, just a short throw from the deep hold the ornery cuss had dug to catch pigs. Cotton and I figured it would be a good turnabout if we used that pig pit as our hiding place. When last we’d been there, Cotton and I tried to fill the hold with limbs and logs. The brush we threw in was still there, clogging up the pit fairly well. We climbed in just enough to hide us and our ghost, and waited.

Soon my teeth were rattling and my whole body was shivering, from excitement as much as from cold. I felt like we'd waited past midnight, but it couldn't have been an hour. Then, into the clearing came Garvey, stomping along in his heavy boots.

He was mumbling to himself and practically on top of us when Cotton let out a moan. Then dead silence. Garvey must have stopped like a balky mule.

"Who's that?" he quavered.

I groaned like I was dying. Garvey commenced stammering and backed away. Cotton and I wailed out a passel of howls and cries, and raised our ghost as high as we could reach.

The old man bellowed, flung aside the sack of provisions he was toting, and lit out across the meadow. He disappeared leaving a trail of sound like a far off train whistle.

Cotton and I tried to follow Garvey with our spook, but by the time we reached the edge of the woods, he was out of sight. There was no way to guess which direction he'd gone. We started home then, chortling and giggling like the half-wits we were.

"Ho, boy, Rooster. You reckon he'll ever stop?"

"Old Garvey makes purty good spook noises himself. Did you ever hear such a caterwauling?" I chattered on, never noticing Cotton had gone quiet.

"Hush, Rooster."

"Huh?"

"You hear that?"

We both froze and listened. Nothing. After a minute we walked on. I started joshing Cotton about having spooks on the brain. Then it was my turn to be chilled full of goose bumps.

"Cotton! There's something behind us."

"You heard it, too?"

The rustling stopped. There was a heavy breathing somewhere in the dark behind us. The thick brush hid everything. I touched Cotton. He was shaking worse than I was.

"Let's go," I whispered.

"I'm way ahead of you, Rooster." And he was.

We hurried along the trail over the ridge toward my house. Our sheet-and-flour-sack ghost was slowing us down. With a real haunt on our tail, we dropped our fake spook and started moving our legs. The path was as black as the inside of a cave. Branches snagged our clothes and slapped our faces. In front, Cotton ran into every trifling limb on the path.

Right behind him, I caught a powerful swat from the same danged limbs soon as he pushed past 'em. Neither of us complained. We could hear it following us, no doubt now — sticks snapping, brush swishing, dry leaves shuffling. Atop of that, there was that tarnal, throaty breathing.

We crossed a clearing at the top of the ridge. Dark as it was, still and all we could see a little in the dim starlight. I grabbed Cotton's arm just as we plunged back into the trees.

"Wait," I hissed. "Let's rest a second. Maybe it'll lose our trail."

"Leggo," he panted. But he stopped with me.

The noise approached, then halted at the far side of the clearing. The perditional breathing came in huge gasps now. The only other sound was my heart thudding like a tom-tom.

Then, in the gloom across the way, appeared two pinpoint eyes, like a pair of stars. Around them I swear I could make out a monstrous form.

No need to say a word; Cotton was as scared as I was. We ran. The two of us fought our way down the path like we were already possessed. It was devil take the hindmost, and mostly I was the hindset.

We forgot the trail and cut straight down the hill. I bounced from tree to bush. I skidded over the rocks and thrashed through the brambles. All the while I fancied I could feel the beast breathing on my neck. I was near giving up when the light from my house came in sight. That gave me fresh hope and I doubled the pace. I saw Cotton reach the porch and disappear inside. Escape was at hand.

Something seized by shirttail. My feet were still moving but I wasn't going anywhere. I let out a bodacious screech and kicked and flailed like an unbroke horse. I heard my shirt rip and I was loose. In two hops I hit the kitchen door and busted into the house.

"Gracious, Rooster. I thought you were a wild Indian," said Ma with a big smile. "Were you two trying to give us a Halloween fright?"

Pa looked at my torn shirttail. "Pears to me he's the one saw the ghost. Maybe he tangled with some spook."

I was so obliterated I was giddy. I gulped air while Ma and Pa chuckled at me. When I thought I could keep my voice from quivering, I said, "Aw, Pa, you know there's no such thing as ghosts."

Cotton and I were so all-fired happy to be safe from that place of haunts, we didn't mind the teasing we took. Cotton was afraid to go home through the dark, so we told Ma that his

folks said he could stay over. We figured we could convince his folks later that it was just a misunderstanding. Anyway, we'd worry about that in the daylight.

Next morning, before breakfast, Cotton and I eased out into the yard to check the scene. At the edge of the garden was spotted a strip of my shirttail snagged on the barbed wire."

"There, Rooster," Cotton pointed at the evidence. "You still say something grabbed you?"

It sure looked as if we'd imagined the whole thing. I walked toward the fence, feeling silly. Then I stopped.

"Cotton! Look at that."

There, right near my snagged shirttail, the sheet and the flour sack lay folded as neat as fresh laundry. We ran to them. I grabbed them up like they were certain proof that we weren't light in the head.

And there, in the soft dirt of the garden, leading in the direction of the woods, was a trail of heavy boot tracks.

Cotton and I were some mortified by our Halloween scare. Whenever we were alone, we discussed and argued about what had happened. Finally, on our annual expedition for persimmons with Uncle Jake, we decided to draw on his considerable know-how.

"Uncle Jake, do you believe in haunts?" I picked persimmons and acted unconcerned. Cotton heard me, but ducked his head and inspected his sack full of squishy orange fruit.

"Do I believe in haunts?" Uncle Jake stared hard till I started fidgeting.

It was almost Thanksgiving. Cotton and I hadn't told a soul about Halloween night. But it was eating on us.

"What Rooster means, some kids at school got chased by a spook on Halloween night. That's all." Cotton sounded almost convincing.

"I see," said Uncle Jake. And he probably did. "In town, or here in the hills?"

"Out here in the woods. Someplace. They didn't say where, exactly."

He grunted. "Mighta been a gowrow."

"What?"

"A gowrow—member of the goofus family. About twenty feet long, looks like a whopping old lizard with tusks."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Could be. Eats cows and sheep. Maybe people. Folks killed a couple years ago. I haven't heard of any lately."

“You think that’s what it was, Uncle Jake?”

“Well, coulda been a jimplicute. Sort of a ghost dragon. Jimplicutes walk the roads nights, looking for people to eat. Course, I never heard tell of anybody actually seeing one.”

Cotton and I had quit picking persimmons now. Any idea of persimmon pudding for Thanksgiving was gone from our heads.

“Then again,” said Uncle Jake, “mighta been a high-behind. Big as a bull, hind legs ten times longer than the forelegs. That’s how it gets the name.” He fixed us with a thoughtful squint. “A high-behind waits in the dark for a body to come wandering down some lonesome path. They laps ’em up like a toadfrog catching flies.”

“Uncle Jake, you don’t truly think it was one of those monsters? Do you?” I was whispering. No more faking for me.

He leaned back and hoorawed. “Course not. I misdoubt anybody ever met a gowrow, nor a jimplicute, nor a high-behind. Leastwise, and lived to talk about it.”

Cotton and I both took a breath. I felt foolish, but relieved.

Uncle Jake shook his head. “It was probably just a painter. Lots of black painters skulking around back in the deep woods.”

I stared at him. He was serious. “A panther!” Around these parts?”

“Sure as sunrise. Last spring I found prints big as my hand at my pond. A painter, for certain. Maybe a wowzer – one of them giant painters, can kill a horse with one bite. Your friends are mighty lucky they didn’t get their heads bit clean off.”

Cotton and I stared bug-eyed at each other. I felt sick. His face was so white it reminded me of our fake ghost.

Uncle Jake watched us shake for a long minute, then he said, “Of course, could that haunt walked on two legs.” His eyes crinkled at the corners.

I looked at Cotton. He understood too. We’d been bested by Garvey, and somehow Uncle Jake knew all about it. And, sure as acorns grow on oak trees, everybody in Arkansas and most of Missouri would hear the story sooner or later.